

The facts speak only when the historian calls on them: it is he who decides to which facts to give the floor, and in what order or context.

— Edward Carr

## **A kingdom with a thousand faces**

February 5, 2010 - By Lita Davidson, Kaowao Newsgroup, Sangkhlaburi, Thailand<sup>1</sup>

A recent historical interpretation has strongly questioned the existence of a Mon Buddhist kingdom in Lower Burma in the early first millennium referred to as Rāmaññadesa (Aung-Thwin 2005). Because of a lack of historical evidence and the paucity of Mon material culture found in archeological excavations, so the argument goes, the Mon did not have a significant presence in Lower Burma prior to the rise of Pagan. This state of affairs pretty much sums up the present essay in a nutshell: a lack of evidence could be due to the fact that very few systematic excavations have been done in Lower Burma, not to mention the current political situation in the southern area of the country that hinders archeological research. However, let's take a closer look at identifying a Mon Buddhist kingdom within the Austro-Asiatic-Mon-Khmer population in this time frame at the beginning of the Common Era. This essay will show that even if it were possible to identify a so-called Mon kingdom our knowledge to date of the mosaic nature of the social organization in this early time period prevents us from doing so due to the diversity of linguistic groups that existed side-by-side. In addition, the social organization of cultural groups particularly with respect to language development in the early to the mid first millennium that would have developed into "kingdoms" is poorly understood. Based mostly on limited archeological data, what little we do know about the early Mon groups is that they were linked by the river systems located on the strategic trade routes to settlements throughout Thailand which likely included Lower Burma and the Ayeyarwaddy Delta (Jacq-Hergoualc'h 2002: 25).

Another problem has to do with the focus of scholarly research. For example, the Malacca Straits is traditionally known to have been the bridge between China and the Mediterranean World in the early first millennium where many of the early Chinese histories were recorded, but the region of Lower Burma including the Ayeyarwaddy Delta, the Gulf of Martaban, and Tenasserim Division would also have been part of that vast expanse of land and sea called a "waist" (Warmington 1974:3) which had coastal ports linked to trade carried out in the Indian Ocean that may not have involved the Chinese pilgrims and their merchants. Nevertheless, there are references of ports linked in Southeast Asia in the Arab, Indian, and Chinese historical records which may have exported products sourced from Lower Burma and Thailand. Trading activity in the Indian Ocean region increased significantly at the beginning of the first millennium that

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<sup>1</sup> This is a non-peer-reviewed article. Responsibility for inaccuracies in the research rests solely with the author. The title "Kingdom with a thousand faces" is borrowed from Joseph Campbell's book title on comparative mythology, "A hero with a thousand faces" (1949).

stretched from the Red Sea to the Malacca Straits and the Isthmus of Kra commonly known as the Maritime Silk Route in which goods destined for India and China were transported across and around the Peninsula. It has been suggested, however, that Burma's coastline trading with India from Tenasserim to the Ganga Delta and the overland routes through Three Pagodas Pass connected to the Indian Ocean have been overshadowed (Moore 2007: 231) by the theories of the Maritime Silk Route due mainly to the greater number of archeological finds on the Malaysian and Thai Peninsula, the Austronesian maritime activity, and the Malacca Strait's long trading history. Paul Wheatley in his *Golden Khersonese* essay (1961: 228), Elizabeth Moore (2006: 285), and Pamela Gutman (2001:108) have considered that the ancient port of Kalah<sup>2</sup> in the Arab texts with its Chinese equivalent, Ko-lo, also known as Kalaśapura (City of Pots), may not have been located on the Kra Isthmus or even on the Malaysian Peninsula but further north in Burma in either an area associated with the third century Mon mandala, Tunsun, or near the Gulf of Martaban which was comprised of a diversity of peoples likely to include the early Mon/Khmer speakers.

Regardless of the exact location where these place names are referring to the sources indicate that most of them including Tun-sun/Lang-chia/Lan-ya-hsiu,<sup>3</sup> Funan, Panpan, Ko-lo, Chin-lin, and Takola, some of which were on the Indian Ocean, were comprised of indigenous peoples, including the Mon-Khmer groups, who harvested aromatic woods and perfumed plants. According to the inscriptions and the early Chinese and Arab descriptions, these early ports included an international presence of the Indians, Sinhalese, Chinese, Arabs, Parthians, Persians, and Indo-Scythians who traded in these items.

The early Mon-Dvāravatī peoples prior to the sixth century were located on the strategic trade and maritime routes and would have sailed across the Gulf of Thailand and it is likely they were involved in the Bay of Bengal trading networks. While there is evidence from Khmer inscriptions that they travelled in boats on rivers throughout Thailand and across the Gulf (Briggs 1951; Halliday 1922), the origins of Mon seafaring is poorly understood and much of what can be reconstructed is based on limited linguistic and archeological evidence from coastal sites in Lower Burma and Thailand. Archeological research has demonstrated the possibility that the indigenous Southeast Asians constructed and travelled to India in their own large cargo vessels (Manguin 1993: 264) called *bo* or *kunlun-bo* (Southeast Asian boat) observed and recorded by the Chinese (Manguin 1993; 263; Christie 1964: 273) and its equivalent in Greek *kolandiapha* which were thought to be piloted by the Austronesians (Ray 2003: 61; Christie 1964: 273; Manguin 1993; Coedès 1968: 273).

The Mon vocabulary has words that reflect maritime activity including nautical language for the reversing monsoons (Guillon 1999). Although no satisfactory explanation

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<sup>2</sup> An essay on the polity of Kalah, possibly located in Lower Burma, will be released later this year, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Lawrence Briggs theorized that Lang-chia and Tunsun, and the later Lan-ya-hsiu polity, which replaced Tunsun, were located in the area of Mergui and Tenasserim and was an early port for transshipment in the second and third century A.D. (Briggs 1950: 259-262).

of the etymological term has been put forward by scholars (Manguin 1993: 262), the term *bo* for the Southeast Asian indigenous boat could be a distortion in pronunciation from the Mon word for their seafaring vessel [bɛŋ], written <kbaŋ> in Old Mon. However, it is difficult to understand the relationship among Southeast Asian languages without enough phonetic material from this time period and often the Chinese transcriptions are not very reliable as will be discussed below in relation to place names (Jenny 2009; Christie 1993:34). There is also some scattered iconographic representation from the Mon Dvāravatī site in Nakhon Pathom of a seal and the stucco relief in Uthong in Thailand (Manguin 1993: 263) and a small lead-glazed model cargo ship that dates to after the first millennium (Guillon 1999). Research has also shown that they had commercial relations with the Malay trading communities on the Peninsula with linguistic studies suggesting that Mon was spoken in the early first millennium in southern Thailand in sites connected to international and interregional trade (Jacq-Hergoualc'h 2002: 27; Stargardt 1979).

At this point it is unclear who was sailing along with the Austronesians, but O.W. Wolters (1960) considered that the Chinese transcribed *Po-ssu* from the Southern Ocean represent a distinct group from the Kun-lun (term for the Southeast Asian seafarers) that traded in resins from northern Sumatra and that the Indonesians played their part in the Bay of Bengal trade to the West and East. The traffic in aromatics, especially aloeswood and camphor from Southeast Asia (Schoff 1922; Wolters 1960) was fairly extensive in India when the Hippalus Winds, the reversing monsoon winds, were discovered by the Greeks in the first century (Warmington 1974: 180) and different groups may have been involved in transporting these items across the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean just as the Indo-Scythians were transporting horses in their large vessels also called *po*, a variant of *bo* (Christie 1964: 347).

Prior to the Common Era the international trading network in the Bay of Bengal that archeologist Himanshu Prabha Ray (1989) has documented likely involved coastal trade with ships skirting the coastlines of India into southern Burma (Ray 1989: 51). Artifacts discovered from this region illustrate a trade network that reached across to ports on India's western coast such as Barygaza where a Gujarati proverb refers to the wealth of seamen returned from Java who had travelled to the Golden Chersonese (Southeast Asia), according to George Coedès' source (Coedès 1968: 273). Ray's studies have shown that by the second century B.C. the whole eastern coastline of India was linked in a coastal sailing network. A characteristic feature of trade in this period was that it was carried out by guilds and merchants who travelled long-distance to build exchange networks outside of their political boundaries (Ray 1989: 43). An indication of the spread of Indian trade to Southeast Asia has been traced to the distribution of Rouletted Ware pottery found in areas along India's eastern coast from Tamruk/Tamralipti in the Ganga Delta to Sri Lanka which reached as far as mainland and island Southeast Asia (Berenice 2004: 73). Other evidence of early contact between the two regions are the etched carnelian beads, lion pendants, bronze knobbed bowls, and the famous Chansen ivory comb, found at sites in western Thailand that date to the Early Historic Period suggesting that India had long been in contact with Southeast Asia (Berenice 2004: 73, 71).

Ray points out that an extraneous factor of trade in the Indian Ocean was the economic growth and political developments in the Roman Empire. Under Caesar Augustus and Nero between 100 B.C. and the 200 A.D., Rome was partly built upon trade with the Orient, which expanded after the Oriental Greek sailors learned the reversing monsoon winds in the Indian Ocean along with the introduction of new navigation technology. Greco-Egyptian sailors relied on the Greek texts, the *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea* (70 A.D.) and Ptolemy's *Geography* (140 A.D.), which were developed by the Greek and Roman elite to provide information on the Indian trade marts and the commercial sea routes in the first decades of the Common Era between India and the Mediterranean World. They were used as guide books to reach commercial ports in the Indian Ocean which included an area that the Greeks referred to as "the Golden Peninsula" the famous Chersonesus Aureus (Freeman 2003: 70), which writers assume is the Malaysian Peninsula, but this likely included southern Burma which is part of the Peninsula and perhaps the Ayeyarwaddy Delta as well.

Peace under Augustus increased the demand of luxury items from India to the Mediterranean markets which coincided with the rise of the Buddhist monastic establishments and the Tamil dynasties that drew adventurous seafarers to the Bay of Bengal followed by the eastern Mediterranean colonies within the Roman Empire in the second century A.D. (Ray 1989: 45). According to the Tamil text, the *Pattinappālai*, the major ports were those on the southeast coast of India such as Cape Comorin in the Tamil Nadu controlled areas as well as the major entrepôts of the Chola port, Puhar [Kaverippattinam] (Mukund 1999: 15) and Madurai, which received commercial crops from Southeast Asia including aloeswood (eaglewood), sandalwood, camphor, (Wheatley 1961: 182) and cinnamon from Burma (Warmington 1974: 188). These goods were then transhipped from India's southwestern ports, Kūlam and Malabar, to the harbors on the Arabian coast and the Red Sea, such as Alexandria, which were connected to the Mediterranean World as early as the first century according to the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* (Schoff 1922: 180).

The most concrete evidence of maritime trade which suggests that the Mon polities were linked between Thailand and Burma are the hoards of coins found in the coastal port areas which reflect trade and seafaring activity that reached across the Bay of Bengal. These silver coins bear the Conch/Srivatsa on either side and have related Dvāravatī symbols of a single denomination labeled by Elizabeth Moore and Pamela Gutman as the Bago or Mon Type dated to the fifth century (Stadtner 2008: 197). While it is not clear what these coins were exactly for they have been found abundantly in and around coastal or maritime sites connected to trade such as in the Pegu area, at the mouth of the Sittaung at Kyaikkatha (Thatôn), as well as in Ho Chi Minh and Bengal. According to Robert Wicks, the coins provided the model for all mainland coinage during the first millennium and may have predated the Pyu coins in Upper Burma. Other similar coins that bear the Conch/Srivatsa image have been found at sites in U-thong in central Thailand, in the third century Funan site at Oc Eo in southern Vietnam, and in Tavoy in southern Burma (Wicks 1992: 112). While a later date to the ninth or tenth century has been proposed for the

coins by Dietrich Mahlo (Stadtner 2008: 197), the distribution of the coins in coastal areas suggests that a trading circuit was active in the Gulf of Martaban perhaps as early as the sixth century. It is noteworthy to point out that another series of coins labeled, the Sandalwood Flower series, with petal designs have been found mostly in southern Thailand in Mon Dvāravatī sites such as Satingpra and Nakhon Si Thammarat but date to a much later period to between the tenth and the twelfth centuries A.D., one specimen of this type has been found in excavations in Egypt which may have been carried there by a merchant (Wicks 1992: 226).

The northern Indian texts, the *Milindapañha* and the *Mahāniddeśa*, compiled between the second and third centuries provide a glimpse of items traded at ports associated with "the Golden Peninsula" (Wheatley: 181). However, an earlier date of 247 B.C. has been proposed for the *Mahāniddeśa* text (Sarkar 1981: 300) which mentions items of trade, including the highly valued aloeswood among other products from Suvannabhumi. The same text records names of ports in Further India (countries east of the Ganges) such as Vesuṅga identified by Sylvan Lévi as Pegu, and Suvannabhumi, which scholars believe was in Lower Burma (Aquiue 1974: 145). Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, dated to between the first and second century also lists perfumes traded in the Bay of Bengal such as three kinds of agaru, Aquila Agallocha (eaglewood: agaru/Sanskrit, sometimes written as aguru in the texts) along with a perfume or cosmetic called 'kaleyaka,' a kind of paste made from a perfumed wood, i.e., sandalwood, described as smooth and yellow from Suvannabhumi perhaps a reference to Lower Burma (Chande 2004: 143). One reference in the *Periplus* mentions a trade in tortoiseshell in Chryse (Golden Land) that researchers believe is the Malaysian Peninsula (Freeman 2003: 70), but the "Golden Peninsula" likely included the coast of southern Burma. The hawksbill tortoise is the species that was sought in the eastern seas (Freeman 2003: 76), a species also found in the Andaman Sea, including on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, and along the coast of Southern Burma (McClanahan 2000: 337). Pliny's *Historia Naturalis* provides information on what products merchants were exporting as does the *Periplus* which records imports into India including spices, aromatics and precious gemstones that likely came from Southeast Asia, including tin, lead, and copper, as well as spices, preservatives, and gems (Ray 1989: 48). Researchers theorize that high tin bronze was exported from Thailand to India through well established exchange networks connected via the river systems i.e., through the Three Pagodas Pass, prior to and after the Christian era which included Lower Burma (Ray 1989: 51).

Chinese historical records provide some idea of the trading ports or entrepôts that existed along the Southeast Asian littoral communities listed above described as having aromatics, including the cultural groups of the early Mon-Dvāravatī mandalas in west central Thailand such as the Brahman community of 'Tunsun' thought to be composed of proto-Mon speakers, whose five kingdoms may have straddled the regions between Thailand and Lower Burma, which will be discussed below. It is also likely that coastal trade was carried out from Tenasserim, the Gulf of Martaban and Cape Negrais from where vessels sailed in a westerly direction across the Bay of Bengal to reach the ports of

Orissa or to India's eastern coastal ports such as Tamralipti on the Ganges Delta that were linked to India's western ports and the Roman World (Warmington 1974: 45-47; Aquique 1974:144-150).

### **Mon Homeland Origin Myth**

It is next necessary to begin with a Mon legend that records Thatôn on the mouth of the Sittaung in Lower Burma as their historical homeland that dates to the dawn of Buddhism over two thousand years ago. Mon legend attributes the founding of Thatôn to the two princes of the king of Telengena (Andhra Pradesh) from the Madras coast in southern India who came to live as hermits on Thatôn Hill. After settling in two boys from a dragon-mother and a supernatural-being father came to live with them. One boy became the King of the Mons at Thatôn, a port known as Suvannabhumi; the other boy died and was reborn in India as Gavampati, who later became a famous disciple of the Buddha. Interestingly, like all folk tales within the context of littoral peoples from this region, wealth, trade, and the king's rule are intrinsically related (Manguin 1991) and in the case of the Mon legend, the Buddhist religion as well. The story goes on to describe the subsequent success of trade relations with India after two Mon, Bhallika and Tapussa, described as merchants, set off on a cargo ship to India's eastern coast. After landing they venture forth with 500 bullock carts of goods (presumably for trade or donation) ending their journey on the first day of Buddha's Enlightenment (Pan Hla 1958: 2). They later return to Thatôn with eight hair relics of the Buddha which were later enshrined in the Shwedagon Pagoda, the foundation of which has been dated to between the sixth and tenth century A.D.

### **What is it, where is it?**

Historian Michael Aung-Thwin in his book *The Mists of Rāmañña* (2005) argues that the Chinese histories recorded every Buddhist kingdom in Southeast Asia and did not mention the existence of any Mon kingdom in the region of Lower Burma referred to as Rāmaññadesa or Suvannabhumi and that Lower Burma was unlikely to have the resources to support any kingdom in this time period (Aung-Thwin 2005: 67). It would be surprising if the Chinese being concerned with the Southern Seas (Coedès 1968: 37), i.e., the region around the Kra Isthmus and the Malay Peninsula, listed all the kingdoms that existed on the shores of the Indian Ocean. Besides, unearthing a polity's name and establishing its geographic position in the proto-historic period, i.e., around the beginning of the first millennium, especially in Southeast Asia, is a tricky endeavor given that rulers and their centers changed location from shifting alliances or the area, including its population, is invaded or destroyed from environmental conditions. While some kingdoms are easily identified in the Chinese annals such as *Shih-li-ch'a-ta-lo* for Old Prome (Sri Ksitra) in

Upper Burma and *Lin-i* on the east coast of Annam (Vietnam), the recorded kingdoms between these regions have been a challenge to place.

Paul Wheatley wrote that even the best known and well documented states are "by no means explicit" highlighting two major problems in trying to locate the Chinese recorded place names: "One being the actual sources and the other its chronology" (Wheatley 1961:2). Another problem was that the Chinese, Greek, and Arab merchants did not often transcribe correctly the place name as they were spoken by the local people, particularly in the earlier histories prior to the seventh century. Plus it is not clear what the area was actually called since traders and merchants may have assigned different names according to what resources were available. Add to this the fact that the Chinese language itself is limited in transcribing the wide variety of sounds spoken by the Southeast Asians. For example, the place name recorded was likely a close approximation to what was actually pronounced by the local people producing a "variety of orthographies" and alternative transcriptions were used for the same sounds to ease pronunciation such as P'eng-K'eng for Pahang and Ch'ü-sun for Tunsun among other variants (Wheatley 1961:4-7). Centuries later visited territories were later changed or guessed at by the Chinese recording information they deemed worthwhile (Munoz 2006: 84). In this early time period, cultural groups were composed of complex chiefdoms, termed 'mandalas', by writers, whose religious leaders and elite traveled within a web of "intra-regional associations" (Brown 1996: 10). Consequently, they likely identified with their local area or a 'city' which was named after a ruler as in the case of Pan-Pan which existed in the fourth century as Lawrence Briggs and O.W. Wolters had suggested (Briggs 1951: 12; Wolters 1999: 16).

Ch'ih-t'u is another place name the Chinese recorded several times whose location has divided opinion among researchers. This is due to its confusing description in relation to other kingdoms with a northern boundary being on an ocean shore leading scholars to place it on the Malay Peninsula; however, the Chinese describe it as having the same material culture as the Mon Dvāravatī from central Thailand. Other problems relate to the recording of information in which expeditions were written up by the Chinese copyists "centuries after the actual journey took place" (Wheatley 1961: 3). Modern scholars and traditional Chinese scholarship believe Ch'ih-t'u was located on the Chao Phraya or in the northeast of Thailand given that it was described as another part of Funan or a proto-Khmer homeland. Wheatley, however, was more inclined to view Ch'ih-t'u somewhere on the Malay Peninsula near Kedah that existed in the seventh century (1961: 32); as well, Ch'ih-t'u may have been a translation from local words and may not be the actual name of a kingdom (Wheatley 1961: 7) but may refer to a cultural area as seen in the way these 'kingdoms' are described as having the same material culture.

Robert L. Brown suggested that Ch'ih-t'u may be the Si Thep site in northeast Thailand and like Lower Burma was an area deemed too inhospitable to have settlements. Archeological studies have shown that the site supported a large population that produced some of the finest sculpture in Southeast Asia and would have sent trade missions to China (Brown 1996: 33). Si Thep was an early Buddhist/Hindu/ Mon/Khmer kingdom situated on

a trade route via the Khorat Plateau from the Menam to the Meklong that lead to Three Pagodas Pass and ultimately to Lower Burma and the Thai Peninsula (Coedès 1968: 28). That the Chinese had known about Si Thep is seen in the discovery of a terra cotta votive tablet with an inscription of a Chinese monk's name (Brown 1996: 36); but no definitive reference has yet been discovered in the Chinese histories of Si Thep.

While Aung-Thwin points to the lack of evidence for a Mon kingdom in the mid first millennium, the same has to be said for the Cambodian homeland: a pre-Angkorian Cambodian kingdom of Funan has not been verified. For instance, what the Chinese called the early Khmer in the second century A.D., Funan, and its Chinese transcribed capital, Te-mu, have not been identified on the ground, but according to the Chinese it was 500 li from the sea which Paul Pelliot believes was near Vyādhapura (city of the hunters or Angkor Borei) (O'Reilly 2007: 92-3; Coedès 1968: 36; Luce 1924: 153). Funan (possible Cambodian kingdom which is thought to have had Mon speakers [Brown 1996: 43]) is known to have existed in the third century A.D. according to the Chinese, but their proto-city centers and the ethnic make-up of their population have not been confirmed.

Scholars believe that a pre-Funan center existed in southern Vietnam at Oc Eo, which, according to early reports, was an emporium where foreign merchants met (O'Reilly 2007: 52) near the Cambodian province of Prei Vèng. Others suggest Funan's center was in central or northeast Thailand (Coedès 1968: 37) and some even say that it could have been on the Malay Peninsula according to the Chinese histories that tell us of the founding of Funan to a local legend about a king that hailed from India or Malaysia or the southern islands (Coedès 1968: 37; Hall 1982: 83). Investigative aerial photography has shown no less than three hundred settlements in central Thailand thought to be in the area of the so-called kingdom of Funan. As argued by Wolters, this "multiplicity of Khmer centers" is evidenced in the early Khmer inscriptions which record thirteen Sanskrit toponyms of settlements that contradict Funan as a "single and enduring kingdom" as portrayed by the Chinese (Wolters 1999: 16). Kedah a trading entrepôt, for example, was part of the Southern Seas international trading hub elevated to an "independent kingdom" by the Chinese which in reality was just a chiefdom according to archeological studies (O'Reilly 2007: 55). Its location on the Malaysian Peninsula in the Straits of Malacca offered an economic advantage around the Isthmus of Kra which had links with Indonesia and India. By way of comparison, placing a Mon homeland or a central kingdom restricted to a particular ethnonym in the region of Lower Burma further north from the Isthmus was likely not geographically advantageous for the Chinese to have recorded it due to its location. However, upon closer examination of the sources there are references to polities that may have been located within Lower Burma connected to cultural groups in Thailand in the early first millennium, but first.

### **The Whereabouts of a Kingdom**

Michael Aung-Thwin claims that no kingdom could have prospered in Lower Burma because it was an uninhabitable swamp, writing: "[Lower Burma] did not have the cultural



wherewithal to have supported any kingdom or polity, much less to have been the source of civilization for another in Upper Burma" (Aung-Thwin 2005: 67). But archeology and historical studies from around the world have shown that coastal settlements and their associated river valley kingdoms did indeed develop in the most unlikely locations such as along tropical coasts similar to Lower Burma. For example, early twentieth century writers described the ancient Maya coastal kingdoms on the Yucatan peninsula as "empty ceremonial centers," but the bulk of the population lived in the surrounding areas. Other kingdoms developed their settlements along the coasts of Vietnam, Peru, China, the delta area of the Nile, and the Tigris-Euphrates, and were just as inhospitable as Lower Burma (McKillop 2004). A perfect example is the ancient Roman port of Ravenna that was built in the Po delta marshlands strategically isolated from the rest of northern Italy in A.D. 402. The nervous Roman emperor Honorius moved his capital there as a safe refuge for the fifth century Roman emperors escaping the barbarian hordes at Venice. Palaces, churches, and bathhouses were built in an area difficult to attack, but Augustus' peers, Gaulish and Roman dignitaries, avoided the swampy new capital viewing it as 'abnormal' and 'decrepit' (Squatriti 1992: 8).

It is argued that very few Mon Buddhist remains including Old Mon inscriptions have been recovered in Lower Burma compared to Thailand where they have been found abundantly prior to 1000 A.D. But the lack of evidence for habitation and a settlement that resembled a kingdom in Lower Burma could be due to the nature of the environment and the archeological record in this region. Lower Burma is characterized by harsh climatic conditions common to a diverse tropical environment that receives the bulk of the heavy monsoonal weather along with a high rate of sedimentation. It receives an annual rainfall of 2500 to 5000 mm (Moore 2007) compared to 1300 to 1600 mm for the Mekong Delta and 795-1500 in Upper Burma and it is likely that a high rainfall combined with other environmental factors disturbed or completely destroyed sites and other artifacts which have been impossible to recover. Plus Thatôn and its related settlements within the vast Ayeyarwaddy Delta which measures approximately 411,000 km<sup>2</sup> compared to the Ganges Delta at 105,000<sup>2</sup> and the Mekong Delta at 39,000 km<sup>2</sup> were built in areas away from the coastline (Moore 2007: 33).

The bulk of the population lived scattered in isolated areas along the smaller tributaries away from the major rivers, but used them to get around, and due to the nature of shifting rice cultivation typical of under-populated terrain like marshlands (Squatriti 1992), settlements were built away from the central area. Over time the ports and settlements relocated from the river's banks which had shifted from the silting, a situation also seen in the ancient port sites of India. It is thought that this happened at Thatôn on the Sittaung where Suvannabhumi is believed to have been located (Ray 2003: 278; Moore 2007: 204), and which could have been a first millennium port of call in a regional network, according to Elizabeth Moore (2007). This type of settlement system is in stark contrast to the much more visible Pyu urban systems in the arid north where the majority of the population lived in densely packed settlements in large fortified cities such

as the larger Sriksetra and Beikthano sites (Hudson 2005). The nature of the climate, the type of habitation, and their mode of subsistence, could have reduced foreigners or traders from stopping there, just as Augustus peers did in avoiding Ravenna. Or travelers would have simply overlooked it as demonstrated in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when contradicting reports by groups of Europeans visiting the Irrawaddy Delta viewed it as widely cultivated and sparsely inhabited (Adas 1972: 175-192).

Finally, the fact that invading armies in the many wars between the Mon and Burman prior and including those in the late sixteenth century and after could have destroyed inscriptions and other evidence as when the Burmans destroyed the Mon chronicles at that time (Adas 1972). As well, Gordon Luce witnessed western scholars in the early twentieth century who either disinterred or disfigured works of art, or looters carted off whatever they found to museums with pieces of cultural artifacts ending up in someone's basement gathering dust. As can be seen today several pieces of terra cotta have been appropriated outright never to be seen again and were probably sold on the international market. Add to that the swarms of treasure hunters looting the pagodas and archeological sites over the centuries, not to mention the bombings campaigns during World War Two (Luce 1948: 7).

### **Kingdoms and multiple centers**

The material culture of Mon Dvāravatī was classified according to a particular art style which includes mostly earthenware pottery, sculptured works of art made of stone, bronze, and stucco found within the context of Buddhist/Hindu temple/caves correlated to the Old Mon language that existed between the fifth and the seventh centuries A.D. that covered much of Thailand (Brown 1996: 23). The culture of 'Dvāravatī' occupied an important place during the Sukhothai and Ayudhya periods in which Sri Sraddha, a Sukhothai monk, claimed descent after visiting Nakhon Pathom (Brown 1996: 22), the largest first millennium Mon Dvāravatī site in Thailand. It is thought that the Mon script was derived from the Pallava kingdom of Southern India based on its distinctive characteristics related to the Old Tamil script of which the earliest evidence has been dated to between the fourth and fifth centuries in Thailand. Emmanuel Guillon argues that based on differences in how the script was rendered in stone the language may have developed in several areas within the same time frame at around beginning of the first millennium. Guillon recognizes at least two areas from where it evolved that shows similarities to the Pallava script from Southern India and from the Lower Krsna River Valley in southeast India (Guillon 1999: 79).

The Mon Rāmaññadesa is thought to be derived from the ethnonym, Rmeñ or Rmañ, found in the sixth and eleventh centuries Khmer and Javanese inscriptions and on an Old Mon inscription dated to 1102 A.D. in Burma (Aung-Thwin 2005: 44). Failing to find a Mon inscription with the "Rmeñ" ethnic name in Lower Burma has led some to conclude (Aung-Thwin 2005) that the Mon did not have a settlement and consequently 'a Mon Buddhist

homeland' has no origins in Lower Burma prior to 1000 A.D. While few excavations have been done in Lower Burma, the same can be said for Thailand, even at the larger sites little is known about the proto-historic period on the Mon Dvāravatī (Mudar 1999: 19; O'Reilly 2007; Wales 1966: 40) and much has been left to speculation. Where Mon Dvāravatī artifacts have been found abundantly alongside Old Mon inscriptions, scholars have been hard pressed to find a reference to a Mon kingdom, this is probably due to the nature of how the mandalas were governed and the lack of systematic studies. Thus, it is difficult to determine the geographical limits of Dvāravatī or define the nature of their political, economic, and social organization, but archeological investigation has suggested it may not have been a centralized state with a capital in the Early Historic Period.

It is generally more accurate to examine the Mon Dvāravatī as a complex chiefdom with Mon being the dominant language and whose culture was composed of the "early Khmer, Tai, and Chinese cultural groups throughout Thailand" (O'Reilly 2007: 67). Merchants and artisans were free to move beyond their borders and, unlike their Chinese and East Asian counterparts, were not confined or restricted to a particular kingdom or an area with their people following a range of beliefs, which characterizes Southeast Asia in this particular time period (Brown 1996: 38).

If there was no strong political centralization among the cultural groups that shared symbolic systems, how were these early polities governed? A leader in a loosely governed "kingdom" was a "man [or woman] of prowess" (Wolters 1999: 19) that looked to his/her neighbors and their kin, and whose people looked to those who could "stabilize" the diversity of peoples who followed different forms of religions. An important feature of this type of social organization according to O.W. Wolters was that kinship was based on cognatic relations as opposed to a lineage system in which one claims descent down through the generations. Cognatic social organization deals with the "present" and a capable leader was one whose "soul stuff" could hold together the 'scattered' communities where the people travelled beyond their borders seeking alliances with their neighbors and trading opportunities (Brown 1996: 57; Wolters 1999:21). The Mon dharmacakras, or "Wheels of Law," of the Buddha's teaching, are circular three dimensional stone carvings found in Mon Dvāravatī sites. Their presence may represent in the public sphere a symbolic representation of a leader or group of leaders who could build an alliance and stabilize the interconnected mandalas of the Mon Dvāravatī kingdoms (Brown 1996: 184).

The "widespread distribution" of shared cultural features found within the mandala framework, i.e., religious works of art and language, of the early Southeast Asian societies including the Mon Dvāravatī does not reflect a highly centralized state (Renfrew 1986; Mudar 1999: 2) that would have produced large steles bearing inscriptions of kingdoms and their rulers. Rather than fixed kingdoms the archeological record reflects a pattern of fragmentation of ethnic groups or the overlapping of a multiplicity of linguistic groups (Moore 2007: 33). For instance, material cultural artifacts associated with both the Khmer and Dvāravatī were found side-by-side in the Mekong River Valley, in the northeast on the Khorat Plateau, and on Thailand's Peninsula in what Robert L. Brown calls a 'cultural interface' (Brown 1996).

According to a locational analysis study on the moated Dvāravatī settlements for the second half of the first millennium, sites on the central plain were of the same size and strength but towards the end of the first millennium the increasing size of the moated settlements demonstrate a pattern toward "a single regional economic system" (Mudar 1999: 1). The polities of the sixth century, however, can be analyzed according to Colin Renfrew's "peer polity network" (Renfrew 1996). This framework attempts to explain a type of social organization in which cultural groups shared symbolic systems, including writing, beliefs, and language (Mudar 20, 23: 1999; O'Reilly 2007: 75), a phenomenon sometimes classified as a 'mandala' type of social organization.

In the sixth century the sea level was considerably higher around the Gulf, where most of the Mon Dvāravatī moated settlements were located on the margins of the "Early Historic Bay of Bangkok" (Mudar 1999: 4). Classified as a regional and primary center, Nakhon Pathom had the most public buildings for this time period, viewed as a supra-regional center. It is thought that it was some sort of 'capital' that performed an administrative function, which had the higher population within the settlement hierarchy (Mudar 1999: 4). Karen Mudar theorizes that the higher population is indicated by the longer period of habitation of an earlier assemblage and is associated with another earlier site to the north called Uthong. Both sites are thought to have been in an area that controlled trade linked to India and perhaps even Sri Lanka. It is thought that the larger sites on the western side of the central plain were more influential due to their location on route to the Three Pagodas Pass to the west and the Mekong Delta communities to the east (Mudar 1999: 21; O'Reilly 2007). Mudar considered that these sites were linked to the early Mon mandala, Tunsun, ruled by Brahmans in the third century, according to the Chinese histories (O'Reilly 2007: 68; Mudar 1999: 21), and adds that trade with India could have been an important source of revenue for communities on the western side of the Bay of Bangkok.

Largely based on similarities of beads and small objects, another moated settlement near the shore of the Early Historic Bay of Bangkok, Dong Si Maha Phot, indicates a cultural relationship with the Beikthano site in Upper Burma. Researchers believe Dong Si Maha Phot was "a hub of east/west and north/south artistic relations" within the mandala political system (Brown 1996: 56). Not far from here is the Narai Cave which some suggest demonstrates a Sinhalese link as indicated by an Old Mon inscription dated to the sixth century which mentions the existence of a polity called Anurādhapura (thought to be in Thailand) that received donations. Anurādhapura was an ancient capital city in Sri Lanka, but the Sinhalese relation with Dvāravatī, however, has not been verified (Brown 1996: 55). Another Dvāravatī artifact link with India is the inscribed post-Pallava copper plate (O'Reilly 2007: 77) found at Uthong which shows a leader's name ending with the *varman* suffix. Uthong, a seventh or eighth century A.D. site, was one of the largest Mon Dvāravatī sites thought to be the Chinese recorded third century A.D. polity of Chin-lin [Golden Frontier] (Luce 1924: 143) that bordered Tunsun (O'Reilly 2007: 77). Inscribing copper was practiced widely in southern India but this is the first evidence for it in Southeast Asia (O'Reilly 2007: 77). Brown identified other names of so-called kingdoms

contemporary with Dvāravatī based on inscriptions: Lavapurā, Tangur, Śāmbūka, and Anurādhapura. A Chinese account from the eighth century indicates that these polities formed a "loose organization" of governance with "[no] systematized bureaucracy" and the king's personal name ended with the *varman* suffix, a political practice also used in the Cambodian and Cham royal families (Brown 1996: 55).

In contrast to identifying a place name, what is clear in the Chinese accounts from the third to the sixth century is their portrayal of a diversity of cults that lived side by side such as the Shiva and Vishnu groups who lived alongside the Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna Buddhists (Luce 1924: 4). Archeological research combined with the Chinese histories has provided some clues about the Mons early history. This has largely been based on the inscribed silver coins found in known Mon sites related to the Dvāravatī 'kingdom' found in 1943 at Nakhon Pathom which matched the Chinese accounts of the toponyms To-lo-po-ti, Tu-ho-po-ti, and Tu-ho-lo-ti, translated by Samuel Beal and Édouard Chavannes in the 1890s as Dvāravatī/Sanskrit that correspond to trade missions they sent to the Chinese courts in 638, 640, and 649 A.D. What Dvāravatī was, a culture, a kingdom, a trading network, a religious cult, a cultural milieu, has generated considerable debate on how it was governed: by a king, or, by both a king and a queen, as indicated by the insertion of "devī" (queen) on one of the silver medals, which reads as: "the meritorious act of the king and queen of Dvāravatī" (Brown 1996: 22). More silver medals were found in 1972 at Uthong and beyond the Menam Valley in the west-central region and as far north as Chai Nat Province (Brown 1996: 23), which suggest that groups moved about widely leading scholars to assume that while Dvāravatī power was limited it may have been a 'city' or an urban like settlement without a central area linked to other linguistic groups and city settlements/mandalas (O'Reilly 2007: 66). The Mon culture was correlated with the Dvāravatī silver medals decades after the conclusions reached by George Coedès in 1928, who identified the Mon as being responsible for the early Buddhist remains located west of the Khmer around the Bay of Bangkok (Wales 1966: 40) in central Thailand in the sixth and seventh centuries.

### **The sharing of ideas and the early Mon Dvāravatī sites**

The locational analysis demonstrated that there was no state level centralization in this early time period. This is also discerned in the art and inscriptions of the early Mon Dvāravatī and Khmer groups in Thailand (O'Reilly 2007: 73). Social organization was governed according to a chiefdom in what O.W. Wolters (1999) refers to as a *mandala*, a theoretical framework used to analyze a type of social organization in which cultural groups lived in settlements connected to other mandalas or city settlements without fixed borders.

While certain aspects found in the art were distinguishable that set them apart, they shared ideas and languages and applied Indian prototypes to their way of life. For example, on the Khorat Plateau and in the extreme northeast there is a cultural interface of Khmer, Dvāravatī, and Cham cultures dated to the eighth century (Brown 31).

We see linguistic groups active in a number of different locales. Early Mon Dvāravatī is traditionally associated with the Menam Chao Phraya plain and Theravada Buddhism while Khmer is commonly associated with Cambodia proper and Hinduism; however, both cultures interacted with each other and shared symbolic elements while their people crossed each other's borders. At the around the mid first millennium, researchers have shown that Khmer influence was present not only in central Thailand, but on the Isthmus of Kra, Champa in Vietnam, and may have even reached as far as the Gulf of Martaban and Beikthano in Upper Burma (Briggs 1951: 13; Moore 2007: 165).

Using a just a few examples from Robert L. Brown's (1996) *The Dvāravatī Wheels of the Law . . .*, one discerns a "non-exclusive nature of religious beliefs" in the Phra Ngam cave reliefs of a hierarchy of three religions being worshiped together: Buddhism, Hinduism, and Brahmanism. In the relief, Buddhism is given a slighter higher eminence; however, the Vishnu, Shiva, and the Brahman figures each clearly represent deities of "power and beauty" (Brown 30). Other forms of art reflect distinct local traditions that suggest "a lack of centralized power" (O'Reilly 2007: 73). Along with the presence of Mon dharmacakras found in southern Thailand, the Dvāravatī-style art found in Nakhon Si Thammarat, Chaiya, and Satingpra is associated with the Khmer and Malay polities on the Kra Isthmus. Other examples from the Kra Isthmus illustrate an array of cultural and religious influences including Buddhism, Hinduism, and Brahmanical beliefs. As well, the distribution of votive tablets, small terracotta Buddha and Stupa images, suggest overland routes between Winka near Sittaung and Mokti in Dawei, Lower Burma, which are similar to those found Yarang in Pattani, Thailand, that date from the sixth to the seventh century (Moore 2007: 198).

Another example of decentralization is seen in the inscriptions of languages from northeast Thailand found on terracotta votive tablets which reflect both Mon and Khmer influences and while Pāli is commonly found associated with the Mon language, and Sanskrit the Khmer, the Indic languages were not confined to either culture (Brown 38). From the same area, Brahmanism and Buddhism is found in the Mon and preAngkorian script on semas (boundary markers) and whose iconography of the 'cakra' is similar to the Mon dharmacakras.

A "shared cultural response" is also seen with the Pyu and Arakan culture in Burma. Studies on pottery recovered from sites in Upper Burma show similarities between India, the Pyu, and Dvāravatī. Sprinkler-necked vessels with flanged rim-tops recovered from the Pyu sites are similar to the Indian pottery, while the spouts with a pouchlike bulge recovered from the Dvāravatī sites in Thailand at U-Thong and Kok Charoen reveal similarities to the Pyu pottery vessels. Based on the evidence recovered, Pamela Gutman believes that the technique of glazing pottery could have been practiced by both the Pyu and Dvāravatī cultures (Gutman 2002: 109). The Pyu and Mon also practiced some of the same inscriptional methods and cited the same Buddhist texts such as the Patisambhidāmagga and Kuddaka-nikāya dated to between the fifth and sixth centuries (Skilling 2005). They both did engravings on metal and stone and deposited their inscriptions in caityas, but Dvāravatī also illustrated verses from the Buddhist texts on

pillars and on the dharmacakras, Buddhist Wheels of Law. One such inscription in Pali occurs on a Dvāravatī dharmacakra quoting the Buddha's realization of the chain of causation, a central tenet in Buddhist mythology that is also seen in the Pyu inscriptions (Brown 1996: 119). Other archeological evidence showing an early cultural relationship prior to Pagan is seen at the Lokanada pagoda near an ancient wharf on the Irrawaddy that reveals terracotta and stucco decorations identical to fragments found at Sriksetra and very similar to those in Dvāravatī (Gutman 2002: 169).

A royal connection has also been noted between the Arakan and Mon Dvāravatī mandalas depicted on both the Mon and Arakan abhiseka plaques whose iconography is similar to the Mon dharmacakras that symbolize royal authority (Tiffin 2002: 52-59). Another iconic link to the dharmacakras and a royal familial connection between Mon Dvāravatī and a Cambodia polities are the designs inscribed on the rim of the Mon dharmacakras which could represent the golden rays of the sun. Brown theorizes that this was a feature shared among the different groups related to a royal tradition. The "golden rays" may be related to the "soul stuff" of a leader practiced by the polities recorded by the Chinese, including Ko-lo, Chin-lin, Funan, Panpan, and Tunsun, which were all described as having the same cultural customs. According to Robert L. Brown, evidence for this insight of the "golden rays" is discerned in the descriptions of thrones written by the Chinese visiting Ch'ih-t'u, thought to be located on the Malay Peninsula and a Cambodian kingdom of the same time period. Ma Tuan-lin, a Chinese pilgrim in a separate visit observed how each kingdom had a disc-like structure mounted behind the king's throne with gold rays in the form of flames rising above it, as described by Ma at Ch'ih-t'u:

*Behind the throne. . . is a sort of large niche made of five kinds of aromatic woods. . . at the back of which is suspended a disc with rays of gold in the form of flames* (Brown 1999: 184).

To sum up, while state development can be recognized with the Khmer and Cham Hindi kingdoms after the eighth century, regarding the Mon Dvāravatī, their social organization did not develop in the same way (Brown 1996:13). In the early first millennium the consciousness of ethnicity likely did not exist as strongly as it did after the ninth century (Brown 1996:39) when we begin to see an ethnic homeland mentioned in the Mon and Khmer stone inscriptions, at about the time, according to Karen Mudar's conclusions outlined above, that the Mon settlements were becoming more of a centralized polity at the end of the first millennium. Peter Bellwood writes that cultural groups probably did have a common origin, language, territory, in the prehistoric period but their ethnicity was a "decidedly fluid" cultural phenomenon (Bellwood 1997: 260). It can be argued that Mon identity was transformed into a political unit after prolonged contact with other migrating groups accompanied by increasing conflict when we begin to see more Mon inscriptions after the ninth century particularly with regard to pressure from the Tibeto-Burman and the Hindu Khmer groups who were developing monolithic and centralized kingdoms during this time (Bellwood 1997: 260; Wolters 1999: 21).

The Southeast Asian cultures in the Early Historic Period adopted the Indian prototypes to their own "language, texts, religions and arts . . . with tremendous internal variety" (Brown 1996: 52). People were not strictly Hindu or Buddhists and lived alongside other groups sharing the same symbolic systems as revealed (Renfrew 1986: 2) in their Hindu and Buddhist iconography and in their languages. Consequently, locating the whereabouts of a Mon Buddhist homeland called Rāmaññadesa in Lower Burma even if there was enough culture material available on the Mon's early history risks falling into a grand narrative and quite possibly is irrelevant since one would have to take into consideration the diversity of cultures and religions found not only among the Austro-Asiatics groups, but the early Tai and Tibeto-Burman groups who also made up the population in this time period (Aung-Thwin 2005; Howard 2009). A 'Buddhist kingdom' in Lower Burma and Thailand in the Early Historic Period was an eclectic mix of religions, thus identifying a "Buddhist kingdom" restricts analysis within an absolutist framework which assumes that social entities vied for political dominance that divided political, religious, and social differences between the cultural groups (Olsen 2005: 3). The evidence proves otherwise, syncretism shaped social organization in the proto-historic period, especially in Lower Burma and Thailand. For example, Buddha images in the Dvāravatī style such as those found in Si Thep were "made in a Hindu style" suggesting to Brown that Southeast Asian societies were "particularly diversified and tolerant" (1996:57).

### **Three Pagodas Pass, a Dvāravatī Gate**

Mon Dvāravatī sites are found in association with the Menam Chao Phraya and the maritime settlements on the margins of the Bay of Bangkok as well as in peninsular southern Thailand (Vallibhotama 1992) and were possibly linked to Mon settlements in Lower Burma as suggested by Elizabeth Moore (2007), Pamela Gutman (2002), and Donald Stadtner (2008). As mentioned above, Nakhon Pathom was situated near the Bay of Bangkok shoreline linked to the valley river Kwai Noi (Meklong Gweno) and Three Pagodas Pass. This area has been recognized by archeologists as being situated for long distance trade and viewed (Mudar 1999; Briggs 1945) as a cultural relay route connected to those in Lower Burma. From this it seems reasonable to infer that Burma's peninsula (Coedès 1968: 28) was very much occupied not only by Mon/Khmer groups, but the evidence indicates a diverse population occupied the area as seen in the material cultural recovered from the sites at Thatôn and Dawei documented by Elizabeth Moore (2007).

Rivers and small creeks were used to get around from region to region not only for communication but for riverine activities in the hunting and trading of turtles and other freshwater creatures that would have spurred settlement and movement along the rivers at very early dates perhaps for millennia (Pookajorn 1985). Associated with the Mae Klong River basin are important prehistoric and early Mon Dvāravatī sites most notably Ban Kao and Pong Tük. At the head of the Khwae Noi ("lesser branch"), TPP is one of the most easily reached routes that lead into Burma (Woodward 2005:23) crossed daily by Burmese migrants and traders. Prehistoric sites are strategically located to TPP from the upper



reaches of the Kwai Yai River (larger branch) and illustrates an interregional network of trade as indicated by the recovery of a Dong Son bronze drum alongside the remains of human skeletons found in wooden boat coffins from Ongbah cave near TPP dated to the last four centuries B.C. (Shaw 2002: 447) demonstrating that goods travelled great distances (O'Reilly 2007: 39).

Today the routes from the Thai-Burma border is crossed daily by the Burmese including the Mon who had often walked to Ye from the Thai border during the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, when Thailand was booming and international trade was restricted in Burma during Ne Win's rule and his Burma's Way to Socialism policy. It takes three days on foot paths to reach Ye from TPP, which has for centuries been a crossroads for trade, refuge, and war. The Burmese invaded Thailand through here and the Mon in turn fled from the Burmese invasions in the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries (Guillon 1999). This reality of traveling to Sangkhlaburi from central Thailand was confirmed during the Second World War when supplies were transported up rivers for POWs building the Kwai Noi Bridge in Kanchanaburi province. Geographers drawing up maps observed that villages "at least one, called by a variety of names (spelling variations of Sangkhlaburi) in the upper course of the Gweno... [were] dependent before the railway was built entirely on river communication" (Fisher 1947: 8). One can imagine this scenario 2,000 years ago in which goods and people travelled on the rivers and then switched to bullock carts or rode elephants while on route to Tenasserim or the Gulf of Martaban. One route to Moulmein was down the Ataran River from TPP while another was through the 'valleys and passes' across the Tenasserim Mountains into Mergui which is viewed by scholars as the most frequented route from and into the Gulf of Thailand in ancient times (Van der Meulen 1975: 7; Briggs 1945: 99).

Early Mon Dvāravatī sites also include those from Ku Bua in Ratchaburi Province near to Mergui/Tenasserim which attests to this region's importance in international trade as shown in the Scythian like figures possibly identified as merchants dressed in pointed hats which have been recovered from here (Lyons 1965: 52-56). Elizabeth Lyons (1965) suggests that the figures were Jewish traders. They possibly reflect a diversity of peoples from the Mediterranean who had settled in southern India: the Roman merchants active in commerce, the Greeks who were guards and carpenters for the Chola Kingdom, and a Jewish community who settled in Malabar (south western India). These groups may have ventured further east migrating to China in the first century possibly through Lower Burma and Thailand (Warmington 1974: 59).

Moulmein was linked to central Thailand and the regional Mon Dvāravatī mandalas, Nakhon Sawan and Uthai Thani, in the area of Sawankhalok that became a major pottery distribution center in the fourteenth century from where goods were transported on rivers to the Gulf of Martaban for transshipment to India, Arabia, and beyond (Gutman 2002: 112). Mergui and Dawei on the peninsula of Lower Burma is in direct sea route to southern India and Sri Lanka that faces the Bay of Bengal and could have been linked to India's eastern coastline. The Mon culture is thought to have received its religion, literature, and the Pallava script from Southern India and Sri Lanka (Pan Hla 1958: 67). At the beginning of the first millennium, Ptolemy's *Geography* records India's Alosygni and

Sopatma ports on the Bay of Bengal in which vessels may have landed after stopping over on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, but they may have touched any point along India's eastern coast.

### *Tunsun*

A place name mentioned in the Chinese text, the *Liang-shu* compiled in the seventh century is Tunsun which "lies on a rugged coast 3,000 li on the southern frontier of Funan" and was thought to be a polity or group of settlements that the Chinese say was a vassal to Funan, the early Khmer polity. P'ong-Tük, a prehistoric site documented by George Coedès (1928: 195-209), was thought to be associated with the place name, Tunsun, that he believed was an early Mon Dvāravatī site where a band of Greek musicians passed through on their way to China in 120 A.D. followed by a Roman Embassy delegation in 166 A.D. (Briggs 1945: 98-107). This site is adjacent to an Iron Age site, Ban Don Ta Phet that Charles Higham says preceded Dvāravatī which was linked to the Gulf of Martaban and ports in India (Bellwood 2004: 59). Tunsun is believed to be one of the earliest of the trading entrepôts and was a trans-peninsular route that existed in the second century A.D. (Briggs 1951: 23). It was first recorded by the Chinese in the third century and like all polities within this timeframe it is difficult to verify their sociological nature, their precise location, and the political limits of their domain. However, Tunsun, according to its description was divided up into frontiers ruled by five kings that illustrate its connection to trade:

"There are five kings, all subject to Fu-nan. The eastern frontier of Tunsun communicates with Chia-chou (Ton-kin: Vietnam); the western frontier connects with India, Ngan-his (Parthia) and other countries beyond the frontier. There is a brisk interchange of trade to and fro. The reason is that Tunsun curves round and enters the sea over 1,000 li." (Luce 1924: 147)

In another Chinese text, the *Tai p'ing yü lan*, records that the king of Tunsun is called "K'un-lun" and recorded the presence of a colony of South Asians which may have been part of the Suvannabhumi (Golden Land) of Indian migration: "In this country there are 500 families of Hu<sup>4</sup> of India, two Fo-t'u<sup>5</sup> and more than a thousand Brahmans of India" (Luce 1924: 149). Its description of being "beyond the Gulf of Thailand" could well mean that it had commercial ties to areas around Mergui/Tenasserim in Lower Burma. The etymology of the name Tunsun may refer to the number five (*sun*) or (*msun*) in Old Mon in which Tunsun was ruled by five kings or cities, which fits its description above by the

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<sup>4</sup> According to Gordon Luce's footnotes quoted from Paul Pelliot: "This term, Hu, which in a restricted sense means Central Asia to the exclusion of the Indians, includes them in a broad sense. The distinction drawn between these Hu and the Brahmans indicates perhaps that merchants are referred to" (Luce 1924: 149).

<sup>5</sup> According to Paul Pelliot, "Fo-t'u means sometimes the Buddha, sometimes a stupa; the expression might signify a Buddhist, but the construction is abnormal and the number scarcely admissible" (Luce 1924: 149)

Chinese (Guillon 1999: 70) and is thought to have been a comprised of proto-Mon speakers (Wheatley 1961: 20).

Elizabeth Moore (2007: 232) believes Tunsun is located in Tenasserim due to the fact that it has a rugged coast in agreement with Gordon Luce while Dougald O'Reilly (2007: 51) suggests that it may be on the northern part of the Malaysian peninsula or near P'ong-Tük in the area of Three Pagodas Pass in Kanchanaburi Province, a fifth century A.D. archeological site that preceded Dvāravatī. George Coedès (1968: 39), Paul Wheatley (1961: 20), and Michel Jacq-Hergoualc'h (2002) suggest that it was on the Isthmus of Kra according to its description by the Chinese as being "situated on an ocean stepping stone" which implies that the area was used to cross from one ocean to another. Although it was described as being 370 kilometers beyond the Gulf of Thailand its center has not yet identified (Luce 1924: 146-149). It is even possible that Tunsun was linked to Thatôn described as a meeting place "in communication with Chiao-chou (Tong-king, northern Vietnam), the western with T'ien-chu (India) and An-hsi (Parthia)" (Wheatley 1961:16). It is quite reasonable to assume a cultural connection to the Indian Buddhist and Brahman immigrant communities that lived within the indigenous settlements who traded with each other and traveled Burma's coast to reach the early port of Tamralipti on the Lower Ganges or set off due west across the Bay of Bengal in open sea vessels from Lower Burma which included the Gulf of Martaban.

The Chinese describe Tunsun as an entrepôt where "countries beyond the frontier [who] come and go in pursuit of trade" (Luce 1924: 146). This description fits in with the mandala framework discussed above in which polities were connected across the region likely to include Lower Burma as well as south and central Thailand. The Parthians or An-hsi were involved in the aromatic trade and served as trading intermediaries (Freeman 2003: 75) between China and India whose Scythian capital of Minnagara was connected to Bharuch (Barygaza) on the mouth of the Narmada in northwest India. They would have left from their base at Bharuch on the west coast of India and then travelled the Paethana and Tagara land routes through the heart of India to reach one of India's eastern ports on the Ganges Delta or the Andhra coastline.

## **Conclusion**

In this essay, I touched upon only a few common examples of the early Mon settlements to show that they were not part of a "single political system" (Wolters 1999: 17), but shared linguistic, political, religious and commercial contacts among themselves and with other linguistic groups. More importantly to this discussion, this type of political and social organization is not easily identified in the archeological record. Determining the geographical origin of the Mons or any cultural group that live in a wet and humid tropical environment near the coastal areas and along a river's floodplain in this early time period is a complex undertaking if not an impossible task given that few excavations have been done in Lower Burma or even in western Thailand along Burma's eastern and southern border areas.

Unlike the Khmer and the Pyu who constructed monolithic structures, the Mons political and social evolution remains indistinct and the extent of their political domains have not been clearly defined. The Mon groups were not confined to either a Buddhist or Hindu kingdom located in one central area in Lower Burma or central Thailand. The Mons lived alongside other cultural groups, the Khmer, Arakanese, Malay, Cham, Tai, and the Pyu, who themselves were diverse in nature and who shared more among themselves than they did with the Indians (Brown 1996: 186). Mon Dvāravatī presence in the form of art style has been found over a wide area which strongly illustrates the presence of more than one Mon "kingdom" with several cultural relay settlements located on strategic routes in west central Thailand linked to Lower Burma in which merchants, artisans, and leaders moved beyond their borders to improve their social position at home and build opportunities for their people.

The Mon dharmacakras are carved stone Wheels of Law which may illustrate this "mandala" like social organization in which a leader is able to garner support and build alliances across the borders of the settlements (Wolters 1999: 17-21). Sarah Tiffin and Martin Stuart-Fox associate motifs on the abhiseka plaques in Burma with the Mon dharmacakras studied by Robert L. Brown and provide a perfect example of how cultural groups shared iconography. This led to a period of political and socio-religious development that in turn affected how languages evolved which occurred over several centuries, kingdoms rose and fell and lasted as long as the leader did. A major feature of Buddhism is the rich variety of religious cults found alongside Hinduism, Brahmanism, and animist beliefs. Hence, the term "Buddhist kingdom" is a double contradiction that implies a unified unit which may not be the best way to describe the enormous diversity of peoples who followed more than one form of religion (Olsen 2005). By way of comparison with the proto-Khmer homeland, prior to the ninth century, if the Mons had a kingdom called Rāmaññadesa they likely did not refer to themselves as being part of an all encompassing kingdom anymore than the Khmer called their ancient kingdom Kambujadesa in the early first millennium (Briggs 1951:15).

Furthermore, patterns of migration between India and Burma are seen in recent genetic studies which have indicated that the ancestors to the Austro-Asiatic language family originated in India with migrations occurring through the Northeastern Indian corridor to Southeast Asia demonstrating a considerable time depth (Kumar 2007). The Mon language belongs to the Mon-Khmer language subgroup that forms the largest branch of the Austro-Asiatic language family consisting of over a 150 languages thought to be among the earliest of the indigenous populations who practiced agriculture for millennia prior to the Common Era in Southeast Asia (Bellwood 1997: 267). They had a continuous distribution over eastern India and most of mainland Southeast Asia, including the Negritos of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, and the Senoi of Malaysia and northern Sumatra, who speak a dialect related to Mon-Khmer. This pattern of distribution matches the genetic studies which show two waves of migration: one through the Northeastern Indian corridor and the other, this time composed of the Mon-Khmer groups, across the Bay of Bengal to India via the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and southern Burma during

the Neolithic period (Kumar 2007). From these astonishing results where could one identify a Mon, or even a Khmer, homeland?

Finally, Lower Burma must have been part of the Bay of Bengal international trade connected to India, but this has largely been ignored by writers who have not addressed the huge geographical gap which would have existed if it had been otherwise between the regions of Lower Burma, India, and Thailand and the cultural groups that lived across this whole region which were linked side-by-side in the "cultural interface areas" at the beginning of the first millennium. While Mon Dvāravatī shared cultural traits with their immediate neighbors they also likely shared commercial contacts (Jacq-Hergoualc'h 2002) with the Indians, Chinese, and perhaps even Greco-Roman traders. The earliest Old Mon inscriptions dated to the end of the sixth century were found in the west central area of Thailand at Nakhon Pathom which is in direct route to the Gulf of Martaban and Tenasserim/Mergui, Lower Burma (Guillon 1999: 79).

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