NOTES

FIVE NINETEENTH-CENTURY BURMESE BRONZES

In recent years the Bangkok art market has become inundated with bronze Burmese Buddha images, although only a decade earlier Burmese art was rarely seen. As increasing numbers of Burmese bronzes reach Bangkok, many obstacles emerge for scholars as they try to place the figures into a chronological and geographic framework. Basically the problem stems from the absence of a definitive history of Burmese art of the post-Pagan period, from the thirteenth century A.D. This unfortunate gap in southeast Asian historical knowledge may be partially explained by the closed-door policy governing relations between Burma and the rest of the world—even today it is difficult for foreigners to study the stylistic traditions of the various ethnic groups in situ because of the restrictions the Burmese government has placed since 1962 on travel and residence. The best available option in attempting to establish a framework for the post-Pagan period is to analyze the bronzes with datable inscriptions which have already left Burma.

In March 1977 two inscribed Burmese bronzes came to my attention (figures 1 and 2). Long before their subsequent purchase by the Australian National Gallery, Canberra, I became interested in these Buddha images for several reasons: (a) the dealer originally dated the images to the seventeenth century A.D. making them two very early Burmese sculptures actually carrying inscriptions; (b) supposedly the bronzes came from the Shan States. If this were true, then they would be quite rare, for Mr. A. B. Griswold has stated in a private communication that he knows of only two dated images from the Shan States, and both bear sixteenth-century inscriptions; (c) the Buddha images display a bluish-green patina which only occurs on bronzes which have been buried for a long time. In Burma it is quite unusual to find excavated sculpture; most images are found in temples and their relic chambers, simply tarnished or perhaps lacquered or covered in gold leaf.

Stylistically figure 1 and figure 2 are quite similar; in fact, they are so alike I believe they could have been produced in the same workshop, if not by the same artisan. The bluish-green bronzes measure approximately 38 centimeters tall, including an angled base marginally lower in the front than the rear. The heads are broad ovals, with vertically marked headband lines dividing the forehead curls and the lotus bud finials. Raised, double eyebrows arch above the almond-shaped eyes, while the broadly formed nostrils nearly reach the outer margins of the slightly curving lips. A boneless quality of the bodies is readily apparent in the foreshortened armpits, attenuated arms and elongated hands. The right hands are frontally posed with four fingers of equal length pointing downward in bhumiśparamudrā. The images sit in tightly locked diamond positions, the vajrasana, with the left hands supported underneath by small bronze lumps. The horizontality of this seated pose is accentuated by the smooth and flattened slab-like feet.
Both Buddha images wear monastic dress which is raised and decorated with a double line motif indicating the hems and edges of the robes. The upper hems of the garments pass diagonally across the chests, with the flaps of the robes reaching below the waists. The lateral edges cross the ankles and flow downward along the sloping bases. The images sit upon double lotus thrones having sharply constricted waists and indented tiers. The banding of these tiers serves to emphasize the horizontality of the images already created by the headband lines, the eyes, the bases of the noses, the left hands, the spread of the laps and the slab feet. With the ushnisha as the pinnacle, it seems as if each Buddha had been conceived as a series of interlocking triangles with each successive horizontal line acting as a subsidiary base.

The lower tiers of the indented bases carry Burmese inscriptions. These were translated by Mr. Aye Maung, a Burmese lawyer and former monk. He stated that the script is perfectly legible, and occasional archaic or misspelt words appear. Two epigraphists from the National Library, Bangkok, have verified the accuracy of his work. The inscriptions read as follows.

**INSCRIPTION ON FIGURE 1**

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*Phonetic pronunciation*

Thākarit 1172 kason lá kwè näy kyay sin dü gó thoon ywāy pyi thi waw si thà thamee khinbōon dà zu kaung hmū neikban sû lu nát thà du khawzaythaw.

*Translation*

In the year 1172, Burmese Era, on the perfect waning moon day of the month of Kason, this image was moulded. By this meritorious deed, Wawsi and members of his family prayed for Nirvana, and may all humanity and nat say 'sadhu' in recognition of this act of meritmaking.

**INSCRIPTION ON FIGURE 2**

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1 The date is equivalent to mid-May 1810 A.D.
Phonetic pronunciation

Thākarit 1173 takū lah bye gyaw sê yet nāy dwin shin einda thā thamee maung hnan dá zu doh gā kyay a chein 30 hnin sin dū daw thōon ywāy py̱ thi dī bū ā hnin neikban sū.

Translation

In the year 1173, Burmese Era, on the tenth post-waxing moon day of the month of Tagu, this image was moulded out of 30 viss of brass or bronze by Shin Einda, wife and members of his family, and they prayed that they would be able to tread over the correct path to Nirvana for this donation.

According to the two translations, the bronze images date to the early nineteenth century A.D., rather than to the seventeenth century as previously ascribed by the dealer. This later date in no way detracts from the historic value of the images. In fact, it demonstrates that fine casting techniques in Burma survived into the early nineteenth century. Of course it is possible that these bronzes are seventeenth-century images with nineteenth-century inscriptions. I spoke with several Burmese monks at Wat Don, Bangkok, who said that on occasion old images retrieved from ancient ruins, or found inside larger venerated images, might be rededicated and newly inscribed at a later date. With regard to figures 1 and 2 this is quite unlikely, since both inscriptions state that the Buddhas were moulded on a particular day, not just given in merit on a chosen day. This effectively negates the possibility that the stated donors inscribed earlier images. Furthermore, I thoroughly examined the inscriptions and the simple etchings on the monastic robes with a magnifying glass. On each image the engravings were equally worn and were approximately the same depth. Assuming the artisan completed the robe decorations shortly after casting, then the inscriptions must be assigned to the same period as the moulding dates.

Another dated bronze Buddha image (figure 3), which has also been recently purchased by the Australian National Gallery, arrived in Bangkok some months after I had discovered figures 1 and 2. Though considerably larger, the third image recalls the stylistic tradition of the first two. A comparison reveals a similarity in the simple bulbous ushnisha, the tiny orthodox curls, the headband line, the broadened oval facial shape with the highly arched eyebrows over elongated and raised almond eyes, a broad nose with a flattened nostril region overshadowing a diminutive and foreshortened mouth, and the boneless quality of the bodies. Furthermore, the images wear similar monastic dress, draped in the 'open' mode with the right shoulder exposed and the cloth covering the left arm sweeping down over the hip. Here, too, the legs are locked in a tightened lotus position, with slab-like feet resting on the lap. The single, tiered throne bears the following inscription.

2 The date is equivalent to mid-April 1811 A.D.
Figure 1. Burmese bronze Buddha image, dated 1810. Recently purchased by the Australian National Gallery, Canberra.

Figure 2. Burmese bronze Buddha image, dated 1811. Recently purchased by the Australian National Gallery, Canberra.

Figure 3. Burmese bronze Buddha image, dated 1807. Recently purchased by the Australian National Gallery, Canberra.
Figure 4. Burmese bronze Buddha image, dated 1852. Private collection, Bangkok.

Figure 5. Burmese bronze Buddha image, dated 1856. Private collection, Bangkok.
Phonetic pronunciation
Thakarit 1168, tawthalin la sun lay yit sa nay nay moon lwe ahecain dwin, kyay sindu daw thun waw yee thi. Kyay paung ah khwet chauk se shi thee. Padon min tayer let htet, thein baw taung ner, pein yay ngok ywa, zaydawun kyaung, dagar baung kaung hmii, neikban si thardii. Tharthanar thakarit kër 2350 yah byee.

Translation
In the year 1168, Burmese Era, in the afternoon, on the fourth day of the month of Tawthalin, this brass image was moulded. The total weight of the brass used was 60 viss. The image was donated during the reign of King Badon at Zeda-wun Monastery, near the village of Pein Yay Ngoke, on Mount Thein Baw, and they prayed for Nirvana. Let all say ‘sadhu’ for the merit. In terms of the Buddhist Era the year was 2350.

Not only is figure 3 stylistically similar to the first set of bronzes, but the 1807 date also reveals that it belongs to the same chronological period. In determining the geographic provenance, however, we have an entirely new problem. The Bangkok dealer maintains that figure 1 and figure 2 come from an unknown excavation in the Shan States, yet the inscriptions make no mention of any geographic area. A possible clue to their origin may be found in the names of the donors. The inscription on figure 1 cites a man called Wawsi and his family who pray for Nirvana. In Burmese the name ‘Waw’ means ‘palanquin’, and ‘Si’

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3 The year is written as a combination of five numbers, 1160 and 8. Often artisans were not highly educated, and this unusual manner of writing the year merely reflects a lack of formal education.

4 The date is equivalent to the beginning of September 1807 A.D.

5 The date for the Buddhist era is written as 2000, 300, 50.
means ‘drum’. The two words are never found combined, although it is conceivable that another ethnic group living in Burma might use the two terms to derive a new name. I have spoken to several Burmese who believe the name Wawsi must come from the non-Burmese tribes in northern Burma. Others insist it has a Shan intonation. The name Shin Einda inscribed on figure 2 also suggests a Shan or a northern tribal origin for the bronzes. The term ‘Shin’ is a Burmese title given to monks and royalty. It is a title of respect, and when applied to a royal personage, Shin means ‘lord’ or ‘master’. In the fifteenth century there was a Shan queen named Bohmai, as well as a Mon princess called Lady Shin Saw Bu. With respect to Burmese monks, the title Shin is given to men when they enter the monkhood. Later when they leave the order, they remove the Shin title, and revert to their given names. However, this is not the case with the Shans. Usually the Shans retain the Shin title even after they leave the monkhood. It signifies that their lives have been enriched and altered by having been monks. As a married man who still carried the Shin title, Shin Einda could not possibly have been a monk nor could he have been Burmese. Most likely he was Shan.

The inscription on figure 3 contains the names of a monastery, a village and a mountain. The Zeda-wun Monastery is on Mount Thein Baw near the village of Pein Yay Ngoke. ‘Zeda-wun’ comes from Pali and is usually the name given to any monastery built by a royal personage. Therefore, since the term is non-specific, it offers no insight to the geographic origin of the bronze. Possibly Mount Thein Baw refers to a mountain located near the present town of Thebaw in the Northern Shan States. This area is just north of Mandalay, and at the time the bronze was cast came under the jurisdiction of the king of Badon, King Bodawpaya. The village Pein Yay Ngoke means ‘submerged yam root’. So far I have been unable to locate this village on any Burmese map. Of course, there is always the possibility that the village has been long abandoned or has changed its name since the nineteenth century.

Two other dated Buddhas from the nineteenth century also suggest that many of the Burmese bronzes entering Bangkok have a Shan origin (figures 4 and 5). Though cruder and heavier in form, both figures 4 and 5 recall the same stylistic tradition as figures 1 and 2, with similar lotus bud protuberances, high arched eyebrows, locked lotus positions, and double lotus bases. The final tiers of the thrones in figures 4 and 5 bear Burmese inscriptions, which are reproduced below.

**INSCRIPTION ON FIGURE 4**

\[\text{Inscription Image}\]
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Phonetic pronunciation

Than karit 1214 khū yā pā thi. Dā nā ku tho shin san may loke dā zū kaung hmū neikban sū āhman nat lu thādu khaw bā ze thaw.

Translation

Received on 1214, the Burmese Era. The merit-makers are the San May Loke group. They pray for the rightful reward of Nirvana. Let nats and humans say ‘sadhu’.

INSCRIPTION ON FIGURE 5

Phonetic pronunciation

Than karit 1218 nadaw 1a san 4 yet boke dā hū nē nay moon tē āchein dwin jaysindu daw go thoon yway pyee thi. Sayā dagā shin san līn mayā thāthāmee dāzū kaung hmū neikban su.

Translation

In the year 1218, Burmese Era, on Wednesday the fourth waxing-moon day of the month of Nadaw, exactly at noon this brass image was done. It is the merit of the teacher, donor Shin San, wife and children. They pray for the reward of Nirvana. Let all the universe say ‘sadhu’ for this deed.

The inscription on figure 4 alludes to a Shan provenance again. The name of the donor was San May Loke, a meaningless combination of words to the Burmese. ‘San’ means ‘example’; ‘May’ refers to a ‘beautiful maiden’, and ‘Loke’ is the verb ‘to do’. Together the name means “an example of a beautiful maiden [doing, or done]”. Doing or done what? This makes no sense, although San May alone would be a suitable name for a girl since it means “an example of a beautiful maiden”. Like the name Wawsi inscribed on figure 1, San May Loke is not a Burmese name. Possibly it is Shan, for the Shans are quite fond of the term San and prefer three-syllable names. With regards to figure 5, a Shan origin is also

6 The year is written as a combination of words and figures. It reads as one thousand, two hundred, and fourteen. The date is equivalent to 1852 A.D.
7 The year is written as a combination of words and figures. It reads as one thousand, two hundred and eighteen. This date is equivalent to 1856 A.D.
8 Nadaw is the ninth month in the Burmese calendar, and is equivalent to December.
possible. Again the name San appears, and in combination with the highly respected title Shin used by Burmese monks. Several Burmese have told me that Shin used together with the name San is very odd indeed. Shin alone as a title of respect is possible; San alone is feasible, but the combination is unusual. Furthermore, Shin San was married because the image was donated by Shin San, wife and children. He could not have been a Burmese monk and still retain the title of Shin, while donating the Buddha in the name of his wife and children, too. Only Shans retain their former monk's title. Shin San could not have been Burmese. Most likely he was Shan.

With the growing amount of Burmese sculpture entering Bangkok, it becomes an increasingly complicated task for scholars to understand the history of post-Pagan Burmese art. Not being able to study works of art in situ, scholars must rely on images with datable inscriptions to establish a chronological and geographic framework. The five dated Burmese bronze images included in this study may serve as specific reference points in further research.

Nancy H. Dowling

Boulder, Colorado
U.S.A.