

AN INTERPRETATION OF BURMESE CAPITAL CITIES AND LANDSCAPES

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The Burmese capital cities of the ancient Pyu up to that of the Konbaung dynasty at Mandalay had similar characteristics: they were enclosed by an outer wall with twelve gates at the cardinal points and a moat where the palaces of the kings were placed at the center. The Burmese capital cities were different from those of the Mon and the Tai, who usually placed the principal temples at the center, and their cities were more organic in shape rather than geometric as those of the later cities in Burma, such as Mandalay. I attempt to read the invisible text under these Burmese capital cities by linking it with myth, Buddhist cosmology and the Burmese supernatural world.

Duncan in The City as Text: The Politics of Landscape Interpretation in the Kandyan Kingdom states that landscape is one of the central elements in a cultural system, which acts as a signifying system through which a social system is communicated, reproduced, experienced, and explored. (p. 17) Raymond Williams views culture as not only the signifying system but also as texts which lend themselves to multiple readings. (quoted in Duncan: 15, 16) Thus we can use the landscape of the Burmese capital cities as a text because landscape is "a story....[people] tell themselves about themselves." (Geertz quoted in Duncan: 19)

I found the Burmese king was a *bodhisatta*, a *dharmaraja*, *mahasammata*, *cakravartin*, *sakka*, an ancestral *nat* and a *kammaraja*. (Michael Aung Thwin, 1981: 57) Michel Aung Thwin asserts that the

Burmese capital cities, where the palace of the king was placed at the center, represented three centers; the Tavatimsa heaven on the summit of Mount Meru; the world of of *nat*; and the Jampudipa, the earth where humans reside. The Burmese capital cities were thus associated with heaven, the supernatural world, and earth and perceived as the source of sacred space, sacred time, and sacred energy. (1987: 88) The Burmese capital cities had a close relation to political power. The capital cities represented the political power of the kings which originated from the Buddhist cosmology and myths.

Buddhist cosmology is a myth, a form of religious expression that tries to explain history, in particular the history of the king, his political power, and social classes. Myth is expected to explain events, which are not clear, in particular political power. Ricoeur says myth is understood as a narrative of the origin which took place other than that of every reality whereas history is a narrative of recent events, which are further in the past but are situated in human time. (p. 273) So the transition from myth, Buddhist cosmology, to history of the Burmese kings extends the time from the beginning to that of recent events and makes it real.

Because Buddhist cosmology and myth that supported Burmese political power were reflected in the Burmese capital cities and their landscapes, the capital cities can thus be read as texts that explain the political ideas of the Burmese kings. The capital cities were the stories that the powerful people, the kings, told about their social relations with the community and with divines. The capital cities represented landscape of a higher order and a narrative of the world of the gods, which was thought to be a real world with real relations to the world of humans. The capital cities were also formed by social, economic and political practices.

Shwe myo daw or Burmese capital cities, from the ancient cities of Pyu to the Konbaung dynasty at Mandalay, including Sri Ksetra, Beikthano, Halingyi, Pagan, Ava, Shwebo, and Amarapura shared similar

characteristics. They were enclosed by the city walls and moats. The outer city wall contained twelve gates, three each at the cardinal points. The palace of the king was placed at the center of the city surrounded by two other walls. Michael Aung Thwin states Mandalay of the nineteenth century was modeled on other cities that do not remain. Mandalay has a rectangular shape with four main gates and two minor ones at each of the cardinal points. Within the outside wall, there were two more walls enclosing the palace, the outer of teak and the inner of brick. Both of these were square and had four entrances at the cardinal points. (1987: 90) *Myo* in Burmese means town or city. It also means wall surrounding an area or a walled-town with a market place. (Department of the Myanmar Language Commission: 369) Michael Aung Thwin states that *Myo* in the early Pagan period of the late tenth to early eleventh century, most often referred only to a fortress. Even though in the later period it grew into a proper town, the terminology was still the same, *Myo* also had less to do with size than with containing three essential elements; a market place, moat, and a fortress wall. The Burmese capital cities, *shwe myo daw* [golden royal city], were ordinary *myos* with exemplary centers and had to possess seven essential features: proper number and arrangement of gates; a moat; and five types of Buddhist architecture, such as the royal pagoda, the royal ordination hall, the royal monastery, the royal library, and the royal *dhammasala* or preaching hall. (1987: 90)

Michael Aung Thwin claims that most of the capital cities contained temples or monasteries at the four corners inside the city wall, but Mandalay contained only one at the north corner. (1987 : 97) The *Shwe myodaw* became an exemplary center made sacred by a legitimate king.(Michael Aung Thwin,1987 : 90)

Buddhist cosmology set the pattern for the Burmese capital cities. The city wall referred to Cakravada Mountain; the moat referred to the Ocean. The king's palace at the center represented Tavatimsa heaven on the summit of Mount Meru where the king of gods, Sakka, resided. Sakka is the rain god and can call for rain. The Burmese kings

were thus referred to as Sakka or Thagya-min in Burmese. The seven-tiered *pyathat* rose above the Lion Throne, the great throne of the Audience Hall, standing exactly in the center of the square city and representing Mount Meru. According to Buddhist cosmology, Thagya-min had four guardians at the cardinal points, Heine-Geldern says that the Burmese kings also had four chief ministers, four special officers, four main queens, and four main princes, representing the cardinal points. The four chief ministers originally had charge of one quarter of the capital and the empire and each of the four special officers guarded one side of the palace and the capital. (p. 5)

The Heir Apparent of the four main princes was that of the east and the principal queen was that of the south. The four main princes and queens had their houses at the cardinal points. Michael Aung Thwin states that the Heir Apparent, "Lord of the Eastern House" occupied the eastern sector. The Chief Queen or Taung Mibaya (Queen of the South) and the Tabintaing Princess (the Princess designate, future spouse of the Heir Apparent) had their residences at the southern part of the palace. (p. 91)

There were numerous associations between the Burmese kings and Thagya-min. Michael Aung Thwin states that "the Burmese king dressed as Sakka when he re-enacted the annual ritual ploughing prior to the monsoons, demonstrating his power to insure nature's generosity – that the rainfall, and the land be productive – Sakka's dominant roles; the king's elephant was named Eravan, after Sakka's; the king built a "glass" (or crystal) palace imitating Sakka's in Tavatimsa; he also constructed a lake called the Mahananda, alluding to the Nanda lake in Tavatimsa;.....the king patronized and protected the Dhamma, one of Sakka's major functions; he built temples specifically for the Buddha's hair-relic, as Sakka was believed to have done; his prowess as a male was taken for granted, as Sakka's was, surrounded by hundreds of beautiful maidens. Lastly, with his thirty-two subordinate deities and Four Lokapalas who stood on the four cardinal directions, Sakka's 'court' created the essential configuration used repeatedly in organizational and architecture structure: the five-point paradigm (four

points and a center) or its most important conceptual equivalent (eight and a center, twelve and a center, thirty-two and a center, thirty-six and a center)." (1987: 94-95) For example, on the city wall of Mandalay city, there were thirty two towers (*pyathat*), each with a defensive post and seven-tiered roofs. (Michael Aung Thwin, 1981: 53)

Thagya-min for the Burmese is also the head of the thirty-seven *nats*. The Burmese kings therefore were referred to as the Supreme One over the supernatural world. The Burmese kings were the guardians of the kingdoms and their people as were the *nats*. Tavatimsa heaven is equivalent to *nat pyei* (*pyei* means state or realm) therefore the king's palace was the residence of the *nats* as well. The thirty-seven *nats* or *devas* with the Thagya-min at the center were depicted as ornaments on the Lion Throne of Mandalay. The thirty-seven *nats* were considered the ancestors of the kings and their kingdoms. Therefore the kings were considered as ancestral *nats*. Singer claims that the ancestral images of the former kings or their relatives, probably besides the national *nats*, were placed at the base of the Lion Throne of Mandalay as well. (p. 113)

From Pagan to Mandalay, the Burmese kings referred to their kingdoms as Jambudipa. (Michael Aung Thwin, 1981: 51) Regarding Burmese Buddhist cosmology, Jumbudipa is the southern island of the four continents at the cardinal points of Mount Meru. Jumbudipa had a lozenge or triangle shape and the Bodhi tree grew at its center. Jampudipa is the only one among the four islands where the Buddha and the future Buddha will be born and attain Enlightenment under the Bodhi tree. Only on the southern island can people gain merit and attain *nirvana*. Besides these four islands, there are two thousand smaller islands; five hundred surrounding each main cardinal island. They had a similar shape to that of their larger island. (Sangermano: 4-6) The Burmese Buddhist cosmology here created a microcosmos, smaller islands surrounding the four larger islands, within the macrocosmos of four larger islands surrounding Mount Meru. I have not found idea among the Thai. Because the ocean divides the four cardinal islands, it

thus prevents communication. So the Burmese believed all people from over the sea including Europeans must come from the smaller islands, which belonged to Jambudipa. That probably is why the Burmese referred to the Indian and English as foreigners, *kala*; they came from oversea. *Kala pyo* was referred to European, English (*pyo* means white). Jambudipa here can be referred to as the palaces of the kings, the capital cities and kingdoms. The Burmese referred to them as Jambudipa because it was the only island in the Buddhist cosmology where people could attain *nirvana* and the Buddhas were born. There will be heaven on earth when the future Buddha comes. Michael Aung Thwin says that Jambudipa will be moral and happy and the king will be like the *dharmaraja*, the righteous king who also preserves and purifies the religion. (1981:51) The kings of Burma were to preserve Jambudipa until the future Buddha would come.

The Lion Throne of Mandalay placed in the exact center of the city represented the bodhi tree at the center of Jambudipa. The Burmese kings who sat upon the throne thus imitated the Buddha, who sat beneath the bodhi tree. The Burmese kings were represented as the Buddha-to-be or the future Buddha, *boddisata*, *cakravartin*, and *dharmaraja*, in political "essence". There are numerous Buddha images in Burma sitting upon a throne. Therefore the Burmese kings could be referred to as the Buddha and the Buddha could be like the kings, *cakravartin*. The Buddha is *cakravartin* in the sense of the world conqueror over the four quarters of the world. Whereas the Burmese kings were claimed to be the iron-wheeled *cakravartin*, who ruled only Jambudipa, similar to the great Asoka of India, whom the Burmese used as their model. (Sunait: 49) There are four possible types of *cakravartin*: the golden-wheeled *cakravartin*, who rules all four continents of the world; the silver-wheeled *cakravartin*, who rules three continents; the copper-wheeled *cakravartin*, who had power over two continents; and the iron-wheeled *cakravartin*, who rules only Jambudipa. (Strong 1985: 51 quoted in Sunait, 48)

Another question is how Jambudipa was represented. According to Duncan, probably in Singhalese Buddhist cosmology, Jambudipa contains India and Sri Lanka. (p. 44) Jambudipa in the Burmese sense must have referred to the kingdoms where Buddhism was established. Sunait suggests that, in practice, the Burmese and Siamese kings created their own imaginary Jambudipa, their field of power. (p. 50) The idea of their field of power led to the Siamese-Burmese wars, because there cannot exist more than one *cakravartin* within one *mandala*, Jambudipa. (p. 48, 50) Sunait claims that the Burmese kings always considered the Thai kingdoms as their field of power, in particular after the first half of the sixteenth century. (p. 51) Jambudipa in the Burmese sense probably included not only the Burmese kingdom but also the kingdoms of the Mon, Arakanese, Siamese, Lanna Tai and probably Laos as well. They all used to be under Burmese rule at one time or another.

The Burmese kings were referred as *boddisata* and a future Buddha. Michael Aung Thwin states that the king who had the most wealth, had built numerous temples, thus attained great merit and virtually assured his Buddhahood. His great merit also was shared with the entire kingdom; he was close to being a savior of the kingdom, *boddisata*. (1981; 50-51) Or because of his great merit in this life and previous lives, the Burmese king was able to be reborn as a future Buddha. There is a close relationship of the Buddha, *cakravartin*, and the Burmese king. Prince Siddharata would have been *cakravartin* if he had not chosen to be the Buddha. Therefore the main throne, the Lion Throne of the Burmese kings not only symbolized the bodhi tree where the Buddha and the future Buddha will attain Enlightenment but also represented a *cakravartin*, a turner of the wheel. I found the form of the Lion Throne, the great throne, at Mandalay palace is similar to the *srivatsa* symbol on a Pyu coin. I wonder if the form of the Lion Throne was developed from the *srivatsa* symbol. *Srivatsa* is the symbol of the merging of Visnu and Sri, the symbol of the king who possessed Sri. (Gutman: 307) This union created life and prosperity for the kingdom as the tree of life, probably the bodhi tree. The *cakravartin* symbol on the

Pyu coins placed the *srivatsa* at the center with the sun and the moon symbols at the top right and left and the water symbols at the base, linking the king with water and wealth. (Gutman: 305-306) The symbol of the sun and the moon also appear on the Lion Throne of Mandalay. The Directorate of Archaeological Survey states the base of the Lion Throne is formed with lotus symbols. (p. 25) It is probably comparable to the water under the *srivatsa* of the Pyu coin. The sun is represented by a peacock on the right and the moon is represented by a rabbit on the left on the Lion Throne; these appear on the same sides on the Pyu coin. The Directorate of Archaeological Survey explains that the rabbit and the peacock symbolize the origin of the Burmese kings, who were claimed to be directly descended from the Solar Dynasty and the Lunar Dynasty. (p. 25) The Buddha also was claimed to be descended from the Solar Sakyan family. (Gutman: 143) Jambudipa, the name of a Buddha image of Burma in the later period, wears royal ornaments, probably reflecting the Buddha as the Burmese king [a Buddha-to-be], the *cakravartin* who ruled over the southern island, Jambudipa.

The *cakravartin* symbol also was reflected in the irrigation system of Sri Ksetra, the capital city of the ancient Pyu. The circular moat around the city symbolizes a *cakra* or wheel. According to Stargardt, the canal flows to Sri Ksetra from the southeast, south and west. The canals A1, A2, and A3 flow into the inner city and surround the palace in a clockwise direction. They link with the three main tanks at the south, the north and the east. The water within the moat surrounding the city walls also flows in a clockwise direction. The flow of water and the circular city shape thus symbolize a moving wheel. (p. 106) Stargardt states of this reading is correct, the Pyu kings were *cakravartin* or *dharmaraja* symbolizing the Buddha turning the Wheel of the Law. (p. 111)

A *cakravartin* is related to a *dharmaraja* because the *cakra* and *dharma* are related to a wheel. Stargardt says that the wheel is associated with the sun; it symbolizes time as well as righteousness and order. *Dharmacakra* usually means the Wheel of the Law. (p. 106)

The city wall of Burmese capital cities usually consisted of the twelve gates. Michael Aung Thwin states there were also twelve posts with signs of zodiac outside the twelve gates of the Mandalay city wall. Each post had a deity (*deva*) standing above it. (1987: 90) I relate the twelve gates and posts with the wheel of twelve spokes, which was the wheel of the months and the zodiac, the wheel of the year and the movement of the sun on the circle of the ecliptic. Spellman states number twelve in ancient India was considered symbolic and was connected with water and the absence of water. (p. 79) The capital cities of Burma in the pre-colonial period were often located in the dry zone area in the central Burma far from the sea. Their economy was based on agriculture rather than trade. Thus an irrigation system and water were necessary. The number twelve of the city wall is probably associated with water and asking for rain. Spellman says because the number twelve is related to water, which is associated with the god Varuna, who represents the path of the sun and man's moral behavior or *dhamma*, water then becomes associated with *dhamma*. (p. 79) When a violation of morality takes place, rain does not fall and drought lasts twelve years. However, if a king restores *dhamma*, rain comes. (Spellman: 81) Therefore the absence of rain means the absence of law. The absence of a king also is the absence of *dhamma*; no king, no rain, no law. (Spellman: 84-85) The king is thus the turner of the wheel, the Wheel of the Law, symbolic of the Buddha, a *cakravartin* or a *dhammaraja*, and the Wheel of the Year (twelve months), who causes the presence or absence of rain.

The palace of the king at the center also represented the sun because the Burmese king was "the King of the Rising Sun." The palace and capital cities were represented as the sacred center of a *mandala*, the center of not only politics but also society and the economy. The capital cities since the Pagan period contained only places for the king and nobles and Buddhist temples but excluded residences of the masses and cultivated areas. The capital cities thus symbolized the city of god, which did not relate directly to communities of the masses. O'Connor states that during the time of the Konbaung Burmese kings,

the great gates of Mandalay always shut and opened. They were shut at night and during the day on special occasions, such as if a fire or disturbance broke out in the city; a person of royal blood or high rank was to be executed; the king received his ministers and subjects in audience or the representative of a foreign state, and on *kadaw* days, "beg-pardon days" [paying homage]. (p. 46) *Kadaw* days were performed three times a year: at the beginning of the Burmese New Year (April), the beginning of the Buddhist Lent (June or July), and the end of the Buddhist Lent (October). (The Directorate of Archaeological Survey: 25)

The capital cities as the center of economy, Mandalay for example. Their source of wealth came from further east, north, and southwest of the capital, which were under the control of the capital through the system of state lands, taxes, and state labor. In Pagan as well, the food supply came from the Kyaukse and Minbu areas. The Burmese capital cities were different from those of the Pyu in the earlier period; for example, Sri Ksetra, contained a mass of population and rice fields within the city wall, The rice fields were able to feed the inhabitants in case the city was under siege. Probably because the later Burmese kingdoms extended their fields of power or Jambudipa and were much larger than those of the ancient Pyu, they did not need rice fields within their cities.

Lastly the Burmese capital cities represented sacred space, sacred time, and sacred energy. Because the capital cities represented Tavatimsa heaven, residence of gods, they were thus sacred space. Moreover, it was only in the capital cities where a king's coronation, *abhiseka*, was performed. Michael Aung Thwin claims that *abhiseka* during the Pagan period of the eleventh century was called *indrabhiseka* and was held during the Burmese New Year (April). (1987: 95) However, Yiyi states that the king's coronation during King Mindon's period in the nineteenth century was called *rajabhiseka* and was held during the full moon of *kason* [around May].

"The capital city was the source, measurer, and keeper of hours, days, weeks, months, seasons, years, and ultimately *kappas*." (Michael Aung Thwin, 1987: 97) The days and nights, weeks and months, seasons and years were calculated and controlled via a clepsydra or water clock, which was located in the capital city. The hours of the day and night were announced by the *baho* (drum) at the north side of the main (east) gate of the city wall. Because the king who resided in the capital city was the custodian of sacred time, the king was referred to as the sun who controlled the months, Lunar, the 'female' side of the dynasty. Furthermore, the regnal titles of the Burmese kings included the term *aditya*, "referring to the twelve Adiya gods who ruled the twelve months of the year." (Michael Aung Thwin, 1987: 97)

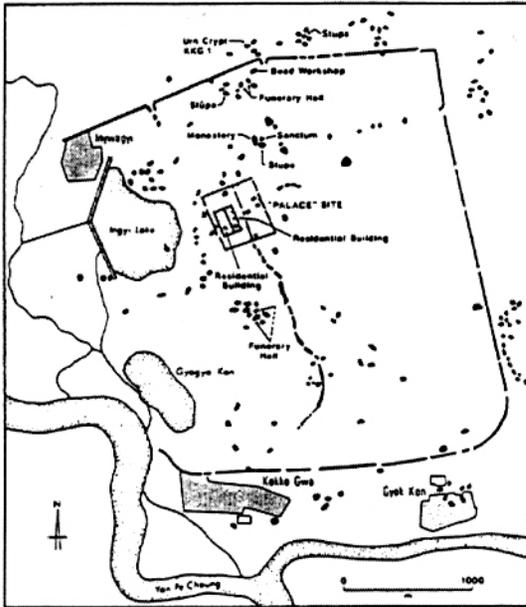
The capital city was sacred energy because it linked the human world with the supernatural world. The king was not only Thagya-min but also the Supreme One of the national thirty-seven *nats*. The Directorate of Archaeological Survey states that the Mahagiri *nat* shrine was behind the Lion Throne. It was a small pavillion with a *pyathat* roof standing on a post. The kings made obeisance to the *nat* shrine before ascending to the throne because the Mahagiri *nat* might provide him with advice. (p. 26) Moreover, Michael Aung Thwin states there was a Hall of Victory, *zetawunzaung*, or Hall of the Ancestors, where the golden images of the members of the king's dynasty were kept. They were given respect on *kadaw* days. (1987: 100)

The Burmese capital cities are texts, which provide multiple readings and relate to the king, his political ideas, and social and economic practices. The Burmese king was the ruler over the three worlds; heaven, earth, and the supernatural realm. The king's palace was Tavatimsa heaven where Thagya-min, the god-king, resided. Because Thagya-min is the supreme *nat*, his palace was thus the realm of the *nats*. The king's palace, his capital city, and his kingdom all were referred to as Jambudipa, heaven on earth, where they share the same center, the bodhi tree, the Lion Throne of the king. The king was

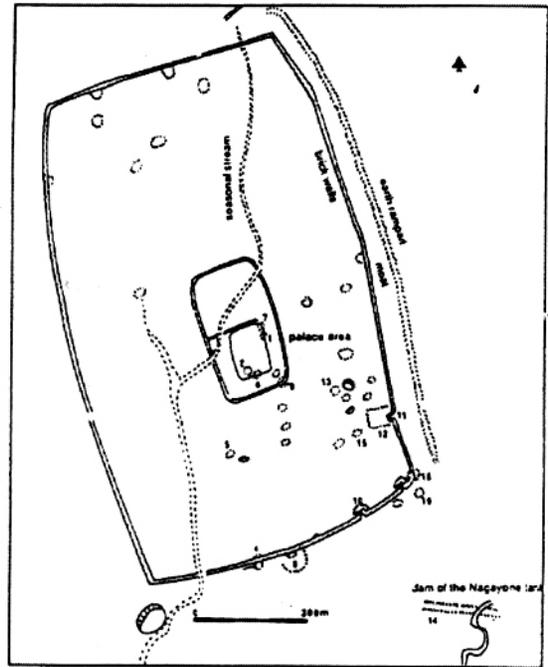
Thagya-min, ancestral *nat*, *bodhisata* or future Buddha, *cakravartin* and *dhammaraja*. He was the center of sacred space, time and energy. These ideas were reflected in the landscape and layout of capital cities.

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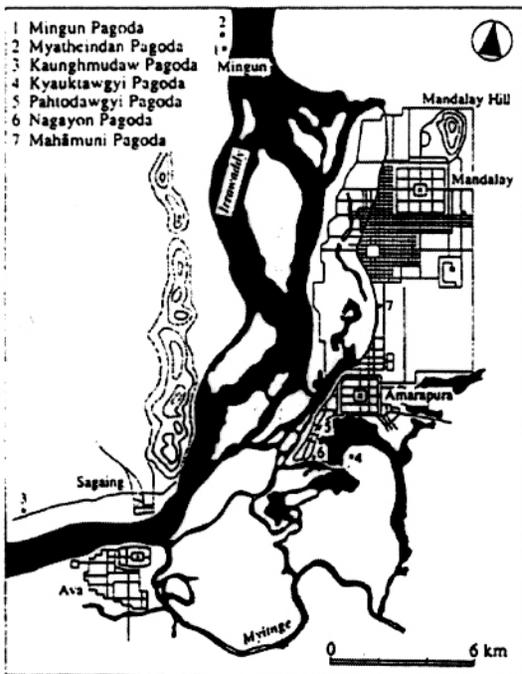


The city plan of Beikthano Myo (Wheatley: 168)



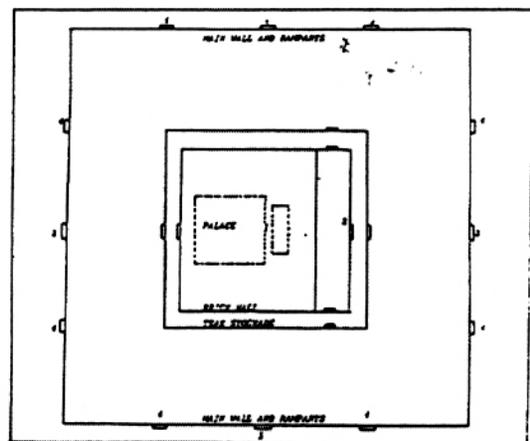
The city plan of Halingyi (Stargardt, 1990: 82)

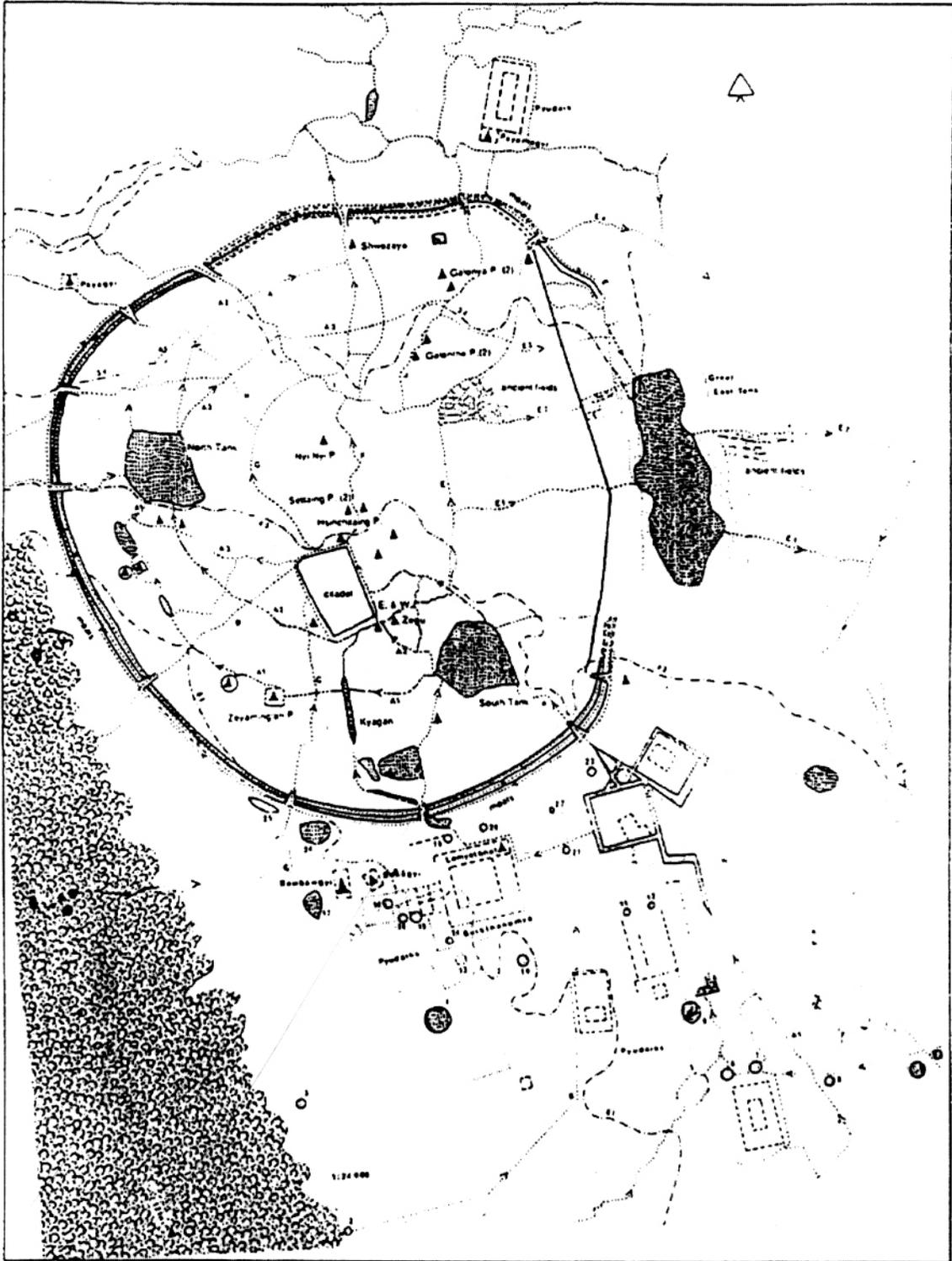
The Pyu and Burmese capital cities with the palace of the king at the center.



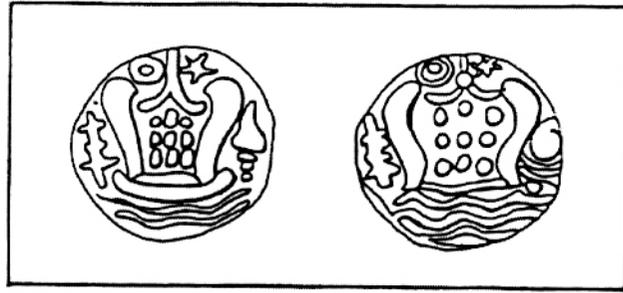
◀ Plan of Ava, Amrapura, and Mandalay (Chihara, 1996)

▼ City plan of Mandalay (Michael Aung Thwin, 1987)



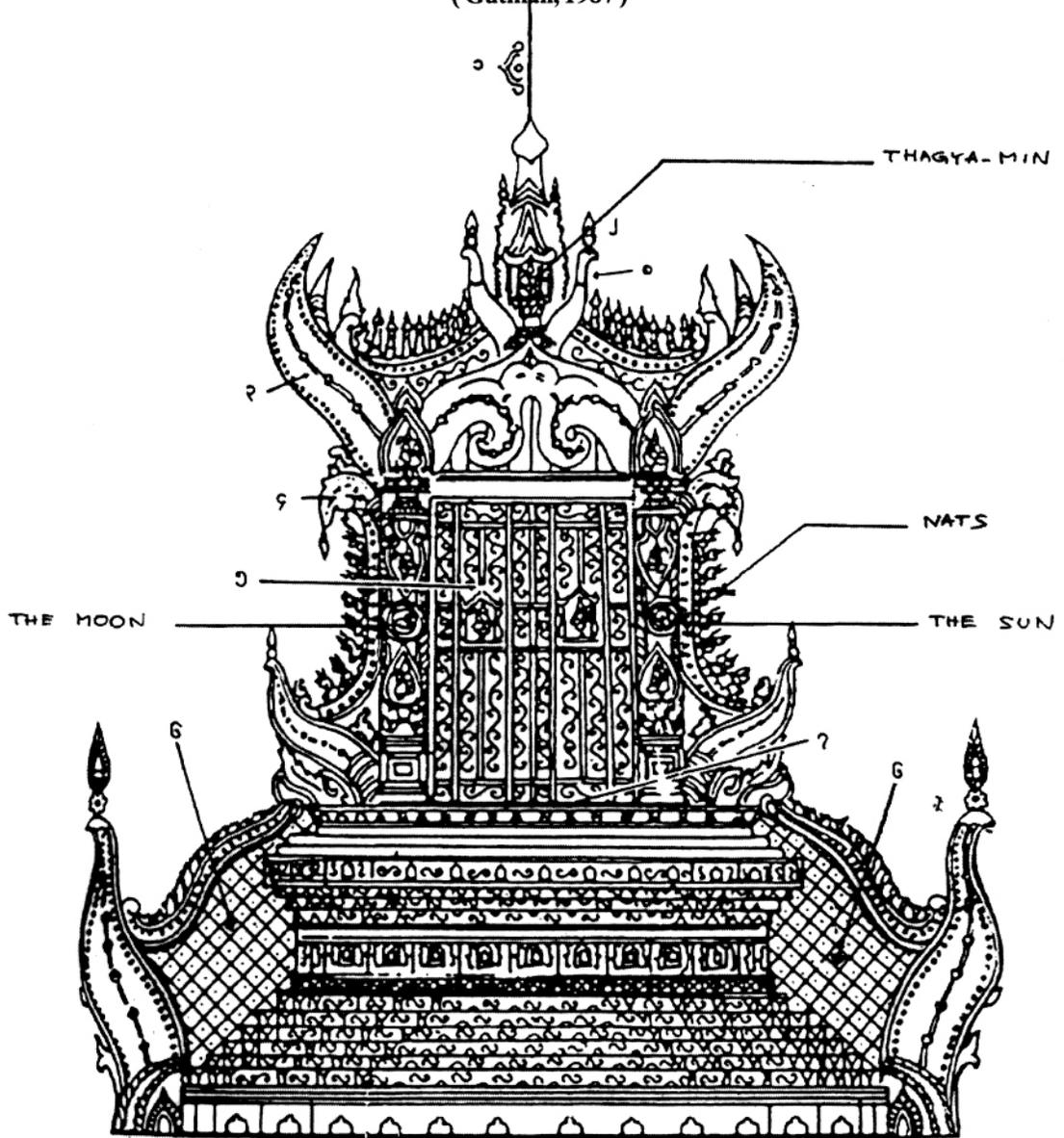


The hydraulic system of Sri Ksetra, the capital city of the Pyu, symbolizing a *cakravartin* (Stargardt, 1990)



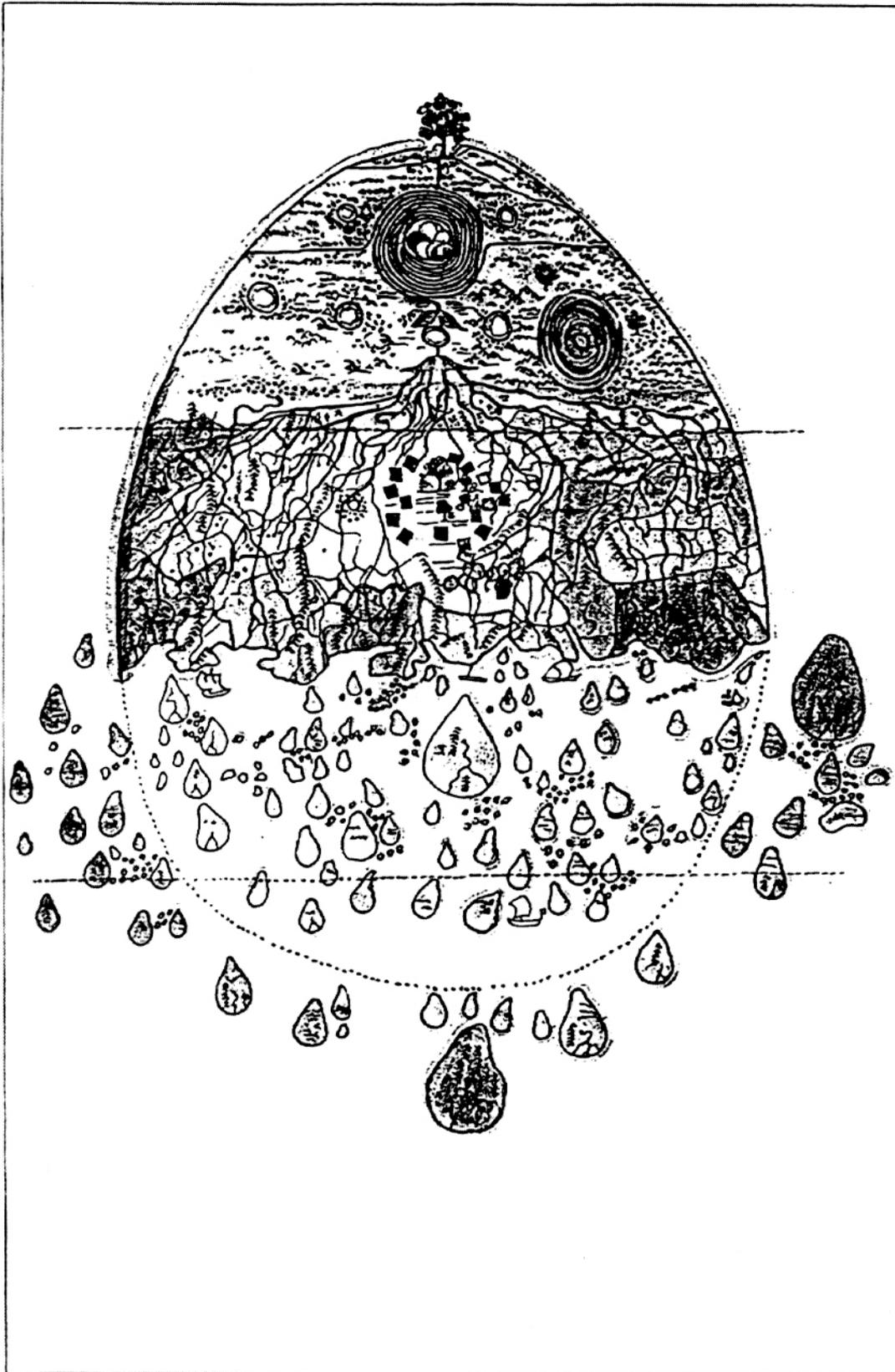
Cakravartin symbol on the Pyu coin with *srivatsa* at the center, the sun on the top right and the moon on the top left.

(Gutman, 1987)



The Lion Throne of Mandalay palace.

(The Directorate of Archaeological Survey, 1963 : 281)



Jambudipa, the southern island, with the bodhi tree at the center surrounded by smaller islands.

(Temple : 1991)