The Two Pillars of the Kingdom of Bagan, Myanmar: How Royalty and Religion Shaped the Settlement Patterns of an Empire

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Introduction

Bagan, originally referred to as "Armadana pura" (The City of the Enemy Crusader) was one of Myanmar’s great Burmese Buddhist kingdoms (850 – 1350CE) (Lieberman 2003:91). During its reign, Bagan constructed an unprecedented amount of brick structures of which approximately 2,200 temples, stupas and monasteries survive today (Hudson 2004:236). This research attempts to address the following question: What types of political, religious, and economic entanglements were formed between the Crown, the Sangha (Buddhist monkhood), and the commoners as a response to merit-making?

Buddhist Plains of Merit

Merit (kuthe) was a Buddhist belief that was associated with all aspects of life, amongst all social statuses, and was the biggest motivating force of a person's behaviour. It was linked to birth, status, wealth, legitimacy, and the entirety of a person and its accumulation meant a better life upon reincarnation (Aung-Thwin 1985:164).

Merit was attained primarily by making endowments to the Sangha. The Crown and the elite made substantial donations that took the form of a variety of resources (ex. capital, fauna and flora, building materials, labourers, and tax-free lands) (Aung-Thwin 1985). This belief system led to the amassment of an incredible amount of wealth by the Sangha and the construction of temples, monasteries and stupas within a short time period and on a tremendous scale effectively transforming the landscape into a Buddhist plain of merit.

Theory and Methods

Entanglement theory analyses the relationships and dependencies that form between humans and things. The change or collapse of one of these relationships can have a radiating effect on a number of others depending on their degrees of entanglement (Hodder 2012). Analyzing the epigraphic (chronicles and inscriptions) and iconographic (mural paintings and terracotta plaques) data will provide insight into residential patterning, village life, agricultural practices, and water management systems in order to reconstruct the nature of Bagan’s city, villages, and commoner homes as well as determine the entanglements that formed between the Crown, the Sangha, and the commoner peoples.

The Village

Although not enclosed by a wall and lacking a royal palace, the villages of Bagan contained similar structures to those found in the city. These villages were inhabited by a variety of occupations (craft specialists, farmers, cooks, blacksmiths, masons, etc). Craft specialization villages were scattered throughout the landscape and relied heavily on the Crown to act as an effective redistributive mechanism. There is also evidence for the presence of ethnic specific villages and slave villages.

The City

The city was home to the king and his family, some members of the elite, and a handful of attendants. The city was surrounded by a walled enclosure and contained gates, towers, a moat, ordination halls, libraries, monasteries, preaching halls, temples, monasteries, and the royal palace. Apart from the temples and monasteries, the majority of the buildings were elaborate wooden structures that were both stilted and non-stilted. The city was a bustling metropolis for trading, attracting people from all over the empire.

The Home

The homes of traditional Burmese houses are typically made of teak, bamboo, timber, or palm leaves with thatched roofing. In art, they were represented as simply ornamented stilted/non-stilted buildings with either flat or peaked roofs. Most families had a small walled garden in close proximity to their home. Houses belonging to agriculturalists were sometimes noted to be relatively isolated and built near creeks or water tanks. Some homes belonging to individuals of slightly higher status held multiple rooms and/or had an open square courtyard in the centre that was surrounded by a range of cells.

Discussion

The temples, monasteries, and royal palaces of the walled-city was where economic, religious, and political ideologies were all bundled together, attracting groups of peoples to this epicenter. Whilst the Crown expanded, it became increasingly entangled with the Sangha as it needed their help in order to maintain stability. The Crown made large endowments to the Sangha leading to the rapid construction of thousands of religious monuments.

This building frenzy resulted in entire populations becoming concentrated around the construction and maintenance of these monuments leading to the development of villages. As the Crown relied on the payment of taxes by the laity in order to continue giving donations to the Sangha, the laity also depended on the Crown to act as an effective redistributive mechanism. The entanglements that formed between these three groups were tightly interwoven with one another, however over time they became increasingly unequal. By the end of the thirteenth century, the Sangha was able to acquire between one and two-thirds of Upper Myanmar’s cultivable land through donations (Lieberman 2003:113). The commoner population became more and more ensnared by this tax-exempt lands and were increasingly bonding themselves to the monochrome, thereby weakening their bonds with the Crown. The loss of a large taxable population effectively destabilized the Crown eventually resulting in the fragmentation and collapse of this once powerful empire.

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