

**In Search of Rama:
a Visit to Tha-Khut-ta-nai
(Part 1)**

For over thirty years I have been wanting to go to Tha-Khut-ta-nai, a remote village in Monywa District of Upper Myanmar. The reason for wanting to visit this far flung place is because there is in that village a pagoda built over a hundred and fifty years ago which has a rare decorative series of stone bas-reliefs illustrating the Myanmar version of the Ramayana.

I read an article entitled "Tha-khut-ta-nai Rama" by eminent historian Dr. Than Tun in the *Hanthawaddy* newspaper of 3rd September 1972 in which he described his visit to the Maha Lawka Mara-zein Pagoda of Tha-khut-ta-nai on 30th November 1969, to study the 347 stone plaques of the Rama story carved by skilled Myanmar artisans around 1849 during the reign of King Bagan (1846- 1853), of the Konbaung Dynasty. Dr. Than Tun illustrated his article with some sketches he himself made from the Ramayan plaques that he saw all around the pagoda platform.

The article and drawings by Dr. Than Tun whetted my interest in these stone plaques, a unique series of Ramayana depictions which cannot be seen anywhere else in the whole of Myanmar. I tried to find other references as I wanted to know more about the donor, the high ranking monk scholar known as the Second Maung Daung Sayadaw U Neyya Dhamma. Also I wanted to study the artistic styles of the traditional stone carvers and the connection between these portrayals and the scenes from the Ramayana Court Drama of the Myanmar King's capital (in Amarapura at the time) which we can no longer see.

I found two other sources. One was an article by U Aye Myint (Myanmar traditional design) published in the *Hanthawaddy* newspaper Sunday supplement of 6th August 1972 about his visit to Tha-khut-ta-nai to study not only the stone sculptures but also the Ramayana pictures on wooden pillars using the lacquer *thayoe* technique.

The best account I discovered was an unpublished report by research officer U Maung Maung Thaïke of the Myanmar Historical Commission dated 9th June 1970. This officer led a field research team which made rubbings (estampages) of the bas-reliefs and recorded three stone inscriptions, four bell inscriptions and other stone statues from around the pagoda platform.

All the accounts I found were in the Myanmar language and there is at present no writing in English about these rare Ramayana artistic representations. Scholars and art historians from abroad studying Myanmar arts, both fine arts and performing arts, have expressed keen interest in these plaques as they would throw more light on Myanmar versions of the Ramayana in the performing arts and various artistic depictions on wood, stone and wall paintings in the form of murals and frescoes.

My desire to visit this far-away place was fulfilled in August 2001, through arrangements made by the Director-General of the office of the State Peace and Development Council. The Director-General himself came along with some other friends and researchers including Dr. Tha Tun Oo of Today group of companies and we spent a night in the village of Wun-ma-nar near by so that we could visit Tha-Khut-ta-nai again the next morning. The photographers who came along recorded the art work on film and video.

From Mandalay International Airport we went by car (actually a convoy of four-wheeled drive vehicles) to Monywa about 85 miles from Mandalay city, crossing the main Ayeyawady River at Innwa (Ava) to Sagaing. After a lunch stop at Monywa we drove through Budalin and Nyaung-gan. Nyaung-gan has become well-known to archaeologists and historians because of the discovery of the first extensive Bronze Age Burial Site in Myanmar near this village in January 1998.

From Monywa to Budalin the distance is about 21 miles. Beyond Nyaung-gan the road deteriorates into a dirt track, but Tha-khut-ta-nai is soon reached after about 45 minutes. From the village it is about five

miles to the Maha Lawka Mara-zein Pagoda where the Ramayana plaques have been preserved since 1972 in a Site Museum built by the Archaeology Department. The Site Museum, the Pagoda and the Monastery are all in the same compound right beside the road leading to Ka-ni across the Chindwin River. We saw a few old buses which go on this route once or twice a day. From Budalin to the Maha Lawka Mara-zein Pagoda, the distance is only 15 miles, so the total distance from Mandalay is about 121 miles.

To the local people the Pagoda is simply called “Paya-gyi” or the “Big Pagoda” as it is the biggest in the area and rather surprising to find so magnificent a pagoda adorned with beautiful sculptures in such a remote place. The locals also call this pagoda Nat Ye Taung Pagoda because it is on Nat Ye Taung (Hill) outside Tha-khut-ta-nai although the hill itself is barely discernible nowadays. The pagoda is about 90 feet in height.

A compensating factor to the rough road is the lovely unspoilt countryside through which the road passes. The same tranquil villages with rural farms have remained unchanged for decades. The people there are nearly all Bama with practically no other ethnic groups or foreigners like Chinese and Indians found in other places of Myanmar. These Bama villagers we found are simple and good natured. Each village has its monastery and pagoda; they are all followers of a peaceful life under the teachings of the Buddha. There are many farms, some teak trees and scattered villages with only a sparse population. A lot of land remains forested with some bears and deer roaming about.

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(Part II)**

There are stone inscriptions which record the building of the Maha Lawka Marazein Pegoda which are now preserved in inscription sheds on the pagoda platform. The builder was U Neyya Dhamma (1799-1865) who became the *Thathana-baing* or Primate the Buddhist Sasana (religion) in the whole of Myanmar. He was appointed to this supreme religious post twice by two Myanmar kings, viz. King Tharawaddy (1837-1846) and King Mindon (1853-1878). But during the reign of Tharawaddy's funloving son King Bagan the title was conferred on the Bagaya Sayadaw U Pyinnya Zawta. So between 1846 and 1853 U Neyya Dhamma went back to the village where he was born, Nat Ye Taung Ywa near Tha-khut-ta-nai. While he was the Presiding Abbot in the village, this well-learned monk who wrote many Buddhist treatises, made a grand donation by building the Maha Lawka Mara-zein Pagoda and embellishing it with hundreds of scenes, statues and other depictions of the Ramayana. The inscriptions record that the building of pagoda was started on 26th November 1846 and completed on 1st May 1849. The fame of the pagoda spread and the village nearby came to be known as Paya Gyi Ywa or the "Village of the Big Pagoda".

Sayadaw U Neyya Dhamma must have known about the Ramayana Court Drama as he had resided at the Royal Capital of Amarapura for a number of years. At present we do not know the reason why this famous monk chose the Rammyana instead of the Jatakas and Buddhavamsa (Life of Buddha) scenes that we usually see in other pagodas and monasteries of Myanmar. Was there among his followers a Ramayana enthusiast? But the Sayadaw himself must have made the final decisions to make these Ramayana depictions because the pagoda was his work of merit. Unfortunately the various inscriptions merely record the donation of the pagoda

and other buildings like the Thein (Sima or Ordination Hall) and do not mention the Ramayana at all.

The carvings of the Ramayana scenes were made on Taung-Oo sandstone using the four basic Myanmar traditional techniques of carving: (1) *Kanoke*, or style depicting female figures; (3) *Kapi*, or drawings of monkeys and ogres; and (4) *Gaza*, or style of depicting elegants, horses and so on. Each plaque is a square, 14 inches on each side and about one inch in thickness.

The carvings are beautifully executed with three layers to portray the back-ground, the middle-ground and the back-ground. The artisans also used symbolism, e.g. a single tree would symbolise a forest. The bas-reliefs are important not only as good examples of traditional Myanmar art and stone carving but also as life-like portrayals of the dancers, frozen in stone in their dance movements, of scenes from the Ramayana Dance Drama at the Myanmar Court.

After the fall of Ayutthaya in 1767 the Thai Court Dramatic and Dance troupe performers were brought to the Myanmar Royal Court. The Thais were instrumental in giving an impetus to the development of Myanmar Ramayana Court Drama.

The Myanmar knew the story of Rama probably from pre-Bagan times, though the court dramas were written down only around the last decades of the 18th century and the early years of the 19th century.

The complete Ramayana Court Drama took between 45 to 65 nights for the whole story to be presented on the Royal Stage. Although we can no longer see the whole dramatic performance, we can visualise how the actors, actresses and dancers dressed, what their dance postures were like and other depictions from this series of 347 Ramayana plaques at Tha-khut-ta-nai.

We also have the complete text of the dramatic performance written down about the time these plaques were made. This is the *Rama Pya-zat Taw-gyi* by Nemyo Narata Kyaw Khaung who was the official

in charge of the Court Dance Troupe at the Royal Capital. The text has been preserved on palm-leaf and paper parabaik manuscripts. It has now been published for the first time in three volumes by the Universities Historical Research Centre in collaboration with Today Printing Co., and with the support of the State Peace and Development Council Office. Volume 1 of this text entitled *Rama Pya-zat Taw-gyi* came out in mid-October 2001, volume (2) was published in mid-February 2002, and volume (3), the last volume, came out in end June 2002. These three volumes are illustrated with computer enhanced drawings made from the rubbings (estampages) of the Ramayana bas-reliefs from Tha-khut-ta-nai.

The search for Rama continues in Myanmar with efforts made to publish more Ramayana texts in book form by editing the old texts from the time of the Myanmar kings. New versions are also being written in modern prose. A book of illustration of the Rama story depicting the bas-reliefs of Tha-khut-ta-nai is now being planned for publication in early 2003. Later this year Ramayana troupes from all over Myanmar will come to Yangon to compete in the annual Traditional Myanmar Song, Dance, Composing and Music competitions as they did in 1998 and 1999. Myanmar Ramayana is being revived and revitalised so that this Myanmar cultural heritage will be preserved for generations to come.

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