King Alaungmintaya's *Golden Letter* to King George II (7 May 1756)

The story of an exceptional manuscript and the failure of a diplomatic overture

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Prologue

In the seventeenth century, Burma was an ethnically diverse but unified kingdom whose territory covered a large part of what is now the Union of Myanmar.[1] But since the early eighteenth century Burmese royal power was threatened by foreign invaders in the north and a general dislocation of administrative control. In the late 1730s, the invasions of the Manipuri cavalry demonstrated the kingdom's weakness to defend its core territories. In the south, a secession of Mon governors led to the resurrection of an independent Mon kingdom in 1740. In contemporary western sources, the north and the south were referred to by the names of their respective capitals, Ava and Pegu.[2] War raged for several years between the Burmese and the Mon kingdoms.

In April 1752 the Mon army took Ava and the king of Burma was deported to Pegu. But at the moment of the greatest Mon triumph, a local man, a Burmese chief of Moksobo, a village forty kilometers north of Ava, successfully resisted the new rulers. Not only did he stand his own against the Mon detachments called up to dispel his followers, but with an extraordinary gift for organization, he also mobilized local troops, struggled to win the

[1] Since 1989, a highly politicized debate has been raging about the use of the terms 'Burma' and 'Myanmar' to refer to the country. 'Burma', a term firmly established only in colonial times and derived from the common name of the majority people (the Burmans, or Bama), is still preferred by those countries, international NGOs or individuals who do not recognize the legitimacy of the present military government and reject the spelling reform and the modified use of official names. 'Myanmar' has always been the classical or literary name of the kingdom inhabited by a majority of ethnic Burmans. The name is now generally used in the country itself and increasingly by Myanmar's neighbors and international organizations. This author would like to stress that he does not intend any political statement with his use of 'Burma' when conventionally referring to the *pre-colonial* kingdom.

[2] As many conventional spellings of place names are still found in the historical literature and thus more recognizable than the new spellings, they have been used in this monograph. Syriam is preferred to Thanlyin, Pegu to Bago, Ava to Inwa, Negrais to Nagarit (unless we transcribe the term from the original Burmese text). 'Rangoon' has been preferred to the now common 'Yangon' because it matches the pre-nineteenth century pronunciation of the city's name. On the other hand, the new spelling Pyay is used rather than the outdated Prome, Pathein has been preferred to the colonial era Bassein, a name generally spelled Persaim in our eighteenth century sources. The country's main river is still called Irrawaddy in preference to the now official, but confusingly spelt Ayeyarwaddy. The spelling of many other names did not change with the spelling reform, such as Shwebo. Occasionally alternate spellings have been included in brackets. Occasionally transliterations have been used where they are relevant for specialists.

loyalty of other Burmese chiefs and in just two years, re-conquered Ava and made himself the new master of Upper Burma. Victorious on the battlefield, he came to be recognized as a king predestined to be born to re-establish the Burmese kingship and reunite the kingdom. In his orders, he referred to himself as Alaung-mintaya-gyi-phaya, "great august forthcoming righteous king" a title that was colloquially shortened to "Alaungphaya".[3] But obtaining the allegiance of the population of the Burmese heartland was the lesser challenge. To conquer the south and outwit the Mon, Alaungmintaya thought that he needed more guns and cannon. Some of his hopes to procure them in a short time lay on the development of close trade relations with the English East India Company. Letters were exchanged with the local chief of the Company who was keen on obtaining the king's approval for a settlement. Missions went back and forth while the war against the southern kingdom raged unabated. In May 1756 the king agreed to the English requests in a letter sent to King George II. It was an exceptional dispatch written on a rectangular plaque of gold dotted with precious rubies. The elaborately packed letter was brought to Madras and from there forwarded to London, where in early 1758 it was handed to George II by the Secretary of

[3] Up to the late nineteenth century, the king's name is commonly found in Western texts as "Alompra," a spelling that matches with the contemporaneous Burmese pronunciation. In the standard historical texts of the later colonial and post-colonial period, the forms "Alaungphaya," "Alaunghpaya" or "Alaungpaya" were commonly adopted. In royal language, the honorific *phaya* (also transcribed as *hpaya*) can also be translated as "majesty". The term has strong religious connotations as it commonly refers to the Buddha, a Buddha statue, a pagoda or a temple. The shortening produced an association of two terms that was somehow unfortunate as it led to an erroneous interpretation of the name as 'future Buddha'. See for example Dorothy Woodman, *The Making of Burma* (London: The Cresset Press, 1962), 32, or Michael Charney, *Powerful Learning Buddhist Literati and the Throne in Burma's Last Dynasty, 1752-1885* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2006), 150. A "future Buddha" (*bodhisatta*) is called *phaya-laung* in Burmese. One has to bear in mind that *phaya* is also used in composite Burmese terms where no religious connotation is implied, such as *mi-phaya* (pron. *mibaya*), queen. Unlike the Mon king Banya Dala, Alaungmintaya himself never openly claimed to be a future Buddha. In the Buddhist context, there is nothing exceptional about the fact that the king expressed the wish to reach omniscience, as kings enjoyed *per se* a prominent karmic mandate. But an express claim to *be* a *bodhisatta* is only found in letters sent to the court of Ayutthaya in 1759 on behalf of the king's sons and officers. The general tendency of these letters was to draw an oversize picture of the king in the context of the propaganda in support of the war with the Siamese. While on the one hand, a thorough analysis of the king's own letters and orders does not warrant any such claim, it is true on the other hand that the shortened title was indeed highly suggestive. For the king's biographers and the nineteenth century chroniclers, Alaungmintaya was not an ordinary man and they have left us with the unquestioned picture of a supra-mundane dynasty founder. In this work, we will exclusively use 'Alaungmintaya', the title under which the king is always known in Burmese language sources.

State William Pitt. Another letter was sent to the Court of Directors of the East India Company. We do not know what Pitt told the English king about the letter's contents, or what opinion formed in the king's mind when he received this exceptional missive. George II kept the letter, but no official reply was ever made following Alaungmintaya's overtures for friendly contacts with the British monarch.

An exceptional piece

In late July 2006, Dr Friedrich Hülsmann, curator of Manuscripts and Special Collections at the *Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Bibliothek* in Hanover, requested my help to identify a singular manuscript that had long been in the possession of the former *Königliche Bibliothek zu Hannover*. The Bodemann catalogue of 1867 where it was registered as "IV 571a" merely reproduced extracts of a ministerial note of 28 March 1758 stating that the item was believed to be a declaration of friendship originating from an independent *Indian* prince from the Coromandel Coast addressed to King George II. The King himself had sent it by post to his cherished library in Hanover. A photo attached to Dr Hülsmann's email made clear that the script was not Indian, but *Burmese*. My curiosity as a historian raised, Dr Hülsmann made arrangements for me to come to Hanover in April 2007 and take a closer look. Unfortunately the gold plaque had been badly mishandled – notably, according to the record, by a Danish prince in 1768 - so that it took some hours of careful reading under a magnifying glass to give a definite answer as to the manuscript's identity. Ms IV 571a turned out to be King Alaungmintaya's original letter to George II.

Alaungmintaya's golden letter is the only known manuscript of its kind: a solid gold plaque with perfectly lined Burmese letters adorned with twenty-four exquisite rubies and bearing the king's signet, a carefully shaped repoussé *hamsa*.[4] But it is not archival rarity alone that turns the Golden Letter into a subject of scholarly interest. The Golden Letter also stands in the middle of a fascinating period of history that saw Alaungmintaya laying the groundwork for a resurgent Burmese empire and the foundation of a new dynasty.

[4] A *hamsa* is a Ruddy shelduck or sheldrake (*Tadorna ferruginea*), commonly known in South and South-East Asia as the Brahminy duck. In its stylized form, it is very common in the art of Lower Burma.

The following work is not the micro-history of a single document. It is a contribution to the study of diplomatic history. We will look carefully at the Golden Letter, studying it from various points of view in order to understand its archival, artistic, historical and political significance. The letter is in the first place a historical document of great interest, being a primary source for the study of the relations between the British - or rather the men who ran the East India Company - and the court of a *homo novus* in Burmese politics. It was one part of a set of diplomatic interactions between the East India Company and Burmese royalty in the 1750s. These exchanges took place at the intersection of the Ava/Shwebo-Pegu wars in the Irrawaddy valley and Anglo-French rivalries in the Indian Ocean.

As communication happens in formal garb, meaning is not only found in what the text says, but political intentions can also be fathomed in the course of an interpretation of rhetoric and symbolic devices. Being an official letter written on a plaque of gold, Alaungmintaya's message is demonstrably more than just a well-formulated piece of standard high-level communication. A beautifully crafted material object, it is by its very nature endowed with symbolic connotations that cannot be dissociated from its *prima facie* textual content and thus calls for a comprehensive study of form, style and content.

I will first provide the historical background summarizing King Alaungmintaya's wars and his rise to supreme power in Burma. British relations with Alaungmintaya stand at the center of this study, starting at the initiative of the king himself in 1755 and evolving around two foci: on the one hand, the request of the East India Company to obtain commercial privileges and territorial rights in the ports of Pathein and in Negrais (at the southwest tip of the Irrawaddy delta), where the English had established an un-authorized settlement in 1753; on the other hand, the Burmese king's concern for arms provisions and ammunition and his interest in developing stable trade relations with the East India Company. To understand the policies of the East India Company towards Burma, one has to consider developments in the Company's main theatre of action in Asia, South India and the Indian Ocean where the English and French East India companies were vying for predominance.

In colonial narratives, many of which have not yet been superseded by more satisfying post-colonial examinations, Burmese kings are rarely spoken well of and when alluded to, done so with barely veiled condescension. The Konbaung kings (1752-1885) in particular were

either belittled or discredited. This study will offer a critical approach of the traditional Eurocentric approach to Anglo-Burmese relations and shift the attention from the English to the Burmese, in this case, King Alaungmintaya. It will show that the contents of the king's letters (including the one that stands at the centre of this paper) demonstrate that the king's political initiatives and actions were truly his own. I will also emphasize how D.G.E. Hall's influential historical works, by focusing on a minor and peripheral episode (the destruction of the Negrais settlement), shifted the attention away from a mistaken English policy to a discussion of Burmese arbitrariness, fully disregarding Alaungmintaya's agency in the development of Anglo-Burmese relations.

By taking an interest in the king's personality and motives as well as in the intricate socio-political context in which he throve, I try to offer a more balanced view of Alaungmintaya's diplomatic initiative and the British failure in Burma. This essay is also an attempt to re-interpret Alaungmintaya's diplomacy with regard to the British. Fundamentally the letter has not been recognized as a major document of Burmese diplomacy, because historical interpretations have been dominated by Euro-centric perspectives. Thus the political relevance of the Golden Letter has never been fully appreciated by historians. But to gain a better understanding of the letter's contents and meaning is actually not a major challenge once the political and economic context has been presented in a more balanced way. I will argue that the Golden Letter was the centre-piece of an initiative on behalf of Alaungmintaya to put his trade relations with the East India Company and his political relations with the British in general on solid ground. His initiative failed and this failure probably had a lasting negative impact on Anglo-Burmese relations.

The Golden Letter was a product of the craftsmanship of the Burmese chancellery and it is an exquisite testimonial of elite material culture. Being most probably the only surviving Burmese golden letter in the world, it is a very special and unique piece. In the last section of the essay I will deal with the material aspects of the production of the Golden Letter. The choice of noble materials entails a process of differentiation and hierarchization that seems obvious in its significance. But it is probably not a futile exercise to re-state the implicit connotations of gold, rubies and ivory in the cultural environment of the Burmese court so as to highlight their importance for the interpretation of the letter itself.

Short sections on the king's titles that provide an insight into royal self-representation, on the style of royal letters, as well as an annotated translation of the letter complete our presentation and should make a contribution to a comprehensive study of a historical document that has been dormant in its Hanoverian repository for over two and a half centuries.

The Rise of Alaungmintaya

The Conquest of One's Own Country

The rise of Alaungmintaya to kingship in Burma is a fascinating story whose intense drama is not matched by any other reign in Burmese history. While other great kings inherited their kingdom, Alaungmintaya had to recreate it largely by himself. Endowed with natural gifts for warfare and diplomacy, he rose from the chieftainship of a village to the throne of a reinvigorated Burmese kingdom. He is the founder of a dynasty that for several decades, up to the beginnings of the colonial period, was driven by dynamics of territorial expansion that brought it into conflict with the nascent British Indian Empire. His sons who succeeded him repeatedly triumphed over Chinese armies, raided India's northeast kingdoms, ruined Siam's capital Ayutthaya and conquered Arakan, a kingdom that had withstood Burmese aggressions for centuries. But the groundwork and the methods for this expansion were laid during the eight years of their father's rule.

To understand how Alaungmintaya made himself into a king involves not only a thorough knowledge of his military career in a particular political context, but also an understanding of the cultural settings that allowed a simple village chief named U Aung Zeyya to lay claim to kingship and to effectively obtain legitimacy and recognition of such legitimacy. He was thirty-eight when he started the career that led him to full kingship and died in 1760 after a reign of eight years. To study Alaungmintaya's biography and meteoric rise, we have both Burmese and Western sources.

The king's edicts and letters have been published in an annotated edition and offer first-hand information on his policies.[5] They were recently re-edited by a Burmese scholar with

[5] *Alaungmintaya Ameindaw-mya (Royal edicts of Alaungmintaya)*, edited by Khin Khin Sein (Yangon: Myanmar Historical Commission, 1964).

English summaries.[6] Two political-cum-military biographies (*ayedawboun*[7]) of Alaungmintaya were written after his death by two of the king's close advisors. The first one was U Nè *a.k.a.* Letwè Nawratha, a prolific author who was also the writer of the Golden Letter. His *Alaungmintayagyi Ayedawboun* was written c. 1766.[8] Letwè Nawratha started his ministerial career of fifty years during the reign of the last king of the preceding dynasty, Mahadhammarajadhipati. A pillar of the administration of the emerging Konbaung dynasty, U Nè was obviously a privileged witness of the new reign. Having joined the inner group of trustworthy men that surrounded Alaungmintaya since 1752, he rose rapidly in the king's service and U Thaw Kaung describes him as "one of the few learned officials who knew about the traditions and etiquette of the former dynasty" who "became indispensable to the new king".[9]

Another biography was written by U Nyo *a.k.a.* Twinthin Taikwun Mahasithu, another contemporary minister. His work bears the same title, *Alaungmintaya Ayedawboun,* and exists in two versions that have been reprinted several times[10]. Unlike the first biography that recapitulates the reigns of the two preceding kings, U Nyo's biography provides us with a straight record of the military and diplomatic events of Alaungmintaya's reign. Other biographical or contextual information is scarce.[11] While Western descriptions do not offer a

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[6] *The Royal Orders of Burma,* ed. by Than Tun (Kyoto: Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, 1983-90), vol. 3, 27-29; 156-7. In this source collection, each volume contains a first part with English summaries followed by a larger section with the original Burmese text. Hereafter royal orders or letters will simply be referred to by the volume where they appear (i.e. volume three for Alaungmintaya's orders and letters) and their respective date. Note that dates given by Than Tun are sometimes provisional and put into brackets in this text.

[7] The term narrowly translates as "account of royal affairs" and is used in Burmese historical literature to denominate a genre of writing that records the wars waged by kings. More generally, the *ayedawboun* display the successful, brilliant and meritorious actions of a few great kings. The medieval Latin term *gesta* would best fit as a Western equivalent.

[8] This manuscript has only come to light very recently thanks to U Thaw Kaung. Information currently available on his biography and works is found in an unpublished paper of Thaw Kaung, "Letwè Nawratha (1723-1791) Recorder of Myanmar History," (Yangon, 2008). The text is now being edited by Daw Ohn Gyi for the Myanmar Historical Commission.

[9] *Ibidem*.

[10] The two versions were first published and annotated by U Hla Tin (*alias* Hla Thamein) in 1961. They were reprinted in 2006 by the Yapye Book House with an index and foot notes indicating divergent readings as found in the earlier edition published by Sudhammavati Press in 1924. The longer version has been wrongly ascribed to U Nè *a.k.a.* Letwè Nawratha.

[11] Alaungmintaya is connected in very brief terms to preceding royalty; a list of the group of sixty-

continuous record of the king's life, their observations contain facts and anecdotes that throw some light on the man.

In the chronicle of the Konbaung dynasty (known as the *Konbaungzet*), we find, just as in the biographies, a detailed chronological account of the battles, a documentation of the composition and the organization of the armies, information on diplomacy, on administrative decisions and finally on the standard legitimizing acts of a dynasty founder who was expected to found a capital, construct a palace, and support religious institutions. In short, the Burmese chronicle contains what its writers considered noteworthy for the public record. At the same time, so as to match the concept of the supra-mundane ruler in Buddhist cosmology, the chroniclers had to fashion Alaungmintaya as a man predestined to rule.

While Alaungmintaya's military prowess matched a natural desire of local chiefs and commoners to resist the Mon conquerors, the new man's claim on power nonetheless needed to be substantiated with a legitimate ancestry and statements of his meritorious antecedents in former lives[12]. It also had to fit culturally engrained expectations of a just Buddhist ruler who cares for the country and the welfare of the Buddhist faith. In practice Alaungmintaya's leadership was implicitly confirmed by the supernatural signs that announced his rise. Stepping into the role of a just king (a *mintaya*), Alaungmintaya had to be politically and militarily successful and he had to perform foundational acts that legitimized his reign. In terms of historiography, the nineteenth century royal chronicles and the biographies fit the king's life into a model role, but these were not naïve attempts to

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eight trustworthy men who supported him and statements on the foundations and construction of the palace and religious buildings are made. U Tin's work contains notes on the king's style of government and administrative measures. See U Tin, *The Royal Administration of Burma,* translated by Euan Bagshawe, (Bangkok: Ava House; 2001), 288-292 (para. 313-319). Georges Baker left a sketch of the character of the king. See Alexander Dalrymple, *Oriental Repertory ....* (London: George Bigg, 1791), 163-88.

[12] The author of the chronicle tells us that Alaungmintaya's ancestors descended from the same lineage that had ruled Burma for centuries and lay claim to Indian origins connecting the lineage to the clan of the Buddha. Such a claim bears no historicity but it was a must to make Alaungmintaya's royal status credible. As Alaungmintaya was predestined to become king, his advent was heralded by auspicious signs and omens. The chronicler tells us that even the reigning king at Ava had heard of these signs. During his youth, Alaungmintaya's future destiny was revealed to him in dreams whose interpretation he kept to himself until the moment was ripe and his destiny confirmed.

idealize the man and his extraordinary life story. Alaungmintaya was endowed with real talents for leadership and filled with determination to succeed before any historian fixed himself the task to write of the man's life.

Nonetheless, for a historian bound to a critical examination of the 'facts', the biography of a super-man raises many questions, especially when it comes to the way that an ordinary village chief reached a level of uncontested, mystically legitimized authority. Alaungmintaya's political claims to royalty bear a supra-mundane dimension in a Buddhist culturally-sanctioned context. So the question, at what point exactly did Alaungmintaya come to see himself as a king, is intimately linked to another question: When did he perceive himself as an extraordinary man predestined to rule the country? The chronicles place, as we have said, Alaungmintaya's predestined rise at a very early stage of his career, something which in practical terms does not sound very likely.

The career that led Alaungmintaya to the throne of Burma started at the moment that, in early April 1752, Aung Zeyya, the chief of the village circle of Moksobo, refused to pledge allegiance to the new Mon masters who had taken the capital of Ava a month before and deported the reigning Burman king Mahadhammarajadhipati. For about one year, he led aggressive attacks on local Mon outposts, but those he challenged militarily were apparently not always regular Mon troops, but also local Burmese leaders. In those early days, he also had to face the incursions of the Gwe-Shans, who descended from the eastern hills taking advantage of the political vacuum. A single strike did not put an end to the trouble they were causing. Alaungmintaya had rather limited forces at his disposal and it was only about a year later that his personal authority was successfully established in large parts of the Mu and Chindwin valleys. While it was psychologically important to combine the effect of his military success with the recognition of his claim to be a *minlaung* (future king), it is unlikely that such this effect spread automatically among the different groups of Tai, comprising mainly Shan and Yuan.

Alaungmintaya (and his successors) were destined to be quintessentially Burmese kings.[13] Alaungmintaya was not an anti-Mon king, but he did not really fight to win the hearts of the

[13] The specifically Upper Burmese character of Alaungmintaya's career and royal profile distinguishes him from the great kings of the sixteenth century, whose kingship culminated in a cultural symbiosis

Mon either. He argued above all that the king of Pegu had no legitimate claim to rule. He therefore led a strenuous fight against the southern kingdom first to throw the Mon ruler out of the Burman heartland, and then destroy the Mon power to exert sovereign rule over the territories that Burman kings had claimed for centuries. As his triumphs on the battlefield made him feel invulnerable, his ambitions became boundless[14]. Once he had established his hegemony over the Shan and the Manipuri, and had overcome the Mon, he wanted to conquer the neighboring kingdom of Siam as well.

But Alaungmintaya was not just a gifted military leader whose ambition was fuelled by a passion for power. He did not simply oppose the Mon king or attack the king of Siam because he saw them as political rivals or natural enemies. After two years of successfully fighting to establish his primacy in the region where he hailed from, he finally saw himself as a predestined king. He was proud of his physical strength, but at first he had to tread carefully when making claims of predestined kingship. With a growing list of victories that made him ever more self-confident, his ambitions were undoubtedly bolstered by his early entourage of followers and family relatives. At that stage, he could not simply promote himself as one king among others. He had to appear as a superior king in terms of cosmological legitimacy, which was ultimately transformed into a practical reality with the support of the multitudes in the countryside, who joined his battle-cry during his advance. True, once his campaign reached Lower Burma, the sympathy for his ambitions would only contribute so much to his success. Some chiefs may not have dared to resist Alaungmintaya, but more commonly local chiefs would have cared less about high-minded political claims than about their power and influence. They had to be re-assured that Alaungmintaya would re-confirm their positions.

Adopting in his letters the *habitus* of a *mintaya,* or, in Pali, *dhammaraja*[15], Alaungmintaya anticipated the submission of inferior kings as a natural thing. War ensued because other rulers refused to accept the superior destiny of Alaungmintaya. Such claims were not just

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of Mon and Burmese influences. I would hold the same view as regards the kings of Pagan, but I concede that the idea of a greater cultural diversity at the court many centuries before is speculative.

[14] On his feelings of invulnerability, see *Royal Orders of Burma,* vol. 3, 15 January 1756.

[15] A *dhammaraja* is a king ideally promised to fairly rule the world and perpetuate the institutions of the Buddhist *sasana* thus preserving the teaching of the Buddha.

made for show. It is difficult to understand the policies of the early Konbaung kings unless one fully acknowledges this legacy of Alaungmintaya's reign. Later colonial historiography had a tendency to describe the Konbaung kings as vainglorious and condescending. It is difficult to make that reproach of Alaungmintaya. Some of his successors – his sons foremost among them – may have sometimes displayed less political acumen and more an air of superiority revealing what British writers lightly termed the arrogance and the haughtiness of the Burmese court. Alaungmintaya's outstanding political ability was displayed in his pragmatism. Despite the high status he claimed, he remained an unaffected, independent-minded and humorous man who knew when and where to strike and when and where to be a diplomat.[16] The relations with the East India Company of which the Golden Letter forms one important chapter are, as we will see in a following section, an ample demonstration of this versatile genius.

Alaungmintaya's military campaigns are best explained with a map of Burma's Irrawaddy river valley at hand. We will roughly summarize Alaungmintaya's military record before moving on to a more detailed discussion. After taking control over the area of the Mu-Chindwin river basin, his home base, in 1752-3, he made incursions into Manipur, a Hindu kingdom lying northwest of the Upper Chindwin valley, and safeguarded the back of his position by either negotiating with the north-eastern Shan chiefs or by defeating them. Less than eighteen months after the Mon had taken the Burmese capital of Ava, Alaungmintaya was able to eject the invaders (1754) from the ancient capital. These early achievements left him free to move down south. The conquest of the entire Irrawaddy valley was a drama in three acts: first, the conquest of Pyay that opened the road to Dagon, where he founded the city of Rangoon (1755); a year later the conquest of Syriam, the country's major port (1756) and finally, the onslaught on Pegu, the Mon capital (1757), the most challenging part of the war. When he had full control of the core lands of the former Burmese kingdom, he successfully crushed Manipur (1758). Less than a year later, his armies were again on their

[16] One takes note nonetheless that his constant success made him overbearing towards the end of his reign. Shameless arrogance is displayed in a letter to the king of Ayutthaya, written two months before he died, where he states that comparing the Siamese king with himself would be like "confusing a red iron rod with a piece of meat where the sand-flies, mosquitoes and insects are flying around," *Royal Orders of Burma,* vol. 3, 25 March 1760.

way south, preparing for an invasion of Siam (1759). But Alaungmintaya did not see the fall of Siam's capital: he fell sick and decided to return to Upper Burma, where he died in May 1760.

From early April 1752 to late April 1754, Alaungmintaya's forces moved in a radius of about 150 km west, north and east of Moksobo, his birthplace which later became the capital and palace site, Shwebo. The Mon, who had never before in history ruled in Central Burma, lacked the logistical support to back up their previous conquest. When threatened, village chiefs would formally submit, but hostile rule and the vicissitudes of warfare pushed country people to run away and hide in the jungle of the peripheral zones of the Irrawaddy valley. Some chiefs may have relished the confirmation of their power, but Alaungmintaya rejected the new Mon order and set an example to follow. But it is likely that at the beginning he had to struggle just as much to fight the Mon as to win over fellow Burmese village chiefs to his cause. The Mon garrisons and rival Burmese leaders were moreover not the only foe. Since the rise of the Mon kingdom in the 1740s, the Gwe Shans, often named together with the Lawa, tried to establish a political hegemony over parts of Central Burma on both sides of the Irrawaddy under their leader, Gunna-eim. After indecisive battles in 1752-3, the Gwe Shans were only overcome by Alaungmintaya's troops in late between 1757 and early 1758.

When Ava fell into Alaungmintaya's hands in April 1754, the Mon mobilized a naval force that went up the Chindwin River and entered Alaungmintaya's heartland. The naval battle near the village of Silakhu marked a decisive turn in the regional military confrontation. The Burmese won the battle but they were seriously challenged by the brave and tactically competent Mon admirals. After the Silakhu victory, the Mon were forced out of Central Burma and local resistance against Alaungmintaya abated. The road into the southern Irrawaddy valley was now open. Just three or four months later, reports spread that the Burmese population revolted in towns further south that were officially under Mon control. The Mon added oil to the fire of the revolt when they executed the former Burmese king of Ava, Mahadhammarajadhipati on 13 October 1754.

The most important of the cities on Alaungmintaya's journey to the south was the old and prestigious city of Pyay that the Mon had started to fortify in September 1754. Losing

another naval battle near Maluan in early November, King Banya Dala himself left his capital for Pyay and decided to take the defense of the city into his own hands. As they anticipated the arrival of Alaungmintaya's besieging army, the Mon did their best to reinforce their garrison in Pyay. The Burmese inside the city secretly appealed to Alaungmintaya while many Burmese in the countryside now stood behind the new king's campaign. In a short time the Burmese forces considerably increased in number. The decisive battle took place between 6 and 9 February 1755 and ended with another triumph of Alaungmintaya's army. More than any previous battle, the conquest of Pyay marked an essential moment for Alaungmintaya to obtain recognition as a predestined king. In his first-hand report of the recent events in Burma, George Baker, the first East India Company envoy to Alaungmintaya's court in September 1755, states that it was after the conquest of Pyay that Alaungmintaya took on "royal behavior" that he had previously refused to adopt[17]. Until that moment, Alaungmintaya had been at best a very successful provincial leader who had resisted a "foreign" occupation, but whose startling political début might still run into a dead end despite a number of triumphs.

From then onwards, the military focus lay on fully crushing the Mon power in Lower Burma. For several months Alaungmintaya's progress looked irresistible. When he reached Lunze on the Irrawaddy in March 1755, he renamed it Myan-aung, "fast victory". In the middle of April, Alaungmintaya came to Dagon, the site of the eponymous pagoda, the illustrious Shwedagon, where on 2 May 1755 he founded the city of Rangoon, meaning in Burmese, "end of hostility". Dagon or Rangoon lay just opposite the heavily defended port of Syriam (now Thanlyin), a stronghold of the Mon. But the middle of the year was not an opportune moment to wage new battles as the rainy season began. Raids were pushed deeply into the area surrounding Pegu, the capital of the Mon kingdom, but attempts at conquering Syriam failed dismally. Alaungmintaya did not advance into the western part of the delta. As often elsewhere, he promised willing local men that they would be appointed or re-appointed, if they could break any resistance and settle the country in his name. Once

[17] "Being thus successful in the Wars, he began now to take a Prince-like-state on him, and to receive the Compliments, and Courtesies usually paid to Sovereigns, in this Country," Georges Baker, "Observations at Persaim and in the Journey to Ava and Back in 1755," *SOAS Bulletin of Burma Research* 3, no. 1 (2005): 120.

the area around Pathein was pacified, the village chiefs were called up to bring "each… his quota of men and grain".[18]

In March 1755, Alaungmintaya sent an embassy across the Mon lines to Pathein make contact with the British chief in Negrais. Henry Brooke's friendly reaction was followed by a second mission sent in June when Pathein had come fully under Burmese control. While the Burmese king wanted to buy military supplies at short notice and showed himself well-disposed to grant trade privileges in exchange, the British hurried to send an envoy to his court, the Baker mission, to discuss a "treaty of friendship and alliance" with binding commercial and territorial guarantees. The Burmese king was interested in trade, but not, as we will see, in concluding an alliance.

At the end of June, Alaungmintaya rushed back north to Shwebo, his new capital, where he took care of administrative matters and attached some of the ex-king's ministers to his court in November 1755[19]. In January 1756, preparations for a new campaign in the south began. The king's sons started a war of propaganda using bulletins and flyers appealing to the Mon to defect. The king was in an optimistic mood, telling his officers that the enemy would soon be subdued, but cautioned them in metaphoric language, not to eat the food when it was still too hot[20]. Alaungmintaya left with an estimated 50,000 men in February and arrived about a month later in Rangoon. Great care had been taken to prepare the campaign in the best possible way. Officers in Rangoon were told to wait for the king and sufficient provisions were assembled. Thanks to the mediation of the *sawbwa*[21] of Bhamo, the *sawbwa* of

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[18] Baker, "Observations", 106.

[19] Among the royal orders of late 1755, we find instructions regarding weights and measures, ceremonial dress, royal and court insignia. The former ministers played a key role in the way the village chief learnt how to be and act as a king, in other words, his 'royal education'. The former ministers provided him, for example, with a chronology of the former reigns, directions on how to build a capital city, and on how to nominate the crown prince (see *Royal Orders of Burma,* vol. 3, 3 November 1755). Regarding the propaganda war, see *ibidem,* 18 January 1756, 9 and 25 April 1756. The struggle for royal legitimacy is also displayed in the exchange of letters between Alaungmintaya and Banya Dala, *ibidem,* 13, 16 and 28 June 1756.

[20] *Ibidem,* 18 January 1756.

[21] A *sawbwa* is the Burmese rendering of a Tai term for a local ruler in the Shan country, geographically the mountainous, eastern part of Burma. The Shan country is a multi-ethnic region. Its predominant population, the Shan, call themselves Tai, "Tai Yai," being the Thai term. The Tai have numerous regional subdivisions, such as Tai Long, Tai Mao, Tai Khamti, and others and belong to the Tai-Kadai linguistic family.

Mong Mit (generally spelled in Burma, Momeit) had also joined the campaign with his men.[22] Besides military effects, the backing of the sawbwas had political advantages, too, as it lowered the risk of further Shan rebelliousness on the kingdom's eastern flanks. Alaungmintaya also put some hope into fruitful relations with the English East India Company. He was ready to satisfy several of their demands regarding trade and settlement conditions. But the connection with the English ultimately provided him with little more than some guns, cannon and ammunition that the Company's men sold to his officers or presented to him on visits.

The siege of Syriam dragged on from early April to 13 July 1756, when the city finally fell[23]. Banya Dala's forces had not succeeded to dislodge the Burmese garrison in Rangoon neither during their attacks in July nor in December 1755 when they tried to enroll the available English ships besides their French allies. In June 1756, a full year after he had refused to send a reply to Alaungmintaya's diplomatic overtures,[24] Banya Dala finally wanted to enter negotiations. But unlike the conciliatory tone of his first letter to the Mon king, Alaungmintaya's reply of 28 June 1756 was a call for unconditional surrender.

After the fall of Syriam in the middle of the rainy season, the Burmese soldiers did not rush into further direct action, but increased their pressure on the Mon. The latest triumph in the south was followed by a flush of administrative activity focusing on over 3,000 appointments which rewarded military merit, but also served to stabilize the king's own power[25]. Allegedly five hundred foreigners captured in Syriam were enrolled in new fighting units. In October, the Burmese started their advance against the capital, Pegu. To the Mon king who by then was desperately trying to save himself through negotiations, Alaungmintaya clearly signaled that nothing less would do than submitting.[26] To further

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[22] Alaungmintaya had won a decisive battle against Shans and Kachins on 21 March 1754. The *sawbwa* of Momit had also pledged his allegiance at that moment but later revolted. During the onslaught of Pegu, he must have performed well, because he was confirmed in his office on 4 December 1757.

[23] *Konbaungset Mahayazawintawgyi (Great Royal Chronicle of the Konbaung Dynasty)* (Yangon : Yapye, 2005), vol.1, 152. The final onslaught saw the tragic death of the Mahasenapati, the artillery chief and one of the king's close and beloved advisers.

[24] *Royal Orders of Burma,* vol. 3, 10 June 1755.

[25] *Ibidem,* 26 July 1756.

[26] In October 1756 a group of Burmese, Mon and Shan monks undertook a peace mission on behalf of King Banya Dala. But Alaungmintaya rejected the compromise they had on offer and called for

weaken the opposite front, Alaungmintaya promised all the Mon who were in debt slavery to set them free once they had switched allegiances.[27] In late December 1756, Banya Dala thought that by sending Alaungmintaya one of his daughters, he would escape losing his palace. But following this gesture, arms rested merely for a short time. Fully encircled since early March 1757, the city finally fell on 12 May. Other places in the Mon country, such as Martaban (or Mouttama) now submitted.

The war for Lower Burma had come to an end and Alaungmintaya was now the undisputed lord over Burma's core lands. Alaungmintaya stayed for two more months in the south before going back north. For the next one and a half year, he did not engage in any major new conquests. His priorities lay with the organization of the tax administration of his kingdom, the development of his central bureaucracy and the restructuring of his troops. To revive trade, he was also now in a position to make some further concessions to foreign traders. A month after the fall of Pegu, Alaungmintaya summoned the British chief at Negrais to present him the sealed copy of the "treaty" that the East India Company had been lobbying him to sign through the Lester mission. Alaungmintaya was confident that the East India Company would contribute to the revival of Burma's trade. But unfortunately, by then the Madras Board had already been told by the Company's directors in London that the British settlements in Burma should only be kept nominally. In a following section, we will pay close attention to this episode.

In late 1758, Alaungmintaya attacked and fully took possession of the small kingdom of Manipur which had been a virulently aggressive neighbor in the early decades of the century. In the south, his troops suppressed a Mon revolt that erupted in early 1759. In July 1759, Alaungmintaya left to go to war against Burma's archrival, the Siamese kingdom of Ayutthaya. Advancing by sea and by land, the Burmese forces first gathered in Tenasserim before crossing the mountain ranges and marching northwards to lay siege to the capital. Well prepared and sustained once more by an ardent campaign boasting of the righteousness of Alaungmintaya's claim to supreme power, the campaign took

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nothing but the unconditional submission of the Pegu king. The employment of monks to mediate difficult political relations is a well-recognized fact. *Royal Orders of Burma,* vol. 3, 9 and 25 April, 19 October 1756 and KBZ, vol. 1, 168.

[27] *Ibidem*, 2 April 1757.

Alaungmintaya to the doors of Ayutthaya. But when he became ill, the king decided to abandon the siege. On his way home, he passed away on 11 May 1760.

Anglo-French Rivalries in the Indian Ocean

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, European trade in India was dominated by the English East India Company and the French *Compagnie française des Indes orientales,* who prospered in a number of fortified coastal trading settlements. Both rivaled each other to gain a dominant position in the Indian Ocean trade, but their commercial rivalry became openly confrontational only when, after 1744, their relations took an increasingly political character. The policies of the British and French trade companies in Burma during the 1740s and 1750s have to be read on the background of the Anglo-French rivalry in southern India and in the Indian Ocean[28]. The clashes of the two naval and commercial powers in South Asia have generally been described and interpreted in the context of two large-scale, primarily European conflicts: the War of Austrian Succession (1740-48) and the Seven Years War (1756-63). But in its Indian setting, the Carnatic and the Coromandel Coast, the Anglo-French confrontation was also tied to a chain of local causes that resulted from the disintegration of the Mughal Empire.

In India, after the death of Aurangzeb (1707), the central power of the Mughal emperors fell apart and stimulated the rivalry of regional powers and local governors. This situation offered new opportunities for the European trade companies to further their own interests. Dumas, the French governor of Pondicherry, developed friendly relations with local rulers such as the nawab of the Carnatic, and actively supported one against the other with a small army of local recruits trained by European officers. After 1742, Joseph-François Dupleix (1697-1763) eagerly pursued this policy of political engagement. Territorial ambitions took the lead over purely commercial concerns and Great Britain was considered by the French as a rival in the same way as it was in Europe. Dupleix identified his personal ambition with

[28] In this section I draw on a range of books about this well documented period, such as Philippe Preschez, *Les relations entre la France et la Birmanie aux XVIIIe et XIXe siècles* (Paris : France-Asie, 1967); Gottfried Niedhart, *Handel und Krieg in der Britischen Weltpolitik, 1738-1763* (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1979) ;. Jean Meyer, *Les Européens et les autres de Cortès à Washington,* (Paris : Colin, 1975) ; David K. Fieldhouse, *Die Kolonialreiche seit dem 18. Jahrhundert,* (Frankfurt: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1984).

the interest of the *Compagnie des Indes* that, in his eyes, blended with the wider concerns of the nation. Neutrality in India came to an end during the War of the Austrian Succession (1740-48) and the navies of the two European monarchies became directly involved in the struggle for pre-eminence in the Indian Ocean. As Dupleix had no lasting support at home for his ambitious plans, he was recalled in 1754. But his methods were not lost on the British, who successfully followed the same policy in their Madras Presidency. In the long run the British proved themselves as the more determined, financially stronger and ultimately militarily superior of the two competitors. As Michael Pearson writes:

> It may be that the relative success of Britain in the Seven Years War (1756-63) marks the beginning of their dominance: certainly in the Indian Ocean this was the period when the British began the long process of conquering India and taking over important choke points.[29]

The qualification of Britain's early success as "relative" overturns the traditional triumphalist retrospective historiography of British expansion. With regard to the year-by-year record of events, such a nuanced re-evaluation is fully justified.

After a British attack on French trading ships, Mahé de la Bourdonnais, the governor of Ile-de-France, was ordered to send war ships to the Coast of Coromandel. This resulted in the First Carnatic War (1746-48). In September 1746, the French took possession of Madras and the British traders took refuge in Fort St David or Cuddalore. Against de la Bourdonnais, who was ready to leave Madras after the payment of a ransom, Dupleix decided to keep the new possession. The British failed to take Pondicherry when they besieged the city in 1748, but the peace treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle of October 1748 restored Madras to the British.

This first war between the French and the British set the stage for the second Carnatic War (1751-54). It was during these years that Dupleix tried to fully realize his political ambitions. We have to note that this war was not officially sanctioned as both European powers were at peace during these years. While the British governor of Madras supported the local raja of Tanjore and thus obtained the territory of Devikot, Dupleix intervened in the succession of two important governorships of South India, the *subahdari* of Hyderabad and the *nawabi* of Arcot. In 1748, the Mughal governor of Hyderabad (Nizam ul-Mulk) had passed away and was succeeded by his second son, Nasir Jang. Muzaffar Jang, the Nizam's nephew, disputed

[29] Michael Pearson, *The Indian Ocean (*London: Routledge, 2003), 190.

Nasir's claim and allied himself to Chanda Sahib, who wanted to recover the government of Arcot that had slipped from the hands of his father-in-law after a Marathi attack in 1740. Dupleix decided to support both Muzaffar's claims in Hyderabad and Chanda Sahib's in Arcot.

The French forces defeated the ruling governor of Arcot whose second son, Muhammad Ali, fled to Trichinopoly and they installed Chanda Sahib as the new governor. As for Muzaffar, his first attempt to take power failed and Nasir Jang forced him to surrender. But when Nasir met the French on the battlefield of Velimadupet on16 December 1750, he was killed and Muzaffar became the new *subahdar.* During the next years, French predominance became entrenched in Hyderabad with the presence of the Marquis de Bussy, a brilliant military leader who crushed a Mahratta army in 1751.[30] In Arcot, however, matters took a turn for the worse. Thomas Saunders, the English governor of Madras, encouraged the resistance of Muhammad Ali against Chanda Sahib. While a French force was besieging Trichinopoly (1751), Saunders sent Robert Clive with a small British force that realised the remarkable feat of taking Arcot. In June 1752, the French left off their siege of Trichinopoly. Muhammad Ali became the undisputed *nawab* of the Carnatic[31] and Chanda Sahib, the French protégé, was beheaded. Dupleix tirelessly built a new alliance with Mysore. But in 1754, lacking both money and support from his superiors in Paris, whom he had never fully informed about his plans, he was recalled to France and the policy of creating additional revenues for the *Compagnie* by extending its territorial control ended.

Dupleix was replaced by Godeheu who, in October 1754, signed an agreement with Thomas Saunders, the Governor of Madras, stipulating that the two companies would forever renounce interfering in Indian politics and keep their possessions in India equal in size, even making a provision for mutual compensation if either of the two companies came to possess

[30] Bussy remained in Hyderabad with 900 European soldiers and 4000 sepoys until 1758 when he was recalled by the Count of Lally to support the siege of Madras.

[31] In March 1753, Saunders submitted a draft letter to Muhammad Ali requesting him to write to the king of Pegu. Insinuating that the French wanted to take possession of Pegu, Muhammad Ali was asked to promote the English as allies against the French. Muhammad Ali complied with that request ("I will send a letter to the King [of] Pegue agreeable to the form…"). The sources contain no further information on this initiative. Saunders to Nabob Aneverdy Cawn [Muhammad Ali], 10 March 1753, CC 1753, 27; Nabob Aneverdy Cawn Bahadur to Saunders, 17 March 1753, CC 1753, 35.

more than the other. This sounded as if the British-French meddling in Indian political affairs had been but a momentary disturbance and as if a balance of interests could be established once the French company mended its ways. Just a few years later, political events had the better of this naïve treaty whose principles proved disastrous for French interests. In January 1756, the Seven Years War broke out. Its Indian episodes have been aptly labeled the 'Third Carnatic War' (1756-63), which brought to fruition two major developments, the elimination of the French as a serious threat to English trade and naval power in the Indian Ocean and the establishment of the East India Company as the dominant territorial power in Bengal. In 1758, French troops arrived under the orders of the Comte de Lally-Tollendal. They were cut off from home provisions by the English navy and failed several times on the battlefield. When Bussy was recalled by Lally to lay siege to Madras from November 1758 to February 1759, Hyderabad was soon lost to French influence. Clive invaded the Northern Circars and the French siege of Madras was a complete failure. Lacking funds and without obtaining any efficient support from their naval force, Lally's troops were decisively beaten by Sir Eyre Coote in January 1760 in Vandavasi, north of Pondicherry. Lally's surrender in Pondicherry in January 1761[32] did not mark the end of the Franco-British rivalry in the Indian Ocean, but it did stop French territorialism in India.[33]

The center of British activities in the Indian Ocean shifts from Madras to Calcutta. In the context of British expansion during these years, the triumph over the French in southern India was the cherry on the cake of an unprecedented success elsewhere: the foundation of British power in Bengal. In 1756 a new Mughal governor, the nawab Siraj-ud-Dawla held power in Bengal and alienated the whole merchant community, including the foreign companies. He took possession of Fort William, the East India Company factory in Calcutta, and famously mistreated his British captives. Lieutenant-Colonel Robert Clive, the newly appointed Deputy-Governor of Fort St. David, prevailed on the Madras Board to recover the

[32] Considered as the man who had ruined the French prospects in India, Lally was brought to justice on his return to France and executed in 1766. The Treaty of Paris of 1763 gave the French back five trading establishments in India.

[33] The English enjoyed the support of royal troops while the French state was unable to finance costly military operations to defend French trade interests in India. On war as an instrument to promote and defend Britain's commercial interests, see Niedhart, *Handel und Krieg*, 52-54; 89-90.

British possession. Clive himself led the troops which landed in November 1756. After beating into retreat the troops of the governor of Calcutta, the British successfully fought the troops of the *nawab* on 2 February 1757 and recovered their former possessions in Calcutta. As the peace concluded with Siraj-ud-Dawla looked uncertain and with the opening of the war with France, Clive made plans to establish Mir Jafar, a reputed military commander, as the new governor of Bengal in exchange of the exclusion of the French from Bengal and the eventual payment of an indemnity of ten million rupees to the East India Company. In March 1757, Clive's troops took control of the French factory of Chandernagore and in June they completely routed Siraj-ud-Dawla's forces near Plassey. Mir Jafar was appointed by Clive as the new nawab of Bengal. In 1758 and 1760, Mughal attempts to recover the power in Bengal failed. The military and political achievements of Clive in Bengal thus marked the beginning of the East India Company's territorial rule in India.

The East India Company and Burma

When we turn from the Indian theatre to the events taking place in Burma during the same time period, we are investigating a similar context with an entirely different political situation. In Burma as in India, Anglo-French rivalries and conflicts were overlapping with an indigenous political and military contest. In India, the French and English traders saw long-term advantages in intervening in Indian dynastic successions and in Burma, they were ready to side with either the Mon king at Pegu or the new Burmese king at Shwebo. Both in India and Burma, they did so because they craved an exclusive share of the export trade. But for neither the British nor the French did Burma ever take on any commercial or political priority. Significantly, the diplomatic course the East India Company followed in Burma reflected the policies and priorities that were decided for India in London. Needless to say, diplomacy and direct military engagement were also generally limited by financial constraints.

While it was intertwined with the Indian Ocean context we have sketched above, the story of the East India Company's presence in Burma during those years reads very differently from what we see in India. The diplomatic and military engagement of the East India Company in the middle of the eighteenth century in India turned out as highly rewarding. In Burma a limited investment in political negotiations and a tightly restricted outlay of

resources ended as a resounding failure. While the end of the 1750s ushered in the rise of British power in India, it also saw the break-down of relations between the East India Company and the Burmese kingdom for over thirty years.

The Mughals, as rulers of a land empire, had had to tolerate the presence of autonomous foreign communities along their coasts for two centuries no less than local kings did. The walls of the British forts hosted self-ruling communities of traders who had obtained written agreements to their rights and proudly considered their trade equally advantageous for themselves and for the local rulers. But the very idea of autonomous foreign settlements on sovereign ground was anathema to either Burmese or Mon rulers. The memory of the historic precedent of Felipe de Brito's independent Portuguese settlement in Syriam (1602-1613) lingered on and it was the one situation that no ruler in Burma wanted to see reproduced.[34] In Burma, there were no unsettled territorial margins where the French or the British could naïvely lay claim in the name of doing trade, as the East India Company learnt to its detriment in Negrais. The Historical lessons of earlier and present experiences with foreigners were not lost on either side of the Bay of Bengal. Certainly Alaungmintaya did not fail to see the advantages of trade and he was also ready to make concessions to the East India Company. But while the events that took place in India demonstrated the increasing power of the British, which made relations with them desirable, at the same time those same relations made an engagement with the British increasingly challenging.

It looks as if the French and British companies expected the conditions for establishing themselves on Burmese ground to be similar to the ones they had experienced in India. But in Burma the political authorities were generally less compliant with the requests of the Companies regarding their port trade. Unlike individual country traders who handled single operations, the Companies wanted to obtain binding commitments and tax privileges. They also wanted to establish factories inside fortified settlements on grounds where they enjoyed an autonomous status just as in India. In Burma such aspirations clashed with the principle of royal territorial sovereignty and they were not unreasonably perceived as the potential to lay the ground for hegemonic ambitions. Relations between the companies and the power-holders in Burma were also more volatile because they were not structured by

[34] Brooke to Saunders, 11 January 1754, DCB 1754, 15.

long-term precedents and bureaucratic procedures as was the case in Indian ports. The legalistic approach of the East India Company called for the signature of 'treaties' that would outlast the reigns of individual kings. But royal grants were the highest politically-sanctioned administrative concessions that the Burmese chancellery would normally provide. The English frowned upon 'royal grants' as favors with a limited validity.

While the disintegration of the Mughal Empire prepared the ground for outside interference, the 1750s in Burma saw a process of territorial re-composition and the foundation of a new dynasty which strengthened the power of the monarchy. In India the British and the French could intervene in dynastic politics because there was a demand for men and arms among those Indians who vied for power and influence. In Burma, neither the Mon nor the Burmese king saw any direct foreign military support as desirable or essential for their warfare. The provision of arms, though of indisputable importance and in great demand at any time, was not the key decisive factor in the final triumph of the Burmese in 1757. The Burmese and the Mon kings wanted to buy arms, but they did not request any troops. The British made fools of themselves at the court of Alaungmintaya when they offered a military alliance to a triumphant ruler who had already accumulated an impressive number of victories on the battlefield without the help of any major ally.

To cope with a diversity of challenges in India and Burma, the Company had to effectively manage a pool of ships and men, to equip and provide them with supplies, and more generally to balance short and long term interests. Its primordial aim was to run a profitable trade for its investors. Fighting its French competitors by any means was a corollary of this policy. While King Alaungmintaya nurtured high expectations regarding his relations with the British, the costly wars in India and the meager return on investments pushed the East India Company to take an increasingly low-level approach towards the country. During the 1750s, the Company actually enjoyed trade opportunities in Burma, but due to its unstable political situation, the country looked less and less a place of appealing commercial prospects. Moreover, the French threat considerably abated with the revocation of Dupleix. But, as we will see in this section, early Anglo-Burmese relations also deteriorated because several of the Company's men behaved ambiguously in their dealings with local authorities.

When their behavior bordered on dishonesty, they created local resentment that resulted in open violence.

In late 1751, the directors of the East India Company in London decided to establish a settlement at the southwestern tip of Lower Burma, on an island near Cape Nagarit, or Negrais. Instructions were therefore sent to Madras appointing David Hunter, previously deputy governor of St Helena, as head of the new project. As a kind of preparatory mission, Captain Thomas Taylor went to Negrais in June 1752. He was soon told by the local people that the land that the British intended to occupy belonged to the king of Pegu! Making 'all the protestations I could of my good intentions I could not make them believe but that I was come to plunder the country' and judging that his ill-equipped team of two dozen men was not in a position to defend themselves, he left for Pegu with the hope of obtaining a grant from the king.[35]

This episode marked the beginning of an ill-conceived venture to establish a colony on Burmese ground, more or less in the same rough way that European settlements had been previously set up on the African or Indian coasts. But Burma was not India and the expectations nourished by the Company's directors in London were mistaken and naïve. It took them several years to understand that they had been wrongly advised until they finally backtracked, having lost their investment at the further price of their credibility.

For the men that the Company sent to Negrais, the disadvantages to a viable and commercially profitable settlement were obvious from the beginning. But the plan enjoyed great support in London. It was stubbornly pursued until 1757 and still benefited from a kind of passive endorsement in Madras until 1759.

The major problem was of a logistical nature: the settlement could not sustain itself. For years, food provisions and construction materials had to be brought at great cost from far away, either from Madras or Bengal or, occasionally from trading places further inside Burma. The island where the British fixed themselves was, as Henry Brooke, who was in charge of the settlement, wrote,

[35] Taylor to Saunders, 14 September 1752, DCB 1752, 61-2.

> …almost entirely destitute of inhabitants and covered with woods… good water [being] scarce in the dry season.[36]

Having sent an expedition to Negrais before declaring any of their intentions to the authorities, the British immediately faced the mistrust of the local people and the hostility of the court. Brooke explained,

> The King and [upa]raja as well as the Peguer in general are extreamly jealous of foreigners since the time of the Portuguese who defended their port at Syrian [Syriam]…[37]

The English traders were thus told that their decision did not make commercial sense and that Negrais was not a place to start trading. If the British did not want to develop their trade at Syriam, the kingdom's major port, they should request a settlement further inland at Pathein. Actually his conclusion was also reached in a short time by the chiefs of the settlement themselves. In their reports, they referred again and again to Pathein as the place with "none of the inconveniences" of Negrais as it had

> "fine air, a good rice country about it, a river safe and navigable for the largest ships and [was] capable of maintaining any number of inhabitants".[38]

Shortly after his arrival in April 1753, David Hunter pointed to the necessity of having Pathein as the "principal settlement".[39] Negrais was described as "extremely unhealthy" and the physical condition of the men sent there was a constant cause of worries. From the start, the chiefs of Negrais stated that the colonists were unable to face any armed attack because the majority of soldiers were usually sick.

David Hunter himself wanted to return to the Coromandel Coast as early as September to recover. He was told to remain in the country and died in December, eight months after starting his job. The Company immediately faced the problem of finding a successor. Failing

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[36] Brooke to Saunders, 11 January 1754, DCB 1754, 15.

[37] *Ibidem.* On the Portuguese in Lower Burma, see Jacques Leider, "The Portuguese Communities along the Myanmar Coast," *Myanmar Historical Research Journal* 10, no. 2 : 53-88; Ana Marques Guedes, *Interferência e Integração dos Portugueses na Birmânia, c. 1580-1630,* (Lisboa: Fundaçao Oriente, 1994).

[38] Brooke to Saunders, 11 January 1754, DCB 1754, 15. David Hunter considered that Pathein lay "much more convenient for trade than Syrian or Pegu" and concluded that "our being possessed of that place appears to me to be most essential". After his arrival, he had sent a "resident" to Pathein whose name and occupation there we do not know from our sources. Hunter to the Secret Committee, 20 September 1753, DCB 1753, 173.

[39] Saunders to the Court of Directors, 29 October 1753, in: Henry Dodwell, *Calendar of the Madras Despatches, 1744-55,* (Madras: Government Press, 1920), 184.

to obtain the agreement of a senior employee in India, the Madras Council finally had to make do with Henry Brooke, who had acted as Hunter's assistant in Negrais. Brooke was still a young man, only in his mid-twenties, and would not normally have held a position of such responsibility. But he already had some experience with local conditions.

We may thus wonder what the expectations had been for investing in and settling Negrais, and who had been lobbying for the project in the first place. D.G.E. Hall points to an anonymous paper, 'The Consequence of Settling an European Colony on the Island of Negrais' that was "written in, or slightly before, the year 1750"[40]. The paper stressed first of all the presence of "a capacious harbour for shipping". While the Coromandel Coast lacked safe harbors, the ports of the eastern coast of the Bay of Bengal offered good conditions to weather the storms of the rainy season, and they were much valued by the European sailors. While this was a solid argument that was never put into doubt in later reports,[41] the following points made up an astonishing piece of wishful thinking. The anonymous author argued that if a European colony were to be established, the local people would be happy to settle there, because of the existing "cruel and tyrannical government" and the oppressive effects of the ongoing war. Like later colonialists, he was driven by a naïvely optimistic view of "improving" the "natives" of the kingdom: "… if once under a good government [they] are capable of any improvement: being generally of a good disposition, a tolerable good genius, and strong constitution and nothing so superstitious in their religion as other people of India", he thought that they could be transformed into "excellent seamen".

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[40] Daniel G.E. Hall, *Early English Intercourse with Burma 1587-1743 and The Tragedy of Negrais as a new appendix,* (London: Frank Cass, 1968), 283. Hereafter this work will be referred to as "Hall, *Tragedy,…".* Hall suggests that Thomas Taylor was the author of the paper (*ibidem,* 286). The letter in question was printed in Dalrymple's *Oriental Repertory*, 97-128. In a note Dalrymple states that he received the paper from Governor Thomas Saunders.

[41] Hall emphasizes the fact that the undeclared war with the French was initially a strong motive to settle in Negrais, but the anonymous paper he refers to does actually not at all focus on the French menace. The War of the Austrian Succession was over in 1748 and the British had not suffered any serious losses. In 1750, Dupleix had not yet sent his representative Sieur Bruno to the court of Pegu. Bruno was a man who earned the reputation to aggressively bribe his influence at the court with donations of arms and cannon. I find few indications in the sources that French and English private traders were competing aggressively in Syriam before 1751 when the increasingly politicized rivalry between the two Companies also touched Burma and shook the relative peacefulness that had prevailed there in the 1740s.

Not unlike several Portuguese authors of one hundred fifty years earlier who argued the case of "legally" settling along the Burmese coast, this English writer confidently stated that the "uninhabited" islands that were to be settled did *not* belong to the king of Ava. Any local opposition was thought to be unlikely and could, if it happened, be easily tackled with a blockade of the trade from Lower to Upper Burma

> …with a few light boats or penances the passage from Syrian, Pegu and Martavan to Ava would be easily stopped and no provisions suffered to go up towards Ava which would quickly bring him [the king of Ava] to terms!

The king would have to accept a

> free trade all over his dominions… because all nations trading to Pegu would infallibly rather chuse to trade under an European government.[42]

It is revealing that none of these rosy perspectives was ever to be discussed again in later reports when the settlers, struggling to survive in an isolated spot with limited provisions, were faced with tough negotiations at the court of Pegu, and disquieting reports on the war between Alaungmintaya and the Mon kingdom.

In June 1752, the month that Thomas Taylor arrived in Negrais, the Madras Council appointed Robert Westgarth, a private English trader as its resident in Syriam[43]. Westgarth had practical experience with local trade conditions, but lacked a critical sense of, and a discerning approach to, diplomacy. His verbose reports were replete with gossip and his financial accounts were unreliable. The Madras Board described him in January 1754 as "irregular, perplexed and contradictory which proceed from ignorance or something worse" and finally dismissed him. In a word, during a crucial phase of negotiating terms to obtain a royal grant for their settlement, the East India Company employed an inefficient man as a go-between with the Court of Pegu for one and a half years. Lest we forget, the year 1752 marked the apex of the political expansion of the Mon into central Burma. In March they conquered Ava, the Burman capital, and deported King Mahadhammarajadhipati with his court to Pegu. Following this triumph, King Banya Dala's courtiers may hardly have been impressed when Westgarth showed up at the court three or four months later to explain that

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[42] Dalrymple, *Oriental Repertory*,130.

[43] The East India Company had dropped any commercial activities in Burma in 1743 because of the ongoing war between the kingdoms of Ava and Pegu.

Thomas Taylor "had not come [to Negrais] with any intention to hurt or molest but to serve him [Banya Dala] in case he should want their assistance."[44] In October, Westgarth got official permission to use the East India Company's Syriam grounds as they had received previously, before 1743, the year the Company had left Burma. But King Banya Dala did not feel any urgency to discuss the Negrais issue that was at that moment a priority for the Madras Board.[45]

In fact, the English were not the only foreigners who were lobbying for their interests at the court. In July 1751, Sieur Bruno, an emissary of Dupleix had arrived at the Pegu court. He told Dupleix that with merely five or six hundred French soldiers he could take possession of Syriam. The overambitious Dupleix, dreaming up a French trade monopoly in Pegu, hastened to submit his *"propositions pour un établissement au Pégou"* in Paris. But in a letter of 2 January 1753, the *Compagnie des Indes Orientales* entirely rejected his plans to increase the French influence in Burma. Dupleix continued to plead that the British were steadily expanding their presence and instructed Sieur Bruno to remain in Syriam. He was ready to give whatever help Pondicherry could provide to support the Mon war against Alaungmintaya.[46]

The British in Madras and London saw Dupleix' plans as a threat to their trade interests. It has generally been considered that the rumor that the Mon court would eventually cede Negrais to the French, is what hastened the Company directors' determination to found the Negrais settlement. It later turned out that the rumor was false. French and English reports that refer to the activities of their rivals in Pegu and Syriam tend to exaggerate both the influence that they had at the court and the means that their competitors invested – such as arms provisions - to cement their status there. Writing from Pondicherry on 15 February 1754, Dupleix told Bruno that the British, having built a fort in Negrais, seemed to be in a position to make themselves masters of Syriam[47]. The real situation in Negrais was a far cry

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[44] Westgarth to Saunders, 1 September 1752, DCB 1752, 59.

[45] In its first letter, the Pegu court did not mention the Negrais issue. It is noteworthy that the court requested on its own behalf assistance to buy "good diamonds", firelocks, iron and cloth in Madras. [Uparaja] to Saunders, received on 8 February 1753, DCB 1753, 15.

[46] Philippe Preschez, *Les relations entre la France et la Birmanie aux XVIIIe et XIXe siècles*, (Paris : France-Asie, 1967), 286-7.

[47] Preschez, *Les relations …*, 288.

from such widely overstated suppositions. The fort was not in a position to withstand any attack[48] and the Pegu court did not want to grant the Company the extensive freedom of trade that it was asking for. After David Hunter's sudden death had brought British negotiations to a virtual stop, the *uparaja,* brother of the king of Pegu who ran the negotiations with the foreigners told Governor Saunders:

> I must inform you that from the former kings to this day it was never customary nor ever heard of having free egress and regress throughout the King's country according to their liking or to buy and sell what goods they pleased and to carry them upon the ships. I cannot make my application to his Majesty about what had been unusual in the time of the former kings.[49]

Taking into account the problems at Negrais itself, Saunders and the Madras Board shifted their attention to Pathein, hoping that "an exclusive right to Persaine [Pathein], a place eminently suited for a settlement" could be obtained[50]. Saunders' successor, Georges Pigot, apparently never an enthusiastic supporter of the Negrais venture, looked forward to seeing the settlement in Pathein become a "place under English rule"[51]. But in March 1755, he reported a total lack of progress in negotiations, stating that the "king of Pegu and Uppu Raja flatly refused to sign the treaty and denied the grant of Persaine."[52] As the French were ardent supporters of the Mon[53] and as the East India Company had heard "nothing but promises… from that perfidious court", a gradual shift took place from investing in relations with King Banya Dala towards cultivating the friendship of the Burmese.

When Alaungmintaya took the initiative to get into contact with the British at Negrais in March 1755, Brooke, the chief of Negrais, immediately saw the opportunity to obtain from the Burmese king what the Pegu court had been reluctant to grant: a formal agreement on East Company settlements as well as territorial and commercial rights in Lower Burma. As the Burmese offered "terms of friendship", and as there was "no hope of ever obtaining

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[48] A storm destroyed most of the houses and defensive works that had been built in early 1755. Pigot to Court of Directors, Pigot 10 March 1755, in Dodwell, *Madras Despatches 1744-55,* 257.
[49] Uparaja to Saunders, 20 January 1754, CC 1754, 61.
[50] Saunders to Court of Directors, 7 February 1754 in Dodwell, *Madras Despatches 1744-55,* 210, and 10 November 1754, *ibidem,* 242.
[51] Pigot to Court of Directors, 27 October 1756, in Henry Dodwell, *Calendar of the Madras Despatches, 1754-65*, (Madras: Government Press, 1930), 31.
[52] Pigot to Court of Directors, 10 March 1755 in Dodwell, *Madras Despatches 1744-54,* 257.
[53] Dupleix shortly played the Burmese card against them when he was unhappy with their reactions to Bruno's demands. Preschez, *Les relations…* , 289.

anything from the court of Pegue," he recommended openly taking sides with the Burmese in April 1755[54]. The Baker mission to Alaungmintaya's court in Shwebo of July-September 1755 allowed the British to articulate their territorial and commercial requests. They wanted to formalize their existing settlement in Negrais by a treaty and were looking forward to obtain a piece of land in Pathein as well.[55] When in October 1755 Alaungmintaya's power was firmly established in Lower Burma's southwest region, Brooke told the Madras Board that it would be "difficult to act as neutral part much longer".[56]

But while Brooke tried to make the best out of the new situation, the circumstances at the war front in Lower Burma produced situations that gave the Burmese court a very ambiguous idea of British intentions. With the foundation of Rangoon in May 1755, the foreign traders in Syriam, the old port lying on the opposite side of the river, faced a tricky situation indeed. On the one hand, both Alaungmintaya and Banya Dala were aware that good relations with foreign traders were important for economic and political reasons. In their correspondence, the two therefore emphasized how well they were treating them, while occasionally openly putting pressure on them. Yet on the other, the traders had to act as circumspect diplomats so as not to appear ungrateful or even as turncoats. Likely all had long-standing ties with Syriam and the Mon administration that they were reluctant to break, yet in the middle of 1755, the Burmese were increasingly expected to win. It became then a question of which side the traders were going to take when the war was dragging on for so long. Alaungmintaya stayed in Rangoon from 16 April to 27 June 1755, focusing on administrative tasks and forthcoming military operations. Both English and French traders paid him visits during that time. The promises he made them probably induced Henry Stringfellow, a private trader who had been appointed new resident of the East India Company in Syriam, to take his business affairs to Rangoon. The Mon court was shocked and secretly sent letters to the British traders in Rangoon, begging them to switch sides once

[54] Brooke to Pigot, 13 April 1755, DCB 1755, 154.

[55] Then situated some 75 km north off the sea shore, the port of Pathein had behind it several centuries of commercial interactions in the Bay of Bengal. It was an old, but in comparison with Syriam, minor port. Nonetheless due to its natural advantages, it was still an important regional trading centre. As for Syriam, a trading settlement there was out of the question as Alaungmintaya had decided to raze the city to the ground.

[56] Brooke to Pigot, 16 October 1755, DCB 1755, 331.

more or at least stay neutral during forthcoming attacks against the Burmese.[57] But Stringfellow's move did not hail a full reversal of English policy. Some English captains were receptive to the Mon advances and openly confessed their friendship for the Mons. When Alaungmintaya left for Shwebo at the end of June, the Mon immediately launched attacks against Rangoon to dislodge the Burmese garrison.

At first, the British ships stayed neutral, which annoyed both the Mon and the Burmese. At the next Mon attack, the English captains refused to join the Burmese but switched sides to support two French ships in another, once again fruitless, attack of the Mon naval forces. At the same time an exchange of friendly correspondence between the English captains and the Mon court was revealed: Alaungmintaya learned of this correspondence just before George Baker arrived at Shwebo, where he had gone to submit Brooke's proposals for a treaty of amity. Instead of focusing on the treaty, Baker was at pains to declare that the exchange of letters did not have the approval of the Negrais and Madras authorities. But to make matters worse, Captain Jackson and other British traders were forced by the Mon to join another unsuccessful attack against Rangoon in December 1755, further damaging British credibility.

Alaungmintaya, however, had decided to invest in building stable relations with the East India Company. He trusted Brooke and was ready to accept what Baker had told him about the events in Rangoon of that July. Reluctant to sign a "treaty" submitted by foreigners, he himself took the lead and generously granted the Company the privilege of tax-free trade and a piece of land in Pathein. As he considered the representatives of the East India Company to have been appointed by the English king, he did not want make a deal merely with Brooke. He decided to inform by letter King George II himself as well as the Court of Directors of the Company in London. In so doing, he wanted not only to promote trade relations, but also cultivate friendly relations with the English monarch. Such initiative in contacting a Western monarch was unheard of in Burmese history.

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[57] The Mon court appealed to British traders not to forget their past relationship and come back to trade in Syriam. See letters of 18 and 28 June 1755 in "Miscellaneous Letters on Burma, 1755-60," *SOAS Bulletin of Burma Research* 3, no.1 (2005), 88-9. Two messages of the British at Rangoon sent to the Mon court (one undated, signed by Robert Jackson, John Whitehill, Thomas Swaine and Edward Savage, and another one, dated 12 July 1755) are quoted in CC 1756, 17. The July note is also found in "Miscellaneous…," 90. These letters leave little doubt on the pro-Mon sympathies of these men.

In Governor Georges Pigot's dispatches to London of October 1755 and March 1756, we find little detail about the exchange of missions with King Alaungmintaya. His reports focus on the problems in Negrais: "many have died on the island this season…," a situation which could not be improved unless the war was brought to an end, the main difficulty being, as he wrote, "the prolonged war between the Peguers and the Burmese". Pigot concluded: "The Negrais must remain a burden to the Company" as it had to be "supplied from Bengal or the coast". Brooke, he wrote, "was ordered to favour the Burmese as much as possible without offending the Peguers" and some new prospects were sketched for an alliance with the Burmese. Describing the Peguers as "averse to trade" and the Burmese as "a commercial race", he thought that with new rulers Lower Burma could be developed into "a center for shipbuilding".

Taking into consideration the financial limits of the Company's engagement in Burma, Pigot knew well that this was largely wishful thinking. The most basic consideration of the Company's policy was at all times to hedge the Company's long-term strategic interests in its commercial rivalry with the French. The practical meaning of the key terms employed in this exchange implied that "favoring the Burmese" entailed direct interference in local power relations and that the conclusion of an "alliance" should result in a dependable, legally binding connection with the court to establish British trade interests. Pigot restated the ever-present suggestion of conquests: "it is believed that a small European force would suffice to establish the Burmese there,"[58] but concluded in October 1755 that "the troubles in the Carnatic" would prevent the English from giving any real assistance to the Burmese.[59] The start of the Seven Years War made any real intervention in Burmese affairs even more unlikely. In his dispatch of 2 March 1756, the Governor of Madras recorded that the Board did not "consider it prudent to weaken their resources by helping either" the Burmese or the

[58] The idea came from Brooke, who in April 1755 wrote, "…we could easily turn the balance of power in favor of the Bûraghmahns [Burmans]: to accomplish this would require brisk force and a vessel to lye at Dagon, in Syrian River, would be absolutely necessary…Troops are expensive, yet they are necessary, if you will think proper to spare any, October is the best month…" in "Miscellaneous…," 88.

[59] Pigot to Court of Directors, 27 October 1755, in Dodwell, *Madras Despatches 1755-65*, 32; 2 March 1756, *ibidem*, *47*.

Mon[60]. While Pigot was half-heartedly speculating on eventual military interventions to gain a territorial foothold in Burma and a say in local politics, Alaungmintaya hoped ardently for close relations at the highest political level and counted on regular military supplies. Both could talk about "friendship" and "alliance" and mean very different things.

Neither the Governor in Madras nor the Company's directors in London took any particular interest in Alaungmintaya's own political plans and intentions. With the dismal news that arrived from Negrais, they lost any appetite for further expanding their activities in the kingdom. After an over-enthusiastic start in 1752 when they launched the Negrais project, the directors of the East India Company were no longer convinced that it was worth pursuing the venture. A first message signaling a possible wrapping up of operations in Lower Burma was issued in December 1755 and in March 1757 the Madras Board was told to "determine on withdrawing entirely or barely keep possession at the least possible expense."[61] Though Pigot had probably not been a great supporter of the Negrais project (unlike his predecessor Saunders), the governor and his council in Madras were apparently reluctant to rid themselves of the settlement once and for all. Negotiations with Alaungmintaya were still on track and in August 1757, Ensign Lester obtained the treaty signed by the king. It was ironically on 28 February 1758, the same day the Madras Board learnt about the completion of the "treaty with the Burmahs" that the orders arrived from their London masters to massively reduce the costs of the Company's presence in Negrais.[62]

As Alaungmintaya's expectations had been inevitably rising as he kept reaching out to the East India Company, finally agreeing to negotiate on *their* own terms (the "treaty"!), the Company's policy was bound for a downgrading of its commercial involvement in Burma. In their despatch from London of 23 January 1759, the directors confirm their earlier orders: "the settlement at Negrais has been so expensive and promises so little advantage that

[60] Pigot to Court of Directors, 27 October 1755, *ibidem*, 32. Besides Brooke quoted above, John Whitehill pleaded in favor of a military engagement in Burma: "The Company will never do anything in the Country without drawing the sword, and that must be in favour or the Bûraghmans" in "Miscellaneous…," 92.

[61] Hall, *Tragedy*, 333.

[62] The directors' orders dated back to 25 March 1757 and Thomas Newton's letter was dated 5 January 1758.

unless it has been already withdrawn this should be done at once, leaving no more than 3 or 4 servants to hoist the flag, merely to keep our right."[63]

The Madras Board, in turn, had deferred any decisions regarding Negrais until January 1759. But by then the field of political gravity inside the East India Company had moved elsewhere. At the end of March, it was Robert Clive and the Board at *Calcutta* who informed Madras that they had sent a sloop to Negrais to recall all the Europeans. Only three or four people under the orders of a certain Lt Hope were to stay there and take care of the timber stocks. In September, Captain Southby left Calcutta to pick up the remaining timber. This could have been the end of the story. But at Alaungmintaya's court, an understandable change of mood had recently taken place. After his return from Manipur, the king had been told by Gregory, an Armenian officer[64] that Lt Hope, the latest head of the Negrais settlement, had provided arms to the Mons who challenged the Burmese rule Gregory had also briefed the king on recent developments in India, where the East India Company had extended its political sway over large territories. Extrapolating to to Burma, he represented to the king that it was just such settlements as Negrais that the Company had been using as a basis for later expansion. Gregory was later accused of having exaggerated the facts.[65]

But the way things went, Alaungmintaya flew into a rage at this new act of treason, decided to put an end to the Negrais settlement and gave the order to seize "all the stores, arms, ammunitions etc.". There were no orders to kill anybody, unless there was resistance. The mission to put the decision into effect was entrusted to sixty men under the orders of Lavigne[66] with the help of Antonio, both of them non-Burmese officers. According to the

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[63] Dodwell, *Military Despatches 1744-54*, 186. The directors wanted the same policy to be applied to the settlement in Pathein.

[64] Armenian, Portuguese or other Christian officers who served the Burmese are generally called only by their given names in the English sources.

[65] His anti-English stance was understandable as the Armenian merchant community was seething with anger from losses they incurred due to the commercial practices of the East India Company in the Burmese market. Background information on the events that took place in Negrais in October 1759 was collected the following year by Captain Alves on his mission to Burma (June-September 1760). It included notably the testimonial of Antonio, the governor of Pathein, who had been involved in the events, but wanted to absolve himself of any responsibility. See Dalrymple, *Oriental Repertory*, 356-8.

[66] Also spelled Lavine or Laveene. He was the French hostage whom Sieur Bruno had left in Rangoon in June 1755 and he had apparently been put into service by the king. Hall accuses him of a "vitriolic

description of the survivors, Antonio first introduced himself with a forged letter from the king and then let the Burmese soldiers kill the English traders, their guard and a number of their Indian servants. Then the Burmese fired on the two British ships that lay at anchor, but were not able to prevent them from leaving the next day.

Once the report of the massacre --first given by Captain Alves, one of the survivors--came to be known in India, it caused a terrible shock. The Council of Fort St George ordered an enquiry to find out what the reasons of the massacre were. As the Company instantly suspected some of its own personnel to be part of the explanation, they made an internal enquiry into the behavior of their staff in Burma.[67] It seemed unlikely to the directors of the East India Company that the Burmese king "would … have proceeded to such a cruel extremity without some provocations."[68] In fact upon closer examination the killings appear to be the worst possible outcome of an inept and badly-implemented operation, and the Burmese king reportedly regretted what had happened.

The British sent Captain Alves from Calcutta to Burma in June 1760 to ask for compensation for the Company's lost goods and to try to collect information on the causes of the massacre. In the next section, we will try to look at the events at Negrais from the Burmese point of view. Alves also learnt about the death of Alaungmintaya and met his son and successor, Naungdawgyi. While Naungdawgyi refused the British request for compensating their losses, he declared nevertheless that he would welcome the British traders returning and settling in Pathein.[69] But the East India Company decided otherwise and definitively left. It did not renew its interest in relations with Burma until 1795, when it sent Michael Symes to the court of King Badon.

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hatred of the English", but we find too little evidence in the sources to support such statements. According to Walter Alves, "Diary of the Proceedings of an Embassy to Burma in 1760," *SOAS Bulletin of Burma Research* 3, no, 1 (2005): 156, he died the same year during a battle in Upper Burma. The record of the events suggests that Lavigne was at a loss how to get efficiently control over the settlement.

[67] Court of Directors to Pigot, 27 January 1762 in Dodwell *Madras Despatches* 1754-65, 292.

[68] Court of Directors to Fort William, 19 February 1762 in *Fort William - India House Correspondence and other contemporary papers relating thereto* (Public *series) vol. 3 (1760-63),* edited by R. R. Sethi (Delhi: National Archives of India, 1968), 137.

[69] Alves, "Diary".

From the moment the Company left, the memory of the "Negrais massacre" was perpetuated in the historiography of Burma as emblematic of the cruelty and arbitrariness of the Burmese monarchy. It was the "massacre" rather than the failure of the East India Company to set up a profitable trade settlement in Burma that became the defining moment of the British experience in Burma in the middle of the eighteenth century. This bias in the public conscience also overshadowed the role and intentions of Alaungmintaya, possibly one of the most open-minded kings in Burma's history, who all along had been keen to develop good relations with the English.

The Golden Letter: Text and Interpretation

Alaungmintaya and the East India Company

Following the above overview of the East India Company's involvement in Burma from 1752 to 1760, this section will examine the Burmese monarch's policy towards the British during the same period. We will pay particular attention tot the king's official correspondence as well as British reports linked to the exchange of embassies and thus deepen an examination of Anglo-Burmese relations during his reign. We have already seen that the Burmese king was not a passive recipient of British requests. It was Alaungmintaya himself, rather than the Negrais or Madras chiefs, who took the initiative to develop mutual relations. In short, the Burmese were pursuing an agenda of their own, an insight rarely conveyed by the study of the English archives alone. In this context, we will explore how the Golden Letter sent to King George II defined a key moment in Alaungmintaya's diplomatic activities.

There are a number of good reasons to pay more attention to Alaungmintaya's diplomacy than historians have hitherto done. One is the fact that eighteenth-century Anglo-Burmese relations have mostly been viewed and analyzed from a British perspective. There is a need for a more complete view. Another concerns the place of diplomacy in the Burmese monarchs political biography, a matter that has as yet been poorly appreciated. A re-examination of early Anglo-Burmese relations may also help us understand how Alaungmintaya's successors --mostly his sons for the following sixty years-- later ran their foreign relations, notably with the East India Company. Finally, a better understanding of

the company its failures in the mid-eighteenth century should clear the way for a fresh reading of Anglo-Burmese relations when they re-ignited in the late eighteenth-century.

In early February 1755, when Alaungmintaya moved his forces down south, following the conquest of Pyay, he was aware that he would face a more complex challenge in the Delta than in the north where he had moved about on his home turf. Lower Burma, or known by its classical name Ramaññadesa, was not an ethnically homogeneous land, with its Mon, Burma and Karen populations. The necessity to prepare long sieges and to face the enemy both on water and on land underscored the need for more arms and more men, who had to be recruited in the villages and trained. Syriam and Pegu, the two major Mon cities, were heavily fortified. The Mons reputedly had to hand more cannon and more ammunition than the Burmese. Despite his initial fast progress moving down south, it took still Alaungmintaya two more years to take Pegu and call himself the master of both Upper and Lower Burma.

We may rightly assume that Alaungmintaya was aware of the importance of the country's outbound trade, the role of foreign traders and the increasing dominance of the trade companies in the Bay of Bengal. In early 1755, he may have considered one of the key advantages the Mon court had was their connections with the French and English trading companies, who were vying to trump each other in the Indian Ocean. Whatever detailed information the king may have had on the practical usefulness of these connections for the Mon, he knew that if he himself wanted to obtain arms and military stores from abroad, he needed to have access to the foreign traders who visited Burma's major port, Syriam. But Syriam was in Mon hands. What could be done to gain access to the maritime arms trade? In this context, the unpromising and severely lagging project of the East India Company to establish a trading outpost in Negrais played into Alaungmintaya's hands. To talk to the chief of the East India Company in Burma and to reach out to its head-quarters in Madras, he did not need to go to Syriam.

In the southern parts of the country, the allegiance of the ethnic Burmans rapidly shifted towards Alaungmintaya in early 1755. This was probably due to the psychological impact of the triumphal progress of the king's armies and to the promises made by Alaungmintaya to local headmen to confirm them in their administrative positions. An interesting record of

events that took place in Pathein after the fall of Pyay is given in George Baker's "Observations at Persaim [Pathein] and in the Journey to Ava and Back". Pathein was a major city of western Burma but it lay far away from the main battle front. About a week after the fall of Pyay, its Burman population rebelled, panic broke out, and the Mon governor left for a safer place. Anarchy prevailed as Mon and Burmese troops moved in and out and looted what was left of rice stocks in the city.

When a detachment of Alaungmintaya's troops set fire to the city of Pathein in late February 1755, it left unharmed the spot of land where the East India Company had provisionally established some facilities[70]. On 13 March, Baker was visited by two ambassadors from Alaungmintaya who at that time had not yet advanced further south than Lunze. They brought a letter from the king, which Baker immediately sent to Brooke at Negrais. A few days later, the Burmese ambassadors were told to come to Negrais. Since they were uncomfortable moving on by themselves, as they risked running into numerically superior Mon troops, Baker took them down the river himself. In Negrais they were kindly received by Brooke.

As we have seen, Brooke had become the *de facto* chief of Negrais after the death of the much older David Hunter in December 1753, when the Madras Board finally appointed him because they could not find any other suitable person ready to go to the malaria-infested Negrais settlement. Brooke's experience with the local political conditions was an asset and his perspective on relations with the Burmese reflected a political necessity that had also slowly begun to be perceived in Madras. In October 1753, the Burmese were first mentioned in a dispatch from the governor of Madras as "likely to recover the kingdom". We have also seen that while the Madras Board had long favored a path of cautious neutrality, many private English traders more or less openly sympathized with the Mon. When it came down to taking sides, they were pro-Mon rather than anti-French. Only when the Board in Madras finally lost patience with the Pegu court over the conclusion of a written agreement on the Negrais and Pathein settlements in late 1754, was Brooke finally advised to "cultivate

[70] The earliest trace of this provisional settlement is the reference (quoted above) from Hunter's letter to the Secret Committee of 20 September 1753, DCB 1753, 173.

friendship with the Burmese as they might defeat the Peguers at any time."[71] When Alaungmintaya sent his first embassy to meet representatives of the East India Company, the Negrais chief was ready to respond favourably.[72]

Alaungmintaya's First Embassy

The letter that Alaungmintaya's ambassadors carried through the front lines at the risk of their lives to the East India Company contained several messages.[73] First of all, Alaungmintaya wanted to make clear that he was the new master of the country. A long list of cities conquered in central Burma was included to demonstrate the extent of his sway over Burma's core lands. He further enumerated the lords of non-Burman ethnicity who had submitted to him and made detailed reference to the decisive battle that ensured him the possession of Pyay. Moreover, Alaungmintaya emphasized his political and dynastic legitimacy with a historical and cosmological interpretation of recent history: he stated that the kingdom of Ava and its lord were predestined to fall and that the Mons of Pegu were but disloyal rebels who failed to recognize their true lord. He concluded by saying: "Given the fact that if you have merit, you rise and if you have none, you fall, the time has come that I, the great Alaungmintaya, the lord of life, appear as a unifier". This statement clearly conveys the message that the king saw himself as fulfilling a historic, preordained role in his country's destiny. As the military record fills in the greater background to the dispatch, we should read this letter first of all as a political self-introduction.

Secondly, the letter contained a message concerning trade relations. The monarch expressed his hope that trade relations between the Indian coast and Burma could be revived.

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[71] Saunders to Court of Directors, 10 November 1754 in Dodwell, *Madras Despatches 1744-54*, 242. We may recall that the war ended only with the fall of Pegu on 12 May 1757. It thus took the Burmese still two years to overcome the Mon.

[72] There is no trace in the sources of the wording of Brooke's reply, but his stance is prominent in later communications (see his letter to Pigot of 13 April 1755, DCB 1755, 54). His action on the spot reveals the same feelings.

[73] *Royal Orders of Burma,* vol. 3, 92-3. The letter as we have it bears no date. As readers of the *Royal Orders of Burma* know by experience, Than Tun has often given provisional dates to undated letters and orders. Unfortunately, he mostly does not give the precise reasons for his suggested dates. In the case of this letter, he proposes 4 March 1755, which was the date when Alaungmintaya renamed the city of Lunze "Myan-aung". This is also the place from which the first embassy left for Negrais, and so the date is indeed a fair approximation. See the text of our translation of the first letter in Appendix 1.

Alaungmintaya recalled that trade and friendly relations with India had already existed for a long time under previous Burmese kings and he twice lists articles of trade such as precious stones, guns and textiles. Together with the letter, the king sent two adorned *hamsa*-shaped figures to symbolize friendly relations. Alaungmintaya's letter was pointedly vague regarding the identity of the addressee. While in the following letters, English names were recognizably transcribed, in the first letter, the names of neither the Negrais chiefs (Hunter and Brooke) nor the governors of Madras (Saunders and Pigot) were mentioned. The letter did not contain any particular compliments to the attention of the East India Company, and the official appellations that were used, including "Mawdin-Nagarit Company" or "Hainggyi Company" were rather imprecise descriptions of the Company.[74] Beyond its local reputation as a merchant company dealing in timber, rubies and textiles and as a potential importer of cannon and guns, the East India Company was apparently yet poorly understood by the new court[75]. One may keep in mind that the letter was sent from Lunze at a moment when the king himself had neither yet arrived at Dagon nor taken control of any part of the southern Delta. At that time, Gregory, the Armenian from Ava, was the only foreigner at Alaungmintaya's court before he arrived in Dagon.[76] It is important to note that Alaungmintaya's first letter did not contain any specific requests to the British from the king, thus revealing a prudent approach befitting a self-introductory letter.[77]

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[74] Mawdin-Nagarit and Hainggyi are Burmese geographical names, the first referring to the southwest cape and the second to the island in the south-west Delta where the English had settled.
[75] We may also note that the Burmese court of Alaungmintaya was not very much informed about the actual trade the Company pursued. Contemporary English records show that timber was the foremost article of export at the Negrais settlement. Coconuts were regularly imported, while the level of import of textiles lay behind English expectations.
[76] George Baker noted the services of two Armenian merchants employed as councillors at the court, Gregory, originally from Ava, and Zachary who hailed from Syriam, to bring "what strangers they could bring over to [Alaungmintaya's] faction" at the time the king resided in Dagon/Rangoon. Gregory had joined Alaungmintaya's camp early on. He was first mentioned by Baker as the "Armenian Ambassador" who handled discussions with the king and arranged for translation. Baker wrote that he "was ever dubious of the uprightness of this man". Zachary entered Alaungmintaya's service at the time the Burmese besieged Syriam. Baker called him "our most dangerous enemy" (see Baker, "Observations," 112, 114).
[77] Note that ambassadors may have made particular requests orally. Baker refers to the king's letter in his "Observations," 104.

The Burmese ambassadors were received by Brooke on the 23rd and stayed in Negrais until the 26th, "their business being not compleated, nor determinate answers given."[78] From Brooke's report of 13 April, the Board at Madras learnt that the "Burman" king "had sent an embassy … to offer terms of friendship to the English which Mr Brooke recommends us to accept"[79].

Alaungmintaya's two ambassadors left Negrais on 26 March with Brooke's reply. They arrived four days later in Pathein, where they discovered to their horror that a detachment of Mon troops had retaken control of the city and confiscated their boats. The Mon captains immediately sent envoys to the English requesting the surrender of the Burmese ambassadors. Brooke, however, adamantly refused and let the Burmese ambassadors return to Negrais[80]. His principled stance in this delicate situation was politically risky, because to Mon eyes, it looked as if he was openly taking sides with the Burmese. At this moment, the military advance of the Burmese was not secure and victory not yet ensured. It was only in the middle of the month of April 1755 that Alaungmintaya finally took possession of Dagon. While the king stayed in Rangoon discussing and planning the best way to gain control of Syriam, the situation in the vast Irrawaddy Delta remained undefined for some more weeks. Fighting raged between hostile naval detachments, making any river voyage utterly unsafe. For the two Burmese messengers, it meant that they were trapped at Negrais for three months. But they were safe and there is no doubt that the protection given to his ambassadors personally ingratiated Brooke with Alaungmintaya. During this time, the king wanted to lure foreign traders away from Syriam, so he took great care to leave them unharmed during military operations. French and English traders came to see him, but as the end of the war not yet decided, he was only modestly successful.[81]

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[78] Baker, "Observations," 104.
[79] Brooke to Pigot 13 April 1755, DCB 1755, 154.
[80] Baker, "Observations," 104.
[81] *Ibidem*, 110-1. In the chronicle account, it is said that while Alaungmintaya was in Yangon, foreign Company traders came from Syriam in four different ships to pay their respects to the king and offered him bales of precious tissues (KBZ, vol. 1, 128). A few months later, the king told George Baker at his first audience how well he had taken care of the English in Rangoon.

Alaungmintaya Sends a Second Embassy

Early in June 1756, a Burmese naval mission of thirty-five boats arrived in Pathein to check the whereabouts of their ambassadors who had been waiting for an opportunity to safely leave Negrais for Rangoon. They left on 5 June with a letter from the chief of the Negrais settlement and probably arrived some eight or nine days later to meet their king. Unfortunately we do not have a copy of Brooke's letter, but there is no doubt that he expressed the willingness of the East India Company to enter into cordial relations with Alaungmintaya, who was apparently very pleased with Brooke's answer and did not lose much time to send a new mission to Negrais. The second embassy was a high-profile mission headed by the newly-appointed Burmese governor of Pathein., and arrived in Pathein on 24 June 1755 sailing twenty boats with 600 men and an impressive amount of presents, among which were two horses[82]. One of the two ambassadors from the first mission was appointed to accompany the mission. Couched in polite terms, the king's letter was more explicit and sounded better informed on whom he was addressing than the first one,[83] but it was erroneously addressed to 'Governor Thomas Saunders'. As Saunders had handed over his charge to Georges Pigot since 14 January 1755, the error is rather difficult to explain, as it is unlikely that Alaungmintaya's scribes would have found Saunders' name in Brooke's earlier letter. [84]

In the second letter, the king introduces himself once again with great self-assurance. The opulent series of titles announces the titles as we find them a year later in the letters to

[82] Even at this moment, the situation was not entirely safe in Pathein. On 7 June, Burmese families who had taken refuge in Negrais, returned to the city. But four days before the arrival of the embassy, on 20 June, Mon soldiers once more arrived at the city in two boats and set fire to Burmese houses. Baker, "Observations," 106.

[83] Than Tun has dated Alaungmintaya's second letter to 6 June 1755. This was the day following John Whitehill's arrival in Rangoon which is mentioned in the text of the letter. But this hypothesis is difficult to accept. The second letter refers to Henry Brooke's answer to the first letter. As the two ambassadors had left Pathein only on 5 June for Rangoon (a date found in George Baker's meticulous account), it is impossible that the king could have formulated a reply to Brooke's letter the next day. The second embassy arrived in Pathein on 24 June. This leaves us with 18 days in between the 5th and the 24th of June for the first ambassadors to reach Rangoon and for the second mission to make the trip back to Pathein. We do not know how many days each embassy needed to cover the trip, but one could argue for a day in the middle of this period, around 14 June, for the arrival of the first embassy.

[84] See *Royal Orders of Burma,* vol. 3, 96-7. After checking the printed volumes of the country correspondence, I have found that there is no translation of this letter of Alaungmintaya in the IOR.

George II and the directors of the East India Company. Alaungmintaya clarifies the issue of the legitimacy of the war that he waged against the Mon, explaining that Pegu formerly used to be part of the Burmese kingdom and that he himself was now "residing in [a] golden palace at a fortified place surrounded by a moat and turrets"[85].

The king also refers to another act of sovereign power that stamped his name onto the annals of Burmese and Southeast Asian history: the foundation of a port-city which he named Rangoon[86] at the foot of the Dagon shrine opposite the river where Syriam had flourished for two hundred years. The foundation of Rangoon was a bold initiative that perfectly expresses Alaungmintaya's keen sense of being an innovator. Instead of waiting for the end of the siege of Syriam to inherit its commercial heritage, Alaungmintaya decided to create a new port. Syriam, he had decided, would be razed to the ground.

Proudly enumerating his most recent victories in the south and the spoils (notably ships and weapons) his men had collected, the king noted that at that moment, the Mon were unable to compete with his powerful army and were merely defending themselves. Local resistance, he declared, was about to be crushed. About Pegu's fate, he was even more apodictic: "I will attack and finish them".

Noting that the Company was "pondering the advantages of an alliance with Us, the Lord of Life", and had "respectfully sent [Us] a reply" - that he interpreted as an intention to "pursue friendly relations" - he noted how much help the Mon had obtained from the French thanks to Sieur Bruno.[87] As his ambassadors had told him how much cannon and guns the British had, the purpose of Alaungmintaya's letter was to make a request for a detailed list of the artillery with which he could "destroy the city of Hamsavati [Pegu]". He wanted the double of however much the French had given the Mons.

Alaungmintaya did not, however, was not asking for any favors: he wanted to buy these arms for cash on the barrelhead. The last sentence of the letter reads very prosaically, "We have given silver to my ambassadors to pay for the guns." The tone of the letter and the unequivocal terms of the request make clear that Alaungmintaya saw relations with the East

[85] By referring to these attributes of kingship, he stressed the fact that he was truly a king.
[86] Alaungmintaya's letter to Howe of 7 April 1756 contains the first mention in an English source of the name of the new city, spelt as "Rangum," CC 1757, 212.
[87] Bruno stated that the French had given the Mon 60 cannon and 300 guns.

India Company as an alliance of strategic interests (the letter in fact says, "united for good and evil times"), and negotiations with the British as a matter between equal partners. In no way could such an approach be compared to the deals that the French and British Companies had been striking with rival noblemen in South India, who accepted military assistance while making concessions which proportionally increased European territorial power.

Alaungmintaya stayed some two and a half months in Rangoon, from April to June 1756, but was unable to take Syriam. The letter sounds as if the king, at the moment that he was writing, expected to buy sufficient arms in a fairly short time to bolster his military efforts. He may have hoped to move faster on the battle front than he actually could. But his tone should not lead us to the conclusion that for Alaungmintaya, "trade was only an excuse to procure arms and ammunition" as Than Tun has put it.[88] In June 1755, obtaining arms and ammunition was an absolute priority for a man who was actively waging war and daily risked being beaten back by the Mons as he moved on their home territory. But due to his defensive preparations at Rangoon, the immediate failure to overcome the Mon at Syriam was just a temporary setback and planning was underway to raise a superior force for the forthcoming dry season. Nor did the lack of artillery hurt his situation in the short run and, as we have seen, the Mon attempts at retaking the advantage in July and December 1755 failed dismally. With the beginning of the monsoon rains, he finally concluded that the campaign had to be reported to the next year.

Alaungmintaya's impatience may also have stemmed from the fact that he wanted to pull the British away from the Mon court. When he got in touch with the Company, it was still fully engaged in negotiating terms of settlement with the court at Pegu. Contacts with both courts still ran more or less in parallel for some months. Though both French and British traders came to see him in Rangoon in June and may have thought that his goodwill receptions would do their work, yet, as we have seen, several British captains kept on rubbing shoulders with the *uparaja* in Syriam.

[88] *Royal Orders of Burma*,vol.3, xviii.

The second letter shows that Alaungmintaya saw the East India Company as an extended arm of the British government. He did not identify the Company as a simple association of traders, but wrote to the Madras Governor as someone "delegated by the English king to the Company". This should come as no surprise. The concept of armed traders exerting sovereign power in foreign lands was not an acceptable concept in either political or cultural terms in Burma. The East India Company had concluded alliances with Indian princes and built fortresses along the coasts of India. It also ran a military force of its own so that it was rather logical that the Burmese court saw the Company's men in Madras as mandated by the sovereign power of the British monarch to pursue apparently well-planned policies.

In a politically more conventional context, we would have seen a senior minister or a minister of warfare negotiate the sale of arms. Mon negotiations with the English were usually handled by King Banya Dala's brother, the *uparaja.* Alaungmintaya had generals, ministers and ambassadors at his hand, but besides the inevitable mediation of the odd Armenian or mixed-blood advisors who traditionally handled relations with foreign traders in Burma, the contacts with the British were handled by the king himself in a direct and straightforward manner. It is thus legitimate to link the contents and the style of Alaungmintaya's letters to the king himself in the sense that the new king's policy was truly his own. The bulk of surviving edicts suggests that before the second half of 1755, Alaungmintaya had not yet put in place an organized and structured government to run the daily administrative affairs. Decision-making was essentially linked to the person of the king himself. But in the long run, an essentially military chain of command was insufficient to perform the tasks of a sophisticated bureaucracy.

The second letter underscores once again that from the beginning Alaungmintaya looked forward to entering into a diplomatic exchange with a sovereign power whose keen interest in trade he hoped would match his own pressing needs for artillery supplies. He also expected all the subjects of that sovereign power to be loyal and obedient servants of the same sovereign power.

Brooke's reaction to the message of the second letter was guarded, as the Negrais settlement had apparently no arms to spare and could not immediately give a positive reply to the king's request. Brooke therefore sat down and drafted a treaty to be presented to

Alaungmintaya, in agreement with his superiors in Madras.[89] The man he chose to go and meet Alaungmintaya was George Baker.[90] But when Baker left Negrais in early July, Alaungmintaya had already departed for Shwebo on 27 June. News had reached Rangoon that the late Burmese king's son threatened to invade central Burma in collusion with some Shan leaders. So Alaungmintaya decided to leave a garrison of 15,000 men in Rangoon, head back north and return the next dry season with reinforcements.[91]

Baker's Mission

Together with Lt. John North, Baker left Negrais in the company of the Burmese ambassadors on 17 July. He arrived in Shwebo two months later and met the king for the first time on 17 September 1755. During three audiences, Alaungmintaya proved himself to be curious, outspoken and ready to go to some length to prove himself generous towards the British. But his appreciation for the Company that he had following Brooke's initial treatment of the Burmese ambassadors was seriously compromised by the behavior of the British traders who stood accused of having given support to the Mon during the renewed attacks against Rangoon at the end of July and early August.[92]

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[89] Baker states that at his first audience, on 17 September 1755, he presented to Alaungmintaya "the Governor's letter" together with presents. I have found no trace of this letter in the Company's country correspondence of 1755, while the relevant volume does on the other hand contain all the letters received by the court of Pegu. Considering the time it took to sail across the Bay of Bengal and return to Negrais, the existence of a letter from the Governor of Madras for Alaungmintaya is only plausible if Brooke had informed the Governor immediately after the arrival of the first Burmese embassy in March. There is no trace of any such correspondence in the "consultations" of the Madras Board.

[90] Some incidental information gleaned from the sources shows that George Baker followed an upward career in the East India Company. If we may judge the man by Brooke's comments, George Baker was the right man for the challenging mission. The detailed account of his mission already mentioned above was soon considered an important source of information on the Burmese court, and was published in Dalrymple's *Oriental Repertory.* See also Brooke to Pigot, 26 November 1755 in "Miscellaneous," 91.

[91] The garrison was further reinforced during the next months. It was on his trip up the Irrawaddy in the middle of August, Baker notes, that he saw a fleet of four thousand heading south to reinforce the Burmese positions in Rangoon (Baker, "Observations," 107).

[92] While on his way to Shwebo at the end of July, a report reached Baker about the Mon-French attack against Rangoon suggesting "a remaining probability of their [the Burmese] being routed from thence [Rangoon]"(in "Observations," 107). But while the Mon had "made themselves masters of English and other vessels there [Rangoon]", the Burmese had actually not been dislodged. During a second fruitless attack, the British captains in Syriam once again supported the Mon and their French allies.

Alaungmintaya did not mince his words about what he saw as an open act of betrayal when he received Baker during a second audience on 22 September 1755: "How can we trust you again?" To which Baker replied - as we know - that Brooke would not have approved of such behavior at all. The king deeply resented this disloyalty, especially from those of whom he had taken special care. One of the most conspicuous cases on Alaungmintaya's mind was John Whitehill[93]. Sent from Madras to Negrais, he landed in Rangoon in early June after his ship had been damaged in a storm. In the second letter, Alaungmintaya mentions that he helped Whitehill, although the latter claimed that the king had prevented him from communicating with Negrais.[94] In mid-August Whitehill had been, according to Alaungmintaya, among the first to open fire on the Burmese.[95]

The behavior of a few British captains who rushed forward to support the Mon cause did not do the embryonic relationship any good, but it was not yet an impediment to the king's long term vision of an *entente* of political and commercial interests. But Baker's position to negotiate a "treaty of friendship and alliance" was thus seriously weakened. In a report written for his superiors four years later, Baker noted: "It was then and is still my opinion

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Ibidem.

[93] Baker quotes the king saying: "We treated your ships that were at Dagon with Mr. Whitehall [Whitehill] with kindness, and supplied them with what they wanted. At Our leaving that Place, to come here to keep Our fast [an expression of Buddhist lay piety], desired him that, in case it should be required in my absence, to assist my people in an emergency; or at least not to join the Peguers against them; which though he promised to observe, yet was the first that fired on them" (Baker, "Observations", 110-1).

[94] Hall relates Whitehill's claim in the context of an episode wherein Alaungmintaya had ordered his men to seize the guns on the English ships while the British captains who had come to Rangoon were paying their respects at court. The colonial-era British historian Hall's interpretation of this very minor issue, taken from a report he calls himself "vague", "confused", and "badly muddled" regarding the facts, is an awkward effort to exonerate the treasonous behavior of the British captains. See Hall, *Tragedy*, 314-5.

[95] Whitehill's own feelings are rather unclear. In the letter sent from Negrais to Governor Pigot dated 10 December 1755 already quoted above, he wrote that "the Company will never do anything in this country without drawing the sword and that must be in favour of the Bûraghmans and that soon if at all…" in "Miscellaneous," 92. In 1757, Whitehill left the East India Company, but returned to its service in 1758. Having arrived as a supercargo on a ship that landed in Rangoon in June 1759, Whitehill was arrested and his goods confiscated. A ransom paid by a Dutch captain was reimbursed to his benefactor by the Madras Board, who later reclaimed the money from Whitehill at an annual rate of eight percent. In a dispatch from the directors of the East India Company of January 1762, Whitehill was mentioned as one of the culprits for the deterioration of the relations with the Burmese kingdom.

that had this act of open violence [not] been committed by those gentlemen at Dagoon we should have obtained much better terms for the company than those we have done."[96]

The primary aim of Baker's mission was to obtain a signature for Brooke's treaty. Baker failed, first of all because Alaungmintaya did not pay much attention to the formal signing of such a document. After the translation of a draft of the treaty, the king immediately declared that he would grant "Negrais, and Persaim [Pathein] to the Company with a place at Dagon". Perhaps this generous offer was linked to the hope of a speedy delivery of arms. However, during the following days, the king reneged on Negrais. At the second audience on 22 September, the king asked Baker once more with what intention the Company had come to Negrais. The next day he dictated a letter to Brooke in Baker's presence and omitted any mention of a grant of Negrais. Baker argued that the Company wanted to stay in Negrais because heavily loaded ships could not go up the river. But Alaungmintaya silenced him saying, "Why are you there, are you not? But I thought you had wanted to come all to Persaim [Pathein]." Baker was unable to provide more explanations, so Alaungmintaya concluded in a conciliatory way, but with a caveat:

> … I don't tell you not to stay there, but let me see the Company's generosity, and then they shall see mine; we are yet but strangers, this is the first time you have ever seen my face, I don't yet well know your Intention of staying there, for what instance have I had of your sincerity, I treated your ships at Dagon, with singular kindness, and they proved traitorous to me after it; let me see how the Company will behave this time, let them show their generosity, and mine shall not be wanting. I don't care if they bring all Madras to Negrais, if they behave kindly now; for this is the only time by which I shall judge of their friendship.[97]

Brooke's draft treaty contained the promise of "assistance as will support Your Majesty's throne against all future rebellions, domestick feuds and foreign enemies".[98] In the Company's own understanding, this would have offered the possibility to meddle in the country's political affairs. But such a pledge was empty from the moment it was made because any military interference was ruled out by the political circumstances in India that kept British military forces bound there. In October 1755 Pigot relayed Brooke's openly

[96] Baker to Pigot, 9 April 1760, DCB 1760, 138.
[97] Baker, "Observations," 116-7. The Negrais settlement was a sensitive issue because it was perceived as a threat to royal sovereignty. As we have said above, the idea of autonomous settlements in Burma was repugnant to either Burmese or Mon rulers because of their memory of Felipe de Brito's independent Portuguese enclave in Syriam (1602-1613).
[98] Baker, "Observations," 111.

interventionist stance ("Had we a force here sufficient to carry weight we could easily turn the balance of power in favor of the Bûraghmans …") to his superiors in London, commenting that the "troubles in the Carnatic prevented the English from assisting" the Burmese. Six months later he confirmed this point of view stating that "should war continue on this coast, it would be impossible to spare forces sufficient to establish the Burmese".[99]

While the promise was in vain in material terms, it was also nonsensical in the context of the negotiations with Alaungmintaya. When the particular sentence was read to him in audience, Alaungmintaya shouted,

> Have We asked [for] or do We want any assistance to reduce my enemies to subjection? Let none conceive such an opinion,

mumbling a few moments later "what madman wrote that…!". Since the British apparently failed to recognize his military record, he told Baker angrily that he

> had not depended on firearms to conquer the biggest part of his kingdom, nor did he request anybody's assistance.[100]

Nonetheless the military conquest of Syriam and Pegu still lay before Alaungmintaya and in late 1755 he had a pressing need for more arms as Pegu was heavily defended with artillery. These arms he wanted to buy from the English as he had told them in his second letter. Brooke's treaty vaguely promised the king "an annual curiosity" in exchange for three trading concessions. To this the king replied that this annual payment should be "muskets and guns". Upon reflection, he specified that he wanted "rather …a good supply of arms now than an annual present."[101] He wondered whether Baker could immediately supply him with 1000 muskets and twenty cannons. Baker could not. Baker promised instead 75 muskets and six cannon on his return to Negrais,[102] with another 525 muskets and fourteen cannon to be sent from Madras later on.

What do we actually learn from the sources about this trade in ordnance? Either the English did not provide the Burmese with many arms or the arms trade was handled with such

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[99] Pigot to Court, 27 October 1755, Dodwell, *Madras Despatches 1754-65*, 32, and 2 March 1756, *ibidem*, 47.

[100] All the quotations are from Baker, "Observations," 111-2.

[101] *Ibidem*, 113. The request for an annual payment of arms and ammunition was repeated in the letter to the Company of 7 May 1756.

[102] This promise is surprising in itself given Brooke's cautious reply at the time of the second embassy.

discretion that we miss some facts. The East India Company offered Alaungmintaya artillery on a few occasions, but its correspondence does not reveal whether firearms were ever sold to the Burmese court in important quantities. Baker had come to Shwebo with a handsome present of four pieces of iron cannon, plus eighty bullet shots and four chests of powder[103]. A year later, Ensign Lester presented the king with a four-pound gun and carriage, a carriage for a nine pounder, two barrels of fine European gunpowder and several of blunderbusses. While Lester was on his return voyage to Negrais, Captain Bailey arrived in Rangoon with a brass field piece, eight chests of gunpowder, and 500 bullet shots sent by the Governor of Madras.[104] Among Captain Walter Alves' presents in 1760 were fifty muskets, twenty brass barreled blunderbusses and one hundred pistols.[105] It is not clear whether Alaungmintaya got all the arms that Baker had promised to provide. According to the *Konbaungzet Chronicle,* Captain Dyer delivered 300 muskets, ten cannon, five chests of pellets and seven barrels of gunpowder in early May 1756.[106] This is less than what Baker had promised, but still quite an impressive quantity to have gone unrecorded in English sources. Thomas Newton sold the Burmese twelve chests of powder in late 1756, but he wrote to Madras that they were unhappy and wanted to buy much more[107]. But during the various audiences with English envoys, the king himself made no complaints regarding military provisions.

In early 1757, Alaungmintaya had sent his own ship to Madras to buy powder. Later, he told Lester in July after the fall of Pegu, he intended to send another ship with local products to Madras, possibly to buy more arms or ammunition. On the other hand the question arises, how much did the Burmese actual depend on British arms provisions to pursue their military campaigns in 1756, 1757 and later on. During the earlier campaigns, firearms had

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[103] Before this audience, Baker followed the customary way of entering the palace, "performed on the knees bowing the head three times low down… three separate times" so that, as he explains in his *Observations…,* the Burmese would not be confirmed in their opinion "of our being in a combination with the Peguers against them… since our ships firing on them". Baker felt that without this concession to local etiquette, he could not have negotiated any kind of treaty. At the same time, he was fully aware that following such local customs was considered by his superiors as "prostituting" the "Honourable Company's Dignity" (Baker, "Observations," 110).

[104] Robert Lester, "Proceedings of an Embassy to the King of Ava, Pegu, etc. in 1757," *SOAS Bulletin of Burma Studies* 3, no, 1 (2005): 129, 141. See also Pigot to Alaungmintaya, 18 May 1757, CC 1757, 213.

[105] Alves, "Diary," 144.

[106] KBZ, vol. 1, 145.

[107] Newton to Pigot, 7 January 1757, DCB 1757, 13.

apparently not played a decisive role and during Baker's second audience, the king boasted that he had not needed firearms to revolt in 1752 and overcome Mon rule. When he received Lester, Alaungmintaya told the English officer about the "great quantities of guns, bombs etc. with all kind of warlike stores" taken at Pegu. The booty from Syriam was probably formidable as well. We may close this digression with the conclusion that while there is little doubt about the importance of the trade in firearms, the sources provide but patchy information to produce an apt description.

We may read between the lines a tacit political agreement that the Burmese would not court the friendship of the French and that the British would not help the Mon. Alaungmintaya also never seriously attempted to play the British against the French. Baker was told that the king intended to pursue Sieur Bruno once Syriam was taken. Indeed, once he was arrested, the king had him grilled over a fire.

When he left Shwebo in late September 1755, Baker was not only aware that he left unfinished business regarding the signature of a treaty, but that his verbal exchange with the king did not match with the way that the Company liked to see itself in the context of such negotiations:

> ... after all it must be confessed the manner of your [*refers to the Company*] proceedings with them is rather begging a favor, than coming to terms with them, on one equal footing and therefore I believe the success of the whole affair depends upon the manner and other circumstances of the next embassy.[108]

While Alaungmintaya could interpret the meetings with Baker as first hopeful steps toward close and profitable relations, Baker's mission lacked tangible results in the Company's eyes and left few traces in the ensuing official reports[109]. The Company wanted nothing but to see its own treaty signed, while Alaungmintaya expected to meet Baker again a few months later to continue discussions.

In December 1755, two months after Baker's return to Negrais, the English *Arcot* was detained in Syriam and its men forced to take part in the last failed Mon attack on Rangoon.

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[108] Baker, "Observations," 116. The Company's men in India thought that local sovereigns should be grateful to see a foreign trading company establish itself, as this would result in commercial profits for the country.

[109] Baker's papers were referred to without further comments in the "consultations" of the Madras council on 9 February 1756.

One could imagine that this new incident would have discouraged Alaungmintaya from pursuing his intense diplomatic efforts as the Company proved itself unable to master the situation. But apparently the king distinguished between the behavior of one group of British captains (which Brooke once qualified as "violent and ungovernable") and those men who ran the Company's interests in Madras and Negrais. It also seems that he progressively gained a better understanding of the workings of the East India Company and the British in India.

Alaungmintaya's Letters to George II and the Court of Directors

After the return of Baker from Shwebo, a problem arose in regard to the choice of a piece of land in Pathein. The British wanted to occupy a "rising ground on which stood an ancient pagoda" (mentioned by Newton as "Pagoda hill") because they saw it as an advantageous spot to erect some fortifications. So, as Brooke writes, the English "pressed the king with all our interest to make the Company the grant," but he candidly told them:

> I am not settled on my throne and were I to give you this sacred spot of ground I should be looked upon as a sacrilegious person. The priests whose influence over the minds of the people is great might set their hearts against me and might be the means of my loosing that slender hold of the crown which yet is but half in my possession.

Alaungmintaya therefore suggested to Brooke another piece of land on the opposite side of the river to build a fort upon. Echoing his earlier calls for patience during the meetings with Baker, he told Brooke

> to be … content with that for the present, it may be in my power hereafter to be more kind.

But at the same time that Alaungmintaya returned to Rangoon in April, Brooke was about to leave Negrais. He left of his own will. As his health had been suffering for a long time, he had requested the Board in Madras to allow him to return to India. Brooke's departure marked a break in the relations with Alaungmintaya and it was truly unfortunate for the continuation of the negotiations with the king. The king had taken a liking to Brooke, who had been pursuing quiet diplomacy to further the Company's interests.[110] Nothing could be

[110] Brooke was expressly mentioned in the Golden Letter as somebody mandated by the English king. The king made him personal presents such as a several rings that Brooke interpreted as a "token of his esteem and as an emblem of his love and friendship". In his report of 9 April 1760 to Pigot, Brooke mentions that "those letters I received from the king had generally a broad margin guilded" which

more wrong than D.G.E. Hall's later judgment that Brooke's successor found in Negrais "a sick and dispirited man who beyond sending this mission, had done nothing to follow up Baker's previous one."[111]

With Brooke's departure, the Madras Board once more faced the considerable problem of finding a proper and willing man to become chief in Negrais. It opted for Captain Howe, a choice later heavily criticized by the directors in London because he was a military officer and not a civil servant. Howe probably had been attracted by the incentive of a considerably increased salary. While he had been appointed owing to his merit and abilities,[112] he was stubborn and obstinate. In a word, he was an entirely different man from Brooke.[113] While Brooke had been, to use a modern expression, culturally sensitive about the choice of land in Pathein, ready to accept the king's argument that a sacred Buddhist pagoda could not be destroyed for the sake of building a fortress, Howe "said [that] an advantageous spot was of great consequence [and that] he would try his influence with the king". Brooke "advised him against it as all had already been done that could be done without danger of offending him". Trouble loomed after Brooke had left. Howe applied once more at the court for "Pagoda hill" and he met a straight refusal. Then the Negrais chief "possessed himself of it [the hill in Pathein] by force" and "erected some works", but "was compelled to abandon them by the king who expressed great displeasure thereupon."[114]

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suggests to me that there were more letters than those extant in our sources. It is obvious from what Brooke writes on the discussions with the court about the piece of land in Pathein (*ibidem*) that there had been further exchanges after the return of Baker which are not recorded in East India Company documents. Brooke to Pigot, 9 April 1760, DCB 1760, 140.

[111] Hall, *Tragedy*, 324.

[112] Pigot to Council of Directors, 6 June 1757 in Dodwell, *Madras Despatches 1754-65*, 93.

[113] Howe arrived on 12 April 1756 in Negrais. He died a few months after his arrival and his second in command, Thomas Newton, had to take over before the end of the year. E 4/861 Madras Despatches, 934.

[114] The clash with the king that took place in August is not mentioned in the correspondence between Madras and London. The quotations are from Brooke's report of 9 April 1760 (as referred to above), written for the sake of clarifying the circumstances of the killings in Negrais in October 1759. After the death of Howe, Thomas Newton sent a letter to Madras on 15 October 1756, which gives a different presentation of the conflict with the Burmese. According to Newton, Howe came for a very short stay to Pathein in early August 1756 and obtained the permission of its governor to build a fort on "Pagoda Hill" that he named Fort Augustus. But after Howe left, the "Burmahs threw every obstacle in their way that they possibly could to prevent their settling on that spot…" Health problems and a lack of provisions induced Howe to order most of the English soldiers to leave Pathein. Newton

Alaungmintaya had decided to promote trade and enter into a close relationship with the East India Company to safeguard some of his own political and strategic interests. The English were calling the shots among the foreign traders in the Indian Ocean and their star in India was continuously rising. He was ready to give them largely what they were asking for: trade privileges and a piece of land in Pathein. But, decidedly, some of the East India Company's men in Burma proved untrustworthy.

Several months before his patience was once again seriously tested by Howe's unacceptable activities, Alaungmintaya had already decided to write directly to King George II and to the directors of the Company. To make some real progress, so the king may have thought, he needed to converse as equals with the men who were decision-makers like himself. When in March 1756 the king came back to Rangoon and looked forward to meet Georges Baker, his chancellery had prepared four letters, one for the English king, one for the Court of Directors, one for the governor of Madras and one for the Negrais chief. But Baker had taken a new position as captain of a ship and left Burma a few months before. Brooke then sent the Company's doctor in Negrais, William Anderson, and Ensign John Dyer to Rangoon to ratify and "confirm the several articles of agreement between the Company and the king."[115] They arrived in Rangoon on 4 May 1756 and met the king four days later. But instead of signing the treaty, the king told them to return to Negrais with the four letters. At their arrival, Brooke had already handed over to Captain Howe and left for Madras.

To match the tone and style appropriate to communicating with a fellow king, Alaungmintaya asked one of the most talented writers of his time, Letwè Nawratha, a man who happened to be both a companion and a minister, to formulate the text of the letter. Utmost care was taken to make this letter into something special and unique. The text was engraved on a plaque of gold dotted on two sides with twenty-four rubies, enrolled in an

himself stayed until 9 October 1756 in Pathein. Newton to Pigot, 15 October 1756, DCB 1756, 354, and 4 April 1760, DCB 1760, 158.

[115] Brooke to Pigot, 9 April 1760, DCB 1760, 139. Hall (*Tragedy*, 324) manifestly refers to the same report of Brooke's, but erroneously indicates page 200-1 of the same volume. Anderson's and Dyer's health conditions were so bad that they had asked to return to India (see DCB 1756, 37). We may note that Rangoon was considered a healthier place than Negrais. Beside Brooke's report of 1760, I know of no written documents concerning Anderson's and Dyer's audience with the king. In Lester's diary, we find a single mention that Dyer had once more presented Alaungmintaya the "treaty" (Lester, "Proceedings," 134).

ivory casket and lavishly packed. For the first time in the history of the country, a Burmese king had decided to communicate directly with a Western monarch. But early on, Alaungmintaya's diplomatic overture met an ill fate and so the king's optimism and his hope to entertain friendly and beneficial relations with the English at the highest political level faded away.

Howe may have been frustrated rather than pleased when Anderson and Dyer returned from India.[116] Once more, the treaty had not been signed and the most substantial concessions found in the letters were the result of Brooke's negotiations with Alaungmintaya, the king now considered as a settled business. It is possible that Howe willfully delayed the dispatch of the letters to Madras. The Golden Letter and the letter for the Court of Directors were first sent to Fort William in Bengal by Howe's successor, Thomas Newton. From Calcutta, they were dispatched to Madras, where they arrived in late March 1757. In early June Georges Pigot sent them on to London[117]. In March 1758, close to two years after they had been written, the translations of the letters finally reached their addressees.

Before taking a closer look at the text of the letter itself, we may list some of the reasons for the delay and the lethargy of the English.[118] The first reason was those primarily concerned by the letters were apparently distracted by other circumstances. For the East India Company, the year 1756 opened with the start of a new conflict with the French (the Seven Years War). Soon the English military successes offered both new challenges and shining prospects in India. In Burma, on the other hand, the year moved on with the unfinished war between Shwebo and Pegu, and the precarious situation of the Company's affairs continued in Negrais. This context did not produce favorable conditions to embrace Alaungmintaya's extraordinary initiative with sufficient attention. Besides Howe's negligence and Newton's mistrust of the Burmese, considerable indifference and plain ignorance were also decisive factors that transformed Alaungmintaya's novel initiative into an entirely fruitless effort.

[116] There is no report of Howe mentioning the arrival of the letters. There was only one single official report sent from Howe to the Board in Madras, dating from 11 May 1756, when Anderson and Dyer had not yet returned from Rangoon. Howe passed away in Negrais on 26 September 1756.
[117] Pigot to Court of Directors, 6 June 1757 in Dodwell, *Madras Despatches 1754-65,* 93.
[118] At the same time, he informed the Governor at Madras and the chief in Negrais, men who are called by their names (Pigot and Howe) in the letters.

The lack of concern reflected the Company's narrow approach to relations with Burma. The country was looked upon as a market rather than as a political entity and its new king was seen as a potential client rather than as an equal partner.

What we know about the handling of the two letters in London does not suggest that either George II or even the directors made - or possibly could make - much sense out of Alaungmintaya's diplomatic initiative, the letters' subtle formulations, their culturally determined code of references and maybe even their factual message. Indeed, without a sufficient presentation to the receivers of the conditions in which the letters had been written, they were going to be treated as little more than curiosities. But all this might eventually have remained secondary if the letter's addressees in Britain had shown some respect for the politically important rules of politeness. Alaungmintaya never received an answer from London or even an acknowledgement that the letter was received. As later evidence showed, this hurt him deeply. The lack of urgency that had characterized the sending of the Golden Letter also had decided effect on how the letter was handled. The Directors decided that they would respond only once George II himself had replied[119]. As the Court of St James never came up with a formal reply, the Directors did not feel able to do so either.

Alaungmintaya's letter to George II was deemed worthy to be fully quoted and included in the royal Burmese chronicles, while in later Western and even *Burmese* historiography, as we will see below, it has left only faint traces. It was never recognized as the unusual diplomatic step it actually was.

The Golden Letter starts with an opulent title that uses some of those rare expressions that we find only in other letters to kings. George II was acknowledged as "king of the great English city surrounded by Chenapattam, Bengal, Fort St David and Devikot". This amalgamation of the English capital with the settlements of the Company in India looks confusing at first glance. While the Burmese had no specific representation of London or the

[119] In their letter of 5 July 1758, the directors told Pigot, "We have presented the King of the Burmurs Letter to his Majesty. If his Majesty should think fit to make reply it shall be transmitted to you to be delivered together with a letter from the Company in answer to that from the king of the Burmurs. In the meantime if you think it necessary, you may make an apology for our not transmitting them." E 4/861 *Madras Despatches*, 934.

British Isles to draw upon, they described the British monarch as "king of a great city (or capital)" (*myoma*) in line with their own representations of a king who was foremost the ruler of a royal city (*nèpyidaw*).

Alaungmintaya acknowledged the wish of the English to renew their trade with Burma following Brooke's request considered to have been made in the name of the English king. Alaungmintaya then stated that he had granted the settlement at the place that Brooke wanted and that a sealed letter had been sent to the governor of Pathein instructing him to take the measurements of said territory in the presence of the "English king's officers," an expression actually referring to the Company's men.[120] Opening with a statement on the prospect of cordial relations, the letter concludes with wishes for long-lasting friendship between the two countries. The four letters—to the British monarch, the East India Company Court of Directors, the Governor of Madras, and the Head of Negrais—contain substantially the same message, but vary in specific and important details. A comparison also shows a clear hierarchical differentiation between the addressees in style and expression. The letter to King George II stands out from the others because it states that the request for a territorial grant, as we have said, had been made in the name of the English king himself.

In his four letters, Alaungmintaya refers to the formerly profitable trade relations between the nations and to the interruption of that trade due to the war against the Talaing (Mon). The letter to the Directors of the East India Company highlights that English and other foreign traders had been growing rich and that Burmese kings were able to obtain textiles as they wished. The important clause that the East India Company ships were exempt from duties is not stated in the Golden Letter, but it appears in the letters to those others who were directly concerned: the Court of Directors, the Governor of Madras, and the Negrais chief.[121] The king requested that the Company continue presenting the usual gift and arms and pay the customary fees to the governor of Pathein, his officers and clerks.[122] In the letter

[120] The letter to King George II says "a sealed letter to the officer of the English king and the governor of Pathein. The letter to the Court of Directors says "to the governor of Pathein and to Mr Brooke" while the letter to Georges Pigot simply says "to Mr. Brooke". It is not entirely clear if the sealed order referred to the grant itself or to an instruction for measuring the piece of land.

[121] The letters specify that all other traders had to pay customs.

[122] The *sitkè*, a military and judicial officer, the *nagan*, an intelligence officer reporting to the king, and the *saye*, official scribes.

to Howe, the king emphasized his recent military record, "Again and again, I myself with my sons, my brothers and my numerous officers, soldiers, elephants, horses and ships have attacked and crushed [the rebellious Mon]". He also mentioned the renaming of Dagon to 'Rangoon', where he had built a palace. The Howe letter is the only one of the four in which the king expresses his great need for arms and ammunition as the campaign for Pegu, he writes, was still unfinished.

Unlike his superiors, Georges Pigot immediately acknowledged the receipt of Alaungmintaya's letters when he received it eleven months after it had been written.[123] Confirming the "friendship of the English nation", Pigot's answer is couched in polite terms but contains little more than a message of congratulations on the king's triumph over his enemies. It does not mention matters of trade or the issue of the Pathein land grant. Pigot instructed Captain Baillie[124] to send Alaungmintaya "a present of some gunpowder and other warlike stores" and promised to write later fully in regard to all affairs. The reason for the letter's brevity may have been the fact that Baillie's ship, the *Welcome* was about to leave Madras. A month and a half later, Pigot sent a slightly more explicit letter, giving thanks for the grant of the settlement at Pathein and expressing "the extreme desire I have of cultivating a lasting friendship with your Majesty and establishing such a trade between the English and your subjects as may prove equally advantageous to both".[125] On the one hand, the engaging tone of Pigot's letter reads like a reflection of Brooke's able management of the Company's relations with Burma's forward-looking king. Yet on the other hand, its gushing friendliness sounds a bit out of pace with Howe's untimely stubbornness that had provoked a strong reaction from the king.

Even before the battle for Syriam, March to July 1756, and the final campaign for Pegu, September 1756 to May 1757, Mon villagers had been fleeing the progress of the Burmese armies and a number of them had sought refuge at Negrais. We can imagine that for

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[123] His first reply is dated 4 April 1756. The correct year should be "1757".

[124] His name is written "Bailey" in Lester's "Proceedings".

[125] The second letter, dated 18 May 1757, was sent by a Mr. Adams, supercargo of the *Ganges.* Pigot also gave the details of the presents he had sent the king, namely "a brass gun and appurtenances with five hundred shot and eight chests of gun powder". The arrival of Captain Bailey in Rangoon with these presents is mentioned by Lester in letters dated 3 July and 9 August 1757 (see Lester, "Proceedings," 130, 141).

humanitarian, but possibly also more ambiguous political, reasons Newton did not dissuade them from to coming to Negrais. But they were an obvious burden for the Company as their presence raised the monthly consumption of rice in a place that was entirely dependent on external provisions.[126] After the fall of Pegu in May 1757, the Burmese started to resettle Mon villagers in Pathein, and Alaungmintaya strongly objected to the Company chief's distributing rice to Mon refugees, thus encouraging them to evade Burmese rule.[127]

Lester's Mission

When Captain Howe died in September 1756, he was succeeded by his assistant Thomas Newton who, at the time of Howe's death, had been living in Pathein. While it is impossible to find a single negative statement on Alaungmintaya or the Burmese in general in Brooke's correspondence, what little we know about Newton's opinions leads us to the conclusion that, like Howe, he had little sympathy for the Burmese.[128] In late 1756, Newton had sold the Burmese twelve chests of gunpowder, but they wanted to buy much more for their final onslaught on Pegu.[129] Newton was unable to meet these demands and Alaungmintaya sent a ship to buy gunpowder in Madras. But when the royal ship was detained by the governor of Fort St George and the king asked for what reason, he failed to get an answer.[130] At the end of March 1757, Newton reported,

> the Burmahs are much dissatisfied at not being supplied with gunpowder as they want it…. [and that he was] well informed that the king had not even opened letters sent him as they were not accompanied with considerable presents which he had expected from the Company and had let drop some expressions intimating that when he had reduced Pegu he would dislodge the English from Negrais.[131]

These were rumors that do not find confirmation in Alaungmintaya's actual policy towards the Company after the fall of Pegu in May 1757. The king sent soon thereafter a message telling Newton that Pegu had been conquered and that he had some matters of consequence

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[126] 9 February 1756, DCB 1756, 38.
[127] Lester refers to the settling of "Pegu families" and to the extortionist practices of the local Burmese strongman (see Lester, "Proceedings," 130, 132, 138).
[128] Much later, in 1760, he wrote to Pigot, "I was of opinion (long since) that their profession of friendship to the English was very insincere". Newton to Pigot, 4 April 1760, DCB 1760, 140.
[129] Newton to Pigot, 7 January 1757, P 240/15, PDC, 21.
[130] The king put the question to Lester during his audience on 23 July 1757, but the envoy said that he had no news on that matter (Lester, "Proceedings," 135).
[131] Lester to Pigot, 30 March 1757, PDC, P 240/15, 380.

to communicate. He had in fact decided to conclude matters with the Company. So Newton appointed Ensign Robert Lester to go and see the king on his way from Rangoon to Shwebo.[132] Newton who put no trust in Alaungmintaya, ominously wrote to Lester that

> "as it will be impossible for me to know at this distance what reception you may meet with from the king, or his great officers about him, so it is out of my power to give you any particular instructions relating to your conduct …".

For the Company's men, the main issue on its agenda of negotiating with the king had not changed during the preceding two years. They wanted a landing place in Pathein, but they did not want to leave Negrais. Above all they wanted to get their "treaty" signed by the king. Nothing else mattered as much as obtaining an official recognition of the Company's rights in Burma expressed in the Company's own terms. So Newton sent Lester with two copies of the treaty.

When Alaungmintaya received Lester on 23 July 1757, Lester congratulated the king on "his late conquest of so potent a kingdom" as the Mon kingdom and presented once more the treaty of alliance. Alaungmintaya immediately observed that he had already "fixed his chop to a plait of gold with rubies set around it as likewise to a paper which were sent by Mr. Dyer", referring to the letters for George II and the Company's directors. Obviously the king wanted to stress that he had already granted the East India Company what it had been asking for. Moreover the Burmese king noted that more than one year after he had sent the letters, he was still waiting for an answer. But Lester was mute on this issue and simply replied that those were just letters, and not on the same level as treaties, saying "[they were] not of the same kind with this Treaty of Friendship and Alliance". The king thus learnt to his detriment that his own understanding of legality did not apparently mean much to the addressees of his letters, who did not even care to acknowledge their receipt. Once again, repeating the earlier requests of Baker and Dyer, the Company's envoy heavily insisted on his signing the document of their own making, saying,

> "…if His Majesty would now be pleased to consent to the fixing his chop to the above, it would be a means of uniting the two nations together for ages to come."

[132] Newton to Lester, 24 June 1757, in Lester, "Proceedings," 127-8.

In the ensuing conversation with Lester, the king brought up various other subjects of concern and interest, but finally he gave in and when the audience ended, he concluded by saying that he

> "would put his Chop to our Treaty of Alliance and give us Liberty to trade in any part of his Kingdom".

How can we explain this apparent change of mind? Depriving himself of the right to enforce his own legal standards, Alaungmintaya resolved himself to sign a "treaty" that he had consistently ignored since it had been first submitted to him by Baker in 1755 and then again by Anderson and Dyer in 1756. He granted the settlement at Negrais that he had been so reluctant to discuss over the preceding two years. As the primary sources contain no evidence on the king's thoughts, we can only imagine his reasons. Apparently Alaungmintaya had not been discouraged by the Company's unhelpful and at times arrogant policies. Flexible and pragmatic, he must have seen a greater advantage in compromising and striking a deal agreeable to the Company than not doing so. No doubt he had in mind the long-term interests of his dynasty of his country.

To understand Alaungmintaya, we also have to take into consideration the shift in the overall political context. Both in Burma and in India the political situation underwent tremendous change between 1755 and 1757. As we know, it turned to the advantage of the king of Burma and the East India Company in their respective quarters. The king was now the sole master of his kingdom and driven by his unbounded self-assurance, he may have felt even freer to be generous with the foreign traders and give them what they wanted. The East India Company had been effectively fighting the French in the Bay of Bengal and was making advances in gaining control over large parts of India. In comparison with 1755, the Company may have appeared as an even more attractive commercial partner and ally in 1757. Alaungmintaya's summoning of Newton shows that he was not and had not been courting the East India Company only for the sake of buying arms. Arms and ammunition provisions had been unreliable and below the king's expectations, despite his instant payments. These supplies then probably mattered much less. Note that he told Lester that "he had taken great quantities of guns, bombs etc. with all kind of warlike stores at Pegu".[133]

[133] Lester, "Proceedings," 136.

Alaungmintaya had shown that he, unlike the Indian princes, did not need the auxiliary support of the English to win a war.

The expectation of expanding trade was likely an important element in Alaungmintaya's pragmatic diplomacy. Alaungmintaya told Lester that he was going to send a "large chest of stones with all sorts of commodities which his country afforded" to Madras. We know unfortunately very little about royal trade. The commercial activity of the Negrais settlement since its beginnings was dominated by the export of timber and planks. It is likely that, because of the profitable trade, the king had never entirely disapproved of the settlement there. Signing the treaty may have been a last concession on his part to have the Company move inland to a place that made commercially more sense and that the Burmese could far better police than Negrais. Turning to the matter of Negrais, Alaungmintaya asked: "What was the reason we did not leave Negrais and come all over to Persaim and settle there?" To which Lester replied with the often repeated argument that the French would likely go there if the British left. But the Company was apparently ready to make concessions too. As Lester reported, "I told him… that we should come with a firm resolution to settle at Persaim *if His Majesty would indulge us in settling the treaty* and leave a small force at the Negrais".[134] Unsurprisingly during a last brief meeting with Lester on 29 July at Lunze, the king insisted once more that the British must go and settle in Pathein. He also made clear that any further support for the Mon in the Delta had to stop immediately.[135]

The relatively easy access to the palace and the directness in Alaungmintaya's talks with the envoys stand in stark contrast with the drawn out ceremonial formalities, the forced delays and the aloofness of the Burmese royalty as found in descriptions of audiences of the late eighteenth or nineteenth centuries. Alaungmintaya obviously enjoyed the conversations with the English envoys; he was curious, full of good humor, passionate and informal. But Lester's account, as much as Baker's more developed narrative, are replete with daily notes on their chronically bad health and their problems travelling safely and obtaining convenient food and lodging. As far as the aims of their missions were concerned, the

[134] *Ibidem*.
[135] Lester, "Proceedings," 138.

negotiations with the king's specially appointed officers and the correct translation of relevant documents were critical issues that called for great attention.

We have already hinted at the fact that during the reign of Alaungmintaya, the practical arrangements of travelling, preparing translations, implementing royal decisions regarding the Company, and any matters of protocol lay in the hands of officers who were not Burmese. The most prominent, Gregory and Zachary, two former Armenian traders, have already been named. The Armenians were generally considered by the British as inimical to the Company's interests. But if they had been as intriguingly pro-French as Baker would make us believe, they were not very successful, given Alaungmintaya's unwavering interest in relations with the East India Company. The organization of Lester's mission lay entirely in the hands of Antonio, who in 1757 was the second officer at Pathein.[136] Lester does not mention either Gregory or Zachary.[137] The real or sometimes imagined threats that the envoys describe, the constrictions of the unfamiliar protocol as well as treatments that they occasionally considered as humiliating put the envoys under considerable stress. Lester speaks for all of them when he writes:

> "I meet with many things amongst these people that would try the most patient man ever existed, but as I hope it is for the good of the gentlemen I serve, I shall put up with them and proceed."[138]

It is perhaps due to the many frustrating moments of the 1757 mission that Alaungmintaya's decision to finally sign the treaty is not described by Lester as a success, nor even as a positive piece of news, despite two years of perseverance. Lester's tone is strictly matter-of-fact. Before he left Lunze, he sat down with Antonio and settled the details of the treaty, in particular the measurements of the territory at Pathein. On his return, he stopped at Pathein and took possession "of the spot of ground in the name of the Honourable United East India Company having the King Allaum Praw's Liberty for so doing". After hoisting the flag, he

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[136] He was *sitkè* (in Lester's "Proceedings" he is called *checado*), an officer second only to the governor in charge of judicial and military affairs. He later became himself governor of Pathein in 1760. He was either an Armenian or a Portuguese half-caste. He played an ambiguous role in the organization of the attack on Negrais in October 1759.

[137] Gregory had a large responsibility in the attack on Negrais and compromised himself by false reports at the court of Naungdawgyi during the visit of Walter Alves in 1760.

[138] Lester, "Proceedings," 132.

left for Negrais, happily looking forward to deliver his papers to Newton and catch a ship for Bengal.

Did the treaty have any particular meaning for the Burmese?[139] Did the king see his latest concession as a promising step forward? Alaungmintaya may indeed have been hopeful about positive economic repercussions: after signing "their" treaty, he could have expected that relations with the East India Company would at last be established on a firm basis. Pathein would be re-settled with Mon subjects and rise from its ashes, its river trade picking up with the presence of the East India Company, Rangoon would succeed Syriam in the Delta, and Negrais would be progressively abandoned while the Company's men would not feed and give support to the Mon refugees. Such could have been the king's expectations. As we know, things soon turned out to be much less promising.

The Abandonment of Negrais

Four months later, when he sent his report together with a copy of the treaty to Madras[140], Newton noted that improvements at Pathein went on very slowly for want of workmen. But even this improvement would come to an end very soon. The treaty had in fact lost a lot of its immediate, practical relevance at the moment it was finally signed. Following the directors' instructions of 25 March 1757 to either withdraw entirely from Negrais or keep possession at the least possible expense,[141] the Board in Madras did not really know what to do, so it chose to do nothing. It chose indeed the easy course of "barely keep[ing] possession of the Negrais" and for over one year deferred considering Newton's reports from Negrais.[142] Not only Governor Pigot and the Board at Madras faced a disastrous outcome after four years of a failed investment policy in Burma. The Company's instructions given in 1757 and 1758 also burst any expectations that Alaungmintaya may have had. Moreover, we also find that the interpretation that was made of the treaty in Madras revealed a

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[139] "Treaty Between Alaung-hpaya and the British East India Company in 1757" *SOAS Bulletin of Burma Research* 3, no.1 (2005): 123-125. First published under the title "Treaty concluded with the King of Ava" in Dalrymple, *Oriental Repertory*, 223-6.

[140] Lester arrived on 26 August 1757. Newton sent his report with a copy of the treaty to Madras on 5 January 1758.

[141] Hall, *Tragedy*, 333.

[142] Newton sent letters from Negrais on 16 November 1758 (DCB 1758, 55, 62) and 4 January 1759 (DCB 1759, 42, 44); Hall, *Tragedy*, 334.

misapprehension, or rather say disregard, of the king's intentions. Pigot only reported the fall of Pegu and the signature of the treaty in his dispatch of 13 March 1758 to the Directors. He wrote,

> By timely presents [we] have obtained a perpetual grant of the Negrais Island and a site at Persaim and concluded a commercial treaty with him.

The Company's men interpreted as "timely presents" the traditional gifts sent by an envoy to the court as well as the annual present to the king that was a symbolic recognition of the grant. But the Board also included in their interpretation the regular fees that had to be paid to the Governor of Pathein and his administrative officers when the treaty was signed. They misinterpreted such payments as graft.[143] It is unlikely that the Burmese court understood the grant as "perpetual". Their understanding was that it could be made by one king and then be revoked by the same king or one of his successors.

A much more serious misunderstanding concerned the status of the settlement of Negrais and the site of Pathein. As we have seen, Alaungmintaya was ready to believe that in due time, the East India Company would move its activities to Pathein. We may also keep in mind that earlier on, both the Mon and the Burmese courts had questioned the wisdom of trading from such a place as Negrais because of its geographical disadvantages and they had been supported in their arguments by the reports of the Company's own men on the spot. Alaungmintaya had shown a great amount of patience listening to the British arguments,[144] though he, like his counterpart in Pegu, was suspicious of hidden intentions on behalf of the Company. Ultimately the Company's clinging to Negrais in the absence of developing further trade activities in Pathein only raised new distrust at the court in Shwebo. But while Negrais had to hang on at a bare minimum, any further investment in Pathein was strictly ruled out when the Directors wrote to Pigot in July 1758,

> …we have been at so large an expence on account of the settlement at that place and the unsettled condition of the Pegu country promises so very little advantage, especially in the

[143] The Company should have known better. An Armenian trader told Captain Alves that the governor and his men did not receive a regular salary from the king and depended on such fees for their living (Alves, "Diary," 143-4).

[144] The Company considered Negrais a strategically important place. It argued that if the British would leave Negrais, the French would rush to fill the presumed vacuum.

> present situation of the Company's affairs that we cannot think of any new settlements at Persaim, Syrian or elsewhere. Schemes of this kind must be deferred for more tranquil times.[145]

The final signature of the treaty with Alaungmintaya went uncommented, if not unnoticed in London. Half a year later, in early 1759, the tone of the Directors regarding Negrais further sharpened:

> The settlement at the Negrais has been so expensive and promises so little advantage that unless it has already withdrawn this should be done at once, leaving not more than three or four servants to hoist the flag merely to keep our right.[146]

But Robert Clive, writing from Fort William at Calcutta, arrived ahead of these orders and he told Thomas Newton in February[147] to embark with all the Europeans on a sloop and proceed to Bengal, leaving just three or four people to keep possession and take care of the timber.[148] That Clive of Fort William and not Pigot of Fort St George anticipated the Directors' orders was not only an effect of the ongoing Anglo-French contest on the Coromandel Coast, but also reflected the shift of the political centre of gravity from Madras to Calcutta.

On 1 September 1759, Captain William H. Southby left Calcutta to relieve Lt Hope at Negrais and remove the timber that had earlier been left there. Two days after his arrival on 4 October 1759, Southby and his men were visited by a group of Burmese led by Antonio, the governor of Pathein. During the visit, the fort was suddenly overrun by Burmese soldiers. Once the fort was taken, the Burmese fired on the Company's ships. Many of the Company's personal were killed; some were taken prisoners; others took refuge on the *Victoria* and fled the following day with Captain Alves who was the first to report the tragic event.

When the Council of Fort St George ordered an enquiry into the killings in Negrais, three questions stood at the forefront: did Alaungmintaya order a massacre of the British and their

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[145] See Court of Directors to Pigot, 5 July 1758 in E 4/861, 934 and in Dodwell, *Madras Despatches 1754-1765*, 160.

[146] Court of Directors to Pigot, 23 January 1759 in Dodwell, *Madras Despatches 1754-1765*, 186.

[147] Clive to Court of Directors, 29 December 1759, in *Fort William - India House Correspondence and other contemporary papers relating thereto* (Public *series) vol. 2 (1757-59),* edited by H. N. Sinha (Delhi: National Archives of India, 1957), 436. On 20 and 27 March 1759 Clive sent letters to Madras telling them that he had instructed Thomas Newton to leave Negrais, DCB 1759, 76.

[148] On 14 May 1759, Newton arrived with thirty-five Europeans and seventy "black people" in Bengal. The officer who remained in charge of Negrais was Lt Hope.

servants in Negrais? If he did, why would he have ordered such an attack? Lastly, what were the responsibilities of the Company's men in what happened?

First, there is no doubt that such an attack was unthinkable without an express order of the king himself. When the events took place, the king was engaged in preparations for his campaign against Siam and on his way to Rangoon. But in Burmese sources, there is no statement, order or declaration from Alaungmintaya regarding what happened in Negrais. There is also no direct Burmese evidence to be found in the British sources, because the king had already passed away before Captain Walter Alves went on a mission to Burma in June 1760. The sources that we have are statements of Burmese officers who presented their versions of the events to Alves, including the explanation given by Naungdawgyi, Alaungmintaya's son and successor, letters of accusation written by British prisoners attacking the Company's men at Negrais, and declarations made by the two former chiefs of Negrais, Brooke and Newton.

We may start with King Naungdawgyi's explanation that has an official character. He told Alves first that Captain Hope, Newton's successor in Negrais, had not shown "the customary respects", that he had not "performed the promises made by the Company", "but that he did just as he thought fit [and] built fortifications where he pleased". Finally the new king accused him of holding "a correspondence with the Peguers (Mon) whom he supplied with arms, ammunition, provisions etc." One may recall that the Mon had once more revolted in the middle of 1759 when Alaungmintaya had just returned from a campaign in Manipur and was in the north. The Burmese garrison had successfully crushed the revolt. Because of their help to the Mon, Alaungmintaya had ordered a group of soldiers to seize "all the stores, arms, ammunitions etc."[149] of the English.

Antonio, the governor of Pathein, had been directly involved in the event and was thus a first-hand witness. Unsurprisingly, he was keen to minimize his role in cutting off Negrais when he talked to Alves in June 1760. According to Antonio, the king had ordered Lavigne, a Frenchman who had entered his service, to take sixty men and "cut off this settlement, by

[149] Alves, "Diary," 154, 157. Hope was also accused of having shared in the booty taken by the Mon rebels and the Burmese court had warned him long before the decision was taken to destroy the fortifications at Negrais.

any means, no matter whether by fraud or force". Lavigne had no orders to kill anybody unless somebody resisted, but should have taken hostages who could be ransomed. Antonio's version suggests that the Burmese soldiers took matters into their own hands and went on the rampage[150]. He confirmed that Lt Hope had indeed given arms to the Mon rebels. But the facts had been exaggerated by Gregory, the Armenian advisor who had made "the four or five muskets with some powder and shot" into 400 or 500 muskets". Moreover Gregory "put up [the English] in the worst light possible" making a report to Alaungmintaya about their territorial expansion in India and suggesting that they had similar projects in Burma.

Mingyi Nawratha, the governor of Rangoon and former governor of Pathein, whom Alves had met in early August in Rangoon, confirmed Antonio's account. He presented himself as a friend of the Company and stated that he was prevented by Gregory from reconciling the Negrais chief with Alaungmintaya. As a consequence of his soft stance concerning the Company's men, the governor had been severely punished by the king.[151]

As for Gregory himself, he played an ambiguous and treacherous role during Alves' time in Burma, which confirmed numerous suspicions about his earlier behavior but need not be analysed here. To exonerate himself, he had sent a letter to Madras in March 1760 giving his own version of events underscoring the fact that it was thanks to his intervention that *not all* the prisoners had been executed by the king[152].

Finally, wemust pay due attention to the letter which James Robertson, one of the captains kept hostage, sent to Madras at the end of November 1759. When he was taken to Alaungmintaya, the king bitterly complained about the way that he had been treated by the English:

> His Majesty observed to me that he had wrote a letter to the King of England on a plate of solid gold, the seal and address of which was ornamented with precious stones to a considerable value… and his Majesty was to this day without any answer notwithstanding some of these letters had been gone three years. Therefore his Majesty could put no other construction on it than the English and the Company looked on him and his people as fools.[153]

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[150] Alves, "Diary," 146-7.
[151] *Ibidem*, 152.
[152] DCB 1760, 122.
[153] Quoted by Hall, "*Tragedy*," 340.

This was not an explanation of the massacre at Negrais, but it showed the bitterness of the king after having exerted so much patience and showing so much goodwill towards the English. It is not difficult to imagine how Alaungmintaya's frustration built up over a long time and turned into bitterness, and how finally an irrepressible anger was ignited by Gregory's invective. Alaungmintaya's fury had many sources and the humiliation that he felt when his overtures of friendship were not returned — not even given a sign of recognition—was definitely one of them. When Brooke was contacted to make a comment on Robertson's letter, he first gave a review of the promising relations with Alaungmintaya. Then he listed the unacceptable behavior of the British captains at Rangoon in 1755 and described Captain Howe's activities as harmful to the success of the Company's negotiations. Newton's reaction to the same letter merely displayed his totally negative attitude towards the Burmese. Confessing that he was "in the dark as to their motives", he said that he "justly ascribe[ed the Negrais attack] … to their own vile dispositions…".[154]

On the other hand, the Burmese court knew well that the events at Negrais were a serious political error. Antonio told Alves that the king deeply regretted what had happened. Naungdawgyi's offer to the Company to resume trade in Burma demonstrated that the Burmese court wanted to normalize its relations with the East India Company as soon as possible.[155] But despite this offer of friendship, Clive and the council at Fort William decided in early 1761 that because the country was "so much in troubles… we shall only bring away what remains of the company's property and we shall not think of establishing a settlement."[156] Official Anglo-Burmese relations restarted only more than three decades later, when Captain Symes visited Burma in 1795.

Alaungmintaya's letter to George II – An Annotated Translation

The Company's English translation of Alaungmintaya's letter to George II of 1756 gives a complete and accurate rendering of the letter's meaning. But for today's readers, the outdated language and the confusing transcriptions of geographical terms rather obscure its

[154] Brooke to Pigot, 9 April 1760, DCB 1760, 138-40; Newton to Pigot, 4 April 1760, DCB 1760, 140.
[155] Alves, "Diary," 148, 156-8.
[156] Fort William to the Court of Directors, 16 January 1761 in *Fort William – India House Correspondence,* vol.3, 195.

understanding. Our own new translation tries to follow the original text as closely as possible, but does not try to imitate the stylistic refinement of the original. It contains annotations that should be helpful to understand the letter's expressions and to value the diplomacy of the king.

"The most meritorious and supreme [king][157], master of all the parasol-bearing[158] kings in the royal cities of the Myanma[159], the Shan, the Yuan[160], the Manipuri[161] and the Talaing[162] in the countries of Sunaparanta, Tambadipa und Kamboza[163], lord of ruby, gold, silver, copper, iron, amber and precious stone mines, lord of white elephants, red elephants and elephants of various colors, lord of the *cakra* [weapon which is] the golden lance[164], a descendant of the solar race, lord of the golden palace [with] tiered roofs, [We]

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[157] In the translations of the Golden Letter as well as the letter to the Court of Directors, the initial expression is translated as "the King, Despotick, of great Merit" while the letters to Pigot and Howe have "the King through Merit Despotick". The latter translation best expresses the essential meaning, i.e. the Buddhist understanding that Alaungmintaya had become king because of his merits in earlier lives.

[158] When a king of Burma was seated, a set of nine superposed parasols was mounted over his head. When he moved around, a parasol would be held over his head. Parasols (or umbrellas) were an elementary symbol of royalty and their mention points here to legitimate rulers under the sway of the king of Burma.

[159] Myanma [Mran-mā] is the literary name of the majority ethnic group of Burmans who have dominated the history of the country. In Chinese sources, the Myanma people are called "Mien". Early modern Western sources up to the colonial period referred to the kingdoms in Burma by using the names of the capitals, such as Ava or Pegu. The English "Burma" is derived from the ethnonym "Bamā", commonly used in the spoken language.

[160] The Shan of eastern Burma and the Yuan of northern Thailand belong to the ethno-linguistic group of the Tai who are spread over a large area of continental Southeast Asia from Vietnam to North-east India.

[161] In the Burmese texts, they are referred to as Kathay (spelt Kasañ). Manipur, a former kingdom of Northeast India that was hinduised in the course of the eighteenth century. Under its king Gharib Newaz, the Manipuri repeatedly raided central Burma in the first half of the eighteenth century, contributing to the political decline of the Second Taunggu dynasty (1599-1752). The reference to Manipur in this letter proves that Alaungmintaya had already raided the country before his invasion in late 1758.

[162] A Burmese term thought to refer to the predominantly Mon population of Lower Burma.

[163] The three literary terms refer to western and eastern parts of Central Burma as well as to the Shan country.

[164] The meaning implied by the use of *cakrā* is "powerful weapon". The edited version in the *Royal Orders of Burma* adds "*arindama*", the name of the lance that, according to the Burmese chronicles, god Indra gave to Anawratha, the founder king of Pagan (11th c. AD). *Arindama* in Sanskrit means "foe-conquering, victorious". With the *arindama* included, an alternate translation of the whole expression can be made: "the powerful golden lance [named] *arindama*".

Alaungmintaya, ruler of the royal city of Ratanapura-Ava[165] and the golden city of Ratanasingha-Konbaung[166] famed as Ayujjhapura[167], convey our kindest greetings to the English king who rules over the English capital[168] surrounded by such cities as Chenapattam[169], Bengal, Fort [St] David[170] [and] Devikot.[171]/[172]

Under the reigns of our ancestors, the English and the Myanma traded as much as they wished[173]. As destiny would have it, due to the troubles in the Talaing country[174] [trade] was interrupted at the time that Your esteemed Highness sent Mr Henry Brooke to settle at Mawdin-Haingyi at the farthest point of our kingdom[175]. We learned about this after his arrival and We are elated at the prospect of cordial relations which are one of the seven marks of a fortified city[176] in the possession of great monarchs.

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[165] Alaungmintaya re-conquered Ava from the Mon on 3 January 1754.
[166] These are two names of Moksobo, Alaungmintaya's native village from where he first resisted the pacification campaign of the Mon in April 1752. Later re-named - and today still known as - Shwebo, Alaungmintaya had it transformed into a royal capital during his intermittent times there between June 1753 and December 1754. The city was also known (its fifth name) as *Yangyi-Aung* or "conqueror of great enemies".
[167] Literally, "the city that is impregnable".
[168] It was a Burmese usage in historical literature to refer to a country by the name of its capital. I use "the English king" each time the letter's text has "the king of the English capital (or, main city)".
[169] Madras (today Chennai). The first English settlement in Madraspatnam, then a fishing village, goes back to 1639. Fort St George, built in 1640, became the nucleus around which the city of Madras developed. Lost in 1746 to the British, it was returned to them by the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle (or Aachen) in 1748.
[170] A British fort near Cuddalore, hundred-twenty km south of Madras (Chennai). In 1746, when the French admiral La Bourdonnais captured Madras, Fort St David was the British headquarters for southern India.
[171] Several cities exist with the roughly similarly spelt name "Devikot" exist in India, for example in West Bengal and Rajasthan. The city referred to here is Devicottah in the Carnatic (now Tamilnadu), situated on the Coleroon (a river in the Kaveri delta). The English obtained the control over this river-port city in 1749 after their first military engagement in favor of an Indian prince.
[172] The Golden Letter's published version (*Royal Orders of Burma,* vol. 3, 156) adds the simile : "…surrounded, like the full moon is encircled by all the stars, by cities such as …"
[173] On early British traders in Burma, see Woodman, *Making of Burma,* 24-40 and the first part of Hall, *Tragedy*.
[174] The expression "Talaing country" refers to Lower Burma, frequently referred to by its classic name Hamsavati and known in early modern Western sources as Pegu (now Bago), the name of its capital. Populated in pre-eighteenth century times predominantly by the Mon people, Lower Burma kingdoms existed between the 13th and the early 16th century and again from 1740 to 1757.
[175] This is the Burmese designation for Haingyi Island and Cape Negrais, "Negrais" is a noun coined by foreigners and derived from the term *nagarāj*, king of the nagas.
[176] The seven marks (or qualities) of a fortified city (*nagara* in Sanskrit; *myo,* in Burmese) listed in the traditional texts called *rajānīti,* are: 1) the lord of the country, 2) a minister who settles conflicts 3)

Following the humble request of your esteemed Highness' envoy, Mr Henry Brooke, We have granted the site for your ships in Pathein[177] at the place he wanted. A sealed royal order was sent to the officer of the English king [i.e. Brooke] and the governor of Pathein was instructed to measure and hand over [the piece of land] in Pathein. When close friendship prevails between kings of different countries, they can be helpful to the needs of each other that we are eager to fulfill.[178]

So that [our] friendship will last until the time of my royal sons, grandsons, great-grandsons and the descendants of the esteemed English king, [I have sent] this royal letter [written] on a plaque of gold on the tenth day of the waxing moon of *kahsoun* in the *sakkarāj* year 1118[179], a Saturday, to your esteemed Highness the English king who rules over the English capital."

A Note on the Letter's Date

According to Southeast Asian Calendars (SEAC), a computer application that handles conversion between South-East Asian and Western Calendars, the corresponding Western date of the letter is 7 May 1756[180]. A curious discrepancy appears when one refers to the English translation of the letter in the 1757 volume of the *Country Correspondence* of Fort St George[181] where it is entitled and dated, "From the King of the Burmurs Dated April 1756". John Christopher Eade thinks that there could be a confusion of the Old Style/New Style English calendar revision by some "diehards out in the colonies" despite the fact that the Act of Parliament of 1750 became effective in 1752. According to New Style, the Burmese date corresponds to 7 May while according to Old Style, it would have been 26 April. Another

friendship with other countries, 4) granaries filled with seven kinds of rice and treasure chests filled with ten kinds of jewels, 5) strong fortifications, moats, firewalls, doors and barricades, 6) a country to be ruled, 7) an army composed of elephants, horses, foot soldiers and chariots. See U Kala, *Mahayazawingyi* (Yangon: Hamsawati Press, 1960), vol.1, 37.

[177] Pathein was the name of the city, but also the name of one of the three provinces of the Mon kingdom. In Italian and Portuguese sources of the sixteenth century, following its Mon pronunciation, it was named Cosmin, a name close to its classical appellation Kusima-nagara.

[178] This can be interpreted as *[luṁ.la]ussāha,* exertion, striving. I thank Kyaw Minn Htin for clarifying this elliptic expression. It is only found in the original, but not in the published version of the Golden Letter.

[179] 8 May 1756 according to Than Tun (*Royal Orders of Burma,* vol.3, 152). We follow J. Christopher Eade's calculation: 7 May 1756.

[180] Developed by Lars Gislén and J. Christopher Eade, SEAC can be downloaded at http://home.thep.lu.se/~larsg/download.html. (last accessed on 29 July 2009).

[181] CC 1757, 210.

practical explanation of the discrepancy could relate to the superficial use of a conversion table by a Madras writer. As the month of *kahsone* starts in the middle of the month of April, the writer could have simply equated *kahsone* with April.[182]

A Note on Alaungmintaya's Titles

In his edicts and letters, Alaungmintaya did not systematically refer to himself with the same formulaic juxtaposition of titles. The choice of titles that appears in the *intitulatio* depended on the status of the addressee as well as on the importance of the matter that the topic [or letter] was dealing with. Western observers were unable to decipher their meaning as the titles did not speak "culturally" to them. Take for example the title "lord of many white elephants". It is only at first sight that titles may look complicated, flowery and even somehow mysterious. Obviously titles were meant to impress an audience by their grandiloquence. But characterizations that deal with titles merely by referring to their stylistic pomposity miss the important point of their functions. Once we make accurate translations and gain a better understanding of the signification of the titles, matters of style fade into the background.

The list of Alaungmintaya's titles takes up no less than three of the ten lines of the Golden Letter. The titles were not a simple adornment of the king's letter, but they form part of the message. They fulfill several intertwining functions. First of all they establish claims regarding the political and cosmological legitimacy of their bearers. Such political legitimacy may often be linked to former and ancient dynasties endowed with mythical origins. Titles generally establish territorial claims as they refer to kings as rulers over one or several countries or territories. Such territorial claims would naturally be associated with the people or a variety of people living in these countries. Only a contextual study of a king's biography or of a reign can reveal whether the contents of the titles reflected tradition with inherited titles and claims; long-standing actuality with references to territorial possessions; or recent facts, with lists of conquests. Lastly it is through their symbolic functions that royal titles elevate the function of kingship itself and adorn kings with an aura of sacredness and super-

[182] This paragraph summarizes and quotes John Christopher Eade's email of 16 June 2009 to the author. The Calendar (New Style) Act of 1750 is accessible at http://www.statutelaw.gov.uk/content.aspx?ActiveTextDocId =1516754 (last accessed 29 July 2009).

mundane power. These symbolic functions are decoded in a particular religious, cultural or mythological context. Titles thus speak to various audiences and convey effective messages only in circumscribed contexts. Rather than being an exercise in public relations expressing new claims, the *intitulatio* would essentially recall well-accredited notions of kingship.

In the case of Alaungmintaya's *intitulatio*, a study of the titles is of particular interest because his orders and letters display a greater variety and complexity in titular composition than any earlier or later Burmese king that we know. The *intitulatio* of Alaungmintaya's letter to George II is quite similar to the one he used in letters sent to the king of Pegu,[183] to the king of Siam (25 March 1760), to the *sawbwa* of Hsenwi (a Shan lord, 20 June 1755) and to Thomas Saunders, the governor of Fort St George in Madras (6 June 1755), but none of these are strictly identical in their titular composition. But their similarity clearly points to a certain standardization in self-representation while addressing other sovereign lords or rulers considered as equals. The differences are intentional as a few examples show. When Alaungmintaya wrote to local lords such as the Hsenwi *sawbwa* or the king of Pegu, men whom he wanted to submit to him, he used titles that stressed his moral legitimacy and referred to prophecies of the Buddha regarding his accession to power.[184]

The title, "the most meritorious and supreme [king]", is found without exception at the beginning of all formal orders, proclamations or letters of a Burmese king. The key Burmese term contained in the title is *phoun* which refers to the great power that the king derives from cumulative result of past meritorious deeds in former lives.

- In the titular expression "Master of all the parasol-bearing kings ...", the king affirms his status as a king above other kings. These lower-ranking lords are referred to as "umbrella-bearing" legitimate kings. A giant white umbrella was a mark of royal dignity carried alongside a king when he set forth in public procession. The list of kings that follows reflects Alaungmintaya's hegemonic claims, some of which still had to be transformed into reality

[183] Letters sent to Banya Dala, 6 June 1755, 19 October 1756 and 19 December 1756.

[184] In his letter to George II, Alaungmintaya did not use the title *sasanadayaka,* "religious donor", a fairly common title that stressed the king's merit in supporting the monkhood. It was not a significant appellation in the context of relations with a Western king and would have little impressed an eighteenth-century London public. The Burmese writer probably thought that such a title was only meaningful for a culturally inward-viewing Buddhist audience.

by the time the Golden Letter was written. Between 1752 and 1755, Alaungmintaya gained effective control over central Burma, here referred to as Sunaparanta and Tambadipa. Some Shan *sawbwas* of Kambhoja had already submitted in March 1754. Early incursions are not well documented, but Burmese rule was enforced in 1759. The country of the Yuan, today known as Lanna in Northern Thailand, was under the rule of a governor appointed by the previous Burmese king. With the exception of the western part of the Irrawaddy Delta, the greater part of Lower Burma was still beyond the king's reach.

Among the surviving letters of the king, the title "Lord of ruby, gold, silver, copper, iron, amber and precious stone mines", is only found in the *intitulatio* of Alaungmintaya's letters to the king of Pegu, the *sawbwa* of Hsenwi and to the East India Company[185]. The Burmese sovereigns were lords of a rich country endowed with mineral resources. The mines were not exploited by the king himself; their exploitation lay in the hands of families or villages that specialised in this kind of work and paid a share of their revenue to the crown. The king was a "lord of the mines" only in the sense that he was in a position to put restrictions on the access to these resources and to monopolise their commercialisation. The first recorded Western visitors to the ports of Lower Burma were Italian gem traders and the country has been famous for its rubies and other gemstones ever since.[186] But before the nineteenth century, no foreigner was ever allowed to visit Mogok and the district where the rubies were mined. Gold was strictly reserved for objects of royal and religious usage. Officially its export was not allowed. We may incidentally note that gold and silver coins were not minted in Burma before the early nineteenth century. The king had a virtual export monopoly and this title is the one that comes closest to acknowledging the country itself as a place of wealth and potential trade.

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[185] Readers should note that indications on the quantitative presence of appellations in the sequence of titles are made here with reference to a statistical evaluation of the known edicts and letters of the king. Such insights may not necessarily be generalized.

[186] On the natural riches of Burma as described by the Western travellers in the pre-colonial period, see Jacques Leider, "Natural Resources, Agricultural Produce and Commercialized Goods in Pre-Colonial Myanmar A Survey of Some Travel Accounts, 1570-1800," in *Essays in Commemoration of the Golden Jubilee of The Myanmar Historical Commission* (Yangon: Myanmar Historical Commission,2005), 109-133.

The title, "Lord of white elephants, red elephants and elephants of various colors", refers to the cultural, economic and military importance of the elephant in the kingdoms of Southeast Asia, which needs hardly to be stressed. Pigmentation was one of various criteria to classify native elephants.

Because of their symbolic status for royalty, rare albino elephants were treasured beyond any measure by the kings of Siam, Laos, Burma and Arakan. White elephants were proof *par excellence* of kingly legitimacy. One Buddhist representation of the ideal universal monarch is the concept of the *cakravartin.*[187] The *cakravartin* is said to be a world ruler whose authority spreads in such a way that minor kings readily submit to him, so that no blood has to be spilt to establish his rule.[188] *Cakravartin* kingship is not only understood as a political ideal, but also as a personal, supra-human nature bearing a cosmological dimension. One of the seven signs or "jewels" of such a ruler is the tall, white elephant. Several Burmese rulers had more than one white elephant and thus could legitimately use the title "lord of *many* white elephants". In the great majority of his orders or letters, Alaungmintaya presented himself as the owner of a white elephant. Two expressions occur alternately in Alaungmintaya's *intitulatio*, either 'lord of the jewel of many white elephants', or 'lord of many white elephants, red elephants and elephants of various colors'. It is the second expression that is found in the Golden Letter.

The title "Lord of the *cakrā* [weapon which is] the golden lance" alludes to the Indian mythological context, in which the *cakrā* is a magic flying disk or turning wheel, an attribute of the *cakravartin*. In Burma it was a lance that could be carried with royal paraphernalia in front of the king during a procession. It is understood to be a supernatural weapon conferred by Sakka, the king of the gods. Found in eighty percent of Alaungmintaya's orders, the frequency of this title stresses its essential importance in the context of the king's

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[187] In Pali, *cakkavatti.* A *cakravartin* is a king who obtains kingship thanks to the meritorious deeds he performed during his earlier existences.

[188] See Collins, *Nirvana,* 602-615 for a translation of the text of the *cakkavatti-sīhanāda sutta*. Information on Buddhist cosmology is found in Charles Archaimbault and George Coedès, trans., *Les trois mondes (Traibhum B'rah Rvan)* (Paris : EFEO, 1973), 86-110 ; Eugène Denis, "La Lokapaññatti et les idées cosmologiques du bouddhisme ancien," (doctoral thesis [with apologies to our Francophone friends], Université de Lille III, 1977), vol. 1, 121-30 and vol.2, 153-83 ; Stanley J. Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer A Study of Buddhism and Polity in Thailand against a Historical Background* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 32-101.

cosmological legitimacy. The *cakrā* is frequently referred to by its proper name *arindama,* "because it brings all [the king's] enemies into subjection". Despite the references to the symbols of the *cakravartin* king, Alaungmintaya did not claim *per se* to be a predestined *cakravartin* king. Unlike the Siamese kings of the Ayutthayan period (14th-18th c.) who frequently used the term *cakravartin* in their titles[189], in early modern Burma the use of the Burmese version of the term, *setkyawade*, remained rare.

Alaungmintaya's claim to be a 'descendant of the solar race (*ādicca-vamsa,* pron. *adeissa-wuntha*) establishes an important dynastic link with the Sakya clan to which Gautama Buddha belonged. This is made clear by the way that the *Konbaungzet*, the chronicle of the dynasty founded by Alaungmintaya, is using this expression. "Solar" does not refer in this context to similes in which kings are compared with the rising sun, but alludes rather to the role of the sun as the fertilizer of semen or an egg from which the legendary King Pyasawthi was born.[190] This title is only found only in Alaungmintaya's letters to other kings, not in his common orders.

The title "Lord of the golden palace" is only found in letters to the king of Pegu, to the *sawbwa* of Hsenwi and to the East India Company administrators. When the astrological signs recommended the foundation of a new capital, Burmese royal palaces built of teak-wood were dismantled and reassembled elsewhere. A palace was "golden" in a purely decorative sense, as thin gold leaves were used to cover either all of the palace, or selected elements, such as the wooden pillars, sculptures, statues or semi-reliefs. It appears that in Burma the title "lord of the golden palace" was not used before Alaungmintaya and

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[189] See Peter Skilling, "King, *Sangha* and Brahmans Ideology, ritual and power in pre-modern Siam," in *Buddhism, Power and Political Order,* edited by Ian Harris (London/New York, Routledge, 2007), 182-215.

[190] *KBZ,* vol. 1, 46. Concerning the origins of the "solar clan" (*sūriya-ghotra*) and the mythological succession of kings in Buddhist literature, see Strong's discussion of the ancestry of the Buddha (John Strong, *The Buddha A Short Biography* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2001), 37). References to the distinction between the solar and the lunar races are given by U Tin who presents also several quotations from Burmese poetry, notably concerning the supernatural birth of Pyusawmin, allegedly an early Pagan king whose reign escapes historical investigation (U Tin, *The Royal Administration of Burma,* translated by Euan Bagshawe (Bangkok: Ava House; 2001), 121-2. See also M. Charney's interpretation of the importance of this origin myth in defining a model of kingship under the reign of Alaungmintaya (Charney, *Powerful Learning,* 74-5).

remained altogether rare after him. It can be found in a couple of orders of King Singu (a grandson of Alaungmintaya, r. 1776-1782).[191]

The title "ruler of the royal city of Ratanāpūra-Ava and the golden city of Ratanāsingha-Konbaung" puts the names of two cities side by side, the former capital of Ava, together with the king's own new capital of Shwebo. The classical name of Ava is Ratanāpūra which was the capital of the Upper Burmese kingdom first between 1364 and 1555 and then again the capital of a unified Burmese kingdom when King Thalwan (1629-1648) transferred the capital there from Pegu. Ava fell under the onslaught of the Mon on 11 March 1752 and the city remained a Mon administrative centre until 3 January 1754, when Alaungmintaya's troops carried its fortifications. The possession of Ava was highly symbolic, as it signified the return of power to the Burmese. But Alaungmintaya did not choose the city as his political capital. It was in Shwebo, the new name given to Moksobo, his birthplace, that he built a royal palace in April 1754. Shwebo was his head-quarters during the two preceding years while he was slowly building his power base in the north. In the Golden Letter, Shwebo is referred to by two other names, the classical *Ratanāsingha* and *Konbaung*. Konbaung is the name of a ridge of hills, referring to the region more widely, and became the common name of the new dynasty.

For Alaungmintaya, there was no uniform set of titles. As our analysis shows, the *intitulatio* in the Golden Letter can be interpreted in conjunction with similar lists in other letters. Peter Skilling has recently stressed the significance of the royal titles, calling them "potent condensations of the royal person".[192] This description perfectly fits Alaungmintaya's *intitulatio*. The titles reflected the image that the king had of himself and that he wanted to convey to others: a great monarch enjoying the status of a powerful, prosperous and legitimate king of ancient and prestigious descent ruling a wide domain from his palace and capital city.

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[191] *Royal Orders of Burma,* vol. 5, 24 and 25 February 1780. It was the most frequently used title of the kings of the neighboring kingdom of Arakan from the middle of the seventeenth century till the conquest of Arakan by the Burmese in 1785.

[192] Skilling, "Kings, Sangha and Brahmans," 188.

Alaungmintaya's Golden Letter in Historiography

The text of the Golden Letter was included in the *Hmannan Yazawin,* the official court chronicles compiled between 1829 and 1831. In 1829 King Bagyidaw (1819-33) ordered a group of scholars to compose a new chronicle based on a revision of the existing chronicles and critically take into account epigraphic evidence.[193] The chronicle takes its name because the scholars met near the *hman nan,* or "glass palace". This text covered the dynastic history up to the year 1821.[194]

The insertion of Alaungmintaya's letter to George II in the chronicles[195] underlines its importance in the eyes of the chroniclers. But the chronicle does not provide us with much information to retrace the vicissitudes of Anglo-Burmese relations. The letter is introduced by the following paragraph:

> At that time, the English king sent Captain John Dyer with three hundred guns, ten cannon, five chests of pellets and seven barrels of gunpowder. They came by ship from Pathein to Rangoon on the sixth waxing day of the month of *kahsoun* in the *sakkarāj* year 1118 [3 May 1756]. The lord of life Alaungmintaya-gyi received the foreign envoys well by giving them food and lodging and he let them return with a royal letter on the10th day of the rising moon of *kahsoun* [7 May 1756]. The text of the royal letter is (as follows) […][196]

One notes the very particular interpretation made by the court writers of the Dyer/Anderson mission. While both men were – as far as we know - sent by Brooke to conclude the unfinished business of the Baker mission, the chronicler tells us that they were sent by the English king to offer arms and ammunition to Alaungmintaya. The chronicle thus intends to highlight an example of royal graciousness and the existence of cordial relations with a foreign monarch. Bearing in mind that the *Hmannan Yazawin* was compiled only a few years

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[193] Inscriptions referring to religious donations had already been collected in a great number during the preceding reign, under Bagyidaw's grandfather, King Badon *alias* Bodawphaya (1782-1819).
[194] The course of events up to 1854 was included in the *Dutiya Hmannan-yazawindawgyi,* the *Second Glass Palace Royal Chronicles* ordered by King Mindon in 1854. A final part covering the two last reigns up to the end of the dynasty in 1886 was composed by U Maung Maung Tin, K.S.M. A.T.M. (1866-1945), a late court official of King Thibaw. Later Maung Maung Tin made a separate compilation of the chronicle record concerning the Konbaung dynasty known as the *Konbaungzet Mahayazawindawgyi.* It starts with the reign of Alaungmintaya in 1752 and comes to an end with the British conquest of Mandalay in 1885-6. It is in this form that the official account of the Konbaung dynasty is best known today and generally referred to in the historical literature (the common English acronym being *KBZ;* Burmese acronym *Ka-bha-cha).* First published in 1905 in Mandalay, the three volumes of the *KBZ* have been several times re-published (1922, 1967, 1989, 2004).
[195] KBZ, vol.1 [5th ed., 2004], 145-6; [4th ed., 1968], 168-9.
[196] *Ibidem*.

after the first Anglo-Burmese war (1824-6), the historiographers suggested that unlike the present moment, there had been a time when the Burmese monarch was in a position to grant favors and receive due recognition from an English ruler.

Together with Alaungmintaya's other edicts and letters, the text of the Golden Letter, as well as those of the three others, were copied onto palm leaves. Such compilations of administrative correspondence preserved the king's political legacy for posterity.[197] It seems that English translations of the Golden Letter and the three other letters had already been prepared in Rangoon before the letter was sent to Negrais and onwards to Madras. This was most probably done with the help of a Eurasian or Armenian translator who was able to read and understand both Burmese and English. The translations accompanied the letters on their way to Madras and from there to London, where they were filed in the East India Company records, with the original letter remaining in the hands of King George II. Henry Yule acknowledged the Golden Letter's existence in his account of Arthur Phayre's mission to the court of Ava in 1855. At that time, nobody knew where the original letter was.[198]

In Madras, translations of the four letters were copied into one of the large leather-bound volumes that contained the English versions of the country correspondence, letters sent and received from and sent by the Government of Fort St George to the several native powers[199]. The country correspondence of the years 1748 to 1757 was printed by the Government Press in Madras between 1908 and 1913. But the colonial historians of Burma did not take any

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[197] The letters were published by Khin Khin Sein in her 1963 annotated edition of Alaungmintaya's edicts (*Alaungmintaya Ameindaw-mya,* Rangoon: Burma Historical Commission), based on a palm leaf manuscript kept at the India Office Records and a manuscript that had belonged to a Burmese minister, U Lat, the *Wetmasut myoza*. Twenty years later, the late Dr Than Tun, a Burmese historian, re-published the text of the four letters in the third volume of *The Royal Orders of Burma* (Kyoto 1985). His edition contains English summaries, various comments and an introduction, but no editorial notes (*Royal Orders of Burma*, vol. 3, 27-29 ; 156-7). Than Tun's summaries are of a limited usefulness to historians who have not mastered Burmese. As the summaries give only approximate translations, many important details are skipped and may suggest erroneous ideas. D.G.E. Hall notes that Henry Burney, the British resident at Ava (1830-37), had found a copy of the Golden letter in a collection of Alaungmintaya's orders. Hall, *Tragedy*, 324.

[198] "In 1757 Alompra addressed a letter to the King of England written on gold adorned with rubies, which he delivered to a Mr Dyer and others who visited him in Rangoon. It is not known what became of this letter." Henry Yule, *A Narrative of the Mission to the Court of Ava in 1855,* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1968), 217. Note the wrong date, 1757 instead of 1756.

[199] CC, 1753, 1.

notice of these precious volumes that also contain the contemporary correspondence with the Pegu court.

Arthur Phayre published the first *History of Burma* in English in 1883. Though he had a more balanced appreciation of Alaungmintaya's reign and his relations with the English than later colonial historians[200], he did not mention the Golden Letter. G. E. Harvey's *History of Burma* (1925), written from a British imperialist's point of view, does not mention it either. Though both men knew of its existence, they did not consider the letter sent to George II as an important historical document. This British disregard can be traced back to Alexander Dalrymple's *Oriental Repertory,* which contains several first-hand accounts of the involvement of the East India Company in Burma during the middle of the eighteenth century. While the *Oriental Repertory* contains a translation of the treaty of 1757, it contains nothing on the king's most prominent letter. The background of the publication of the *Oriental Repertory* in 1791 was probably linked to a renewed interest in Burma thirty years after the Negrais disaster. When the Company wanted to again contact the court of Burma in the last decade of the eighteenth century, its self-confident leaders wanted to conduct a critical review of what had happened earlier. They requested Alexander Dalrymple to compile relevant source materials. Dalrymple had become secretary of the Madras Council in 1753 and he personally knew several of the decision-makers and administrators on the British side. Even though the *Repertory* is extremely useful as a compendium of primary sources and later historians have made extensive use of it, no one has hitherto pointed out that itis not a comprehensive, but rather a selective, collection of sources that throws little light on weak decisions and failures on the side of the English.

Historiography at its worst: D.G.E. Hall and the legacy of colonial interpretations

The Golden Letter became known to a larger public when D.G.E. Hall published "The Tragedy of Negrais", his study of the mid-eighteenth century period of the English

[200] Phayre, a British administrator who could speak Burmese, gives a fair account of Alaungmintaya's reign and deals not uncritically with eighteenth century British colonial politics. Arthur P. Phayre, *History of Burma* (London: Trübner, 1883), 161.

connection with Burma.[201] The title of Hall's article is ambiguous. From a historical point of view, the "tragedy" of Negrais was the failure of the English to transform the settlement into a profitable venture due to English misapprehensions on the advantages of the location. During five years, the project had no legal recognition and when the Company finally did obtain an official permission formulated on its own terms, it had practically decided to drop out of the contract. Rather than bringing the facts to a point, Hall sentimentalizes the narrative by shifting his reader's attention to a brutal incident that took place in October 1759[202] two and half years after the Court of Directors of the East India Company had decided to close down the Negrais settlement. True, Hall's writing echoes the mortal blow of the incident. But by his dramatisation, he entrenched in Burmese historiography a representation of a marginal episode that overshadowed much more significant aspects to the story. He perversely transformed an ugly story of the British into a chapter in which, at the end, moral outrage over Burmese brutality totally overshadows the failed economic and political decisions taken by the East India Company. In the nascent imperial discourse and more widely in Western colonial writing on Southeast Asia, the so-called "Negrais massacre" became fatally one of the examples to be cited when historical precedents needed to be sought fro the brutal nature of Burmese kingship.

Hall also quoted the letter to George II in his *Europe and Burma* (1945) and Dorothy Woodman included the text in her book *The Making of Burma* (1962).[203] But the publication of the letter did not pave the way for a balanced account of Anglo-British relations or for a better appreciation of Alaungmintaya's diplomacy. In Hall's writing, it was rather the opposite. Alaungmintaya's reign was insidiously interpreted in the same unfavorable light as those of the later Konbaung kings. Reading *The Tragedy of Negrais* between the lines, his

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[201] Hall did not quote the text from the 1913 printed volume of the Country Correspondence, but from the IOR Home Miscellaneous 95 volume where the text is entitled "Copy Translation of a Letter from the King of the Burmars to The King of Great Britain". The turn of phrase quoted here is found in the introduction to Hall, *Tragedy.* The article appeared for the first time in 1931 in the *Journal of the Burma Research Society* published in Rangoon and was reprinted in 1968 as an appendix to the new edition of his *Early English Intercourse with Burma 1587-1743.*

[202] "Chapter VI - The Massacre".

[203] D.G.E. Hall, *Europe and Burma A Study of European Relations with Burma to the Annexation of Thibaw's kingdom 1886,* (London: Cumberlege, 1945) 66-7. Woodman (*Making of Burma,* 34-5, 38) does not make any particular comment on the letter's text as such, but provides some further information on the Burmese version due to archival research done by the Burmese historian U Tet Htoot in 1957.

low opinion of King Alaungmintaya is obvious in several instances. His later publications were less scrupulous, for example, in his book *Burma* (1950), he wrote with regard to Lester's audience:

> In accordance with his instructions, Lester asked for a treaty. To this the king rejoined that the order on a gold plate which he had sent to the king of England was sufficient guarantee. After some further argument he said in an offhand manner that if Lester insisted on a treaty he might have one.[204]

A careful reading of the Lester diary shows that the envoy insisted on the difference between a letter and a treaty in British eyes. Nowhere does Lester suggest that the king talked to him in an "offhand manner". It is clear from the context that the king's decision to reach a compromise had been taken ahead of Lester's audience.

While G.E. Harvey wrote in his *Outline of Burmese History* (1929) that Alaungmintaya "was glad when in 1757 the English sent Ensign Lester to sign the agreement whereby they on their part gave him every year a cannon..."[205], Hall described Alaungmintaya as extremely reluctant to negotiate with the Company in his *History of Southeast Asia* (1955), long considered a standard history of the region. On the letter to George II, he writes:

> At Rangoon Ensign John Dyer and Dr. William Anderson met him and concluded an agreement whereby in return for military stores, he recognized the Negrais settlement and gave permission for a factory to be established at Bassein. The terms were recorded in a royal letter on gold-leaf, directed to the King of England. It was beneath Alaungpaya's dignity to deal with a Governor of Madras representing a mere trading company.

In fact, Dyer and Anderson did not conclude any agreement. They merely presented once more to the king the Baker treaty. The letter for George II which they were given was not an "agreement", but was a statement of the grant of Pathein. It did not mention Negrais in the same context and had nothing to say on "military stores" at all. The prejudiced assertion in the last sentence regarding Alaungmintaya's supposed arrogance in dealing with the East India Company in Madras is unproven and beside the point. D.G.E. Hall's interpretation of early Anglo-Burmese relations was retrospectively biased by the knowledge of later experiences of the British with the Konbaung kings, notably Alaungmintaya's son, Bodawphaya (1781-1819). True, Alaungmintaya was overconfident and had a tendency to brag about his military successes during audiences, but there is no instance in the sources

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[204] Daniel G.E. Hall, *A History of South East Asia* (London: Macmillan, 1955), 84.
[205] Geoffrey E. Harvey, *History of Burma,* (London: Frank Cass, 1967), 128.

where he personally displayed any haughtiness towards the East India Company envoys. Dorothy Woodman, a historian writing in the early sixties, gave exactly the opposite description of Hall when she took careful notice of Alaungmintaya's "willingness to negotiate".[206]

While the final signature of the English treaty in 1757 demonstrated the king's readiness to compromise, Hall characterized this as being, in the king's eyes, an "unparalleled ...act of condescension" and he concluded: "...the haphazard manner of its ratification was undoubtedly designed by Alaungpaya to show his utter contempt of treaties."[207]

Hall is not a historian who distorts the facts, but his pervasively negative bias towards Alaungmintaya leaves his readers with an ambiguous and incoherent picture of the king. It is correct that the king was annoyed by the lack of truthfulness of several of the British traders in 1755. But he was apparently ready to trust Brooke with the negotiations and to believe what Baker promised him despite the events in Rangoon and Syriam. Hall singles out what he called "the affair of the Arcot", i.e. the forced conscription of three British ships during the last unsuccessful attack of the Mon against Syriam in December 1755, to conclude:

> It made an uneradicable impression upon the mind of Alaungpaya, breeding in him a secret mistrust of the English.[208]

This was probably true at a later moment, but it is difficult to account for such a categorical judgment at a time when the king was still preparing his diplomatic overture of May 1756. Actually we can find no trace of the king's immediate reaction to what happened in December 1755. The negotiations with Brooke regarding the grant of a settlement in Pathein were not interrupted after the return of Baker in October. In the eyes of the king matter was in a way finalized by the dispatch of the set of four letters that we know.

In no way does Hall explain why he thinks that Alaungmintaya would have had "an utter contempt of treaties" and why he would have considered the signature of the treaty as "an act of condescension". The chronological order of events rather suggests a different story:

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[206] Hall, *History of Southeast Asia*, 347; Woodman, *Making of Burma*, 38.
[207] Hall, *Tragedy*, 330-1.
[208] Hall, *Tragedy*, 319. He repeats the expression *ibidem*, 344, when he summarizes the causes of the Negrais killings.

Alaungmintaya signed the treaty in 1757, despite the considerable trouble that he had incurred with Howe at Pathein in 1756, and despite the fact that his letters sent to George II and the Company remained unacknowledged and unanswered for over a year.

A last example of Hall's questionable interpretations may be given as it concerns the causes of the violence at Negrais in October 1759. Hall writes that "an Armenian in the royal service whispered to the king a rumor that the Chief of Negrais had helped the Mon rebels".[209] As we have seen, this was not a "rumor", as the help given to the Mons by Lt Hope was an established fact confirmed by witnesses and later on strongly criticized by the East India Company's own directors.

Superficially Burma's historians distanced themselves from the colonial interpretations of Burmese history by rejecting Western perspectives. But how much Burma's post-colonial scholarship itself was indebted, if not enslaved, to such colonial interpretations of the Konbaung kings can be illustrated by many examples. In Dr Thaung's 1959 article on "Burmese Kingship during the Reign of Mindon,"[210] the author, instead of giving an interpretation of the style of the original letter, actually interprets the style of the old-fashioned English translation as if it were a word by word rendering of the original. He highlights the "hyperbolism" and "euphemism" of its style, concluding that it points to an "ostentatious display of power" and to the "absolute nature of the Burmese monarchy".[211] The fact that a Burmese author made wholly derisive comments on the excellent, but antiquated turns of phrases of the translation of a letter ordered by one of the greatest kings of the country and written by one of the century's greatest Burmese writers shows the extent to which the Golden Letter has been read out of context.

In *The Stricken Peacock-Anglo-Burmese Relations 1752-1948*, Maung Htin Aung, a resolutely nationalist Burmese author, criticized the derision of others, but Maung switched to a naively apologetic interpretation when he writes:

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[209] Hall, *History of Southeast Asia,* 349. In the *Tragedy of Negrais*, Hall confines himself to state that "Gregory poured into [the king's] ears the greatly exaggerated story of Hope furnishing arms …etc." (Hall, *Tragedy,* 344), slightly obfuscating the factual truth of the story.

[210] Dr. Thaung, "Burmese Kingship during the Reign of Mindon," *Journal of the Burma Research Society* 42, no. 2 (1959): 171-185.

[211] Thaung, *Burmese Kingship,* 172-3.

> … this letter, because of its quaint language has caused amusement to modern scholars, including Burmese scholars. But it was in many ways a pathetic letter in which Alaungphaya was trying to find a place for Burma in the sun of European diplomacy.[212]

In his *History of Burma,* published two years later, he definitely missed the essential importance of the letter when he writes, "[Alaungmintaya.] also delivered to the English representatives a letter on gold leaf addressed to the king of England conveying his felicitations on the occasion of the first official contact between the King of Burma and the king of England."[213] As we have seen, the letter to George II was neither pathetic nor did it convey felicitations. The most surprising was that instead of turning to the original text, Burmese historians still quoted the old translation as if it were somehow an authoritative representation of Alaungmintaya's mind and particular style.

While colonial historians have privileged Western involvement and Western sources in their writing of Burmese history, Victor Lieberman's *Burmese Administrative Cycles - Anarchy and Conquest c. 1580-1760* (1984) marks an entire reversal with its wide use of Burmese sources. But his desire to demonstrate the cyclical nature of Burmese history shrinks the Anglo-French involvement in Burmese affairs to a few sentences that marginalize the Alaungmintaya's diplomacy in the context of Burmese foreign relations.[214]

While new approaches to Burmese history have indeed been broached, stunningly, D.G.E. Hall's colonial interpretations are still quoted and uncritically paraphrased as valid statements on Burmese history. The latest author who quotes the full text of the letter to

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[212] Maung Htin Aung,*The Stricken Peacock Anglo-Burmese Relations, 1752-1948* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1965), 16-7.

[213] Maung Htin Aung, *A History of Burma* (NY/London: Columbia University Press, 1967), 164-5.

[214] Lieberman writes: "Alaunghpaya attempted to play off the Europeans against one another by securing arms from the English East India Company. Yet although the English returned his diplomatic mission, they declined to supply a substantial number of cannon," Victor Lieberman, *Burmese Administrative Cycles* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 244. Lieberman does not mention the Golden Letter. In his "Political Consolidation in Burma under the Early Konbaung Dynasty 1752- c. 1820," he perfected his theory by integrating linear trends of innovation into the cyclical conception of early Konbaung history. In this context, King Alaungmintaya appears as the member of a clique sharing common endeavors. Individual qualities or biographical information do not play a distinctive role in Lieberman's interpretation of Burmese history. Victor Lieberman, "Political Consolidation in Burma under the Early Konbaung Dynasty 1752- c. 1820." *Journal of Asian History* 30, no.2 (1996), 152-168. Unlike Charney, Lieberman did not pay attention to the impact of Europeans on the development of Burma (see Charney's, *Powerful Learning,* 2006, chapter seven "European Learning").

George II is Thant Myint Oo in his *The River of Lost Footsteps – A Personal History of Burma.* Following Hall's analysis of Alaungmintaya's reign, Thant Myint Oo thinks, like Hall, that "the idea that the English could not be trusted was planted early in the hearts of the new dynasty and in the imagination of early Burmese patriots."[215] Hall's influence is also perceptible in Michael W. Charney's recent study of the cooperation between the educated elite and the political leadership in Konbaung-era Burma. Here Charney also deals with the impact of the Europeans: on the period considered in this essay, he writes,

> "Alaung-hpaya, either fearful of a British presence at Negrais or genuinely believing that the latter had supported Mon rebels as well, massacred the British residents of the settlement in the late 1750s."[216]

The two gross errors contained in this sentence look like over-interpretations of Hall's tendentious writing. As we have seen, Alaungmintaya did not plan to massacre the people in Negrais, he wanted to put an end to the settlement. He also did not need to "genuinely believe" that the chief of Negrais had helped the Mon, he had simply learned about the facts that were not even contested by British witnesses.

With the exception of Lieberman's work, the existing historiography dealing with Alaungmintaya's reign is a patchwork of uncritical summaries, abstracts of the traditional chronicles and clichés. It is unhelpful when we want to take a freshly nuanced approach of the king's policies. As the disregard of the Golden letter shows, Alaungmintaya's diplomatic initiatives have not raised any serious interest on behalf of historians. One could imagine though that a Burmese nationalist historian would have picked up the golden opportunity to praise the great king as someone who did not merely glorify himself by waging wars. But in the latest Burmese language biography of Alaungmintaya, Tin Htwe's *Alaungmintaya U Aung Zeyya, Founder of the Third Myanma Kingdom,* published in 1992, the Golden Letter is not even hinted at. In an appendix entitled "Alaungmintaya's orders" and set out of the context of the book's main text, the author reproduced the letters sent in May 1756 to Howe, Pigot and the Directors, but omitted the letter to George II. As, on the other hand, the

[215] Thant Myint-U, *The River of Lost Footsteps* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), 95, 162.
[216] Charney, Powerful Learning, 150.

English are vaguely referred to as "white foreigners" in the main text, readers are left with an ambiguous and unsatisfactory idea of early Anglo-Burmese relations.[217]

While this monograph is an attempt to demonstrate the historical relevance of Alaungmintaya's letter to King George II by setting it inside the context of Burmese history and Anglo-Burmese relations, we have earlier stated that its historical interest is not limited to the political circumstances. In the next part we will take a look at material and stylistic aspects of the letter that contribute predictably to our interpretation of the letter as an extraordinary piece of writing.

The Golden Letter: Material, Production, Art and Style

The significance of the Golden Letter is not limited to the written message put in its political and diplomatic context, but is also an artifact of material culture worthy to be studied in its own right. Both of these aspects are linked and the material analysis provides strong supporting evidence for the weight that the king gave to his diplomatic overtures. Golden Letters must have been exceedingly rare, but we would be going too far to say that this one was the only letter ever written on a gold plaque in the history of Burmese diplomacy. Nonetheless the Golden Letter seems to be the only one of its kind that has survived.

Conveying messages of the highest esteem, golden letters were only sent to fellow kings. As there were few direct exchanges with other sovereign rulers that the king of Burma would have looked upon as equal or, say, worthy of such treatment, it is unlikely that the Burmese chancellery ever produced such pieces in a standard way. A likely candidate to receive such a letter would have been the emperor of China.[218]

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[217] Tin Htwe, *Alaungmintaya U Aung Zeyya Tatiya Myanma Naingngan ko tihtaung khè thu (Alaungmintaya U Aung Zeyya, Founder of the Third Myanma Kingdom)*, (Yangon : Ministry for Information, 1992), 76-77; 148-9. In the introduction, the author writes that he wants to write a book on Alaungmintaya for our time.

[218] A somewhat comparable item is the so-called "Silver Letter" now in the Gugong National Museum in Taipei (Taiwan, Republic of China). But it is not an original letter issued by the Burmese chancellery, but a letter ascribed to a Chinese trader and owner of a silver mine. He created a fake a royal letter addressed to the mother of the Chinese emperor for a mission that he himself sent to China, probably in the year 1750. This was at a time when the political situation in Central Burma was shaky due to the war with the Mon. The mission never reached the Chinese capital.

In this section we will look at the chancellery that was responsible for the drafting and the production of royal correspondence. Drawing mainly on information from the royal orders of Alaungmintaya himself, we can form a rough idea of the secretarial environment in which the Golden Letter was prepared and produced. The following section will give a material description of the Golden Letter that mirrors the textual comments and the stylistic analysis of the preceding section. Focusing on the material substance, gold, the decoration of rubies, and the art work as well as the elaborate packaging of the letter for transport, we will highlight the relevance of form and symbol to the letter. In the last section, we pay attention to the "survival" and the reclusive existence of the Golden Letter in George II's Hanoverian library.

The Chancellery and the Production of a Royal Letter

The Golden Letter was produced by the king's chancellery, a department of the royal administration about which we have relatively little direct information. Like at any other court, the department entrusted with the formulation and the writing of royal orders and letters was a key office. Royal scribes and secretaries were officials who had to have particular qualifications as they were responsible for drafting edicts, orders and letters and presenting them for comment and approval to their superiors.[219] Heads of the chancellery had to be trustworthy men as they would deal with confidential and secret matters. Secretaries were likely to be among the most highly-educated staff, with training in diction and literary style. They also had to master sufficient knowledge on matters of etiquette and protocol.

In the case of Alaungmintaya's reign, the working of the chancellery calls for some particular attention as it was part of an administration that the new king had to rebuild from scratch during his reign. At the beginning of his political career, a headman like Alaungmintaya himself would have had only a limited knowledge of the inherited bureaucratic practices of diplomatic and political management. Certainly, standards and procedures were not to be re-invented by the new king. Alaungmintaya recruited ministers

[219] In an order provisionally dated to 4 November 1755, we read that Bayasena, the officer in charge of spell-proofing (see below), had a quarrel with a minister whom he scolded because he had not written an order properly, *Royal Orders of Burma,* vol. 3.

from the administration of the former Burmese king and thus inherited from the Nyaung-yan dynasty the professional and practical knowledge that he needed to follow tradition. He did not just have to exert power efficiently, but had to transform himself recognizably into a king. This practical knowledge comprised for example the history of his royal predecessors, instructions regarding the building of a palace, and ceremonial court matters.[220]

At the executive level, the chancellery needed well educated and versatile people who were familiar with language for official matters, particularly the honorific expressions used for royalty, as well as with the intricacies of orthography. When moral and political guidance was sought, the scribes[221] who drafted letters, edicts, proclamations, and appointment orders sought precedents in religious literature, especially the Buddhist *jatakas* containing role models of ancient rulers whom the kings themselves were keen to refer to. It is thus not surprising that men of literary reputation had a hand in the formulation of the more relevant diplomatic correspondence, with their names expressly mentioned at the end of certain letters. As a corollary, we should also look at these diplomatic documents not only as products of daily political activity but also as gems of literary craftsmanship.

Alaungmintaya faced one challenge which his successors had to worry much less about: his royal legitimacy. He had to argue convincingly that the former dynasty based in Ava had lost its karmic mandate and that the Mon king of Pegu was a rebel whose rule was an accident of history, rather than the result of meritorious destiny. Besides winning battles, Alaungmintaya had to invest in "public relations". He needed to persuade his compatriots, first in the north and then even more so in the south, that he truly was predestined to be a great king. To win the minds of the people, he had to hire men who had the necessary talent

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[220] See the orders of 3 and 4 November 1755 and a provisionally dated order of 19 January 1757, *ibidem*. The best-known example of a work compiled with this intention is the great minister Siri-Uzana's *Lokabyuha Kyan (Treatise on Worldly Strategems*), edited by U Pho Lat (Yangon: Ministry of Culture, 2001).

[221] We must bear in mind that there is more than a hierarchical difference in this context between a writer as being the author of a text, or a secretary, and the writer being the one who simply copied a text in due form following a procedure and particular instructions, scribe). At the court, *saye*, "secretaries or scribes" were of sub-ministerial rank. As for the numerous and ubiquitous clerks or copyists, they were a profession of their own as they were in constant need to write and copy not only royal orders and letters, but also religious texts, whose reproductions were looked upon as works of merit. The term *ameindaw-ye* seems to apply to the second category. See Yi Yi, "Thrones of Burmese kings," *Journal of the Burma Research Society* 43, no. 2 (1960): 100.

in rhetoric to formulate messages, men who were able to exploit the hope for a better life as much as the local beliefs of the people to turn them to the political advantage of their royal master. Letwè Nawratha (U Nè), who has already been mentioned as the author of the Golden Letter and as one of the king's biographers, was one such gifted writer. During the siege of Syriam, a flyer was circulated in the name of the god Sakka[222], prophesying that the time had come for Alaungmintaya to rule. At the same time, a letter issued in the name of the king's sons was sent to the Mon officers claiming Alaungmintaya's superiority and telling them to throw down their arms.

Textual Support

The bulk of Burmese literature is of a religious nature. A great part of it consists of Buddhist scriptures written in the Pali language or in mixed Pali-Burmese (*nissaya*). Both religious and non-religious —poetic, administrative, medical, astrological—texts were commonly written either on palm leaves or on folded paper, called *parabaik*.[223] Royal donations to religious institutions had a legal character and were inscribed on stone so as to outlast the donors. Gold, silver or ivory leaves were noble materials used by royalty mostly, if not exclusively, for religious purposes[224].

Palm leaves have been used all over South and Southeast Asia as a medium for writing texts. The most common type of palm leaves used were the leaves of *corypha umbraculifera*, the talipot palm tree. The natural enemies of such materials were fire, humidity and insects. But if they were well stored and correctly preserved, palm leaves could last for one, two or even more centuries[225]. After the leaves had been cut to a convenient size of elongated rectangular shape, they were washed in clear water, dried in the sun and flattened by compacting them in bundles. Before they could be incised, the leaves were polished. The manuscripts became fairly readable only when the incisions were darkened with charcoal powder. The common size of such manuscript leaves varies from one Asian country to another. Though there are different sizes one comes across in Burma, depending on certain

[222] Sakka is the Buddhist version of Indra, the king of the gods in Hindu mythology.
[223] These are folding books made with paper produced with the bark of the mulberry tree.
[224] We are only giving a few introductory statements on a complex subject. Texts were also incised on statues, and dedicatory formulas were woven into the ribbons used to fasten the palm leaf bundles.
[225] Older dated manuscripts have come down to us, but they are relatively few in number.

types of texts, the majority of manuscripts found in collections today consist of leaves of the tallest type, measuring between 45 and 50 cm. One or two holes were made in the middle and single leaves could thus be assembled into bundles and held together with tiny bamboo sticks or strings. Gold or vermillion coloring on the outside of these bundles, were used to embellish and highlight certain types of manuscripts, indicating for example the background of the person who ordered the writing or copying of the text. Gold was once more the unfailing mark of royalty.

But the royal chancellery generally did *not* use this type of common flattened palm leaf for orders that required validation from royal authority. Royal orders (issued on a daily basis, included replies to petitions) were written in a single line on very long strips of leaves of the toddy palm tree *(borassus flabellifer)*. Unless the straight and evenly cut leaves of the common type mentioned above, these special leaves, called *sagyun* in Burmese, were shaped pointedly on either one or two sides and rolled up. Bayasena, an officer in charge of managing daily affairs at Alaungmintaya's chancellery[226], was told on 14 April 1757 to discontinue the use of these pointed leaves for ordinary correspondence. The king worried about forgeries produced in his name.

Sealing orders was another important aspect to letter production. An order issued on 29 October of the same year told Bayasena to make first a copy of the order in a paper book (*parabaik*) and then have it checked by another officer before having it sealed.[227] The second officer had to provide a written confirmation of his verification. In the previously quoted order, the king also ordered that the royal seal had to be locked up every evening. But it seems that confusion still prevailed at the palace about how and by whom royal *sagyun* orders were to be issued. Two months later, the king limited the number of *sagyun* scribes to a total of eight expressly appointed officers who were told to write orders not at home, but at the palace from where they should then be dispatched.[228] Such orders, dating mostly from

[226] The royal orders of late 1757 show that Bayasena was obviously one of Alaungmintaya's most trusted officers and his right-hand man for executing his decisions. In an order of 7 February 1758 appointing him as officer of the toll stations (*kinwun*), he is lavishly praised. An order of 16 May of the same year granted him the use of certain insignia.

[227] An officer of the seal is occasionally mentioned at the end of certain royal orders, see for example the first of several orders dated of 29 October 1757. *Royal Orders of Burma,* vol. 3.

[228] *Royal Orders of Burma,* vol. 3, 28 and 29 December 1757. The first order was followed by the threat

1757, provide a glance at how, after the fall of Pegu, Alaungmintaya started to establish secretarial services to rule the country. For our study of the Golden Letter, they offer a view of several relevant aspects of the issuing of royal letters: the provision of writing materials, the choice and the appointment of writers, the concern for style and execution, or in a word, the proper craftsmanship that had to undergo a due process of control and registration.

Individual rolled-up *sagyun* could be carried without any risk of damage and transferred to the addressees in bamboo containers. They were further stamped with a seal to identify them as royal messages. The tradition of rolling up royal orders shows how the Golden Letter was forwarded in its ivory cask. It was a convenient way of safely transporting such a big leaf of pure gold - as long as one would roll and unroll it carefully.[229]

Unlike the overall majority of buildings inside the palace compound that were built of wood, the buildings that were used for secretarial work and archival preservation were built of bricks, because they were considered fire-proof.[230] Documents were kept in bundles tightly pressed between wooden panels, could be wrapped in cloth, and were preserved in wooden chests.

Style and Etiquette

We have already paid attention to the four letters sent at the same time to King George II, to the directors of the East India Company, to Governor George Pigot of Fort St George at Madras and to John Howe, the chief of Negrais in the context of our narrative of Alaungmintaya's relations with the British traders. The existence of four letters with very similar content and conveying the same political message, but sent to four addressees of various hierarchical status, offers the unique chance to analyze the style and etiquette observed by the Burmese chancellery.[231] We have seen that Alaungmintaya was thoughtful

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of harsh punishment for offenders --culprits should have their hand cut.

[229] While it was originally meant to be tightly rolled and stored in a cylindrical ivory case, the gold plate is now kept unrolled in a fitting card-box.

[230] The partially reconstructed palace compound in Shwebo offers a rough idea of the outer appearance of such brick buildings, as the one situated near the entry of the enclosure. See the photo in the appendix.

[231] In an appendix to his doctoral dissertation, D.G.E. Hall writes, "In the localities custom, and at the Court precedent and, above all, etiquette had enormous binding power. Custom and etiquette in Burma played the same part as public opinion in the West," (*The Dalhousie-Phayre Correspondence*

in his approach and focused pointedly on each addressee's field of authority and command. The letters' form and style were governed by an overriding principle of hierarchy. This was immediately reflected in differences in writing materials. While the letter to George II was written on a plaque of gold, the three other letters were written on red paper in an "illuminated writing".[232] The wrapping of the letters was also considerably different: on the one hand, there was a marked dissimilarity between the letter to George II and the three others. On the other hand, we find that the letter for George II and the one for the directors of the East India Company do have some common features. The letters for Pigot and Howe make fewer references to hierarchy. The Golden Letter has the most elaborate *intitulatio*. The various populations and the descent from the solar race are not indicated in the three other series of titles. Yet the Golden Letter does not contain the title "Lord of Life," one of the most common titles of the Burmese kings, but expressing a claim that might have been considered as offensive to another king[233]. The letter for Howe bears the equally common, but more emphatic and somewhat tautological expression "Lord, Lord of Life". A clear differentiation is found in the turns of phrases addressing the four addressees. In the Golden Letter, King George II is called "royal friend" (*akyidaw*) whom the king "kindly informs" (*khyi kyi zwa kya yauk*), while the directors are simply "told" (*kya ap*). On the other hand, the letters to Pigot and Howe have at the syntactically identical place the common expression *ameindaw,* "royal order" that clearly signified the addressee's inferior status.

It is interesting to look at the way Alaungmintaya's letter diplomatically turned around the delicate subject of the Negrais settlement. Let us recall that the court of Pegu had found the settlement at Negrais outrageous and it had said more or less so, though it had not been willing to oust the British altogether. The settlement was not viewed with much sympathy by the Burmese either. While writing to George II, Alaungmintaya therefore had to subtly

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1852-56, edited with introduction and notes by D.G. E. Hall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1932), 415.

[232] The manuscript version of the letter to Howe was followed by a brief description that provides information on the measurements, the writing and the packaging of the four letters. Than Tun does not reproduce this description, but gives its translation. The Burmese text can be found in *Alaungmintaya Ameindaw-mya,* edited by Khin Khin Sein (Yangon: Myanmar Historical Commission, 1964), 54. In the *Konbaungzet* the letter to George II is also followed by some descriptive notes relating to the Golden Letter.

[233] The expression "lord of life" qualifies the king as supreme judge over his subjects.

overlook the fact that the British had already settled illegally at Negrais *before* they had obtained permission to settle anywhere else. In the Golden Letter, the king hints at the fact that he learned about the settlement only after it had been established, but the letter euphemistically refers to the arrival of Brooke[234] as having the purpose of "respectfully inquiring" about a grant for a trade settlement in Pathein. In the three other letters, the fact that Brooke had arrived in Negrais and was living there is more prosaically asserted. With regard to the English, the king's letters are unsurprisingly using a standard Burmese expression that denotes a top-down relationship between the king and the English supplicants.[235]

There are some minor differences between the original Golden Letter and the edited version that we refer to in the footnotes of the transliterated text. Other minor differences between the four letters may be due to the fact that various scribes handled the writing of the letters and used commonly alternating turns of phrases that were stylistically of little or no particular significance. As we have noted above, some of the differences in formulation can also be attributed to the constraints of the physical length of the plaque. Though the letters to the Company, to Howe and to Pigot do not bear an identical text, we are told that all three were written in exactly twenty-five lines. It is remarkable that an English translation was joined to the letters. Perhaps the chancellery did not trust translators that the English would be able to hire in India. Perhaps the English lacked translators and were glad to obtain the letters with an accompanying translation.[236] The translations as copied in the 1757 Country Correspondence volume of Fort St George are remarkably accurate. Despite their dated diction, they compare favorably and prove more useful than Than Tun's summaries.

An interesting stylistic comparison can be made of a sentence that praises the advantage of the friendship between kings. In the four letters it works as a rhetorical device that concludes in a friendly and conciliatory tone the king's grant of land at Pathein and makes the transition towards a concluding expression of wishes for future good relations. Readers

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[234] The Burmese court may not have known about the existence of the late David Hunter who had been the first chief of Negrais.

[235] The expression is *rhi khui: sam tō ū: taṅ*, pron. *shikho thandaw u tin*.

[236] In one earlier instance the Company had complained to the king of Pegu for not having his letters written in a South Indian language to make them translatable in Madras.

familiar with Burmese will observe the gradation in the use of the highlighted key expression that refers to the friendship between kings.

In the letter to Howe, the sentence reads: (1) Maṅ: ekarāj tui. way praṅ thoṅ khyaṅ: **mahāmit** rhi kra mha 2 ū: chandā rhi rā praṅ. cum kra mrè phrac saṅ.[237] In the letter to Pigot, we read: (2) Maṅ: ekarāj tui. way praṅ thoṅ khyaṅ: **rāja mahāmit** phrac mha 2 ū: chandā rhi rā praṅ. cum kra kun saṅ. In the letter to the directors, it reads: (3) Maṅ: ekarāj tui. way praṅ thoṅ khyaṅ: **maṅ: rāja mahāmit** rhi mha 2 ū: sā: chandā rhi rā praṅ. cum kra saṅ phrac saṅ. This is the formulation of the letter to George II as found in the collection of the king's edicts: (4) Praṅ thoṅ khyaṅ: maṅ: tui.way mrat so **achwe khaṅ mwan:** koṅ: tui. kui mhī kra ra saṅ *phrac mha alui rhi rā 2 ū: sā:* praṅ. cum kra maṅ phrac saṅ. Finally, the formulation of the Golden Letter: (5) Praṅ thoṅ khyaṅ: maṅ: tui.way mrat so **achwe khaṅ mwan:** koṅ: tui. kui mhī kra ra saṅ *phrac mhya ūsabha luiw rhi rā* praṅ. cum saṅ phrac saṅ.

In the first sentence, the reference to friendship between kings is expressed with a single word, *mahāmit* "great friend" or "ally."It is amplified in the two other letters with the terms "*maṅ*:" and "*rāja*" which both mean "king", so that there is no change in the sense, but merely an increase in pomposity. The final parts of the five sentences show minor formulaic variations which may reflect the usage of different writers. In the Golden Letter we find a different expression to characterize the friendship between the kings, one that gives the concept a distinctive feeling of proximity and familiarity. No doubt that the choice of the term was due to the poetic inspiration of Letwè Nawratha as he tried to enliven this standard phrase with a special note. What we see as well is how hierarchy and etiquette were encoded in the language using differences in words. The core meaning of the five terms is the same, but the process of enlargement and modulation by synonymous replacements (*achwe khaṅ mwan*) or tautological (*rāja*) and emphatic (*mahā*) additions created a repertoire of expressions to make symbolic distinctions.

[237] "When close friendship prevails between kings of different countries, they can be helpful to the needs of each other…"

Royal Letters on Gold Leaves

Metal plates or leaves were used for many centuries in Asia to inscribe important or particularly significant texts such as votive inscriptions, religious texts, donations, letters of credit, and royal correspondence. The most common ones were plates of copper or various alloys. In Burma, gold was reserved for royalty and for religious purposes, for example the adornment of objects of veneration such as Buddha statues, *zedi* and Pali formulas that were put into reliquaries. Gold was not used as money and its export was discouraged, if not strictly forbidden. Goldsmith craftsmanship thus flourished in the realm of royalty. The most common usage of gold at court was the conferring of names and titles that were engraved on rectangular leaves or the inscription of royal horoscope.[238]

The use of a leaf of gold as medium for a royal letter sent to another king is particularly well documented for Siamese monarchs. Descriptions are variously found in Jesuit accounts of the seventeenth century.[239] Phra Narai (1656-88) sent several letters written on gold leaves to Louis XIV of France. M. Jacq-Hergoualc'h also mentions King Rama IV's golden letter of 1861 sent to Napoléon III.[240] The *Glass Palace Chronicle* records a golden letter of the court of Ayutthaya, King Borommakot's letter to King Mahadhammarajadhipati of 1746.[241]

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[238] Yi Yi (*Thrones,* 92) mentions golden name plates for royal children. The Shan *sawbwa* were given gold plates with their respective titles by the Burmese kings. An order of King Bodawphaya (7 August 1797) mentions the golden name plate of a white elephant. Similar usages are found in the other Buddhist countries of continental Southeast Asia. A royal horoscope is mentioned by Naengnoi Suksri, *The Grand Palace* (Bangkok: River Books, 1998), 142. J. C. Brodbeck mentions the inscription of the name of the Thai crown prince on a gold tablet (Jean Claude Brodbeck, "L'intronisation du prince héritier de Thaïlande, 28 décembre 1972;" *Bulletin de la Société des Etudes indochinoises* 4 (1973) : 4. The ceremonial writing of the horoscope and the royal titles in Siam are described by Herbert G. Quaritch Wales, *Siamese State Ceremonies Their History and Function with Supplementary Notes* (London: Curzon Press, 1992), 102. An undated Cambodian text states that the titles of the king written on a gold leaf were part of the regalia. David P. Chandler, "The Duties of the Corps of Royal Scribes : an Undated Khmer Manuscript from the Colonial Era," *Journal of the Siam Society* 63, no. 2 (1979): 343.

[239] "Toutes les fois que le roi de Siam écrit à un autre roi, il le fait sur une feuille de ce métal, aussi mince qu'une feuille de papier. L'on y marque les lettres par compression, avec un poinçoin émoussé, comme ceux que nous écrivons sur nos tablettes," Simon de la Loubère quoted by Michel Jacq-Hergoualc'h, *Etude historique et critique du livre de Simon de la Loubère 'Du royaume de Siam', Paris 1691* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1987), 276. Another missionary source cited by Jacq-Hergoualc'h gives a description of the letters sent to Louis XIV and the Pope : "Elles sont gravées sur une lame d'or d'un pied et demi de long et de huit pouces de large, si bien battue qu'elle se roule facilement…", *ibidem*.

[240] Jacq-Hergouac'h, *ibidem.*

[241] Mentioned by Harvey, *History of Burma,* 214, quoting the third volume of the *Glass Palace Chronicle*.

A Mon inscription mentions a letter written on a gold leaf that King Kyanzittha (1084-1113) wrote to a Chola lord.[242] The famous Kalyani inscription states that King Dhammaceti's letter to King Bhuvanekabahu of Sri Lanka was "inscribed on a tablet of gold".[243]

Father Tachard, who took a golden letter from King Narai to France in 1699, writes that gold leaves were only used when the king of Ayutthaya wrote to "great kings."[244] This criterion is visibly illustrated by King Alaungmintaya, who apparently did not consider King Banya Dala of Pegu or King Ekathat (Boromaracha Thirat V) of Ayutthaya as fellow great kings. They received letters from him, but none of them ever received a golden letter.

The Golden Letter: a Material Description

The following section provides narrowly descriptive accounts of physical elements of the Golden Letter, such as measurements and scientific data on the gold plaque and its ornaments. The edited text taken from the royal archives is followed by a description of the wrapping, sealing and packaging. A similar, but slightly different description is found at the end of the letter sent to Captain John Howe. A post-script of the Howe letter was certainly of practical importance for those who had to forward the royal letter; given the fact that royal letters could be (and had indeed been) faked, there was an obvious concern for ensuring that the letter was formally recognized as issued by the court.

The plaque of gold on which the letter was incised was rolled up, placed in an ivory casket, which in turn was put into a sealed "golden" pouch. This pouch was set in a lacquer box bearing a seal with a paper attached written in English. The lacquer box was finally inserted into a satchel bearing a seal with a Burmese inscription. Only the letter itself and its ivory container have come down to us and are now kept in the Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Bibliothek in Hanover, Lower Saxony, Germany.

We have Alaungmintaya's golden letter to George II in a slightly damaged, but unaltered and complete form. The Burmese chronicle description leaves no doubt about the identity of the letter, as it states that an image of a golden *hamsa* was attached to the letter and that a

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[242] Mentioned by Harvey, *History of Burma,* 42, quoting *Epigraphia Birmanica,* vol.1,part 2, 153.
[243] Taw Sein Ko, *Kalyani Inscriptions erected by King Dhammaceti at Pegu in 1476 AD*, (Bangkok, 1925), 43.
[244] Jacq-Hergoualc'h, *Etude historique,* 276.

line of twelve rubies was fixed at each of the two extremities of the rectangular gold plaque.[245] A spectro-analysis attests to the extraordinarily high grade of the gold fineness that varies between 95.25 and 98.69% in purity.[246]

The twenty-four rounded and slightly egg-shaped rubies are original Burmese ruby stones originating from the Mogok ruby mines.[247] These were fastened in hexagonal settings made of pure gold measuring 6 x 6 mm. The rubies were not polished but inserted in their original shapes. Specialists have been amazed at the assemblage of twenty-four such highly similar pieces.

The hexagonal settings were fixed with tiny cramps on two thin overlapping gold strips that were pressed onto the gold plaque. In the Burmese descriptions, the *hamsa* incised on a thin gold plate is termed a *yout tu* or image. The *hamsa* has to be considered a symbol of authenticity of Burmese royalty. Bits of lacquer are still recognizable under a magnifying glass. These bits may come from the lacquer seals that mentioned below. The style of the *hamsa* is distinctly early Konbaung. The square *hamsa* gold plate has on each side a tiny flange that was inserted into a slit and tightly pressed against the back of the gold plaque.

According to the Burmese descriptions, the golden letter was wrapped in red paper before it was placed in a cylindrical ivory casket. The ivory is Asian, a fact that is not surprising as Burma was a country which exported elephants and ivory during the early modern period.

The ivory casket was placed in a sealed *shwe phyin-eit*, a "golden cloth pouch", a term which Than Tun interprets as "brocade bag". This bag was kept in a lacquer casket described as being made of polished wood covered with red resin and bearing a golden design. The casket was sealed and a piece of paper with an English text was fixed to it. Finally it was put into what seems to have been a particularly solid, red-colored bag called *goun zayat eit ni.* As the spelling of the two initial terms raises problems of interpretation, Khin Khin Sein reads

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[245] In the Burmese text, the gold is described as *nārakā,* a rare term explained as "an excellent kind of gold".

[246] A spectro-analysis of gold specimens taken from the gold plaque, the *hamsa* image and the ruby settings were kindly done by the *Niedersächsisches Landesamt für Denkmalpflege* in Hanover (dated 26 June 2007), and a copy is in the hands of the author.

[247] On the history of the Burmese ruby mines, see E.C.S. George, *Burma Gazetteer Ruby Mines District* vol. A (Rangoon: Government Printing and Stationery, 1961), 15-43, and N. M. Penzer, *The Mineral Resources of Burma* (London: G. Routledge, 1922).

the first part of the expression as *goun zat,* "joined by strings" and interprets the whole as referring to a bag made of cloth and small wooden planks stitched together.[248]

The measurements of the gold plaque in its present condition are 54.7 x 8.5 cm. In both Burmese descriptions, the indicated measurements are 1 *taung)* x 5 *thit.* Using modern conversion tables, we obtain 53.3 x 9.5 cm. When we consider the fact that a slightly different standard would have prevailed in the middle of the eighteenth century in Upper Burma, these measurements are still fairly close to each other.[249] Similar variations appear for the weight of the gold plaque which has a thickness of 0.2 mm. The actual weight of the plaque including the rubies is 100 g. The Burmese descriptions give the weight of the gold as five *kyat).* According to the current standard, this is the equivalent of 84.8 g, a trustworthy conversion when we discount the weight of the rubies.[250]

The Golden Letter in its Hanoverian repository

The Golden Letter tells an amazing story and our exploration has led us into many different directions. From a historiographical point of view, our investigation has opened up a new approach towards the history of early Anglo-Burmese relations and the role played by King Alaungmintaya. From an archival point of view, our work may contribute to a better knowledge of one of the most amazing documents of pre-colonial Burmese history. The Golden Letter has had a lonely existence in its Hanoverian repository for over 250 years. Yet we can deplore this fact only half-heartedly: As it was "forgotten" and had "disappeared",

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[248] *Alaungmintaya Ameindawmya*, 44, fn. 7. In the 1967 and 2004 editions of the *Konbaungzet,* the term is spelled *goun zayat,* a term not traced in most dictionaries. In his *Research Dictionary of Old Burmese History (Khac-hoṅ:mranmā susena abhidhān),* Thein Hlaing quotes *goun zayat eit ni* with the explanation given by the *University Burmese Dictionary (Takkasuil Mranmā Abhidhān),* as being "a red-colored bag sewn with a kind of precious hand-woven cloth". Than Tun adopted the spelling of the chronicle and translated it as "gunny bag" which is a bit surprising as a gunny bag is made of jute, a non-precious material. Moreover it is not obvious that a jute bag would have been red-colored. But Than Tun does not provide any explanations on his choice of translations. As Judson's *Burmese-English Dictionary* has an entry *"guni eit"*, "a gunny bag", one may wonder if Than Tun interpreted *goun zayat eit ni* as a term derived from the English term "gunny bag". Looking at the context, I find the two first interpretations more attractive.

[249] Than Tun converted the measurements inconsistently as 49,5 x 5 cm in his translation of the Howe letter and 45 x 8 cm in his translation of the Golden Letter itself. He does not provide any clue on the standards he applied for these conversions. *Royal Orders of Burma,* vol.3, 27-28.

[250] One may refer to the tables in the appendix of the *Myanmar-English Dictionary.* Than Tun gives a distinctly higher figure with two conversions, 300 and 331 g, which he does not account for.

the Golden Letter was all the better saved for posterity. Similar letters on gold plates are not known to exist in Western collections. If other golden letters existed, their material support was probably destroyed after the text had been read, that is, the gold was taken and re-used for other purposes.

Over a year after Alaungmintaya's letters had been written, they were sent by George Pigot, together with his General Letter of 30th July 1757, on the *Walpole* from Madras to London. Both letters were presented at the Court of Directors during its session on 3 March 1758. On the same day, John Payne, the chairman of the directors, tried to present the Golden Letter to the court of St James himself, first trying to meet the Secretary of State, William Pitt, and after that, Robert Wood at Hampton Court. He probably left the Letter there without meeting either of the two men. The next day he sent a letter to Wood providing him with some background information on the Burmese-Mon war, the Company's policy of neutrality, the Negrais settlement and Alaungmintaya's grant to settle in "another part of his dominions esteemed more healthy" [i.e. Pathein].[251] To this letter, Wood sent a reply of which there is no copy in the Company archives.[252] The Golden Letter was transmitted with a beautifully written English translation of which a copy was kept together with Payne's and Wood's letters[253]. We do not know what happened at the Court of St James with the Golden Letter when Pitt presented it to George II. What attention did Pitt pay to it? Did George II have any questions on it?

Obviously George II took some kind of interest in the letter, because he immediately sent it to his library in Hanover where it was registered three weeks later (28 March 1758). The king, as we know, nourished a great affection for Hanover, his birth-place, to where he returned four times between 1729 and 1741.[254] But his interest in the letter does not seem to have been of a political nature. He may rather have looked at the Golden Letter as a kind of exotic curiosity. The true identity of the letter was lost on its way to Hanover. It was confusingly registered as the letter of an

[251] The text of this letter was published by D.G.E. Hall in Appendix 1 of Hall, *Tragedy*, 355.
[252] IOR, Court Book B 74, 654.
[253] IOR, Home Miscellaneous 95 (1756-60).
[254] Uta Richter-Uhlig, *Hof und Politik unter den Bedingungen der Personalunion zwischen Hannover und England, Die Aufenthalte Georgs II. In Hannover zwischen 1729 und 1741* (Hannover : Hahnsche Buchhandlung. 1992).

> independent Indian king on the Coromandel coast (of the religion of the Magi or Gebres who do not eat anything alive and who adore the fire).[255]

Such a formulation would not naturally have raised the curiosity of a historian of Southeast Asia.

In his letter to Wood, Payne did not suggest that a reply was expected on behalf of the king. But the directors of the East India Company thought that before they themselves could formulate a reply, they would wait for the English King's reply. As there was no reply from George II, there was never an official reply from the East India Company to Alaungmintaya's letter. Since the directors had decided in March 1757 to vacate the Negrais settlement, their lack of enthusiasm to send a reply to Shwebo, independently of what King George was going to do, may be understandable. Furthermore sudden changes in the direction of the Company in London most probably prevented any further thought on this matter.

Just a few days after the Golden Letter had been sent to King George, the annual election led to an unusual change in the composition of the Company's twenty-four directors. Due to the recent events in Bengal, a hot debate had been running among the proprietors and inside the Court of Directors about the succession for the head of the presidency of Bengal. Payne and his faction lost. Payne, who had been chairman of the directors of the Company for twelve years between 1741 and 1757, then sold off most of his East India Company stock and more or less quit the Company's affairs. Nor was Thomas Saunders, another director and former Governor of Madras who had been instrumental in the creation of the Negrais settlement, re-elected.[256] One may surmise that this tidal change also had an impact on the Company's Burma policy.

Afterword

This monograph fulfills the conditions of an agreement concluded with the *Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Bibliothek* to deliver the results of an in-depth historical investigation into the library's

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[255] Eduard Bodemann, *Die Handschriften der Königlichen Öffentlichen Bibliothek zu Hannover* (Hannover : Hahn'sche Hofbuchhandlung, 1867), 98.

[256] Lucy S. Sutherland, *The East India Company in Eighteenth Century Politics* (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1962), 34-5; 66-72; James Gordon Parker, "The Directors of the East India Company, 1754-90," (Ph.D., University of Edinburgh, 1977), 199-201; 461-2.

"Manuscript 571a". It offers the contextual framework for a historical understanding of the Golden Letter which should ensure an accurate public presentation of the letter and stimulate further interest in the manuscript. Thanks are due to the director of the *GWBL*, Dr. Georg Ruppelt, for his permission to undertake this research. Dr Friedrich Hülsmann initiated the project and showed utmost patience as the work was much more time-consuming than could be anticipated. He should be duly praised for bringing the letter to the knowledge of the scientific community and, we may say, for his impatience with the unsatisfactory knowledge about the letter in his care. May the *Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Bibliothek* henceforth treasure the exquisite value of this singular and extraordinary manuscript.

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H 95 Home Miscellaneous 1756-60.

P 240/ 6 Fort St George Public Department Consultations 1744-45.

P 240/ 11 Fort St George Public Department Consultations with index 1753.

P 240/ 12 Fort St George Public Department Consultations with index 1754.

P 240/ 13 Fort St George Public Department Consultations with index 1755.

P 240/ 14 Fort St George Public Department Consultations with index 1756.

P 240/ 15 Fort St George Public Department Consultations with index 1757.

P 240/ 16 Fort St George Public Department Consultations with index 1758.

P 240/ 18 Fort St George Public Department Consultations with index 1760.

P 240/ 19 Fort St George Public Department Consultations with index 1761.

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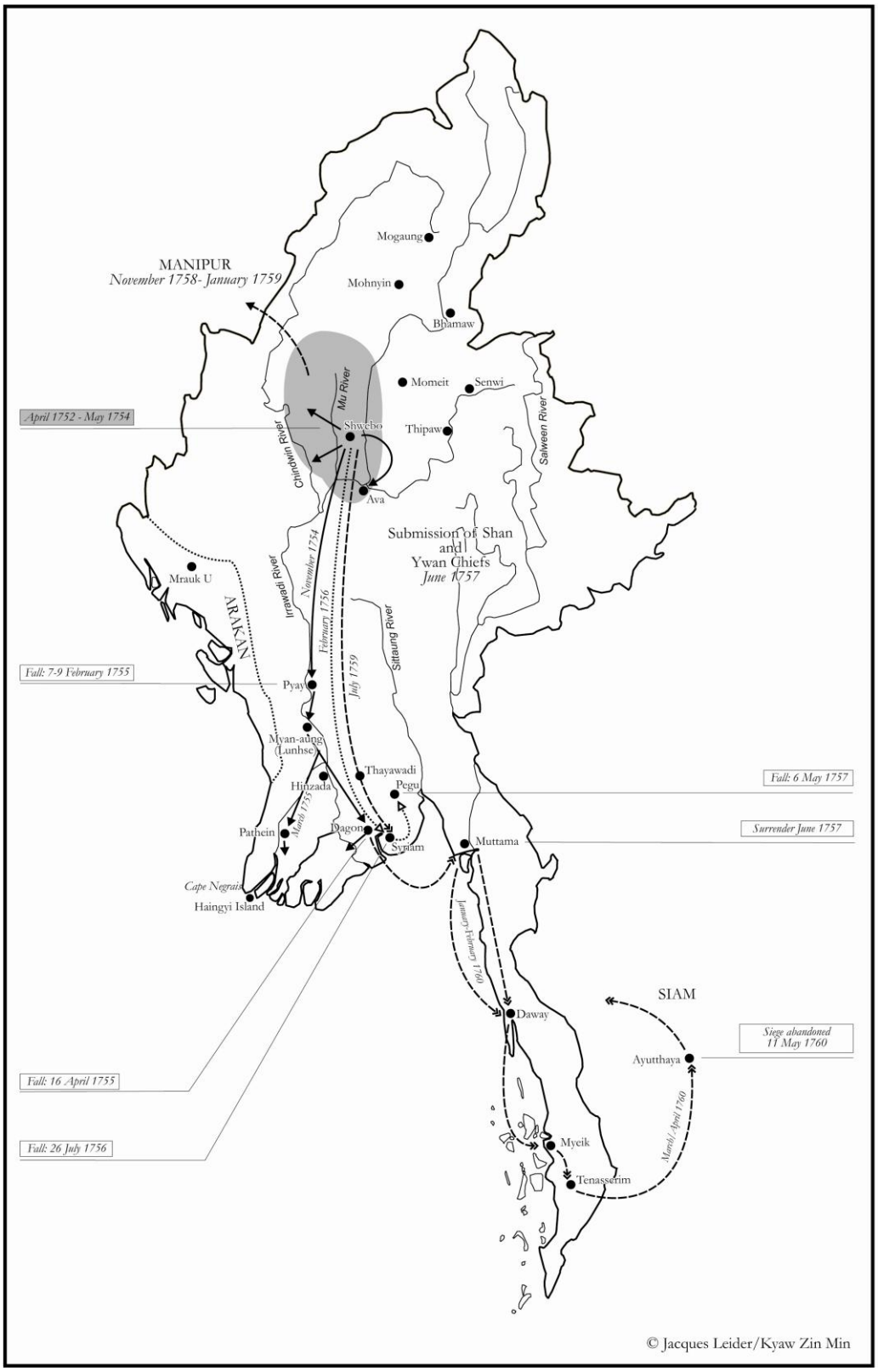
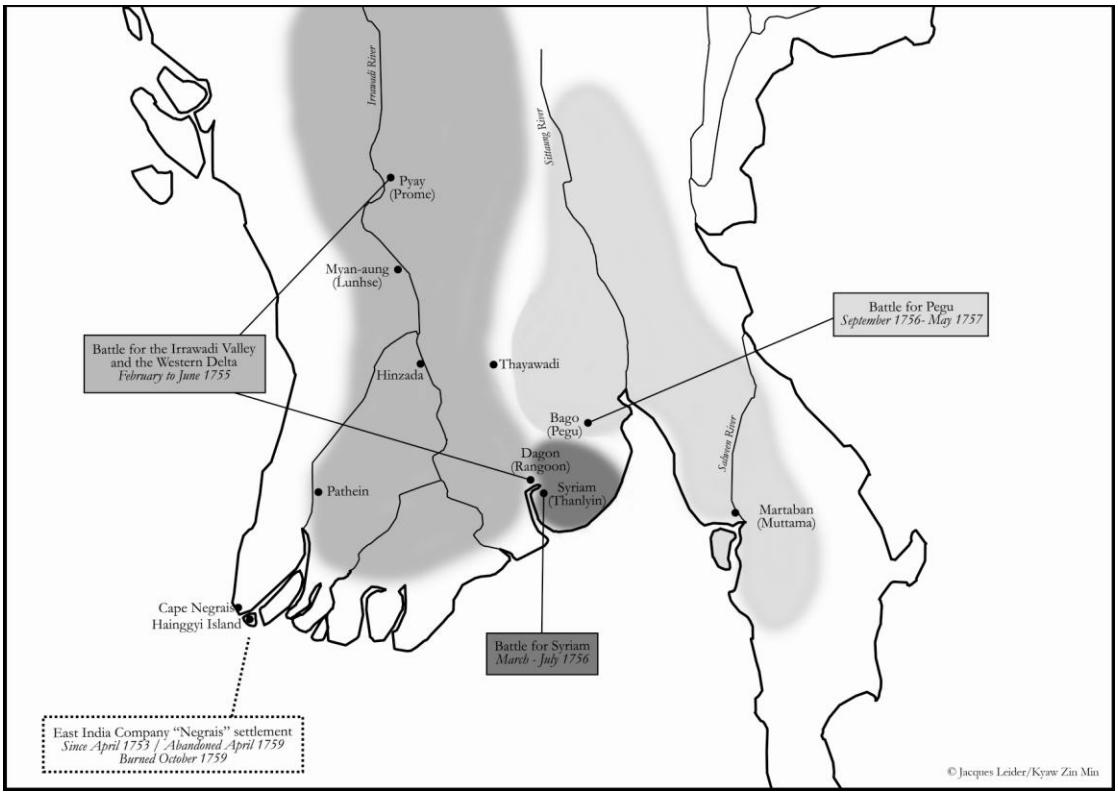
Maps

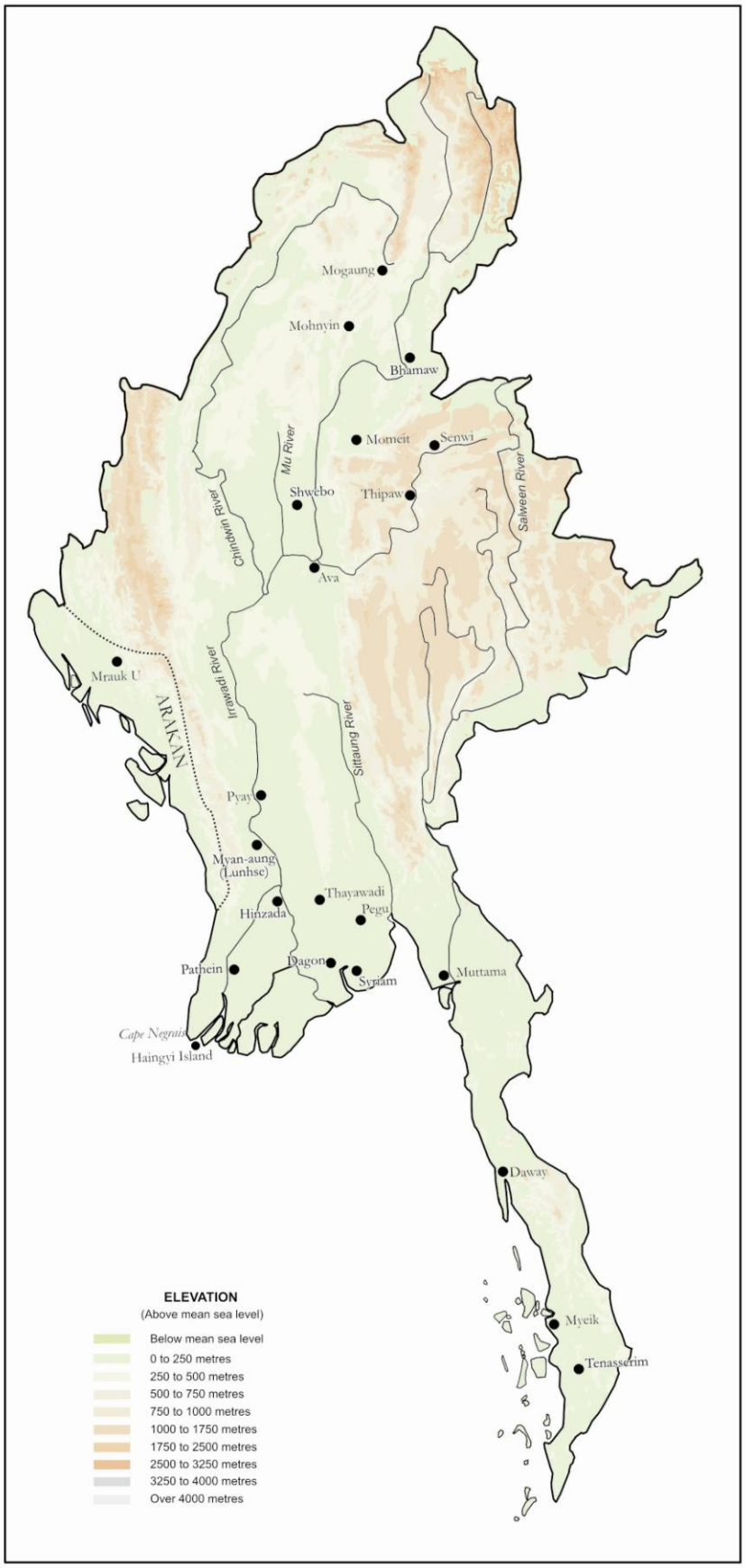
Map 1 Alaungmintaya's wars in Upper and Lower Burma (1752-60)



Map 2 Alaungmintaya's warfare in Lower Burma (1755-57)



Map 3 Burma Topography



Appendix : Alaungmintaya's Letters to the East India Company

Alaungmintaya's First Embassy to the Company (March 1755)

The most glorious [king], lord of the great countries of Sunaparanta, Tambadipa and Kamboza, ruling over umbrella-bearing *myosa* and *sawbwa*[257] in royal territories such as the cities of Thaye Khettaya-Pyay, Arimaddana-Bagan, Pin-ya, Myinzaing, Sagaing, Ava, Kale, Mogaung, Mohnyin, Bamaw, Momeit, Thibaw and Yauksauk.[258] as well as the golden city of Ratanasingha Konbaung,[259] lord of the ruby, sapphire, topaz, gold, silver, amber, copper, iron and [other] precious stone mines, lord of white elephants, red elephants and elephants of various colors, master and lord of life, Alaungmintaya-gyi-phaya, [moved by] the 528 kinds of loving kindness, sends this message to Do,[260] the Company chief of Mawdin [Na]garit.[261] Cordial relations which are one of the seven marks of a royal city[262] and a mark of great monarchs who rule over umbrella-bearing kings of the [various] countries, have existed since the time of my ancestors between the noble Myanma and the lords of the countries of Majjhimadesa.[263] Since the time of my ancestors, there has been friendship with the lords ruling in Majjhimadesa. The people have been trading goods such as precious stones, guns, cannon or bales of textiles and their families have lived a prosperous life. According to their destiny, the Ramanya Talaing (=the Mon) did not recognize their lord as their lord, "turning the palms of their hands", they broke their loyalty, rebelled and commited acts of atrocity. The moment having arrived that the city of Ratanapura-Ava was

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[257] *Myosa* are royal appanagés who "earn" the revenue of a city or district. *Sawbwa* is the appellation of the various rulers in the Shan and Kachin country who traditionally submitted to the authority of the kings of Burma.

[258] Yauk Sauk may actually be Yap Sauk in the Shan country, north of Taunggyi.

[259] These are two names of Moksobo, Alaungphaya's native village from where he resisted the pacification campaign in April 1752. Later renamed and today known as Shwebo, Alaungphaya supervised its transformation into a royal capital during his intermittent stays there between June 1753 and December 1754. It was also known (its fifth name!) as Yangyi-aung ("conqueror of great enemies").

[260] I could not clearly identify this proper name. The most likely candidate would be Henry Brooke.

[261] The chief of the East India Company settlement at Negrais.

[262] In this letter the term *prañ,* capital, city or country is used, rather than *mrui.* found in the Golden Letter for example. For the seven marks (or qualities) of a fortified city, see notes to the Golden Letter.

[263] This refers to India. Majjhimadesa is the term used in the Buddhist scriptures for mainly northern India at the time of Buddha.

going to be destroyed, so as if it had existed just for a period of over hundred years, the old king of Ratanapura-Ava was not observing his [royal] duties. On the other hand, given the fact that if you have merit you rise and if you have none, you fall, the time had come that I, Alaungmintaya-gyi-phaya, the lord of life would appear as a unifier. The Myanma were just declining for a short time. After their decline, I founded in accordance with a prophecy the golden royal city of Ratanasingha Konbaung placing in the ground the golden parasol and [building] a golden palace. The umbrella-bearing *myosa,* the nine *sawbwa* of the Shan, the *sawbwa* of the Kathay,[264] the chief *sawbwa* of the Hun,[265] the Kachin, the Karen and the Dhanu humbly submitted [to me]. Because [now] they all perform their tasks for the king, thanks to my merit, the mining of precious stones has progressively picked up again while it had mostly disappeared under the reign of the preceding kings. The country people feel happy just as if they would hold a pot of cool water close to their body. Following my vow, I have again and again crushed those who were unjust and caused suffering in the country. In the year 1116,[266] I myself marched with elephants, horses and led the attack. [The enemy] was still resisting in the wooden fort on Kyettin hill in Pyay surrounded by a moat and with many boats; but as I had made a vow of truth, I destroyed the rebels who could not resist my royal merit. I made them run away and captured more than 600 boats, and all their cannon, guns, elephants and horses.

The traders and merchants from the countries of Majjhimadesa [come to] do business at the golden royal city of Ratanapura-Ava. Let there be good will and let them prosper peacefully for a long time and more than in the reigns of my royal predecessors. Let the two countries join in prosperity following the old roads trading in rubies, gold, silver, copper, iron, amber, guns and bales of textiles.

With this message, I send two *hamsa* [-shaped figures adorned] with rubies as a symbol [of our friendly relations].

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[264] Manipuri.

[265] "Hun" could possibly be interpreted as Ahom (of Assam) though at this time Burmese hegemony did not extend to that region. But this interpretation could eventually be an anachronism.

[266] The year 1116 covers the period from April 1754 to March 1755. In the Burmese text of this letter, Dr Than Tun inserted the date "7 February 1755" in between the lines. He fails to explain that this is the date at which the Burmese took control of the city of Pyay (*Royal Orders of Burma*, vol.3, 95), the event described by the king in the following sentence.

Alaungmintaya's Second Embassy to the Company (June 1755)

The most glorious, lord of all the great countries of Sunaparan[ta] and Tambadipa, ruling over all the umbrella-bearing kings of the [various] countries, being a donor of the *sasana,*[267] lord of the *cakrā* [weapon], lord of a golden palace with many buildings, having control over all the precious stone mines, gold mines, silver mines, amber, topaz, sapphire, zircon, copper, iron and ruby mines, lord of white elephants, red elephants and elephants of various colors, master and lord of life, Alaungmintaya-gyi-phaya sends this message to Candarap (Saunders?) [of the] Company [at] Mawdin [Na]garit.[268]

The city of Hamsavati comes under the sovereignty of Myanma; it has traditionally belonged to the land ruled by dynasties of Myanma kings. The Talaing rebels have betrayed their loyalty and for a short time they have taken the power. We, our sons, our younger brothers, our army and navy officers and our soldiers, we have attacked and fought again and again with our boats, elephants, horses so as to get rid [of them]. We have taken many of their boats, cannon, arms and weapons and conquered Pyay, Taungngu, Thayawadi, Okkan, Thonze, Lunze, Kyamkhin, Danubyu, Hinzada, Pathein, Myaungmya, Khèbaung, Dagun, Dala, Komyo[269] and many [other] towns and villages.

The rebels are still resisting in several places such as Syriam, Panlaing, Thanlin, and Kyaikkhami[270] where we are attacking, catching and crushing them. After attacking, destroying and taking control of all the cities and villages surrounding Hamsawadi, I have changed the name of Dagon into Rangoon. I have built and I am residing in a golden palace at a fortified place surrounded by a moat and turrets.

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[267] The king is a benefactor of the Buddhist faith performing meritorious religious works.

[268] To (Governor General Thomas) Saunders (of the East India) Company at Negrais. Saunders had been Governor General at Madras until January 1755. He was succeeded by Georges Pigot. The chief of Negrais settlement at that moment was Henry Brooke.

[269] Literally *ko myo* means "nine cities", but the enumeration contains more than nine names. On the other hand, I am unaware of a city called "Komyo".

[270] The Burmese spelling of the city names we spell here Syriam and Thanlin is confusingly close. Possibly Thanlin matches with two places called by Baker Sanyangon and Sinyangon, "Observations,"102, 104 and 105. Sanyangon is at first said to be "a place two days journey above Syrian" where the Mons resisted the Burmese, the Burmese attack being referred to later on by Baker under the spelling "Sinyangon". Finally under the date of the 2 May 1755, Baker notes that he learnt about the victorious attack of the Burmese against the Mon fortifications "at Sinyangong and Panlang". Kyaikkhami, situated on the Tenasserim sounds rather out of place here and one may suppose that it refers to a place in the vicinity of the previous locations.

I had sent a letter to the Company so as to extend our unbroken friendship because the former Myanma kings cultivated friendly relations and traded with the rulers of Majjhimadesa. In the reply that the Company respectfully sent me, I read that it intends to pursue friendly relations. Those who rule at Hamsawadi do not dare to come out to attack and compete with the vanguard of my soldiers. They only stay there increasing [the fortification] of their city. I will attack and finish them. I hear from my ambassadors that the Company has many cannon and guns. As I need twelve cannon of 5, 4, 3, 2 and 1[271] to destroy the city of Hamsawadi, I kindly request you to let me have them. Bruno of the French Company[272] has made an alliance with the Pegu Talaing and has given them sixty cannon and 300 guns with a lot of ammunition which have increased the power of the Talaing at Pegu. The men of the Company at Hainggyi (=Negrais) have been pondering the advantages of an alliance with me, the lord of life, Alaungmintaya-gyi-phaya. I think that for everything that the French Company is doing to support the Talaing, the Hainggyi Company, in the interest of their long-term prosperity, should give me the double. As for Bruno, he is unworthy of my country and I have driven out his ships from Syriam. Whitehill sent by the English king to the Company[273] arrived on his ship at the royal city of Rangoon

[271] Obviously these figures refer to the weight of the shots. Than Tun considers these to be measured in *viss* (a *viss* is a unit of weight corresponding to 3,6 pounds or 1,6 kg). But rather than making a strict conversion as he does (*Royal Orders of Burma*, vol. 3, 6), I consider that the Burmese measurements may be roughly approximated with the weight of English cannon shot, in this case, 18 pounds, 15 pounds, 11 pounds, and 4 pounds.

[272] Read: [Sieur] Bruno of the French [East India] Company (*Compagnie française des Indes orientales*). Bruno had been sent by Dupleix to develop relations with the Pegu court since July 1751. In British sources his name was commonly misspelled as "Bourno".

[273] Read: [John] Whitehill sent by the English king to the [East India] Company. The expression reflects the king's misunderstanding of the status of the East India Company as he wrongly interprets it as an arm of the British monarchy. Whitehill was appointed the East India Company's agent in Rangoon. He was allegedly among the first to support the Mon attacks against Rangoon a few weeks after his arrival. As Alaungmintaya had given instructions to take care of him, he strongly resented the man's conduct and he bitterly complained about him to Baker during his audience in September 1755. In a dispatch of 17 January 1762 of the Court of Directors of the East India Company in London we learn that he was considered by his superiors as one of those who by their partisan behavior in 1755 betrayed the Company's general political interest. Whitehill left the service of the Company in 1757. Apparently unaware of the grudge that the king held against him, he returned to Burma as the supercargo of a private ship in June 1759. He was immediately arrested and his goods were confiscated by the order of Alaungmintaya. A Dutch captain kindly paid a ransom to set him free from prison. After the Board of the Company at Madras had decided to reimburse the Dutch captain, Whitehill had to pay back the full sum at a rate of 8% per year.

on the 11th day of the waning moon of *nayoun* of the year 111[7].[274] When he came to pay respect to us, he was questioned and said that he had been sent by the English king to the Company and that he has [suffered] from a storm. So We gave the order to take good care of him. We have given silver to our ambassadors to pay the guns. This is a royal letter sent to Candarap (Saunders) of the Hainggyi Company.

[274] 5 June 1755.

Burmese text of the Golden Letter

ဘုရင် အလောင်းဘုရားမှ ဘုရင်ကျော့–၂ ထံ

ပေးပို့သည့် မြန်မာဘာသာသဝဏ်လွှာ– အကွေ့ရာပြန် (၁۷۵၆)

စာကြောင်း–၁

ဘုန်တော် အလှုန်ကြီးမြတ်တော်မူလှသော သုနာပရန္တတိုင် တမ္ပဒီပတိုင် ကမ္ဘောဇတိုင် စသော တိုင်းကြီး အပေါင်တိုင့် နှုက်
မြန်မာပြည် ရှမ်းပြည် ယွန်းပြည် ကသည်းပြည် တရိုင်းပြည် ရာဇဌာနီ ပြည်ကြီး ထီးဆောင်မင် တကာတိုင် သခင် ပတ္တ

စာကြောင်း–၂

မြာ ရှေ ဌေ ကြေး သံ ပယင် ရတနာတူင်မျာ သခင် ဆင်ဖြူ ဆင်နီ ဆင်ကျား စက်ကြာ ရှေလှဲရ အာဘီဖွ ဝံသ နေမင်၏
အဆက်အနွယ် အဆောင်ဆောင် သော ရှေနန် ရှေပြသင် သခင် ရတနာပူရ အင်ဝပြည်ကြီး နှင့်တကွ အယုဇ္ဈပူရ မည်သော ရတနာ

စာကြောင်း–၃

သိမ်ယ် ကုန်ဘောင် ရှေပြည်ကြီ ကိုင် အဖိုင်ရတော်မူသော အလောင်မင်တရာကြီ ချစ်ကြည်ဖွာ ကြာရောက် အပ်သော
ဇိနပ္ပတ္တိ ဘက်လာ ဝှတ် သံ ဒေဗီ ဒေဗီ ကတ် စသော မြေ့ပ်အပေါင်တိုင် မြန်ရလျက် အင်ကရိတ် မြေ့ပ်မကိုင်

စာကြောင်း–၄

အဖိုင်ရသော အင်ကရိတ် မြေ့မဘုရင် ဘေလောင်တော် ဘိုင်းလောင်တော်တိုင် လက်ထက် မြန်မာမင် အင်ကရိတ် အဆက်ဆက်
ဘောက်ကာ ရောင်ဝယ် ရောက်ပေါက်ကြ၍ အလိုင်ရှိသမျှကိုင် ဆောင်ယူ ကြရသည်။

စာကြောင်း–၅

ကိန်ခန် အလျောက် တရိုင်တိုင် နှောင်ရှက်ရာတူင် တလပ် တကြာ မရောက်မပေါက်ကြ ရှိ၍ တောင့်တလျက် နေသည်နှင့်
အကြည်တော် နိုင်ငံတော်ရွှန် မော်ဝင် ဟိုင်ကြီးသိုင့် အကြည်တော် အင်ကရိတ် မြေ့ပ်မဘုရင်က

စာကြောင်း–၆

မည်သလိပ်ရှတ် တိုင်ကိုင် စေ၍ ရောက်ပေါက်လှာရာတူင်မှ မေမြန်၍ ကြာသိရလျှင် အတိုင်ထက် အလွန် မင်ဓကရာဇ်တိုင့်ဝယ်
မြေ့ပ်၏ အင်္ဂါ ၇ ပါးတူင် သက်ဟာ ဟူသော ပြည်ထောင်ချင် အင်္ဂါ တပါ သည် မြစ်ခဲသော အရာကိုင်

စာကြောင်း–၇

တွေ့ရပေတော့မည် ဝမ်မြောက်တော်မူသည်။ အကြည်တော် အင်ကရိတ် မြေ့ပ်မ ဘုရင်က စေသူ မည်သလိပ်ရှတ် တိုင်ကာ ပုသိန်မြေ့ပ်
တူင် တိုက် ကြ သင်ဘော သူင်ထာ နေရာ နေရော် လိုပ်ပါသည် ရှိနိုင် သံတော်ဦတင်သောကြောင် အကြည်တော် အင်

Transliteration of the Golden Letter

(1) Bhun-tō a-lhwan-krī mrat-tō-mū lha so Sunāparanta-tuiṅ Tampadīpa-tuiṅ Kampoja-tuiṅ ca so tuiṅ-krī a-poṅ-tuiw. nhuik Mran-mā-prañ Rham-prañ Ywan-prañ Kasañ-prañ Taluiṅ-prañ rāja-ṭhānī-prañ-krī thī: choṅ maṅ ta-kā-tuiw sakhaṅ patta (2) mrā rhwe ṅwe kre: saṁ pha-yaṅ ratanā twaṅ myā sakhaṅ chaṅ-phrū chaṅ-nī chaṅ-kyā: cak-krā[275] rhwe-lhaṁ ra ā-dicca-vasa ne maṅ i achak-anway achoṅ-choṅ so rhwe-nan rhwe-prasad sakhaṅ[276] Ratanā-pūra-Aṅwa-prañ-krī nhaṅ.ta-kwa Ayujjhapūra mañ so Ratanā- (3) singha-kun-bhoṅ rhwe-prañ-krī kuiw acuiw ra-tō-mū so Aloṅ-maṅ-tarā-krī[277] khyac-kraṅ-cwā krā rok ap so jinappattaṁ Bhaṅkalā what saṁ-devī-devī-kat ca so mruiw a-poṅ tuiw[278] khraṁ[279] raṁ lyak Aṅkarit[280]-mruiw-ma kuiw (4) a-cuiw ra so[281] Aṅkarit-mrui-ma bhuraṅ bhe-loṅ-tō bhuiw:-loṅ-tō tuiw lak-thak mran-mā maṅ Aṅkarit a-chak-chak bhok-kā roṅ-way rok-pok kra rwe. a-luiw rhi sa mhya kuiw choṅ yū kra ra sañ // (5) Kin-khan a-lyok Taluiṅ-tuiṅ nhoṅ-rhak rā twaṅ ta-lap ta-krā[282] ma rok ma pok kra rhi rwe. toṅ.-ta lyak ne sañ nhaṅ. akrañ-tō nuiṅ-ṅaṁ-tō cwan-Mō-dhaṅ-huiṅ-krī: suiw. akrañ-tō Ankarit mruiw-ma[283] bhuraṅ ka (6) Mañ-sa-lī-pa-rut tuiw kuiw ce rwe. rok pok lhā rā twaṅ mha me-mran rwe.krā si ra lhyaṅ atuiṅ thak alwan maṅ ekarāj tuiw. way mruiw. i aṅgā 7 pā: twaṅ *sakhā* hū so prañ-thoṅ-khyaṅ aṅgā tap sañ phrac khè so arā kuiw (7) twe. ra pe to. mañ wam-mrok-tō-mū sañ // a-krañ-tō Aṅkarit mruiw-ma bhu-raṅ ka ce sū Mañ-sa-li-pa-rut tuiw ka Pu-sin mruiw twaṅ tuik kra saṅ-bho swaṅ thā ne-rā ne rap luiw pā sañ rhi khuiw saṁ-tō ū-taṅ so kroṅ a-krañ-tō Aṅ (8) karit mruiw-ma bhu-raṅ ka ce rwe. lhyok ra sañ phrac sañ a-rhañ khyac-krañ ra mañ kuiw thok rwe. kruik rā ne thuiṅ ce Pu-sin mruiw twaṅ mre-kuiw tuiṅ-tā mhat sā: rwe. Pu-sin mruiw-wan tuiw ka khya pe ce sañ // a-krañ-tō Aṅkarit mruiw-ma bhu-raṅ amhū: amat Pu-sin mruiw-wan (9) tuiw myak-nhā[284] ñī taṁ-chip cā-khywan-tō pe ap tō mū sañ // prañ-thoṅ-khyaṅ maṅ tuiw way mrat so achwe-khaṅ mwan koṅ tuiw kuiw mhī kra ra sañ phrac mhya ū-sā-bha luiw rhi rā[285] prañ-cum kra sañ[286] phrac sañ // ṅā sā-tō acañ mre-tō achak mrac-tō a-ñwan. akrañ-tō (10) Aṅkarit mruiw-ma[287] bhu-raṅ kuiy[288] mre[289] mrac a-cañ rhañ-cwā khyac-krañ kra[290] ra mañ akroṅ kuiw sakkarāj 1118 khu

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275 The published version (*Royal Orders of Burma,* 156) includes "arindama".
276 The published version includes: "phrac tō mu so".
277 The published version includes : "bhurā :".
278 The published version includes: "tui. sañ la prañ wan : kui nakkat tā rā apoṅ:".
279 The published version includes: "ram sa kè.sui.".
280 Here and in the following instances, the published version has "aṅgalip" instead of "aṅkarit".
281 The published version includes: "akrañ tō".
282 The published version has : "ta lap ta lyā :".
283 The published version does not include "ma," most probably a lacuna of the copyist.
284 The published version includes: "cum".
285 The published version has : "phrac mha alui rhi rā nhac ū : sā:".
286 The published version has "prañ cum kra mañ".
287 The published version does not include "ma", probably a lacuna.
288 The published version has : "kui".

ka-chun la-chan 10 rak wa-ne. rāja saṁ rhwe-pe-cā nhaṅ. khyac-krañ-cwā rok ap so Aṅkarit mruiw-ma kuiw acuiw ra so a-krañ-tō Aṅkarit bhu-raṅ//

[289] The published version has : "sā: mre :".
[290] The published version has : "rhañ-cwā khyac kra".

Photos

1. The Golden Letter

2. The Golden Letter : Left side with rubies and *hamsa* seal

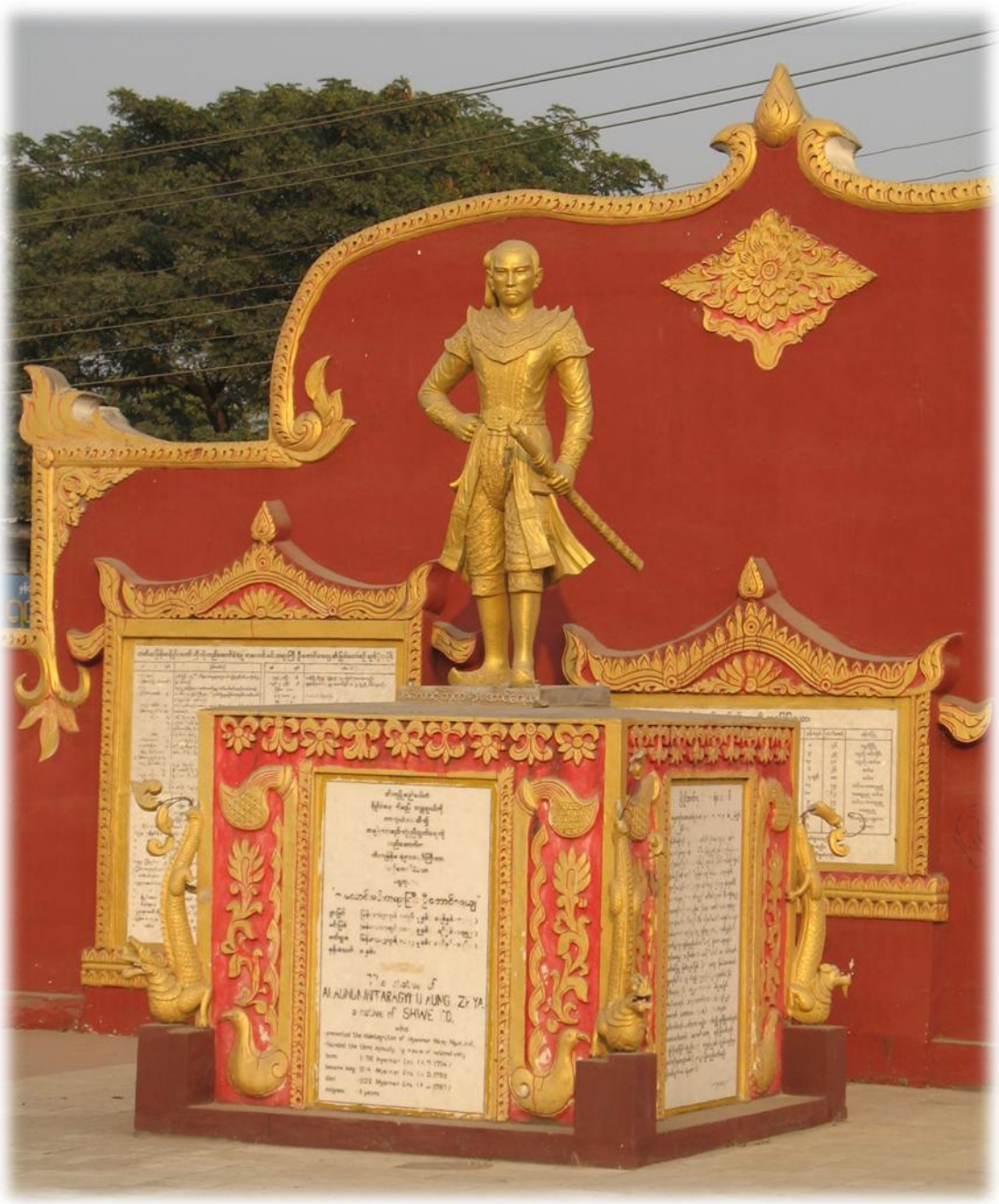
3. The Golden Letter : The *hamsa* Seal

4. The Golden Letter : Detail of the back fixation of the ruby setting

5. King Alaungmintaya : Statue in front of the reconstructed palace in Shwebo

6. King Alaungmintaya : Statue in front of the reconstructed palace in Shwebo

7. King Alaungmintaya : Statue near the bus gate, Shwebo.



8. King Alaungmintaya : Statue near the bus gate, Shwebo.

9. Buddha statue pointing his finger to the place where Shwebo would be founded (Shwetaza Myatswa Pagoda, Shwebo)

10. *Byadeik* prophecy of the Buddha regarding Alaungmintaya

ဗျာဒိတ်ပေးစေတီတော်မြတ်ကြီး

သမိုင်း အကျဉ်း

ယခုစေတီကြီးနေရာတွင် မူလကပြိုပျက်နေသော စေတီဟောင်းကြီးရှိခဲ့သည့် ဘုရားဒါယကာကြီး ဦးဗလ + ဘုရားဒါယိကာမကြီး ဒေါ်စိန်ရင် တို့မှ လည်းကောင်း စေတီဟောင်းနေရာ၌ ရွှေတိုမြို့တွင်မရှိသေးသောမော်၍ဖူးရသည့် မတ်ရင်ဗျာဒိတ်ပေးရပ်ပွားတော်မြတ်ကြီးတည်ရန် စိတ်ကူးဖြင့်ပြိုပျက်နေသောစေတီကြီး အားရှင်းလင်းရာ ဘိနပ်တော် ဌာပနာတိုက်အတွင်းမှ ဥာဏ်တော်(၁)တောင်ခန့်ရှိပြူဖွေးတောက်ပြောင်နေသော၊ စကျင်ကျောက်ဖြင့်ထူလုပ်ထားသည့် ဗျာဒိတ်ပေးရပ်ပွား ပုံတော်၊ ညီတော် အာနန္ဒာ ပုံတော်၊ ကြာပန်းရှစ်ခိုင်ဆက်သနေသော ဦးအောင်ရေယျ ပုံတို့ကို အုံ့ဩတွယ်တွေ့ရှိခဲ့ပါသည်။ မြတ်စွာဘုရားသက်တော်ထင်ရှားရှိစဉ်က ညီတော် အာနန္ဒာ နှင့်အတူ ဤရွှေတန်ဆာတုန်း(ရွှေယဉ်သာတုန်း) မြေသို့ရောက်ရှိခဲ့ရာ ဦးအောင်ရေယျ အလောင်းအလျာ (ထိုစဉ်က လူသူတော်စင်တစ်ဦး) က ကြာပန်းရှစ်ခိုင်ဆက်သရာမှ အောက်ပါအတိုင်း ဗျာဒိတ်တော် ထားခဲ့ပါသည်။

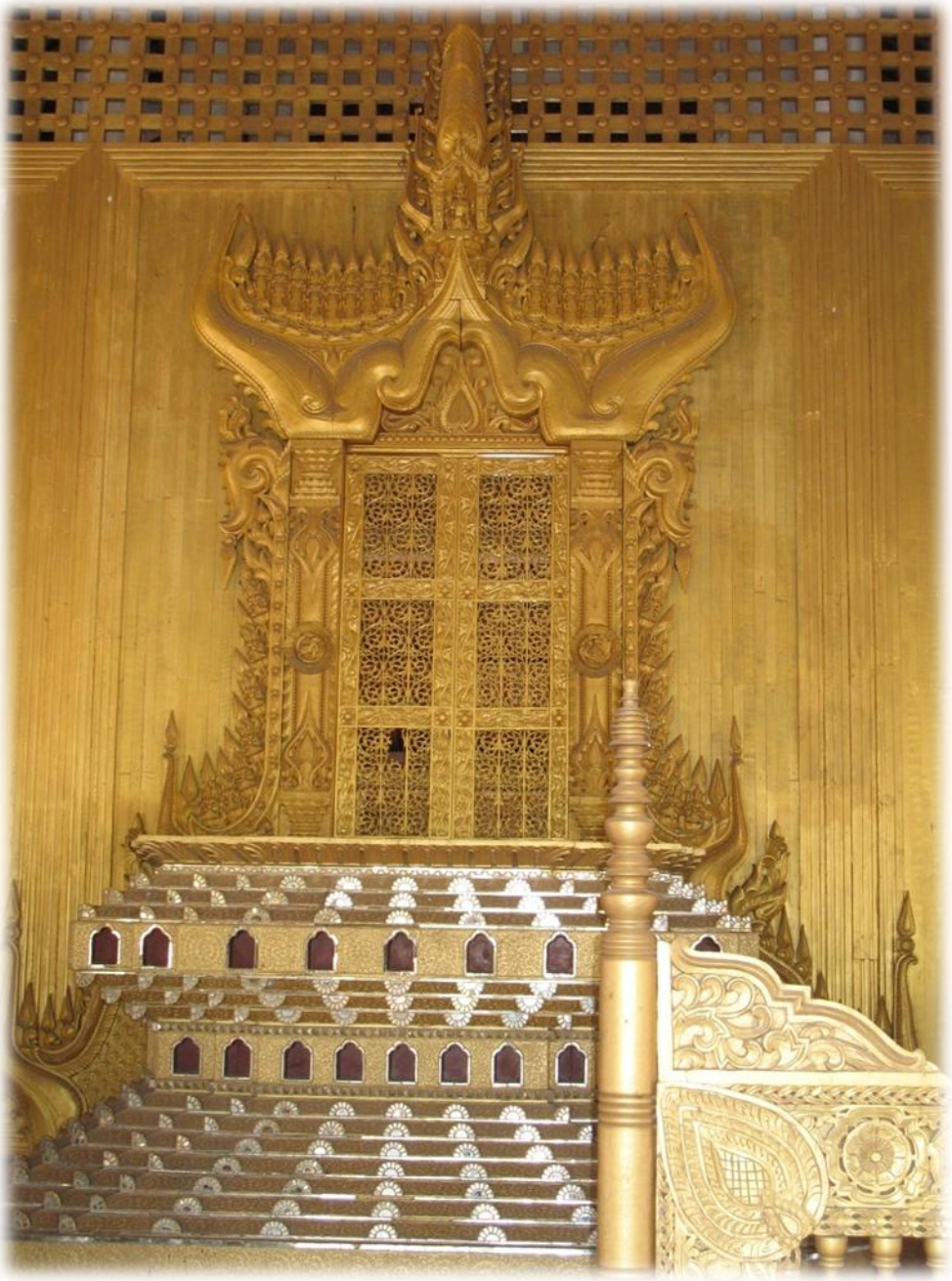
ချစ်သားအာနန္ဒာ ငါဘုရားသည်အလောင်းတော်အဖြစ် ပါရမီတော်ဖြည့်ကျင့်စဉ် အချိန် ဤအရပ်ဒေသ၌ နိုင်မင်းအဖြစ်(၁)ကြိမ်၊ ကြက်တူရွေးမင်းအဖြစ်(၃)ကြိမ် ခြေသေ့မင်းအဖြစ်(၁)ကြိမ်၊ ငုံးမင်းအဖြစ်(၁)ကြိမ်၊ ဟင်္သာမင်းအဖြစ်(၇)ကြိမ်မြစ်ခဲ့ဖူးသည်။

"ငါဘုရား ပရိနိဗ္ဗာန်စံပြီးနောက် သီရိခမ္ဘာသောက အမည်ရှိသော မင်းသည် ဤကုန်းမြေပေါ်၌ ငါ၏ဓာတ်တော်၊ မွေတော် တို့ကို ဌာပနာ၍ မုဒ္ဒေ စေတီတည်လိမ့်မည်။"။ "ဇာရိမဒ္ဒန(ပုဂံ)ပြည်ရှင်ဘုရင်မင်းမြတ်သည် ဤကုန်းမြေ သီရိခမ္ဘာသောကမင်း တည်ထားသော စေတီနေရာ၌ပင် ဓာတ်တော်၊ မွေတော် တို့ကို ဌာပနာကာ စေတီထပ်တည်၍ စေတီလှုံ့ကော်(မုဒ်) အတွင်းပကတိ ကိုယ်မှာပင် တန်ဆာစုံလင်အဆင်အယင်ပါရှိသော ရုပ်ပွားဆင်းတူထူလုပ်ကိုးကွယ်လိမ့်မည်။"

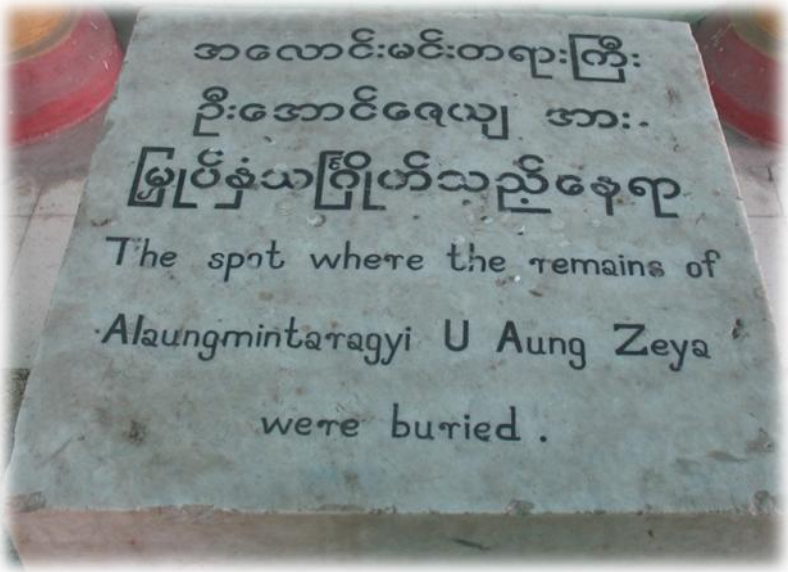
"ယခု ငါဘုရားအားကြာပန်းရှစ်ခိုင် ကိုပူဇော်သူဤလူသူတော်သည် ဤအရင်ဒေသ၌ပြည်ကြီးတည်ထောင်၍ ဘုန်းတန်ခိုးကြီးမားထင်ရှားသောမင်းဖြစ်လိမ့်မည်။ ထိုမင်း၏ အဆက်အနွယ် သားမြေးမြစ် တို့သည်လည်းမင်းချည်းနှင်နှင် ဖြစ်ကြ၍ ငါဘုရား၏ သာသနာတော်ကိုပူဇော်စေ၍ ရှောက်ရှောက်မြောက်ကြလိမ့်မည်။"

ထို့သို့ ဗျာဒိတ်တော်ထားခဲ့သည့်အတိုင်း သီရိခမ္ဘာသောကမင်း တည်ခဲ့သော ကျောက်စေတီကို ငုံ၍ သက္ကရာဇ်(၅၅၁)ခုနှစ်တွင် နရပတိ စည်သူမင်းကြီးက ရွှေတန်ဆာစေတီတော်ကြီး ထပ်တည်ကာ၊ သိကြားမင်းဆက်သသည့် အန္ဓိယနိုင်ငံ ဟာဝယုကျွန်းမှရရှိသော စန္ဒကူးသားဖြင့်ထူလုပ်ထားသည့်တန်ဆာစုံလင်အဆင်အယင် ပါရှိသော ရွှေတန်ဆာရုပ်ပွားတော်မြတ်ကြီးကို လှုံ့ကော်မုဒ်အတွင်းပူဇော်ခဲ့ပါသည်။။

11. Throne hall in the reconstructed palace in Shwebo



12. Alaungmintaya Memorial building and commemorative stone (Shwebo)



13. Monastic Compound in Shwebo

14. Building of royal archives in Shwebo (reconstruction)

15. White elephant, symbol of Buddhist royalty.

16. Popular representations of Alaungmintaya

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Popular representations found in Tin Htwe (drawings above and lower left) and Standard 4 School book, Ministry of Education, Myanmar.