

The Making of Modern Burma

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Contents

Acknowledgements [vii]

Introduction: The fall of Mandalay [1]

1 Kings and distant wars [12]

2 The Irrawaddy valley in the early nineteenth century [24]

3 The Court of Ava [53]

4 Empire and identity [79]

5 The grand reforms of King Mindon [104]

6 Revolt and the coming of British rule [130]

7 Reformists and royalists at the court of King Thibaw [154]

8 War and occupation [186]

9 A colonial society [219]

Conclusion: The making of modern Burma [245]

Bibliography [255]

Index [272]

1 | Kings and distant wars

A still nameless ridge of mountains, rising to heights of over 20,000 feet, extends east from the Himalayas and separates Tibet from the headwaters of the Irrawaddy river. For more than two months each winter, temperatures fall well below freezing and fierce storms envelop the region in snow. Between the mountains, narrow and thickly forested valleys are crowded with rhododendrons, magnolias, maples, firs and tall Formosan pines, and the mountains themselves, in their lower reaches, are covered in dwarf junipers and an abundance of small evergreens and perennials.

Here, in this home of tigers, Himalayan black bears and the Asian rhinoceros, two small rivers, the Mali Hka and the N'Mai Hka, have their origin. Fed by the melting snows, they wind their way south and eventually merge to form the Irrawaddy just below the twenty-sixth parallel. From this confluence, the river rushes down, in occasionally violent torrents, through steep gorges, some only fifty yards across, before reaching the hot arid plains below.

The country which it crosses through nearly all of its 700-mile-long journey to the sea is very dry, with cool winters and scorching summers, a dusty expanse of alluvial land where temperatures climb to an average of over 100 degrees Fahrenheit in March and April and the annual precipitation in places barely reaches twenty inches. The rains, when they do come, come in a few sharp downpours, violent monsoon storms which transform waterless stream beds into dark brown torrents in a matter of minutes. Much of the region is covered in a dry scrub forest of short thorny acacias, euphorbia and cutch. Along the water lines there are taller tamarind and Indian elm trees and nearly all the cultivation is confined to these irrigated zones. An extinct volcano, Mount Popa, 5,000 feet high, dominates the middle part of this otherwise almost entirely flat plain. The only other exception is a long line of hills, the Pegu Yoma, which parallel the Irrawaddy along its middle course.

The river's valley is almost entirely surrounded by a horseshoe of increasingly high mountains. To the west are dense forests, mainly of ebony, and then series of mountain ranges – the Arakan Yoma, the Lushai and Naga Hills and others – the tallest mountains over 12,000 feet

high. To the east are thick teak forests which suddenly give way to the Shan uplands, a plateau averaging 3,000 feet, in some places rising in single steps of 2,000 feet from the basin below. Often treacherous passes link the valley to its nearest lowland neighbours: Arakan, Manipur, Assam and Siam.

Only to the south is the valley free from its mountain fastness. Here, the badlands, savannah and scrub-clad hills give way to the broad alluvial plains of the delta, as the Irrawaddy spreads out like a fan, the river dividing and sub-dividing and finally spilling into the Bay of Bengal through nine smaller rivers and countless streams. This lower region is as wet as the upper valley is dry, with some parts receiving nearly 200 inches of rain a year. Much is also relatively new: the gradual silting of the river has pushed the land forward three miles each century, with many parts of the delta still below the level of the spring tides. Mangrove swamps and great tidal forests along the coast turn to marshes and grassland further inland, and dense tropical jungle covers the higher elevations just to the east and west.¹

Bodawpaya and western campaigns

The Prince of Badon was 37 years old when he ascended the throne of Ava in 1782.² His reign, which lasted until his death in 1817, was to be the longest in Burmese history since the days of Pagan, the longest in over five centuries. He is better remembered today as Bodawpaya or ‘the royal grandfather king’, the name by which he was often referred to in court writings of the mid-nineteenth century. With 53 wives and 120 children, Bodawpaya, the fifth son of Alaungpaya, the dynasty’s upstart founder, was perhaps the greatest of all the Konbaung kings. He presided over the Burmese empire at its very height, marching his armies steadily westward to the very borders of an equally expansionist British India.³

His first target was Arakan, a small kingdom along the Bay of Bengal

¹ Eugene Dobby, *Southeast Asia*, London, 1950, pp. 147–67.

² On Bodawpaya’s reign, see Tin(Mandalay), *Konbaungzet Maha Yazawindawgyi* (Great Royal Chronicle of the Konbaung Dynasty) (hereafter KBZ), vol. I, pp. 525–67; vol. II, pp. 1–219.

³ For a first-hand description of Bodawpaya, see Hiram Cox, *Journal of a Residence in the Burman Empire and More Particularly at the Court of Amarapoorah*, London, 1821, p. 90.

14 The making of modern Burma

which was separated by a formidable mountain range, the Arakan Yoma, from the Irrawaddy valley. The Arakanese ruling class spoke Burmese, and there existed many similarities in court culture and social organisation between the two societies, but the area's principal role as a centre of Indian Ocean trade and piracy also meant that Arakan was much more exposed to Indian Ocean influences, in particular from Bengal, but also from further afield. The religion was primarily Theravada Buddhist, but with a large Muslim minority and strong Brahmanical influences. In the late eighteenth century, the kingdom was in a period of disarray and more than one of its rival palace factions appealed to the Burmese for assistance, providing Ava with a welcome excuse to invade .

The Arakan campaign was led by the new crown prince, the king's eldest son, Thado Minsaw, the Prince of Shweidaung. The Burmese invaded in four columns totalling 30,000 men, three columns crossing the Arakan Yoma mountains and the fourth coming up along the Indian Ocean coastline from the erstwhile English base at Negrais, and they occupied the Arakanese capital at Mrohaung without serious loss in early 1785. Arakan was then annexed outright as a 'kingdom held by arms' (*lethnet naingngan*) and divided into four governorships, each backed by a garrison. Revenues from the occupied towns were divided between the treasury and selected members of the Court of Ava, with all the revenues from Mrohaung itself being granted to the king's white elephant. The Shweidaung Prince brought back with him the great Maha Muni image, symbol of Arakanese sovereignty, together with 20,000 captives to populate his father's new capital of Amarapura, the 'Immortal City'.

Earlier imperial dreams had rested on the conquest of the Chao Phraya valley and had led to the bloody sacking of Ayuthaya, the Siamese capital in 1767. But now the new and vigorous regime at Bangkok ended any real hope of expansion to the east, and it was an entirely new empire, to the west, which would now provide fertile ground for royal ambitions. In 1817, Bodawpaya died and was succeeded by his grandson (his son having died earlier) in the smoothest of all the Konbaung successions. The new king, Bagyidaw, though not nearly as capable as his grandfather, proved an even more ambitious imperialist.

Manipur, which had given so much trouble to the last Toungoo kings, had been the first object of Burmese aggression under the new Konbaung rulers. By the early eighteenth century, their nascent state, set in a small valley to the west of the Chindwin, had come under the influence of

Vaishnavite Hinduism and a process of 'Sanskritisation' encouraged by immigrant Bengali Brahmans. Their king, Garib Nawaz, had been the first to convert to the new faith and pursued a policy of repression of indigenous religious beliefs as well as of rival Hindu sects.

The first Konbaung invasion of Manipur in 1758 wreaked havoc on the small kingdom and was followed by an even larger and more devastating invasion in 1764.⁴ Thousands of Manipuris were forcibly deported to the Burmese capital and the combination of war, flight and deportation left Manipur virtually empty for years. Many of these captives were boatmen, smiths, weavers and artisans who became hereditary crown servants at Ava, and for generations they, their descendants and later Manipuri deportees formed an underclass in the valley, acting as domestic servants, menial labourers and agricultural workers for the Burmese royal family and nobility. They also formed the new Cassay Horse, an elite cavalry regiment, a few gaining fame as the best polo-players of their generation.

In 1813 the Burmese, having moved their forward bases up the Chindwin into the adjacent Kabaw valley, decided to consolidate their position in Manipur, and Prince Marjit Singh, a member of the local ruling house, was installed on the throne at Imphal. Marjit Singh had spent much of his youth at Ava and the Burmese believed he would make a pliant tributary. But by 1819 he had proved much too ambitious for the Court of Ava's liking, asserting his autonomy and refusing to attend the coronation of Bagyidaw, Bodawpaya's grandson and successor. This then led to the final conquest of the Manipur valley and a change in Burmese policy from a simple demand for tribute to indirect administration through a puppet prince. A permanent garrison was stationed, backed by a long supply line up the Chindwin river.

From their most northern forts along the Hukawng river, the victorious and confident Burmese army pushed yet further west, to Assam.⁵ The kings of Assam, with their capital at Rangamati, ruled over the Brahmaputra valley, from the descent of the great river in south-eastern Tibet to its entry into the plains of Bengal. A narrow valley hemmed in by high mountains, Assam had come under the rule of the originally Tai-speaking Ahom royal house in the thirteenth century. This old and distinguished family had led the mainly Tibeto-Burman-speaking peoples of the valley

⁴ Gangamumei Kabui, *History of Manipur, Vol. I: Pre-Colonial Period*, New Delhi, 1991, pp. 194–291.

⁵ S.L. Baruah, *A Comprehensive History of Assam*, New Delhi, 1985, pp. 220–369.

16 The making of modern Burma

in a series of defensive wars against the Mughal empire and had gradually, like the Manipuris, come under increasing Sanskrit and Hindu cultural influences. By the 1790s, however, the power of the Ahom court had begun seriously to decline, as intra-dynastic disputes combined with a widespread uprising by followers of the neo-Vaishnavite Moamariya movement. Rival groups turned to both Ava and Calcutta for assistance, leading to an initial British expedition in the winter of 1792–3 which aided in the quelling of the rebellion.

But by 1817, the situation in Assam had again reached a point of considerable instability, as the leader of one of the court factions appealed to Bodawpaya to intervene against the incumbent ruler or *swargadeo* of Assam, Chandrakanta Singh. Bodawpaya had already been looking to invade the Brahmaputra valley in support of the Moamariyas and in support of his own imperial aims. A well-equipped force of 8,000 men was marched north, swelled along the way by thousands more Jingpaw and Shan levies from the Hukawng valley and then, in an amazing logistical feat, was brought across the Himalayan passes along the Patkai ridge, and into the valley at its eastern end. The Assamese were decisively defeated at the battle of Kathalguri and the pro-Burmese premier Badan Chandra was installed. Chandrakanta Singh was allowed to remain as the nominal king.

Several years then followed of local intrigue and Burmese intervention, Assamese princes constantly switching allegiances and Ava becoming convinced of the need for tighter control. In 1821, a huge army of 20,000, including 10,000 Jingpaw levies, under the command of General Thado Maha Bandula again crossed the snow-clad mountains and began a pacification campaign intended to consolidate Ava's permanent hegemony over the country. In 1823, with the back of Assamese resistance largely broken, Thado Maha Bandula established his forward base at Rangpur and extinguished the Ahom court. He then began his initial forays into Cachar and Jaintia, and planned to march on Bhutan.⁶

Domination of this vast area, now sandwiched between British Bengal and Burma, was to have two profound effects. The first was the importation to the Court of Ava of many of the often Sanskrit-educated elites of these occupied states, a process which will be discussed in chapter 4. The second was to whet the Burmese appetite for further expansion, into the

⁶ Baruah, *History of Assam*, pp. 361–8.

heart of India, a course of action which would lead directly to the First Anglo-Burmese War in 1824.

The British and the Burmese

The first two hundred years of Anglo-Burmese relations had revolved around occasional attempts by the British East India Company to establish profitable trade ties with the Court of Ava. Small branch offices were set up at Syriam, Ava and Bhamo in the mid-seventeenth century but these had soon closed, mainly for lack of business. Another attempt was made to resume trade relations in the 1750s and a fortified settlement was established at Negrais along the coast. But the unwillingness of the British to intervene on the side of the Burmese had aroused suspicions in Alaungpaya's court and he ordered the settlement destroyed in 1759. When contact resumed almost forty years later, the British and Burmese had, for the first time, a common border, between Bengal and Arakan. As this frontier expanded northwards and westwards, mutual mistrust and fears over security on both sides increased.

By the turn of the century, Amarapura had become deeply concerned with the growth of British power in India. Spies were sent to the Tipu Sultan in Mysore, to the Marattas, to Nepal and to the imperial court in Delhi as well as to British Bengal. Interest in the East India Company even led Bodawpaya to employ an Englishman, or perhaps a Eurasian, named George, to teach English to several of his sons.⁷ Muslims and Armenians at the court had warned Burmese officials of the coming British threat. One intelligence report announced that 'only the East India Company flag flies along the Coromandal coast'. Another compared the English to a Banyan tree, which first leans on others while growing, only later to kill them when strong.⁸

The main point of tension between Calcutta and Amarapura was to be Arakan. The Burmese occupation of that country had been extremely repressive, with constant demands for men and material. In 1795 a levy of 20,000 men to help expand Meiktila lake, south of Amarapura, set off the

⁷ Than Tun, ed. *Royal Orders of Burma 1598–1885*, part 9, Tokyo, 1989 (hereafter *ROB*), 3 March 1810.

⁸ Tin (Pagan), *Myanma Min Okchokpon Sadan* (Documents Relating to the Administration of the Burmese Kings) (hereafter *MMOS*), 5 vols., Rangoon, 1931–3, vol. III, pp. 70–1.

18 The making of modern Burma

first wave of refugees into British territory and the beginnings of an Arakanese insurgency. In 1811, a new royal levy for 40,000 men sent another huge exodus of refugees towards Chittagong, adding impetus to the local guerilla resistance which soon defeated the Burmese garrison and took Mrohaung. The guerilla leader Chin Byan had offered to hold Arakan as a vassal of the East India Company, and this increased Amrapura's suspicions of Calcutta's motives, especially as his bases were located well within Company territory. British troops had prevented the Burmese from pursuing his men across the Naaf river boundary and cross-border relations quickly soured.

The second arena of contention was in the far north, in Manipur and in the Himalayan states of Assam, Jaintia and Cachar, where Ava's forward policy was meeting with growing British influence and concerns over the security of Bengal. The Burmese occupation of Manipur had driven large numbers of refugees into Cachar and the raja of Cachar in 1823 invited Ava to help restore order in his country. The Burmese occupation of the Brahmaputra valley and its probing moves into the adjacent high grounds were clearly intended to place pressure on Bengal. The British, worried about losing this buffer and with expansionist designs of their own, unilaterally declared Cachar and neighbouring Jaintia as protectorates and sent a force to halt the Burmese advance. Clashes soon developed between the two armies in Cachar and this, coupled with a worsening situation along the disputed Arakan border, led Fort William, on 5 March 1824, to declare war on the Kingdom of Ava.⁹

The First Anglo-Burmese War turned out to be the longest and most expensive in British Indian history. It lasted nearly two years, cost the British exchequer 5 million pounds, and led to the deaths of 15,000 British and Indian soldiers as well as tens of thousands of Burmese. At the onset of the war, the confident Burmese forces, under the command of their well-trying general and governor of Assam, Thado Maha Bandula, made a spirited attempt to break through British lines and march simultaneously on Syhlet from the north and Chittagong from the east. Bandula, a very tall man with a violent temper, had little time for precedence and protocol in a country obsessed with both. He was reported once to have decapitated by his own hand one of his senior officials for counselling retreat

⁹ George Bruce, *The Burma Wars: 1824–1880*, London, 1973, pp. 1–127; Htin Aung, *History of Burma*, pp. 194–217; KBZ, vol. II, pp. 369–425.

and had been one of the main proponents at Bagyidaw's court of an offensive policy against Calcutta. He believed that a decisive victory could gain them eastern Bengal as well as allow them to consolidate their gains in their new western empire of Arakan, Assam, Jaintia, Cachar and Manipur.

But despite a few initial victories against British Indian border units, the Burmese were quickly thrown on the defensive. As the rains approached, Bandula, having crossed the Naaf, paused with his army of 40,000 on the road to Chittagong, only to receive urgent news that a British fleet had reached Rangoon. This was a possibility the Burmese had not taken into account. Bandula was then forced to wheel his divisions around quickly and march them over the Arakan Yoma at the height of the monsoon while keeping most of his army intact. But then, even with fresh troops from Amarapura and levies from throughout the Irrawaddy valley totalling 60,000 men the general was unable to re-take Rangoon.

With the coming of the cold weather, and reinforced and resupplied by sea, the British then managed to break through Burmese lines and begin their march up-river. At Danubyu, Bandula tried to make a stand, massing 60,000 at that small delta town, including 35,000 musketeers and Ava's best cavalry. He had continued walking among his troops under a gilt umbrella marking his rank, despite the obvious danger, and was killed by an exploding shell. In disarray, the Burmese, under heavy bombardment, retreated north.

The British Expeditionary Force was led by General Sir Archibald Campbell, a veteran of the Peninsula Wars where he had fought the French under the Duke of Wellington. He pushed his army north along the Irrawaddy and then halted for a second rainy season at Prome. A faction at the court, led by the Prince of Tharrawaddy advised the king to open negotiations. The prince, who was the king's younger brother, was a military man. He had been Bandula's deputy at Rangoon and Danubyu and had seen first-hand the enemy's superiority in arms. The king, however, decided to try his luck and fight on, sending down thousands more hastily raised and improperly equipped levies.

The British resolutely pressed on despite Burmese attacks both on land and on the river. The *Diana*, a steamer recently arrived from Calcutta and the first ever used in battle, was deployed to counter the huge teak war-boats which had been the pride of Amarapura's armed forces. These were one hundred feet long, with up to sixty oarsmen and thirty

musketeers and were fitted with six- or twelve-pounder guns, and it was the defeat of this river fleet, as well as a decisive British victory at Pagan, which finally led to a Burmese request for negotiations in early 1826. On 24 February at Yandabo, a small village along the Irrawaddy forty-five miles from the capital, a peace treaty was signed between Campbell and the Myoza of Lègaing, a senior minister.¹⁰

Under the Treaty of Yandabo, the Court of Ava agreed to cease interference in the affairs of Jaintia, Cachar and Assam and to cede to the British their provinces of Manipur, Arakan and the Tennasserim. They also agreed to allow for an exchange of diplomatic representatives between Amarapura and Calcutta and to pay an indemnity, in instalments, of 10 million rupees or 1 million pounds sterling. The British would withdraw to Rangoon after the payment of the first instalment, and withdraw from Rangoon after the payment of the second.¹¹ After much delay, the second instalment was paid, the British left Rangoon, and in the steamy towns and forests of the Tennasserim and Arakan began their creation of 'British Burma'.

The end of empire

The kingdom's inglorious defeat was a profound shock for the Court of Ava. But Bagyidaw held on to his crown and his government remained essentially the same as before the war, dominated by those who had counselled against negotiation until the very end. His closest and most powerful advisor was his queen, Mè Nu, who was intensely disliked by many in the aristocratic establishment because of her common origins and autocratic manner. She had ensured her position by having her brother, the Myoza of Salin, raised to princely status and made the *de facto* head of the Council of State. The two together established a huge patronage network throughout the country, appointing loyal followers to key offices both in the provinces and at the capital, and amassing a substantial private fortune. Mè Nu schemed to marry her only child, a daughter, to the crown prince, Bagyidaw's son by his deceased chief queen.¹²

The king himself changed in personality after the war, shunning all of

¹⁰ For a translation of the relevant portions of the Konbaungzet chronicle, see Anna Allott, *The End of the First Anglo-Burmese War: The Burmese Chronicle Account of How the 1826 Treaty of Yandabo Was Negotiated*, Bangkok, 1994.

¹¹ *ROB*, 31 August 1824. ¹² On Bagyidaw's reign, see *KBZ*, vol. III, pp. 220–545.

his foreign friends except for the Spanish merchant Don Gonzales de Lanciego, who translated for him the Calcutta newspapers and was thought by the British to be pro-French. Described by the American missionary Judson as ‘mild, amiable, good natured and obliging . . . fond of shews, theatrical exhibitions, elephant catching and boat racing’, he was said to be ‘inordinately devoted to technical researches and experiments’. Understandably weary from the endless rituals and intrigue of court life, Bagyidaw was also reported to be ‘particularly desirous of discovering the secret of rendering himself invisible at will’.¹⁵

Up until the early 1830s, the Burmese government harboured considerable hope that with the final payment of indemnity, Calcutta would hand back Arakan and the Tennasserim. The Viceroy, Lord William Cavendish Bentinck, sent as the first British Resident to the Court of Ava Henry Burney, a career company-man who had just spent several years as Political Agent in Bangkok, and a Burmese embassy headed by Mingyi Maha Sithu visited India in 1830 in return. But when the last payment was made and it was clear to Amarapura that the annexations were final, relations began to deteriorate. This worsening of ties coincided with a decline in Bagyidaw’s health, the king sinking into a severe manic-depression and increasingly unable to fulfil any of his official functions.

A regency was formed, headed by his full-brother the Prince of Tharrawaddy and including the queen, Mè Nu, her brother, the Myoza of Salin, and two half-brothers of the king, the princes Thibaw and Kanaung. This was a coalition. During most of this time, Tharrawaddy kept a low profile, spending time with a circle of courtiers described as including ‘the most saucy set of fellows in Ava’.¹⁴ Mè Nu and Salin, on the other hand, became very active and tightened their grip on power, much to the dismay of the rest of the court, and eventually provoked an open split between them and the royal family. On 21 February 1837, Salin ordered the arrest of the Pagan Princess, Tharrawaddy’s sister, on suspicion of hoarding arms, and Tharrawaddy, fearing he would be next, first fled the capital, and then, after weeks of fighting and attempted diplomacy, defeated Salin’s forces and seized the throne. Bagyidaw was spared and died a natural death in 1846, but both the ex-queen and her brother were soon executed together with dozens of their followers as the new king moved to secure his throne.

The British had hoped that relations would now improve. But neither

¹⁵ Political and Secret Correspondence with India, Bengal Secret and Political (vol. 341), 5 August 1826. ¹⁴ Quoted in Pollack, *Empires in Collision*, p. 16.

under Tharrawaddy nor under his son and successor Pagan did the Burmese court display the sort of deference Calcutta now expected. By the early 1840s, British policy-makers grew fearful that Ava, having crushed an uprising in the delta and having reorganised the army, would launch a surprise attack on British Moulmein. Tharrawaddy's sons were given military commands in the south in Rangoon, Bassein and Toungoo and the king himself in 1841 sailed down-river at the head of an enormous flotilla of war-boats to pay homage at the Shwedagon Pagoda. Tharrawaddy knew that the British were preoccupied in China and Afghanistan and had hoped that his sabre-rattling would compel the British to negotiate the return of lost territory. But it seems he also knew that his armed forces were still no match for the East India Company and was careful not to be overly provocative.

Amidst this bellicose atmosphere, Tharrawaddy began to show signs of the same manic-depressive affliction which had debilitated his brother. Increasing the number of his wives and concubines from the sixteen he had when a member of the Regency Council to over one hundred probably aggravated his condition. A new cycle of intra-dynastic intrigue then began with several of his many sons jockeying for position. One of these, the Prince of Prome, rebelled against his father in 1845, supported by a number of *grandees*. Another son, the Prince of Pagan, was then made head of the government. He moved fast to end the rebellion and to purge the court of his brother's supporters. Tharrawaddy himself was placed under restraint as his condition worsened. When the king died in November 1846, Pagan ascended the throne.

Pagan's rule was not to last long. Once secure in power he entrusted many of the day-to-day affairs of state to one of his Privy Councillors. Initially, the king concentrated on his religious obligations and undertook numerous merit-making projects. He abolished livestock slaughter during certain parts of the year, freed caged animals, built pagodas and monasteries and searched far and wide for a new white elephant. His government, however, was directed towards managing relations with the British, in particular the large and vocal business community in Rangoon, where an unbending Burmese administration combined with profit-hungry British traders and ambitious missionaries to create a volatile atmosphere. Pagan's officials raised port charges, increased shipping regulations, opened incoming mail and restricted the movement of Burmese women, all measures which led the expatriates to call for a tough British response.

Calcutta was indeed frustrated that the Court of Ava, after such a resounding military defeat, had not adopted a more subservient attitude. Once the Company's hands were freed from other far-flung engagements, the Governor-General, Lord Dalhousie, began actively to consider a new war, one which would impress upon the Burmese the need to recognise British superiority.

In December 1851, the governor of Rangoon fined the captains and crews of two British ships 1,000 rupees for reported customs violations. Lord Dalhousie immediately dispatched two vessels of the Royal Navy with an ultimatum that the Burmese government rescind the fine and that the governor be immediately removed. The surprised Pagan and his ministers, fully aware of the consequences of a new war, accepted the terms. Nevertheless, the British naval officer in command at Rangoon, Commodore Lampert, went ahead and blockaded the coastline. Though Dalhousie reprimanded Lampert for his actions, Calcutta decided hostilities were inevitable and sent a new ultimatum, demanding 1 million rupees to cover the costs of having had to prepare for war. Without waiting for a reply, joint British naval and ground forces quickly seized Rangoon, Bassein and Martaban.

Burmese forces were commanded by the Myoza of Tabayin, a son of the great general Thado Maha Bandula and a career military man, who had served as colonel of the Marabin Artillery and as captain of the Eastern Gate. But thirty years of advances in military technology and planning on the British side, and little innovation on the Burmese side, meant that the king's forces could offer only a limited defence. In April 1852, the Myoza of Tabayin himself was killed in the defence of Rangoon, and Pegu was taken in November despite spirited resistance.¹⁵ In December, Dalhousie declared the newly occupied territory as a new province of British Burma. Two months later, a palace coup overthrew Pagan. His half-brother Mindon, leading a peace party, became the new king and Burmese forces were withdrawn northwards of the annexation line.

¹⁵ Hmawbi Saya Thein, *Myanma Wungyi Hmugyi Mya Akaung*, Rangoon, 1967, p. 151.

2 | The Irrawaddy valley in the early nineteenth century

The early-nineteenth-century realm of the Burmese monarchs stretched from the Himalayan mountains in the north to the Andaman Sea in the south and from the plains of Siam in the east to British Bengal in the west. But the writ of the king and his ministers only penetrated sections of this vast territory. Much remained under the cover of dense jungle or within the effective authority of tributary chiefs. In Arakan, Burmese governors, backed by elephants and musketeers, barely controlled more than the main towns of Mrohaung, Ramree, Cheduba and Sandoway, as the peoples of the marshy countryside and the adjacent hills held out against their grasp. Ava's occupation lasted only forty years and throughout this time rebellions and cross-border raids by Arakanese insurgents continually challenged a precarious presence.

In the small northern and eastern principalities nearby, local rulers accepted or resisted Burmese sovereignty but never lost their autonomy. The Shan and other *sawbwa* were required to attend regular homage ceremonies, bring tribute of gold and silver and provide daughters for the king's western apartments. Burmese troops were posted at selected garrison towns and the largest was at Mong Nai. But these soldiers were there to suppress outright rebellion and were not part of a more general structure of government. These lesser states were viewed by the regime as their principal tributaries, a vast arc of dependent polities. In areas close to Ava, there existed strong cultural and often personal ties between the Shan-speaking and Burmese-speaking courts. Marriage tied the Ava aristocracy to all important tributary princely clans and the sons of Shan rulers often spent their formative years as pages to their paramount ruler. But further away, Ava's authority was negligible, and the more distant states, such as Chiang Hung across the Salween, were all but independent.

The Burmese initially sought a similar tributary relationship with the states to the north-west. Indeed, the term *sawbwa*, from the Shan *saohpa*, 'lord of the sky', was normally applied to the rulers of these predominantly non-Tai-speaking principalities and kingdoms. But chronic instability, continued resistance to any tributary relationship and expansive Burmese

ambition eventually led to attempts at a more permanent occupation and Ava's direct administration. This was, however, to be very short-lived and the first British war ended the Burmese presence throughout the Brahmaputra basin.

In between all these lowland polities were the extensive upland regions. Here, with the exception of slave raids and occasional trade, the Court of Ava showed little desire to impose her authority. Only in the far north was there any official interest: the aggressive drive of Jingpaw-speaking peoples into the upper reaches of the Irrawaddy valley had begun to harass the rear bases of Ava's Himalayan campaigns, and royal patrols attempted, usually in vain, to check their southward movements.

It was only the Irrawaddy valley that the Burmese kings really controlled. The overwhelming proportion of their subjects lived in a narrow strip of land on either side of the Irrawaddy and its principal tributary, the Chindwin. Quite a large proportion lived within the environs of the royal city itself. This relatively densely populated region was the core of the local state, as it had been during the heyday of Pagan. It measured approximately 400 miles north to south and about 200 miles across. The boundaries of the region were almost exactly those of the dry-zone, thus creating a political and ecological unit which remained at the heart of the kingdom until its final demise.

Directly to the south, the delta and the Tenneserim littoral was a frontier region, one which was firmly tied to royal power, but still sparsely settled and not yet fully Burmese-speaking. By the early nineteenth century, the language and culture of the royal courts were only just pushing south, displacing older traditions centred on the Mon language and memories of autonomous Mon-speaking rule. Rangoon emerged as the second most important city in the kingdom and the rice-growing economy of the delta became an important part of the overall economy. Under the early Konbaung kings, administrators worked to pull the delta and the Tenneserim littoral firmly into the orbit of Ava's government, a process, half-finished, which was to be interrupted by the annexations of 1853.

People and population

Exactly how many people lived in the valley is not known. The earliest extant royal census dates from 1783 and lists a total of 282,000 households while a slightly later census of 1802 lists only 178,000 households. If

the average number of people per household was seven, this would work out to 1.97 million and 1.25 million people respectively.¹ These censuses included all the registered households reported by local officials to royal agencies from the entire valley as well as some of the Tennasserim littoral and settlements along the Shan escarpment. They did not include Arakan and more peripheral parts of the kingdom. Local officials often under-reported the number of households in their charge in order to minimise the amount of revenue or labour later demanded. In addition, people living away from royal authority such as forest monks or bandits, itinerant traders and entertainers, as well as the slaves and the retainers of the larger and more important households, were probably not reported at all. Thus, there were perhaps somewhat over 2 million people in the Irrawaddy valley in the early nineteenth century, a figure similar to that reached by several contemporary European observers.

This population was very unevenly distributed. A majority of people lived close to the Irrawaddy river itself, from around Shwébo in the north to Prome in the south. This is an area of only about 40,000 square miles compared with a total area for present-day Burma of 238,000 square miles. A large proportion of these people lived in and around Ava and as much as 10 per cent of the valley population lived either in the royal city or nearby along the Irrawaddy–Chindwin confluence. Ava and Amarapura were both, at different times, reported to have been home to over 100,000 people. Few other places reached even a tenth of that figure, including major towns such as Alon or Salin. Other areas were very sparsely populated, including the delta, which was only just beginning to recover from the devastation of the mid-eighteenth-century wars. Even along the middle valley, large tracts of scrub forest separated the mainly riverine communities.

Population trends are even more difficult to estimate, but it is possible that overall population grew very gradually over the early modern era, say from the sixteenth century onwards. Population certainly rose and fell to an extent. War, disease, famine and forced relocations could all turn fairly densely inhabited areas back to desert or jungle in a short space of time. On the other hand, long periods of internal stability, such as the peace

¹ On population, see Lieberman, *Burmese Administrative Circles*, pp. 20–1; Lieberman, ‘Secular Trends’ pp. 3–12; H. Burney, ‘On the Population of the Burman Empire’ (1842), reprinted *Journal of the Burma Research Society* (hereafter *JBRS*) 31 (1941), 19–33.

which the dry-zone enjoyed from the final expulsion of Mon-led forces during the civil war in 1752 to the turn of the century, were periods of demographic expansion. In the late eighteenth century, natural population growth was also supplemented by the large-scale importation or immigration of peoples from the surrounding uplands, Manipur and Siam.

Most of the people of the valley spoke Burmese as their mother tongue. Many were descendants of the earliest Burmese-speakers of the valley but many others were descendants of speakers of other languages, such as Pyu, Thet or Kadu, who gradually came to adopt Burmese and assimilate into the majority society. Others were recent arrivals. These included recent captives, as well as Armenian, Jewish, Chinese, Persian, Bengali, Tamil and other south Asian traders. They also included the descendants of Portuguese and Muslim mercenaries from the Deccan, and peoples imported after earlier military victories. Some had ancestors from quite far afield. In 1758, for example, a French warship was seized towards the end of the civil war. Its crew were marched north, enlisted into the king's army as hereditary gunners and given land near the capital. There they joined the descendants of earlier European mercenaries, Dutch, Spanish and Portuguese. Their leader, the *chevalier* Pierre de Millard was made head of the royal bodyguard and granted a suitable noble title. A few small Roman Catholic villages remain to this day, and their inhabitants are aware of their European ancestry. But in every other way they are virtually indistinguishable from their neighbours. For the Theravada Buddhist Lao, the Siamese and others, assimilation was doubtless even faster. While names such as 'Vientiane Hill' or 'Manipuri village' remain, very few are aware of the great mix of backgrounds which went into creating the modern Burmese.

Kinship and social organisation

The vast majority of people in the Irrawaddy valley were organised into small descent or kinship groups. These groups were normally associated with a particular place. People generally married within these descent groups and lived together with other group members. Peoples' livelihoods and their relationship to political authority rested on their group membership and their group position. Larger villages and towns might contain members of more than one group but smaller villages might consist exclusively of a single group of extended kin. Some groups were part of

larger formations with constituent descent groups scattered across a region. From the royal family itself to a group of slaves attached to a small village pagoda, these descent groups formed the basis of social organisation and of political control throughout the king's realm.²

People lived in very distinct clusters of settlements along the Irrawaddy river. Some of the settlements were fortified, and these were called *myo*. Some also had a moat as well as a wall and a permanent market, or *zay*, and were usually the site of a shrine to a local deity, or *nat*, where a festival would be held once a year. There would be one, or perhaps several, Buddhist monasteries which served not only as religious centres but also as local schools, places of rest for travellers and places of refuge for stray animals. Many of the houses were built of simple materials, bamboo and thatch, but the more important people of the *myo* – its rulers, rich traders and representatives of the king – lived in large wooden compounds, their doors sometimes painted vermillion, the colour of minor nobility. An army garrison might be stationed within the walls, but more likely a number of local men would be given the right to bear arms and they would act as police and as a military reserve in times of need.

Other settlements, which were not fortified were known as *ywa*. A *ywa* was generally smaller than a *myo* and was often just a collection of houses, perhaps a few dozen, built closely together near the fields, where most of the inhabitants worked. The houses themselves would be simple constructions of bamboo and thatch and were raised for protection from floods and snakes. Mango and tamarind trees were often planted for shade and the entire settlement would normally be surrounded by a protective wall of tall thorny hedges.³ At the edge of the *ywa*, there would invariably be a small shrine to the village *nat*.

A *myothugyi*, the chief of the *myo*, was the hereditary ruler of his town and its hinterland, the *myo-nè*. Some of these chiefs had other names, but all were the leading members of the area's dominant descent group and served as the primary link between their communities and the Court of Ava. They were supervised to varying extents by the royal governors, quite senior officials who set up headquarters in the largest and most strategi-

² On Burmese kinship and village organisation in the immediate post-colonial period, see Manning Nash, *The Golden Road to Modernity: Village Life in Central Burma*, New York, 1965; and Melford Spiro, *Marriage and Kinship in Burma: A Cultural and Psychodynamic Analysis*, Berkeley, 1977.

³ O.H.K. Spate, 'The Burmese Village', *Geographical Review*, 3(4) (1945), 23–43.

cally placed *myo* and acted as agents of the crown. In addition to the governor and the local chief, the third important figure within the rural towns was the *myo-za*, literally the ‘eater’ of the town. These were members of the Ava aristocracy, normally members of the royal family or serving high officials, to whom the crown alienated its customary income from a given town. They also had other rights, including some judicial authority, but this varied from place to place and time to time. They normally lived in the royal city and so were represented at their *appanage* by their representative, the *myo-kaing*. Together these three august personages, the governor, the chief and the eater, dispensed justice, collected taxes, presided over religious and state ceremonies and led their men in war. Between themselves, they shared the power and divided the surplus wealth of their local community.

Most people lived with their extended families. The word for ‘kinsman’ or ‘relation’ is *a-myo*. Confusingly, though *myo* meaning town and *myo* meaning kin or descent are spelled the same in English, they are distinct in Burmese, being of different tones. They are entirely different words. The root of the words for kinsmen and descent group is a cognate of the Tibetan *’bru*. Both mean ‘seed’. In Burmese *myo* has come to imply a shared origin or a common descent. It also has come to have a more general connotation of ‘sort’ or ‘kind’ and may be applied to people and animals as well as inanimate objects. The Burmese saw the word as equivalent to the Pali word *jati*, which in English is usually translated as ‘caste’. Descent was reckoned biologically, that is both the mother’s and father’s relations were regarded as the individual’s *a-myo*.

Marriage tended to be endogamous, within the circle of one’s *a-myo*. Cross-cousin marriages in particular were encouraged and incest rules extended only to parents, children and full siblings, marriages to half-siblings being far from unknown. Marriage outside of one’s group was permitted, but often actively discouraged, both by royal decree and probably as well by local custom. Various rules were established to then determine the position of children in a ‘mixed’ marriage, the general principle being that male children were recognised as members of the father’s group and female children as members of the mother’s group. Residence was neo-local, that is to say newly married couples moved away from their respective parents and into their own homes.

Throughout the early modern era, periodic war and famine and attendant displacements of people led to frequent abandonment and

recolonisation of villages, particularly in less productive areas. In addition, the low density of population in all but the most intensely irrigated places, and places close to the main river-ways, meant that new communities were constantly being formed by immigrants. These immigrants included settlers from nearby upland areas such as Maru, Jingpaw or Mizo speakers of related Tibeto-Burman languages.⁴ Others were immigrants from overseas, or war captives who were settled in newly colonised land by the crown.

Within these small single-*myo* villages, there would be a line of chiefs. This was known as the chiefly *yo*, or bone. *Yo* is a cognate of the Tibetan *rus-pa*, and in Tibetan means clan or family.⁵ In Burmese, however, the word means 'lineage', normally a patrilineage in which office descended from father to eldest son. This was the most common inheritance system in general, the eldest son having the special position known as *oratha*, which granted him not all his parent's property, but the largest share. In some villages, the *yo* might descend from father to youngest son, or even from mother to daughter, but these systems of inheritance were relatively uncommon. Most chiefs were known as *thu-gyi*, literally 'the big person', and he would be the head of his lineage, the head of his descent group, and the chief of his village.

Over time, outsiders would arrive at these new settlements and apply for permission to live. They would normally be accepted, given the acute labour shortages in most parts of the valley. They were known as *kappa*, and would be assigned land or other duties by the chief. If they married into the local *myo*, their children were known as *ala*. This sense of difference between 'locals' and 'outsiders' was very important and was traced through many generations of descent, with clearly marked categories for varying degrees of 'outsideness'. The members of the original descent group would propitiate the same deity, perhaps an ancestor of the ruling family. This would be their ancestral or *mizain-pazain nat*.⁶ Outsiders would bring their own *nat* worship, and, over time, a small village might have one dominant *nat* cult with a small number of subsidiary ones as well.

As these settlements grew in times of peace and prosperity as well as in the older, larger walled towns, the founding descent group would come to

⁴ *ROB*, 2 April 1647 refers to the settling of upland immigrants.

⁵ G.H. Luce, *Phases of Pre-Pagan Burma: Languages and History*, Oxford, 1985, vol. II, chart T. ⁶ Richard Temple, *Thirty Seven Nats*, London, 1906, pp. 7-8.

see itself in a position apart from newer, subordinate *myo* who had arrived later. Whatever the truth of people's actual descent, even in centuries-old towns, the dominant *myo* was seen or saw itself to be the *myo* of the original colonisers of the locality. The chief, who might enjoy a noble style, would be of the chiefly lineage of the 'founding' descent group. Being of the 'founding family' or of the 'original family of chiefs' was a key claim to local elite status. Below them, all other inhabitants would be ranked in an hierarchy.

The Burmese legal literature clearly divided all people into four general social classes.⁷ The first was the *min-myo*, the rulers. The second was the *ponna-myo*, the ritualists who were 'learned in the Vedas'; the third, the *thuhtay-myo*, the bankers and rich merchants; and the fourth, the *sinyètha-myo*, the 'poor people' or commoners. These reflect the Indian *varna* system which was known to the Burmese at the time and in which descent groups were classed as *Ksatriya*, *Brahmin*, *Vaishya* or *Sudra*. The Burmese used their single word *myo* as a synonym for both the Indian derived *zati* (*jati*) and *wunna* (*varna*).⁸ Indeed, the Burmese explicitly link each of their four classes to one of the four *varnas*. But the difficulty of the fit is seen in the addition, especially in the legal literature, of a number of other categories and sub-categories.

For example, a distinction was made between the ruling class and the 'noble' or 'official' class. The first was said to refer mainly to the royal family, but also included a few very senior ministers, generals and other 'exalted persons'. The second, the *amat-myo*, included the families of all office-holders, both those who held local office by hereditary right and royal office-holders who were, nominally at least, selected by the king. The first group was said to rank above the *ponna*, whereas the *ponna* ranked above the ordinary nobility. In addition, the legal literature often makes reference to the *konthè-myo*, the 'trading class', which ranked somewhere in between the richer merchant-bankers and the ordinary 'poor people'. Finally, below the normal 'poor peoples' class was the much lower class of

⁷ D. Richardson (ed.), *The Damathat or the Laws of Menoo*, Moulmein, 1847, p. 91 and *passim*; John Jardine, *Notes on Buddhist Law*, Rangoon, 1882, *passim*; see also Kala, *Maha Yazawindawgyi*, pp. 13–14; Andrew Huxley, 'The Village Knows Best: Social Organisation in a 18th century Burmese Law Code', *Southeast Asia Research*, 5 (1997), 2–15.

⁸ *Pali-Myanma Abhidan*, vol. VIII, Rangoon, 1974, p. 217; *Pitaka Kyan-hnyun*, vol. I, Rangoon, 1972, p. 519.