

Figure 2 Map of Tagaung ancient city. Courtesy of Department of Archaeology, Myanmar.

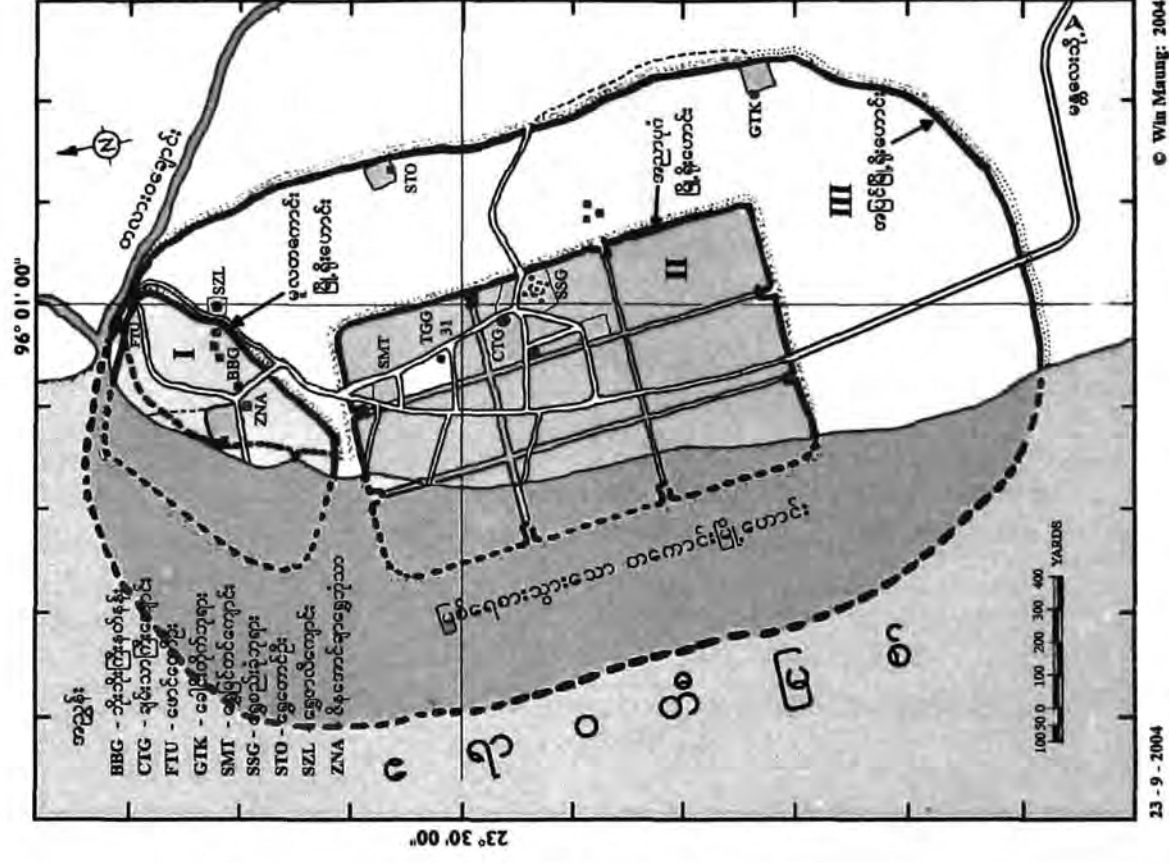


Figure 3 Conjectural drawing of Tagaung map (before the city was eroded by the Ayeyarwady river). Courtesy of Department of Archaeology, Myanmar.

## New Finds at Tagaung, an Ancient City of Myanmar

### Location

## Trade and Ecology



traders and farmers from the surrounding regions.<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, Myanmar chronicles record the royal cities not as a lineage of people but one of place: a *bodhimanda* or site where successive Buddhas attain Enlightenment.<sup>4</sup>

The trade in resources from Mogoke and Namtu, such as teak, rubies and silver (used then for land purchases<sup>5</sup>) add to the advantages of Tagaung's river location and position as a trading post for products from other regions and valuable local resources, among which were elephants (captured in the uplands, and held south of Tagaung at Hsin Hnyat Kone, the hill where elephants were clamped). Varied types of land east of the city supported a range of crops, from edible oil to rice and coriander. Pheasants, partridges, toucans, pelicans, *Saurus* cranes, and fish live around and in seasonal lakes (*inn-gyi*) and tall swamp grass areas. Tigers, elephants, bantengs, gaurs and deers were once common around Tagaung (Figure 4, Figure 5).<sup>6</sup>

Figure 4 Iron bearing mountain south east of Tagaung. Photograph: Elizabeth Moore

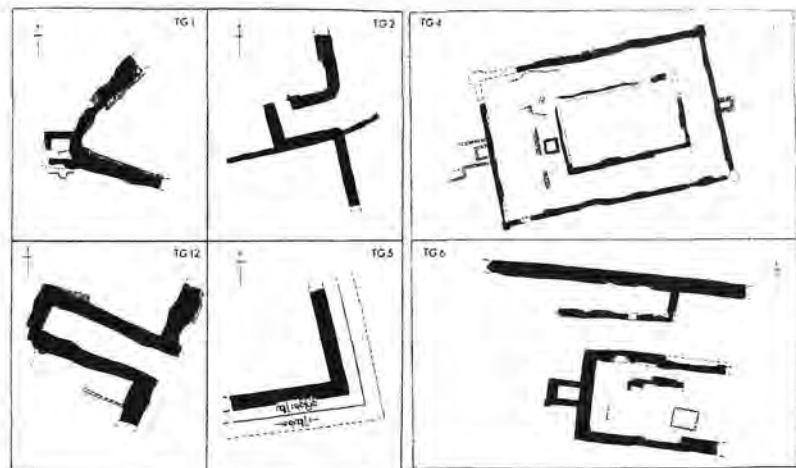


Figure 5 Seasonal lake east of Tagaung. Photograph: Elizabeth Moore

## Excavations at Tagaung

In 1904, Taw Sein Kho, chief epigraphist of Burma Epigraphy Office, carried out the first archaeological exploration at Tagaung. In 1916, terracotta votive tablets with inscriptions of the 11<sup>th</sup> century A.D. King Anawrahtar were discovered at Tagaung and other Upper or Anyar Bagan ancient cities. U Mya, another chief epigraphist, later explored Tagaung in 1930. After Independence in 1948, the Department of Archaeology was founded in 1957 but excavations were first conducted at other ancient cities such as Beikthano, Hanlin and Sri-Ksetra. It was only in 1967-68 that systematic excavations were conducted at Tagaung. Twelve mounds (TG1-12) were unearthed, all revealing brick structures (Figure 6), as noted below:

Figure 6 Plan of excavated structures at Tagaung (1967-1969). Courtesy of Department of Archaeology, Myanmar.



- City walls, city gates, fortress TG 1, 2, 5, 8, 11, 12

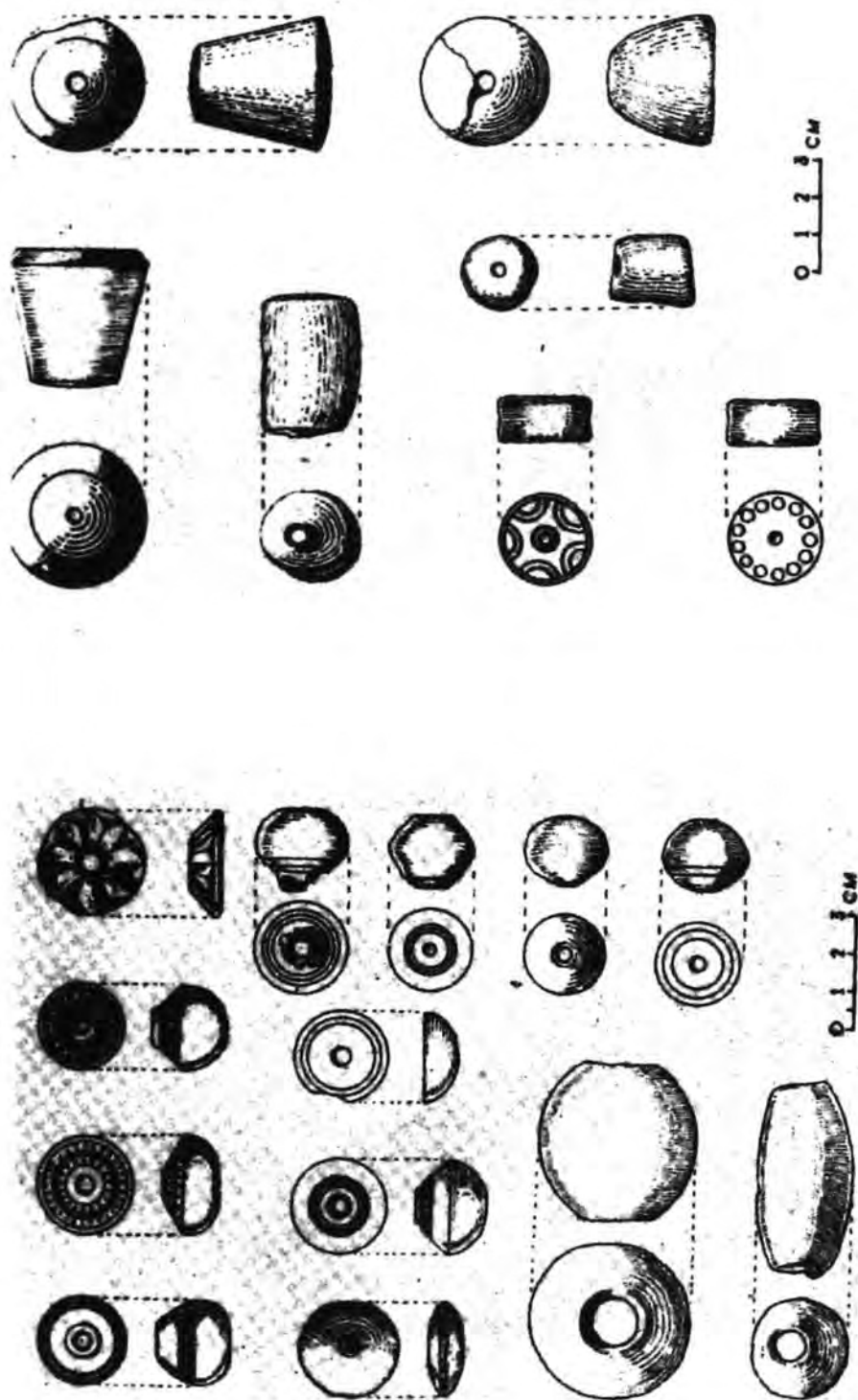


Figure 7 Drawing of terracotta beads excavated at Tagaung. Courtesy of Department of Archaeology, Myanmar.

- Residential buildings                      TG 3, 7, 9
- Religious and ritual buildings        TG 4, 6, 10

Artefacts found during the 1967-1969 excavations included dolomite Buddha images of the Bagan period, Bagan-type pottery (Figure 8d) and terracotta beads (Figure 7 on previous page). There were also stone images of the Buddha, spouted jars, earplugs and iron arrow heads, all placed in the Bagan period. Many surface finds of votive tablets attributed to King Anawrahta were recorded during this period and in the following years (Figure 8). A hoard of level fifty round tablets 4-6 cm in diameter was recovered in recent years, 150 centimeters below ground level, under a deposit of Anawrahta-type tablets. All the small tablets depict a single figure of the Buddha in *Bhumisparsa* mudra (a posture with hands in a certain gesture/position). They have been divided into three groups according to the surrounding motifs (Figures 8a, 8b, 8c):

1. Oval halo, *takeh* or throne back and up to eight stupas
2. Filled with the medicinal *gamon*, an aromatic tuber of the ginger (*Kaempferia*) family
3. Two small stupas and enclosing lines, the outer marked by *beindu* dots

One tablet of Type 2 was previously dated to the 11<sup>th</sup> century A.D. with Myanmar scholars today holding various opinions on their dating. Some retain an 'early Bagan' or 'late Pyu' label, based on the leg position, with both feet facing upwards. Others consider them in an earlier framework of Gupta influence in the rounded abdomen, closeness of the feet to the torso and lack of a triangular face that would suggest Bagan or Pala styles.<sup>7</sup>

Given the high proportion of Bagan finds from excavations in the 1960s, U Than Swe, who first excavated at Tagaung, retained a dating of Tagaung at between the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> century A.D.. The site was again excavated in 1992-1993 at TG 13 to TG 16, during which time the inner city walls, outer city walls and some religious buildings were for the first time revealed. One important find was a small gold Buddha image in relief, from TG15 (Figure 9). More work was carried out from 1997 to 1999 at TG 17 to TG 21 (Figure 10), unearthing further parts of the city walls and gates as well as religious buildings. Again, the artefacts were assigned to the Bagan period.

Continued excavations at Tagaung (TG31) and Hsin Hnyat Kone (SNK 1 to SNK 3) in the past decade have brought to light a number of





Figure 8 Dolomite stone Buddha images and terracotta votive tablets from Tagaung. Courtesy of Department of Archaeology, Myanmar.



Figure 9 A gold Buddha relief image found at site TG 15. Courtesy of Department of Archaeology, Myanmar.



Figure 10 View of excavation site TG 21. Courtesy of Department of Archaeology, Myanmar



Figure 8a Type 1 round votive tablets, Tagaung, showing thumb print on reverse. Collection: Pandita Nanda (Uzin Min Han, Tagaung). Photograph: Elizabeth Moore



Figure 8b Type 2 rarest of the Tagaung round votive tablets. Collection: Pandita Nanda (Uzin Min Han, Tagaung). Photograph: Elizabeth Moore



Figure 8c Type 3 round votive tablets, Tagaung, showing variation in size and placement of motifs on tablet. Collection: Pandita Nanda (Uzin Min Han, Tagaung). Photograph: Elizabeth Moore



Figure 8d Artefacts discovered during 1967-1969 excavations. Courtesy of Department of Archaeology, Myanmar

objects dated to the (200 B.C. to 850 A.D.) Pyu period. At Hsin Hnyat Kone, a religious building with finger-marked bricks was uncovered (Figure 11). A number of roof tiles, end-pieces (of roof tile) and large round pots were also recorded at the Hsin Hynat Kone sites (Figure 12). The roof tiles are distinctive, bearing textile impressions on the convex side. Some were slightly curved quarter sections, others semi-circular with a smaller diameter. Two types of end-pieces were recovered. Some are round and others crescent-shaped, divided into two sections. Each section is decorated with a tri-lobed festoon and a dotted border (Figure 13). The round end-pieces are marked with sun-like rays, usually 10 to 15 in number, tipped with circular raised dots around a central spot. Both round and crescent types vary: the crescents in the style of the festoons and number of surrounding dots, and the circular pieces in the number and width of the rays. The crescent pieces are 1 to 1.5 cm thick, 15 to 20 cm in height and 21 to 26 cm in width, while the round ones are *circa* 1 to 4.5 cm thick, 13 to 20 cm diameter and with the rim 1 to 3 cm wide. The circular impressions are stamped into the clay to make heavy, often roughly finished, objects that contrast with the more standard proportions of the crescent pieces. The design of the superstructure remains unclear, with the possibilities ranging from brick to a tiered wooden roof, or similar to the Han two-storey halls (Vietnam), built around an earthen core with timber, pounded earth or mud brick walls.<sup>8</sup> Notably, similar types of roof tiles and end pieces dated to the period between the 1<sup>st</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> century A.D.



Figure 11 Finger-marked bricks found at site SNK 2. Courtesy of Department of Archaeology, Myanmar.



Figure 12 Two large round pots found at site SNK 2. Courtesy of Department of Archaeology, Myanmar.



Figure 13 Decorated roof tiles found at site SNK 1. Courtesy of Department of Archaeology, Myanmar.



Figure 14 A large pot uncovered at site TG 24. Courtesy of Department of Archaeology, Myanmar



Figure 15 Terracotta beads, stone beads, and iron objects found inside the pot. Courtesy of Department of Archaeology, Myanmar.



Figure 16 Decorated round pots and jars with long bottle neck found at site TG 31. Courtesy of Department of Archaeology, Myanmar.

have been found in Linshang, Hebei province, northeast China and at Trakieu and Go Cam in central Vietnam. The tiles found in Vietnam have been likened to Chinese styles of the Qin and Han of early first millennium A.D. while the Hebei pieces are dated to the slightly later Northern Dynasties period.<sup>9</sup>

Excavations were undertaken again at Tagaung from 2003 to 2005, yielding more artefacts dated to the first millennium A.D. Pyu era of Upper Myanmar. Among the notable finds are large pots from site TG 24 containing grave goods, such as stone and terracotta beads, iron rings, and iron spearheads (Figures 14 and 15). Similarly, excavation at site TG 31 located inside the Tagaung State High School compound brought a large number of distinct pots and burial urns to light (Figure 16). The Pyu-type pottery was found at a depth of 2.5 meters on a brick 'floor' made with finger-marked bricks. Altogether sixty-five vessels were unearthed, twenty five of which bore stamped designs on the shoulder in single, double or triple rows (Figure 17). Motifs included floral, geometric and zoomorphic designs, such as birds, a human figure, elephants and bulls. The designs, placement of motifs, and the contents of the Tagaung urns are different to the vessels from Hanlin, Beikthano and Sri-



Figure 17 Burial urns and pottery vessels found at site TG 31. Courtesy of Department of Archaeology, Myanmar



Ksetra (Figure 19). The urns are generally egg-shaped, with some of other shapes, including a tall baluster pot with bones and ashes (Figure 18). Vessel 14 had two lids, one bronze and one terracotta, and contained the bones of a complete skeleton. Other finds were shells, copper and bronze bells, bracelets, rings, lids, swords, iron rings, brackets, rivets, gold and silver artefacts. There were also beads made of terracotta, bone and various semi-precious stones with drum and cylinder shapes.

## Conclusion

Myanmar chronicles excelled in the art of allusion, something well illustrated with the serpents, giant boars, blind sons, crows, and mighty iron-smiths of Tagaung accounts. As a result of such elements, archaeologists and historians often dismiss chronicles and the record of places cited in them. At Tagaung, however, these burial urns, stamped vessels, roof-tiles, and votive tablets highlight varied links with Yunnan and South Asia. In recent writings on Tagaung, the TG 31 and Hsin Hnyat Kone pottery, decorated designs, finger-marked bricks, terracotta and semi-precious stone beads, the tradition of urn burials have been put in a Pyu cultural context. The identification of the Pyu people, before Bagan, is based on scattered evidence, relying on about twenty-five inscriptions written in Kadamba scripts, which were dated between the 4<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D. These have been found on stone objects such as steles, images of the Buddha, burial urns, terracotta votive tablets, sealings, a gilded silver casket and gold plates with Buddhist texts. The majority of the inscribed pieces come from the largest Pyu ancient city, Sri-Ksetra, located some 500 km south of Tagaung. Sri-Ksetra is thought to have reached its zenith between the 4<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> century A.D. although it had been founded many centuries earlier. Finds of two roof tile end-pieces at Sri-Ksetra underline links between Tagaung and Sri-Ksetra as described in the chronicles. Despite the wide distribution of similar artefacts



Figure 18 Pot 14 cluster in site TG 31.  
Courtesy of Chit San Win.

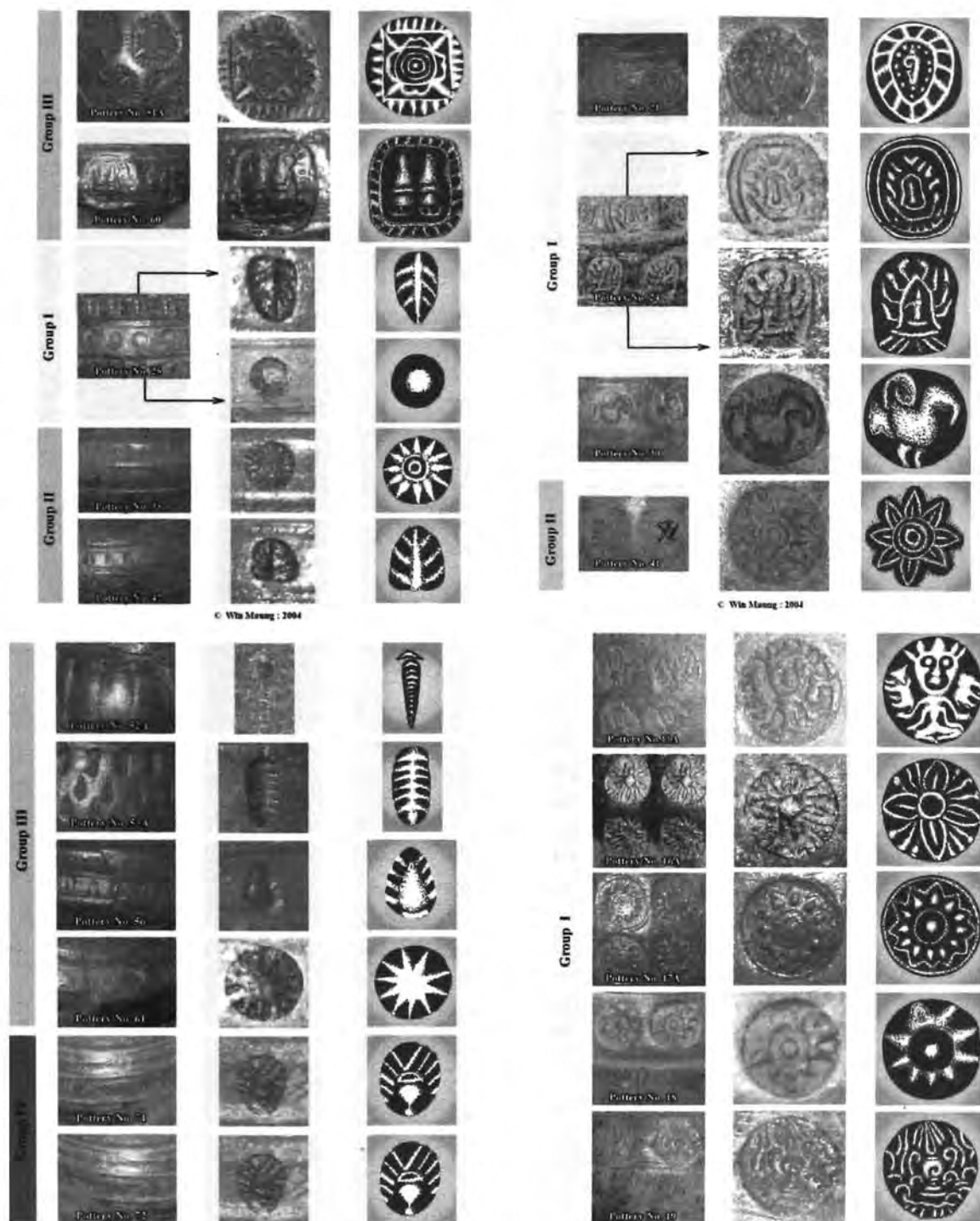


Figure 19 Drawing of stamped designs on pottery vessels found at TG 31. Courtesy of Tampawady U Win Maung.

throughout Upper Myanmar, the absolute dating of the Pyu cultures comes from only two major sites, Beikthano and Hanlin. The radiocarbon date of Beikthano's Phase I is 1950±50 and the date from the Phase II is 1650±50. From these results, it has been surmised that Beikthano was at its apex between 1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. and Hanlin between 4<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> century A.D.

In Upper Myanmar, most objects associated with Pyu cultures have been found along the Ayeyarwady river basin. Many of these are highly portable beads, symbolic silver coins, semi-precious stone beads, sealings and seals, stone and terracotta Buddha images and votive tablets. These link Upper Myanmar to South Asia and Dvaravati sites, such as Nakhon Pathom and Uthong. Similarly, the large burial urns with stamped designs point to cultural relations with areas outside present-day Myanmar. It is hoped that further excavations may shed more light on the role of the site during the many social and religious changes of this era, and the early history of Tagaung at this unique crossroads of rivers, lakes, mountains and man.

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- 5 Tun Aung Chain 2005: 4, 8
- 6 San Win, pers.comm. August 2006, George 1961: 13-14
- 7 Pandita Nanda (Tagaung) 2006; U Mya 1960 (1): 50, Pl. 67; Win Maung (Tampawaddy), pers.comm. 23.12.2006
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