

TERRACOTTA VOTIVE TABLETS OF S'RIKSETRA*

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Abstract

Sri Ksetra is one of the ancient cities of Pyu in Myanmar. It is situated at the present village of Hmawza, about 5 miles southeast of modern Pyay, Bago division between lat 18° 50' N and long 05° 20' E. It was built in 101 Buddhist Era (443 BC) and the people of Sri Ksetra became Buddhists before the Christian Era. It had favorable geographical condition for internal trade as well as trade with other foreign countries. By trade relation with India, Sri Ksetra received Theravāda Buddhism from Southern India at least as early as the 5th or 6th century AD. Besides, Mahāyāna Buddhism was introduced to Sri Ksetra from Northeastern or Eastern India after 6th century AD and between 6th and 9th century AD, Theravāda Buddhism and Mahāyāna Buddhism flourished side by side in Sri Ksetra.

Votive tablets were a sign of Buddhist influence of Pyu period. These evidences were numerously found at Sriksetra, Bagan, Thaton and Kautgon caves near Pha-Am in Kayin state. But, terracotta votive tablets were not yet found in Beikthano, Halin and Maingmaw (Pinle) old cities. The term of “votive tablet” in Pyu language has not yet been determined. In the Bagan period, ring of Queen Ci Pe and King Thi Luin (1084-1113) century A.D both referred to votive tablet as “ Patima” in Pali¹. This word means image of the Buddha. A large number of terracotta votive tablets were being found at S'riksetra museum and are concerned with Mahayana and Theravada

¹(a) Dr Than Tun, *Myanmar Terracottas pottery in Myanmar & Votive Tablets of Myanmar* Monywe History Series, 2002.p-53(Hereafter cited as Dr Than Tun, *Myanmar Terracottas*),

(b)Khin Ma Ma Mu, Associate Professor, Archaeology Department, Yangon University, “ Votive Tablets of S'riksetra & Arimaddana”.p-1(Hereafter cited as Khin Ma Ma Mu, “Votive Tablets of S'riksetra & Arimaddana”)

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Buddhism. Professor G. Coedes suggested that the practice of making clay votive tablets was confined only to the Buddhist.²

There are four Cetiya as in the Buddhist tradition: Saririka (bodily relics of the Buddha) cetiya, Paribhoga (a thing used by the Buddha) cetiya, Uddissana (a thing made sacred by dedication) cetiya and Dhamma (a memorial in honour of the Law) cetiya.³ Therefore, S'riksetra people might be made the terracotta votive tablets for the enshrine of Uddissana cetiya. The practice of making of votive tablets might be reached Myanmar as part of the adoption of Buddhism from India by pilgrimages.⁴ Some assumed that the art of making of votive tablets came to Myanmar in the 7th century A.D.⁵ Votive tablets were made of earth. Therefore, all Buddhists whether poor or rich, commoners or kings can make the votive tablets easily.⁶ The Ancient Pyu might be used the moulds which were made of terracotta, bronze and stone during the making of terracotta votive tablets. A bronze mould, 1inch high, oval shaped, was discovered in Sriksetra.⁷ It did not know exactly that mould was either imported from India or locally.⁸

S'riksetra votive tablets have different forms and styles. In analyzing the forms of votive tablets, the following points are significant. There are seven shapes in S'riksetra Pyu old city.

1. oval

² Dr Than Tun, *Myanmar Terracottas*, p-54-55

³ Ibid, p-53

⁴ *Hanthawady Newspaper*, No.174, 4.2.1973, p. extra sheet

⁵ Gordon H.Luce, *Old Burma-Early Pagan*, Volume one, Artibus Asiae and the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, 1969, p-97 (Hereafter cited as G.H.Luce, *Old Burma-Early Pagan*)

⁶ Dr Naing Pan Hla, *Archaeological Aspects of Pyu, Mon, Myanmar*, Thin Sarpay, Yangon, 2011, p.77 (Hereafter cited as Dr Naing Pan Hla, *Archaeological Aspects*)

⁷ (a) Dr Than Tun, *Myanmar terracottas*, p.54 (b) See figure-1

⁸ (a) Dr Than Tun, *Myanmar terracottas*, p.54

(b) Maung Maung Swe, *NrefrmEdkifiH&SdysLurÁnf;pmrsm;rS
ysLtu©&mpmwrf;rsm;ESifU ysLpmvkh;a&om;ykH
pepfrsm;udk avUvmcsuf (Study on Pyu Writing System and Pyu Characters
of Myanmar Epigraphs)*, Ph D Dissertation, Department of Myanmar Language,
University of Yangon, 2006, p.100 (Hereafter cited as Maung Maung Swe, *Pyu Writing
Systems*)

2. oval with pointed top
3. square
4. circular
5. rectangular
6. rectangular with pointed top
7. rectangular with rounded top⁹

Some assumed that oval shape and oval with pointed top of votive tablets were imported from India. Circular and square shapes may have been made locally during the old city of S'riksetra. Oval, oval with pointed top and circular shapes are most common. Generally the length and width of the votive tablets are 3.6"×4", 4"×3", 2.25"×1.75" or 5"×3".¹⁰The smallest votive tablets are oval or circular, 1.5" in diameter.¹¹ The largest are square shaped tablets, 7.5" high and 6" wide.¹² Some Pyu tablets have frames but others are without a frame.

There are ninemudras of Buddha seen in the S'riksetra Pyu period:

1. Bhumi-phassa mudra or touching the earth
2. Dharmacakra mudra or turning the wheel of law; the teaching of the Buddha's doctrine
3. Dhyana mudra or meditation; both hands on the lap
4. Varada mudra; giving a gift
5. Abhaya mudra; showing fearlessness and security
6. Namaskara mudra; prayer, with both hands at the breast in an attitude of prayer
7. Vitarka mudra; discussion in a dialectical manner
8. Alingana mudra; attitude of embrace

⁹ (a) Khin Ma Ma Mu, "Votive Tablets of S'riksetra & Arimaddana", p-2

(b) Dr Than Tun, *Myanmar Terracottas*, p.58 (c) See figure-2

¹⁰ U Mya, *Votive Tablets of Burma*, part II, Pl.41 and P.25 (Hereafter cited as U Mya, *Votive Tablets of Burma*)

¹¹ See figure-3

¹² See figure-4

9. Anjali mudra; salutation, with both arms stretched upward above the head. Some scholars take it to be a prayer attitude with clasped hands¹³

During the Pyu period votive tablets from S'riksetra show the Bhumiphassa mudra in two ways:

- (1) Left hand on the lap and right hand touching the earth (Usual mudra)
- (2) Right hand on the lap and left hand touching the earth (Unusual mudra)¹⁴

Unusual or reverse Bhumiphassa mudra terracotta votive tablet was discovered from S'riksetra.¹⁵ Unusual Bhumiphassa-Mudrā stone image was discovered in Be Be temple, Sriksetra. The style of this image is used to give a 7th century A.D date.¹⁶ U Mya and G.H Luce thought that this image belonged to 9th or 10th century AD.¹⁷ Some scholars assumed that the above reverse Mudrā (Unusual Bhumiphassa mudra) images were wrongly made by pioneer sculptors of Sriksetra.¹⁸ But, such images were also found at Ananda temple in Bagan period.¹⁹ Therefore, that kind of mudra was made intentionally during the Pyu period.

There are three kinds of Asana of the Buddha in the S'riksetra Pyu period;

¹³ (a) G.H.Luce, *Phases of Pre-Pagan Burma Language and history Illustrations Vol.I,II*, Pl.55-63 p.157-159.(Hereafter cited as Luce, *Phases of Pre Pagan*)

(b) U Mya, *Votive Tablets of Burma*, part II, Pl.41 and P.25

¹⁴ (a) Luce, *Phases of Pre Pagan*, Pl.61(f) and p.157

(b) U Mya, *Votive Tablets of Burma*, part II, Pl.41 and P.25

¹⁵ See figure-5

¹⁶ (a) Elizabeth Moore, E.H, *Early Landscapes of Myanmar*, River Books, Co.Ltd, Bangkok, Thailand, 2007, p.171

(b) See figure-6

¹⁷ Dr Than Tun, *The Pyu where had they gone*, Monywe offset, Yangon, 2006 p.140

¹⁸ Nihar-Ranjanray, *An Introduction To The Study of Theravada Buddhism In Burma*, University of Calcutta, 1946, p.67. (Hereafter cited as N.R Ray, *Theravada Buddhism*)

¹⁹ Cao Htun Hmat Win, *Myanmar Buddhist Iconography*, Department of Religion, 1986, p.69. (Hereafter cited as Cat Htun Hmat Win, *Buddhist Iconography*)

- (1) Paryankasana, with ordinary folded knees, seen as a casual style
- (2) Dhyanasana, where the Buddha sits in meditation, cross legged position
- (3) Bhadrasana or Pralambanasana, sitting with both legs pendant

Paryankasana is most commonly found but Dhyanasana is also fairly frequent in the S'riksetra Pyu period.

In 1927-28, Mons. Charles Duroiselle discovered many hundreds of terracotta votive tablets by the excavation of a mound near Mahtaw village. All of them, a votive tablet which portrayed the two miniature stupas flanking the Buddha was discovered.²⁰ Each of these ornamental stupas is supported by a lotus on its stalk, and is shaded by an umbrella. The Buddha is in the common earth-touching attitude, seated within a trifoliate arch surrounded by a flamboyant design. Of the three panels forming the pedestal, the middle one contains a lion face, the other two have each a flower-bowl placed on a stand.²¹ The stanza “Ye dhammā hetuppabuavā” was inscribed in the upper part of votive tablet. Moreover, on the reverse of votive tablet inscribed a line of Pyu characters. The Myanmar translation of this Pyu line is “b̄a: carke” presumably the name of the donor.²² It is 5" high and it is 1" wide. U Mya suggested that the date of this votive tablet may be between 8th and 9th century A.D.²³

Numerous votive tablets with Buddha figures and containing Pali formula of “Ye dhammā hetuppabuavā” have been discovered from S'riksetra. This formula was uttered by arahant Assaji when he told Sāriputta the keynote of the Buddha's teaching. It runs:

*Ye dhammā hetuppabuavā tesaṃ hetuṃ Tathāgato āha tesaṃ ca yo
nirodho, evaṃvādī Mahāsammano.*

²⁰ See figure-7

²¹ *Archaeological Survey of India (1927-28)*, Central Publication Branch, Calcutta, India, 1931, p.129

²² Luce, *Phases of Pre-Pagan Burma*, p.155

²³ U Mya, “*Votive Tablets*”, Vol.II,p.17

The conditions which arise from a cause, of these the Tathāgata has stated the cause, also the way of suppressing these same: this is the teaching of the Great Ascetic.

In this stanza it can be found the essence of Theravada Buddhism. Moreover, during the king Kanishka (c.200 B.C) the Buddhist religion was divided into two sects: Mahayana and Hinayana in India. Language is the main distinction of these two sects.²⁴ Mahayana sect used the Sanskrit language but Theravada sect used the Pali language in the recording of religious literature.²⁵ Therefore, votive tablets which inscribed the “*Ye dhammā*” stanza by Pali language were might be concerned with concept of Theravada Buddhism.

A large number of votive tablets were discovered from a mound on the south of Ngashintkan-kone. All of them a votive tablet with flat base and pointed top was discovered.²⁶ A Buddha image is sitting down on the lotus throne at the center of tablet. The two hands are placed on the chest. It can be seen a letter line faintly at the foot of throne. By the comparative study of other votive tablets these alphabets were formula of “*Iti pi so bhagavā*”. These alphabets are similar to Telegu-Canares writing system used in Southern India about 5th -7th century A.D. Therefore, the date of this votive tablet may be 5th-7th century A.D.²⁷ This formula extracted from Mahāvagga Pali, Digha Nikaya, Suttanta Pitakas²⁸ and composed of Buddha’s attributes.

There are Mahayana votive tablets in the Pyu period. Ardibuddha (universal Buddha), Avalokiteswara or Lokanatha and Arimatera are found. Some Ardibuddha have weather crowned or not. The mudras and asanas of

²⁴ PROF. P.V. BAPAT, *2500 YEARS OF BUDDHISM*, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, India, 1956, p.143. (P.V. BAPAT, *2500 YEARS OF BUDDHISM*)

²⁵ U Myint Swe, *ouúwESifh NrefrmpmayqufoG, fyHk* (“The Relationship Between Sanskrit and Myanmar Literature”), *Literature and Social Science Journal of Myanmar*, Vol.1, No.2, 1968, p.273

²⁶ See figure-8

²⁷ U Mya, “*Votive Tablets*”, Vol.II, p-14,15

²⁸ Daw Than Swe, *ysLpmc ifba&TaycsyfavUvmcsuf* (*Study on Pyu Literature of Khinba Gold-leaves*), Department of Myanmar Language, Yangon, 1992, p.21. (Hereafter cited as Daw Than Swe, *Study on Pyu Literature*)

Adibuddha and Bodhisatta in Arimaddana (Bagan) are not as varied as the (Theravada) votive tablets of S'riksetra.²⁹

A votive tablet with Bodhisattava figure was discovered from Hmawza. The leg style of Bodhisattava is Rājālilasana and sitting on lotus pedestal. The stanza "Ye dhammā" was written by ancient Nagari character at the edge of votive tablet. It might be made during 8th and 9th century A.D. Some researcher assumed that this figure may be Avalokitesvara (or) Lokanāhta.³⁰ On the reverse of this tablet inscribed the name *SrīNālandāya*. If that is the correct reading that it might mean some sort of link between Nālanda and S'riksetra.³¹

An interesting Mahayana votive tablet was also discovered from a field near the Taung Lone Nyo village.³² In the size, the height is 4½" and the shape is similar to a small cave. There are three images at the center of votive tablet. The middle one is wearing the headgear and sitting down on the lotus throne like a preaching style (Dhamma Cakka mudra). The flanked images are also portrayed the preaching style and sitting down on the face of opposite side of the middle image. They were also wearing the headgears. The date of this image may be 9th or 10th century A.D.³³

During the Pyu period votive tablets of ordinary Buddha image which were flanked by Bodhisattavas was also discovered. Such kind of votive tablet was found at Mathaw village, on the south of Ngashintkan mound, Sriksetra.³⁴ The shape of this votive tablet is circle. The leg style of Bodhisattava is Rājālilasana_royal ease with the left knee raised and right leg folded loosely.³⁵

²⁹ Khin Ma Ma Mu, "Votive Tablets of S'riksetra & Arimaddana", p-

³⁰ Win Maung (Thamine), တၢ်ကၢ်ဖၢၣ်ဂၤဖၢၣ်ကၢ်မၤ; ယံး: ယၢ်အံၤ"သၢ်ဝံၤ (Bodhisattava on the surface of Votive Tablet)", *Dhamma Yokesone Magazine*, No.6/96, 1996, Yangon, p.103. (Hereafter cited as Win Maung (Thamine), "Oakkhwet Phaya")

³¹ (a) Dr. Than Tun, "Myanmar Terracotta", p.81

(b) See figure-9

³² See figure-10

³³ U Mya, "Votive Tablets", Vol.II, p-33

³⁴ See figure-11

³⁵ Win Maung (Thamine), "Oakkhwet Phaya", p.102

The stanza “Ye dhammā” written by Nagari character was inscribed under the ordinary Buddha image.³⁶

Conclusion

Many kinds of religious evidences were discovered from S’riksetra by the archaeological excavations. These are structures, stone, bronze and gold images and terracotta votive tablets. S’riksetra people might be made the terracotta votive tablets for the enshrine of Uddissana cetiya. It can be seen three kinds of votive tablets. They are concerned with Theravada, Mahayana and another one is concerned with by both. Such kinds were differentiating by images e.g Buddha and Bodhisattava images. Although Theravada votive tablets were portrayed the ordinary Buddha images, Mahayana images were portrayed the Bodhisattava, Arimaitaeya and Avalokitesvara etc. Third kind of votive tablet was portrayed the Buddha images flanked by Mahayana deities. Therefore, S’riksetra people might be accepted concepts of both of Theravada and Mahayana. It had a problem in the differentiate of what kind of votive tablet by the alphabetical ground. Because, the formula “Ye dhammā” was inscribed by both of Pali and Sanskrit languages. In ancient India, Mahayana sect used the Sanskrit language but Theravada sect used the Pali language in the recording of religious literature. So, it did not exactly express that a votive tablet with “Ye dhammā” formula was concerned with Theravada or Mahayana Buddhism. But, the main theme of “Ye dhammā” formula was to escape from rebirth (Samsara) which is the main purposes of Theravada Buddhism. Therefore, votive tablets with “Ye dhammā” formula without Mahayana deities might be concerned with Theravada Buddhism. In the compare of votive tablets, it can be known that Theravada Buddhist votive tablet might be earlier than 7th century A.D and Mahayana votive tablet later than that date. Therefore, the concept of Theravada Buddhism might be early accepted by S’riksetra people than the concept of Mahayana Buddhism.

³⁶ U Mya, *Votive Tablets*, Vol.II, p.17

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Figure 1: A bronze mould discovered at Sriksetra
(From U Mya, 1961)

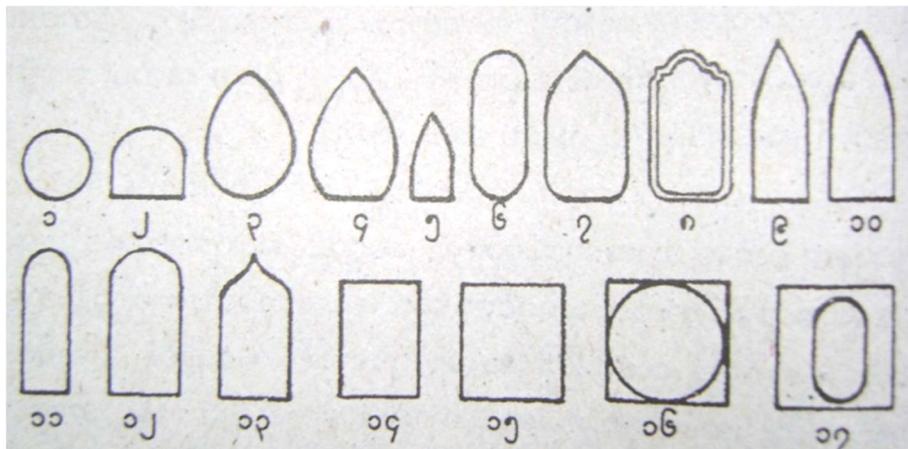


Figure 2: types of terracotta votive tablets
(From Dr. Than Tun, 2002)



Figure 3: The smallest votive tablets



Figure 4: the largest votive tablet



Figure 5: Unusual Bhumiphassa-mudrā Terracotta Votive Tablet, Sriksetra



Figure 6: Unusual Bhumiphassa-mudrā image of Be Be Temple, Sriksetra



Figure 7: Votive tablet of two miniature stupas flanking the Buddha



Figure 8: votive tablet with “*Iti pi so bhagavā*” formula (from U Mya 1961)



Figure 9: Avalikitesvara (or) Lokanahta votive tablet and *SrīNālandāya* letter, Sriksetra (From U Mya, 1961)



Figure 10: A Mahayana votive tablet from Taung Lone Nyo village
(From U Mya, 1961)



Figure 11: A votive tablet with Buddha image flanked by Mahayana deities
(From U Mya, 1961)



Votive tablets of S'riksetra at Shwe Phone Pwint museum