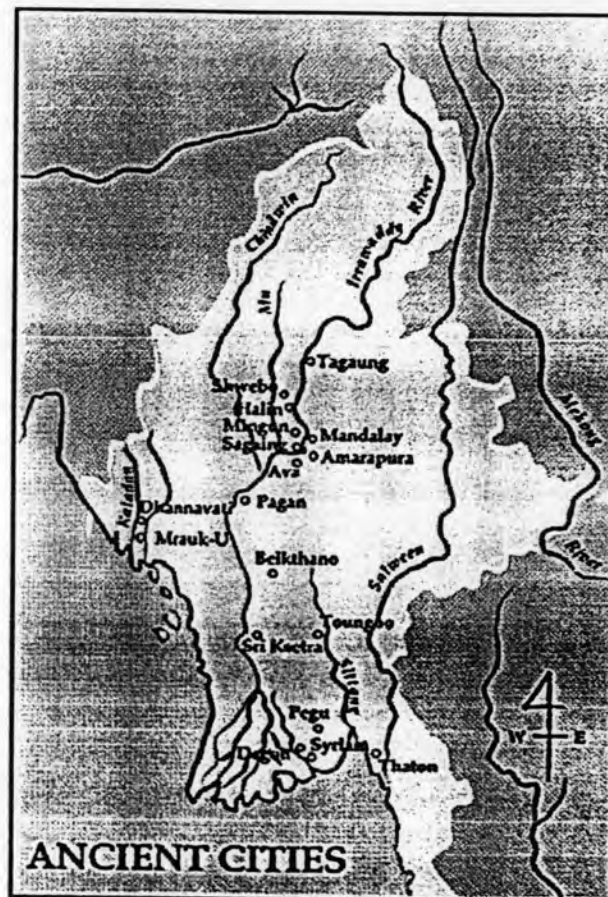


CHAPTER II

THE MAIN FACTORS OF CAPITAL RELOCATION IN BURMESE HISTORY



Map 8 Ancient Cities in Burmese History

Source: Aung Zaw, *Behold a New Empire*, Irrawaddy Magazine, 14 October 2006,

Available from: <http://www.irrawaddy.org/aviewer.asp?a=6248&z=102>

Throughout the history of Burma, moving a capital has not been an unusual phenomenon and is perceived as an ancient tradition of Burmese monarchs. According to the historical data, there are five main factors for capital relocation in Burmese history.

2.1 Security Policy and Military Strategy

In the history of warfare, Burma was generally considered as a military state in mainland Southeast Asia because of continuous military invasions by neighboring kingdoms and strategic conflicts and confrontations with ethnic minority forces, especially the Mon, Shan and Arakanese. In this respect, moving a capital was a grand strategy of Burmese monarchs when the old capital was totally plundered and destroyed by the enemy. The Burmese monarchs in both the Toungoo (1486-1752 A.D.) and Konbaung dynasties (1752-1885 A.D.) frequently transferred royal capitals for security and strategic reasons.

After the fall of Pagan from the Mongol invasion in 1287 and the penetration of Shan power into the dry zone, hundreds of Burmese refugees began to flee southwards to Toungoo on the Sittang River, where in 1280 a village had been fortified on a hill-spur (taunggnu) as a protection against slave raids from the neighboring state of the Karenni.¹ Toungoo strategically functioned as a military stronghold for Burmese refugees escaping from Shan hegemony in Upper Burma. In this way "a new centre of Burmese power gradually came into existence, a nucleus from which in the course of time a new kingdom of Burma was to arise".²

Toungoo was a garrison city which played a very significant role as the heartland where the traditional Burmese state recovered after the dissolution of the first Burmese Empire. During the reign of King Minkyinyo (1486-1531), Toungoo was established as the powerful Burmese capital in the Sittang Valley and dramatically threaten the Shan power in Upper Burma. According to the author's perspective, Toungoo had three main advantages in terms of military strategy:

Firstly, even though Toungoo was not situated on the banks of the Irrawaddy River like Pagan, it was located at the southern edge of the dry zone in the Sittang Valley where Burmese immigrants could benefit from the fertility of the valley and

¹ D.G.E.Hall, *Burma*, Hutchinson's University Library, 1988, P.29-30.

² *Ibid.*, P.29.

stock supplies during the long campaigns of warfare. In this regard, Toungoo functioned as a self-sufficient capital in a time of crisis.

Secondly, Toungoo emerged as a small strategic community to protect against the slave raids of the Karenni and the attacks of nomadic tribes from the Shan plateau. This automatically gave the Burmese soldiers at Toungoo the characteristics of military culture, such as discipline and order and served as a foundation for patriotism among the Burmese subjects in order to struggle strongly with the enemy.

Lastly, Toungoo was a safe place from which to resist and crush the enemy. The geographical terrain around the city comprises highland and mountains which offered natural military advantages, especially the effectiveness of ambush, surprise attacks and guerrilla warfare. Additionally, from a geopolitical aspect, Toungoo was strategically situated in land sandwiched between the Ava and Pegu political domains* and when the power of these kingdoms went into a dramatic decline, Toungoo played a vital role as a military springboard to expand its hegemony over Ava and Pegu. It acted as a geopolitical bridge between the dry zone and the delta.

One obvious example of capital relocation for security reasons followed the sacking and burning by Arakanese troops of the new Burmese capital at Hamtavati (Pegu) in 1599. The second Burmese empire collapsed and the land of Burma was in chaos and anarchy. Prince Nyaungyan, a younger brother of Nandabayin (former king of Pegu), planned to restore Burmese empire by establishing himself as a new monarch in Upper Burma and set up the new capital at Ava in 1600. The strategy was motivated not only by the fall of Hamtavati, but also from Mon rebellions in the delta and a Siamese invasion around the Tanasserim mountain range. These strategic threats dramatically increased and the king felt insecure about having a capital in Lower Burma.

* After the Mongols totally destroyed Pagan, there emerged many fragmented political domains occupied by different tribes. In this matter, Ava was the Shan-Burman centre in the dry zone and Pegu was the Mon centre of the delta while Toungoo was the centre of Burmese refugees in the Sittang Valley at the southern edge of the dry zone.

In these circumstances, King Nyaungyan transformed the landscape of Ava to serve as a new centre of Burmese military strategy concentrated in the Irrawaddy Valley and as an inland strategic springboard to suppress other independent cities throughout the dry zone. He strengthened the defenses of his capital and marched against the Shan principalities. The country in the valley of the Irrawaddy to the north of Pagan submitted to him.³ Moving the capital to Ava signifies that the Burmese monarch chose to consolidate military strength in the dry zone and extend Burmese military power from a continental landscape when the former capital in the delta was destroyed.

Even though Ava was a strategic capital in Upper Burma; it was heavily invaded and attacked by neighboring kingdoms. In 1738, the small state of Manipur led by Garib Newaz send its powerful cavalry to invade Ava and at the same time, the Mon, who wanted to recover their hegemony in the delta, sent troops to attack Ava and finally captured the capital in 1752. During the crisis, Maung Aung Chaiya, a brave warrior and former member of a village chief's family in Moksobo (Shwebo), had recruited volunteer soldiers from 46 villages in Upper Burma and planned to wage war with the Mon. U Aung Chaiya proclaimed himself Alaungpaya, King of Burma and established his strategic village – Shwebo - as the new capital in 1753.

He decided to withdraw the army deeper into the hinterland and the protective folds of the mountainous regions of the Mu Valley and consolidated his military strength at Shwebo to recover Burmese military power. In this matter, Shwebo functioned as a springboard from which to attack neighboring Burmese kingdoms and the king was in a critical position to determine security policy and military strategy. As a result, a new centre of Burmese power gradually came into existence and the third Burmese empire was to arise. During 1752-1759, Alaungpaya invaded many principalities and controlled Upper Burma as far as Shan territory. He successfully recaptured Ava from the Mon and was able to capture Syriam and Hamtavati. Moreover, he suppressed Manipur and brought a lot of war captives including cavalry and Indian Brahmans back to the royal court of Burma and also surprisingly attacked the Siamese kingdom and penetrated right up to its capital at Ayutthaya in 1759.

³ Arthur Purves Phayre, *History of Burma*, Orchid Press, Bangkok, 1998 {Reprinted}, p.127.

Sometimes, the establishment of a new strategic capital was abrupt and temporary depending on political and military circumstances. Alaungpaya was taken ill during a war with Ayutthaya and passed away as he crossed the border to Thaton, returning to Burma.⁴ His son, Nanda or Naungdawgyi, ascended to the throne in 1760 and temporarily moved the capital from Shwebo to Sagaing.* During his short reign, Meng Khaung Noratha, the great warrior of King Alaungpaya in the war with Siam, sought a new seat of power by making civil war and marching on Toungoo and Ava respectively. He expelled the governor of Ava and occupied it. In order to subjugate Noratha, "king Naungdawgyi marched on Ava, and, establishing his headquarters at Sagaing, closely invested the city."⁵ The geographical terrain of Sagaing comprises high mountains, cliffs and lush green trees along the Irrawaddy. So the king could utilize the prominent geography of the city by looking towards Ava from Sagaing Hill, where movements inside Ava were visible in the distance, beyond the river. Then the king captured Ava and successfully recovered the situation.

The last example of capital relocation because of military strategy is the move from Amarapura to Mandalay in 1857. Although there are many theories about the relocation to Mandalay, western scholars such as Adolph Bastian, a German traveler who wrote a 19th-century memoir, *A Journey to Burma (1861-1862)*, explained that during the reign of King Mindon, British steamers were traveling up the Irrawaddy River to Ava and Amarapura. Because these ships could be armed, the king may have considered relocating the capital to a place outside the range of cannon fire.⁶ Even though there is no explicit evidence that this was the reason, the location of Mandalay is strategically related to the anticipated direction of foreign invasion. It is located deeper

⁴ Vincenzo Sangermano, *The Burmese Empire A Hundred Years Ago*, Orchid Press, Bangkok, 1995, P. 46.

* Sagaing is situated on the bank of the Irrawaddy River in the opposite side to Ava. It is a strategic city for waging war on Ava. If the enemy seized and controlled Sagaing, the Burmese soldiers at Ava would be in a difficult situation. The obvious example is when the Manipuri cavalry invaded Upper Burma; seized Sagaing to contain Ava and heavily attacked the city.

⁵ Quoted in Arthur Purves Phayre, *History of Burma*, P.185.

⁶ Dhida Saraya, *Mandalay the Capital City, the Center of the Universe*, Muang Boran Publishing House, 1995, P. 98.

in the hinterland region than Amarapura and stands on a highland slope at the foot of the Shan Plateau. Although British naval forces finally seized and captured Mandalay in 1885, the move to Mandalay reflects the strategic worldview of Burmese leaders when the empire directly confronted modern strategic threats from the sea or navigable rivers.

Therefore, the capital relocation in Burmese history had been greatly and repeatedly influenced by security and military factors. Moving a capital is the result of security policy and the adaptation of military strategy to resist or suppress the enemy. According to geostrategic framework, Burma had been more inclined to relocate its capital deeper into seclusion, usually into the hinterland and mountainous regions in the dry zone. Moving the capital under strategic pressure is highly related to the direction of foreign invasions and most Burmese monarchs always chose to consolidate military strength from a continental landscape in order to recover national independence and expel undesirable enemies.

2.2 Power Manifestation and Political Conflicts

In ancient times, Burma was a political state ruled and governed by an absolute monarchy. The kings had a special status over their subjects based on the traditional concept of kingship as “Bodhisattva” (the Buddhist monarch who sacrificed himself for the benefit of man and salvation) and “Cakravartin” (the world conqueror or universal monarch). In this respect, relocating a capital is significantly related to the kingly manifestation of power and expansionist policies. According to the Burmese worldview, a “capital” is perceived as the centre of monarchical power and of the universe, and shifting the capital not only represents shifting the seat of power but also shifting the kingdom and the position of the universe at the same time. Moving a capital is a grand strategy of Burmese monarchs to manifest power and build political charisma.

A clear example of capital relocation in order to manifest power can be seen during the time of the Toungoo dynasty. King Tabinshwethi was very proud of his position as representative of the ancient kings of the Burmese people and wanted to expand his absolute power throughout the Sittang Valley and the delta occupied by the Mon. Tabinshwethi’s political expansionist policy was motivated by the concept of Cakravatin or “Universal Monarch”, a traditional concept of kingship in Southeast Asia.

Powerful kings must create their own Mandala or “field of power” within the Jampudwipa universe.⁷ Consequently, he expanded his circle of power by marching to principalities in the Sittang Valley and the delta. He then penetrated right up to the Mon capital at Pegu and attempted many times to suppress the Mon armies. The capital was surrendered in 1539.

After that King Tabinshwethi officially ordered the relocation of the capital from Toungoo to Pegu in 1540. He portrayed himself as the king of kings and set up a royal ceremony for his coronation in the Burmese style at Pagan and did the same thing in the Mon style at Pegu in 1546. This behavior symbolized that he was the right king who had great power and governed the lands of Tatadesa and Ramandesa.* Transferring the royal capital to Pegu signified that Tabinshwethi wanted to mark his great victory over the enemy and show Burmese hegemony over the Mon capital just as King Aniruddha of Pagan had attacked the Mon kingdom at Thaton in 1057. In another way, it is also conceivable that Tabinshwethi planned to end the long political conflicts between two powerful nations by having the capital in the land of the enemy for political consolidation.

However, absolute kingly power in practice might be challenged by the fluctuations of power politics in the royal court. Throughout the history of Burma, many kings were deposed or forced to step down from the throne by rebellions mostly led by powerful princes from the royal family. Political conflicts and confrontations supported the emergence and establishment of strategic cities which served as power bases and the places of assembly for groups preparing to challenge the throne.

During the period of the Konbaung dynasty, there emerged political conflicts and rebellions among the capital cities. When Bodawpaya, the eldest surviving son of Alaungpaya seized the throne in 1782, he made a clean sweep of all possible rivals in the family and established himself as the king of kings. Even though his political

⁷ *Cakravartin Kings or 'Universal Monarchs'*, Available from: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mandalay>

* Tatadesa is the name of the country and political domain whose core of power is at Pagan while Ramandesa is the name of the country in the delta occupied by the Mon with the core of power at Thaton and Hamtavati (Pegu).

enemies were killed and eliminated, he was afraid of revenge from his political rivals and felt insecure to have the seat of power in Ava and eventually decided to relocate the capital to Amarapura in 1783.

Before the end of 1831, King Bagyidaw had become “subject to recurrent periods of insanity”⁸ and the administration in the royal court of Ava was in a state of turmoil (the capital was moved from Amarapura to Ava by King Bagyidaw in 1823). “This was much to the distaste of a party led”⁹ by the king’s younger brother, Tharrawaddy (Shwebo Min), who was anxious to seize power and finally carried through a successful coup and dethroned his brother in 1837. However, he was afraid of revenge from his political rivals and decided to relocate the capital from Ava to Amarapura in the next year. When Tharrawaddy died in 1846, his son, Pagan Min, won the struggle for power by killing his rival brothers and became king.

The new king had political conflicts with and different ideas about the war with the British from his younger half brother, Prince Mindon, who had opposed the war with the British from the start. The latter went to Shwebo region which had been a power base of the Konbaung dynasty since the reign of Alaungpaya, collected armed forces, extended political bases and eventually staged a coup and deposed Pagan Min. King Mindon perceived that the older capitals (Ava and Amarapura) had lost their dignity. They had become bloody arenas where Burmese slaughtered one another in hopes of gaining the throne.¹⁰ In order to escape from political turmoil and the networks of his rivals in the old capitals, he decided to relocate the capital from Amarapura to Mandalay in 1857.

According to the examples above, capital relocation in Burmese history was motivated by kingly manifestation, expansionist policies and political conflicts in the court. Importantly, moving a capital in the past was significantly influenced by a

⁸ D.G.E.Hall, *Burma*, 1988, P.109.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Dhida Saraya, *Mandalay the Capital City, the Center of the Universe*, P. 99.

political system where real power centralization had apparently never occurred. Concentration of power depended importantly on the strength and political policy of each monarch and there were many fragmented powers and political organs over which the capital exercised no effective control throughout the history of Burma. A discontinuity of political institutions and changes of political centre stems from the lack of political centralization based on the western bureaucratic model and the concept of modern nation-state. Thus, it is usual for Burmese monarchs lacking clear political consolidation to shift their capitals frequently for political and strategic reasons.

2.3 Buddha's Prophecies and Astrological Influences

Buddhism and spiritualism have had played an important role in Burmese society and greatly influenced leaders' perceptions of religious affairs and royal administration. Burma has been recognized as a Theravada Buddhist state and every Burmese monarch strongly believed in the legends and prophecies of the Buddha. Lord Buddha is a symbol of peace and purity according to the Burmese worldview and his prophecies occurring in ancient myths and legends would bring fortune, good luck and auspicious times to state rulers and their subjects.

Moreover, astrological predictions conducted by Brahmans had also played a significant role in the royal court of Burma. Ancient monarchs believed that the advice of astrologers could ward off evil omens, open a new era of empire and upgrade their charisma to that of an omnipotent and powerful ruler. In the past, all royal traditions were regulated by Buddhist rites and the opinions of the Brahmans who acted as court soothsayers. In this respect, capital relocation was heavily influenced by the Buddha's prophecies and astrological predictions.

One of the important reasons for the capital relocation from Toungoo to Hamtavati in 1540 is the importance of Buddhist myth and legend. King Tabinshwethi perceived that Hamtavati was a fortunate and auspicious land where Lord Buddha had visited and made a prophesy. It is related that, in the eighth year after the Buddha had become enlightened, he paused in his missionary wandering on a small hill in Ramadesa and visited the auspicious area where present Pegu is located.

“All about him, where now there spread the rice-lands and hamlets of Pegu, there rolled the untrammelled sea. Two Hamsa birds (golden swans) alone broke the monotony, and these creatures, conscious of the presence of one who had passed through all phases of existence, and had attained to the fullness of knowledge, came before him with joined wings and made him their obeisance. “On this spot,” he foretold, “one thousand one hundred and sixteen years after my death, there will be built a city, which will become the capital of a race of monarchs.”¹¹ According to this legend, Tabinshwethi viewed that Pegu or Hamtavati was the holy capital which could legitimize and enhance his Buddhist charisma into that of a great monarch who sincerely believed in the Buddha’s prophesies.

The most obvious example in this respect is the capital relocation from Ava to Amarapura in the reign of King Bodawpaya of the Konbaung dynasty. Like many other Burmese rulers, Bodawpaya (Bo daw Phaya) had many astrologers and ministers surrounding him. He had dreams and fantasies which he often hoped to materialize.¹² In *Ko Baung Set Ya za win daw Gyi* (U Maung Maung Tin, pp, 577-580) King Bodawpaya and his royal astrologers were influenced by a prophecy of the lord Buddha who, on one of his visits to Burma, had predicted that a great city would rise on this spot. It was a place where the four demons - Nga Taung Tha Man, Nga Taung Kyin, Nga Taung Pyone and Nga Taung Myint - came to pay respect to the lord Buddha with their offerings.¹³

According to the astrologers’ prediction if a new palace and kingdom was constructed on this auspicious land, the kingdom would enjoy great success, prosperity and wonders. White and red elephants would come to this land and the great Buddha would arrive during the King’s reign (the great Maha Myat Mu Ni Buddha image now residing in Mandalay). In addition, not only is the land auspicious, but it is considered

¹¹ V.C. Scott O’Connor, *Mandalay and Other Cities of the Past in Burma*, White Lotus, 1996, p. 356.

¹² Than Than Myint, *Bo Daw Phaya / Ba don Min / Sin Phyu Mya Shin*, unpublished article, p.2.

¹³ Ibid.

as a land of great prosperity full of gold and jewels. It would be a land where lakes and rivers would emerge for easy navigation and irrigation.¹⁴

Bodawpaya strongly believed in the Buddha's prophecy and the King's courtiers and his astrologers had predicted the following regarding his move to a new capital.

Ta-go-Kyi-thaw.Min-the-Myo-haung-ko-swint-ywe-Myo-thit-ko-Pyaung-lant. [.....] or in English translation, 'the most omnipotent and powerful king shall leave the old kingdom and build a new one'.¹⁵

As a result, Bodawpaya decided to relocate the capital in order to establish a new powerful kingdom. He also contributed a lot of time to building hundreds of temples and pagodas and brought stone inscriptions from Pagan and Ava to Amarapura. "The removal of the new capital does not however come without a price to pay. The move caused great hardships not only to the citizens but also to the country at large which had to pay heavy contributions in money and labor".¹⁶



Picture1 U Bein Bridge in Amarapura



Picture2 City Landscape of Amarapura in the Past

Source: www.seasite.niu.edu/.../Part1/Images/NS20.jpg

The influence of astrology in this relocation is apparent through the construction and process of transferring the capital in 1783. After a careful search based on the opinions of the Brahmans, a site was selected on a plain about six miles north-east of

¹⁴ Ibid., p.3.

¹⁵ Ibid., p.4.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Ava, bordered to the west by a branch of the great river. The new city was laid out as a square of about two thousand five hundred yards, according to the traditional rules for the capital of a Burmese king.¹⁷ The new city was named "Amarapura", meaning "city of the immortals" according to the advice of the royal Brahmans. When the work was completed, the king solemnly went to take possession of the city and palace, on the 10th of May 1783, observing many superstitious rites and ceremonies prescribed by the Brahmans.¹⁸ Bodawpaya, along with his queens, son, daughters, brothers and courtiers rode on a beautiful eleven-layered Kara-weik barge. The barge was surrounded by combat arms and infantry. Surrounded by his entourage, King Bodawpaya's barge headed to his new capital "Amarapura", leaving behind his old capital "Ava" or "In-wa".¹⁹

Bodawpaya died in 1819 at the age of 75 and was succeeded by his nephew-King Bagyidaw or Hpagyidoa. The new monarch ordered the relocation of the royal capital from Amarapura to Ava in 1823. Although the causes of the move are uncertain, there is one story regarding to the move. King Bagyidaw saw a vulture alight on the palace spire, which was always regarded by the royal Brahmans as an evil omen, and the burning of a large portion of the city, including the court of justice, the palace campanile, and other buildings pertaining to the palace. So the king determined to return to Ava. The preparations proceeded in a leisurely fashion. A new and more extensive palace was built upon the ancient site, which the king and queen entered in great state.²⁰

One of the reasons for the move to Mandalay by King Mindon in 1857 was the influence of the Buddha's prophecy. Some archaeologists such as Taw Sien Ko, believe in the old prophecies concerning the location of Mandalay. It was said that Mandalay Hill was a strategic place to built a city, and that any person wishing for a long life should live beneath the shadow of the Hill. It was a place kept fertile by waterways

¹⁷Vincenzo Sangermano, *The Burmese Empire A Hundred Years Ago*, p. 67.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, P. 68.

²² Than Than Myint, *Bo Daw Phaya / Ba don Min / Sin Phyu Mya Shin*, p. 2.

²⁰ Arthur Purves Phayre, *History of Burma*, p. 233.

from lake Nanda, where the water was as green as jade.²¹ The Buddhist story also told that the Buddha, in his previous incarnations as animals, had lived there. He came back to visit and teach the people in nine villages, including Mandalay. While he was among them, four ogresses came to respect him with their offerings. The youngest of them offered the flesh of her bosom. In response, the Lord Buddha made this prophecy. After his religion had existed for 2,400 years, Mandalay would be a big city. It would be called "Ratanapura", and the ogress, in that future lifetime, would rule as its king.²²

According to this legend, King Mindon manifested himself as the ogress's reincarnation according to the predictions of royal Brahmans and relocated the capital to Mandalay to open the new Buddhist era in 2400 B.C. (in 1857). The image of the ogress still remains at the monastery on Mandalay Hill and there is also the image of the standing Buddha pointing towards the location of Mandalay city. It is said by royal chronicles that in a dream, king Mindon saw a magnificent city at the foot of Mandalay Hill and dreamed again that there were two women, Ba and Maw, who came forth to lead him up to the Hill. Fascinatingly, the names of Mindon's two consorts were associated alphabetically with those two women, Ba and Maw, in his dream. Thus the king was confident that he was being encouraged to build a new capital.

Throughout the history of Burma, Buddhism and spiritualism have had a deep influence on the roots of Burmese culture which was passed from generation to generation over the centuries. In this regard, moving a capital which is a symbol of kingship and national spiritualism was significantly motivated by religious and astrological factors during a time of rulers' mental crisis. Buddha's prophesies and the Brahmans' suggestions not only provided a holy atmosphere to the ceremonies involved in transferring the capital but also enhanced monarchical charisma and convinced people of the auspicious and prosperous time of Burma.

²¹ Dhida Saraya, *Mandalay the Capital City, the Center of the Universe*, p. 97.

²² *Ibid.*

2.4 Hinterland and Agricultural Development

For much of the monarchical period, the most stable component of the pre-colonial economy of Burma was agricultural development in the irrigated plains of Upper Burma in what is commonly known as the dry zone. Virtually all known dynasties in Burmese history acknowledged that reality by establishing their capitals in, and therefore basing their political existence on, these areas watered by the tributaries of the Irrawaddy. This nucleus lay roughly between 94 and 98 degrees longitude and 19 and 24 degrees latitude.²³ The dry zone was, indeed the agricultural heartland where the Burmese state originated and developed, especially in plains area of Kyaukse which was considered as the rice basket and agricultural core of Burma.

A clear example of capital relocation in order to enlarge agricultural spaces can be seen when King Thadominbya established Ava situated at the confluence of the Myitnge and the Irrawaddy in 1364. In terms of geographical location, "Ava stands in the great mid-land of Burma, where the wide valley leaves space for the growth of a people, and its actual site, served by the majestic Irrawaddy, the winding Myitnge, the deep and rapid Myittha, seems to offer every advantage of beauty and peace that a city-builder could desire."²⁴ Importantly, Ava is situated at the entrance to Kyaukse which is considered as the rice basket of Burma and thus the labor force and food supply could be extensively increased in that fertile location. In this respect, King Thadominbya reconstructed and renovated irrigation networks from the Pagan period in the Kyaukse region by having Ava as the centre of agricultural development. This supported the rise of Ava as the agricultural capital in the heartland of Burma.

One of the main reasons for the capital relocation from Pegu to Ava by King Nyaungyan in 1600 is that the king knew the importance of the dry zone as the rice basket of Burma and if the capital was moved to that position and the irrigation system

²³ Michael Aung-Thwin, *Irrigation in the Heartland of Burma: Foundations of the Pre-Colonial Burmese State*, Northern Illinois University, Occasional Paper No. 15, 1990, p. 1.

²⁴ V.C. Scott O'Connor, *Mandalay and Other Cities of the Past in Burma*, p.116.

was maintained, the great Burmese empire could increasingly recover after the dissolution of the kingdom of Hamtavati in 1599.

King Nyaungyan paid more attention to agriculture in the nuclear zone than to trade in the coastal areas because revenue from the latter could no doubt be substantial, but it was not stable, and was very volatile as a result of foreign intervention, Mon rebellions and Thai challenges in Lower Burma. He came to realize that the dry zone had a high potential in eco-demographic conditions for improvements of the economic system and manpower during times of crisis. Therefore, he decided to stay in Upper Burma and expanded agricultural areas in the dry zone. As a result, establishing Ava as the centre of agriculture clearly provided economic stability and predictability in the heartland of Burma and the weak kingdom recovered and developed.



Map 9 Capitals' Location in the Konbaung Dynasty and Agricultural Heartland of Burma

Sources: D.G.E. Hall, Charnvit Kasetsiri (ed.), *A History of South-East Asia*, Foundation for the Promotion of Social Science and Humanities Textbooks Project, 2006, P. 392.

After the collapse of the Second Burmese Empire at Ava in 1752, Alaungpaya established Shwebo as the new Burmese capital not only for strategic reasons but also from consideration of agricultural development in Upper Burma. The area around Shwebo was popularly known as "Konbaung". The farmers of the town depended on the irrigation system watered by the Mu River, a tributary of the Irrawaddy. High dams

were constructed along with canals and moats. This irrigation system had been in use since the Pagan era. The area was called Konbaungpyi, meaning “the land with high dams.”²⁵ So, Shwebo was not only the new capital and Burmese military stronghold but also the land of agricultural fertility after the fall of Ava.

King Alaungpaya made it his concern to repair irrigated networks around Kyaukse and Shwebo Districts which had suffered at the hands of the Mon and to bring them back to their original condition, with the purpose of providing the people of the country with plenty of food and water. He paid much attention to the areas around his capital Shwebo in order to build the centre of a self-sufficient economy in the Mu Valley. He quickly built a dam upon the Mu River and connected it with Nanda Lake, forming a large area of irrigated land. It is this that is referred to in the *Ei-gyin* for Singu-min, where the poem has:²⁶

“The Mu cannot flow as it wishes; it submits to authority and is constrained by the King’ order; in its rocky narrows the water is tamed – it dare not escape and it flows now only to plump up the revenue with abundant grain.”²⁷

Another example of hinterland development is the establishment of Mandalay by king Mindon. There are many factors behind the move to Mandalay. In terms of geography, Mandalay is situated not far from the heart of the Kyaukse area and stands on a highland slope connecting to other principalities in the Shan Plateau. Not only the Irrawaddy flows near the city but also the Chaungmagyi and the Myitnge Rivers pass nearby and the Chaungmagyi is the natural demarcation line separating Mandalay from the Shan settlements.

Mandalay is surrounded by Lake Shwepyithar and Lake Nanda and four important mountains rising from the fertile plains, Sagaing Mountain, Yankintaung, Kalamataung and Mandalay Hill. Therefore Mandalay is located in an excellent position in terms of

²⁵ Quoted in Dhida Saraya, *Mandalay the Capital City, the Center of the Universe*, p. 81.

²⁶ U Tin, Euan Bagshawe (Translated), *The Royal Administration of Burma*, Ava Publishing House, Bangkok, 2001, p. 290.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

irrigation and agricultural development. Moreover, Mandalay was the centre of inland trade and communication routes between the dry zone and the Shan Plateau. It stood at the junction of overland caravans of various ethnic peoples from the highlands through the ancient and well-traveled routes between India and China. In this respect, it is conceivable that King Mindon knew the capacity of Mandalay as a centre of agricultural development and hub of inland transportation. Thus, he decided to leave Amarapura, withdrawing to a region with significant development potential and established a new capital at Mandalay.

Economic factors have deeply influenced capital relocation in Burmese history, especially rice cultivation in the dry zone. In fact, most Burmese monarchs paid great attention to agricultural development in the hinterland because the rivers flowed year-round, with nutrients and water available for irrigation. These environmental conditions inspired ancient monarchs to establish or relocate their capitals in the dry zone to open new agricultural frontiers. The new capital could function as the centre of hinterland development and a magnet pulling scattered people to settle communities in irrigated regions around the capital. As a result, the king could exercise effective control over manpower and natural resources, allowing the Burmese empire to arise, develop and prosper.

2.5 International Relations and Cultural Identity

External relations have also played an important role in capital relocation in Burmese history. Some Burmese monarchs such as Tabinshwethi and Bayinnaung saw the sea as a window to the outside world and paid great attention to command over the delta while most Burmese monarchs such as Nyaungyan, Thalun, Alaungpaya, Bagyidaw and Mindon viewed the coast as the entry-point of foreign cultural intervention and threats to Burmese identity. In order to escape foreign influences and protect cultural identity, Burmese monarchs were inclined to withdraw from the outside world and transfer their capitals to the dry zone which was a cultural core where the Burmese state emerged and matured.

One of the main factors for the relocation of the capital from Toungoo to Hamtavati by king Tabinshwethi is the importance of international trade and commerce.

Hamtavati was a centre of maritime trade in the delta and controlled the sea routes in the Gulf of Martaban. So it was the seaport to the outside world.²⁸ It is no surprise that a monarch from an inland kingdom at Toungoo was paid special attention to foreign trade and command of the sea. Importantly, King Tabinshwethi was able to buy various kinds of war equipment, such as ships, guns, ammunition and small arms, through international trade with European merchants, especially the Portuguese, who had occupied Malacca in 1511 and extended their trade northwards to the coastal area of Burma. This motivation can be seen through the recruitment of Portuguese mercenaries in the royal army and the invasion of King Tabinshwethi to dominate other sea ports in the delta such as Bassein and Martaban.

When Bayinnaung ascended to the throne after the murder of Tabinshwethi in the Mon rebellions, he still resided in Hamtavati and did not move the capital elsewhere. The delta and the Gulf of Martaban were still important for international trade and the king was able to purchase modern weapons from western merchants and a lot of income from maritime trade went directly to the royal court which had its capital in the delta. Consequently, King Bayinnaung rebuilt the city in 1564 on a far grander scale, “furnishing it with twenty gates, each named after the vassal responsible for its construction. Pegu became once more a great centre of commerce, the resort of merchants from many distant lands”.²⁹

After the collapse of Hamtavati in 1599, the delta became depopulated and famine-stricken in the tide of war and Hamtavati fell into a state of anarchy. The delta was heavily influenced by foreign culture while the ambitious Portuguese adventurer Philip de Brito held a position as Chief of Syriam in 1603 and carved out a domain for himself in Lower Burma.³⁰ Even though De Brito was suppressed by King Anaukpetlun in 1611, most Burmans came to realize the threat of western influence from the delta and the Burmese monarchs after the reign of King Anaukpetlun (1605-1628) began to

²⁸Charnvit Kasetsiri, *Myanmar: History and Politics*, the Foundation for the Promotion of Social Science and Humanities Textbooks Project, 2001, P.18.

²⁹ Available from: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mandalay>.

³⁰ D.G.E.Hall, *Burma*, p.48.

shift their capitals back to the dry zone to maintain their cultural identity and escape from the outside world.

The turning point in Burmese foreign policy apparently came during the reign of King Thalun (1629-1648) which contains one event of supreme importance in Burmese history. In 1635 he abandoned Pegu and transferred his capital to Ava.³¹ The most important factor for the move was paranoia regarding western culture in coastal cities around the Gulf of Martaban. "By 1600 Pegu had become useless as a trading port through natural silting. The Pegu River became shallow and Syriam had taken its place, and in many ways would have proved a better capital than Ava. But no Burmese king of this period had any appreciation of the value of overseas intercourse."³²

This relocation was not an ordinary move but in contrast, was a significant attempt to turn back to ancient historical and cultural roots. The paranoia of western intervention and De Brito's legacy at Syriam still haunted the Burmans while the Dutch and the British began to expand their sphere of influence over India and the Bay of Bengal. In this respect, King Thalun was afraid of westernization and not interested in the outside world. Syriam was the symbol of foreign tricks, corruption and interference and threatened the identity of Burmese culture. As a result, Thalun relocated the capital back to Ava in the traditional heartland of Irrawaddy Valley.

Some theories explain relocation of the capital from Amarapura to Mandalay as based on fear of British colonialism and preservation of Burmese culture. Some Burmese scholars, like Maung Htin Aung, have proposed that "King Mindon founded the religious and cultural centre of Mandalay as an alternative to the shame, humility and defeat embodied in Ava and Amarapura". The British had twice defeated the old regimes, in 1826 and in 1852.³³ "In time, the king realized bitterly that his country could hardly hope to attain equal diplomatic status with the nations of Europe. He wished to draw the attention of his people from the disasters that had overtaken his dynasty by

³¹ *Ibid.*, p.65.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Dhida Saraya, *Mandalay the Capital City, the Center of the Universe*, p. 99.

establishing Mandalay as the centre of Buddhist world.”³⁴ Maung Htin Aung has proposed that King Mindon revealed the essential unity of Burma as an indivisible nation. “Buddhism was the means by which he accomplished this unification. The king believed that his establishment of numerous new religious sites in Mandalay affirmed the continuity of past glory with the present.”³⁵

“The establishment of a new capital in Upper Burma suggested a return to the true origins of the Burmese people and to their cultural heritage. Moreover, the new capital represented the vision of a new Buddhist world that would staunchly face the British invaders in lower Burma. The new world was to be founded upon the powers and virtues of the young Buddhist monarch in a vast and boundless space that defied measurement by any person or government.”³⁶ Throughout his reign, King Mindon refused to sign any treaty which acknowledged boundaries between British and Burmese territories and transformed the landscape of Mandalay to the land of merit. In this regard, Mandalay was not only a Buddhist capital but also a symbol of Burmese spiritualism and of anti-colonialism.

Most Burma’s monarchs, especially in the Konbaung dynasty had always been conscious and appreciative of external sensitivities to cultural issues and had constantly taken great pains to avoid situations which would give the slightest excuse for foreign aggression or interference in their cultural identity. Moving the capital, which is a symbol of historical pride and cultural heritage, was an important manifestation of a policy of Burmese monarchs to escape from the volatile outside world and preserve their own cultural identity.

2.6 The End of Capital Relocation in Monarchical Period

Burmese capital relocation by monarch ended with the expansion of British colonialism into Lower Burma and the Gulf of Martaban. King Bagyidaw (1819-1837) was the first king to face the real power of western colonialism. He was never afraid of

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

the British because he was confident in Burmese imperialism and had a great warrior in Mahabandoola, who threatened British India by intervening in Manipur and invading Chittagong. As a result, "the British, unhappy not only about the border, but about trade and diplomatic relations, used this as the excuse to launch an invasion of Burma and thus the First Anglo-Burmese War began. The war ended with the British capture of Rangoon (Yangon) in 1824 and British containment of Ava in 1826. The Treaty of Yandabo ceded the Arakan and Tenasserim regions, as well as the kingdom of Manipur, to the British who proceeded to rule them from Calcutta."³⁷

"When Pagan Min ascended to the throne in 1846 tensions with the British continued to escalate and in 1852 the Second Anglo-Burmese War ensued. "The ostensible cause was the imprisonment of two British ship captains who were charged with murder and forced to pay a large ransom to secure their release. The British invasion was short and successful; within a few months, British armies captured the cities of Yangon and Prome and announced the annexation of Lower Burma to the British crown. The British now fully controlled all trade and shipping on the Irrawaddy River."³⁸

When King Mindon passed away in 1878, his son King Thibaw ascended the throne and cruelly executed many political rivals at Mandalay. He was not a great warrior or a skillful diplomat and was under the power of his queen Supayalat. The third Anglo-Burmese war began and finally Burma fell under the British colonial rule. Moving the capital to Mandalay could not protect the country from the enemy. The capital of the traditional Burmese world was subjugated to the power of the modern world and British colonialism.

The British Empire threatened Burma by establishing Moulmein as its first administrative capital after the first Anglo-Burmese war. Then it successfully seized Yangon in 1852, and transformed it into the commercial and administrative hub of Lower Burma for the benefits of international trade. Yangon was a strategic springboard

³⁷ Quoted in http://www.aseanfocus.com/publications/history_myanmar.html

³⁸ Quoted in http://www.explore-myanmar.com/Destinations_Innwa.asp

for British-Indian troops to seize Mandalay by cruising upstream along the Irrawaddy River. Since then, the monarchical institution of Burma was totally destroyed and capital relocation never occurred throughout the colonial period.

2.7 The Rise and fall of Yangon as a Capital City

After the British had without major effort won the third Anglo-Burmese war and had conquered northern Myanmar, Yangon was then established by the British government as the new Burmese capital instead of Mandalay in 1886 and became the administrative centre of the Burmese part of the crown colony India.* When Lower Burma became integrated into British India, “the city’s present boundaries were established, with the Cantonment’s streets (downtown) paved in a chessboard fashion along the eastern banks of the Yangon River.”³⁹ The British rebuilt the town completely anew and used a square pattern for their city planning and by the early 1890s; Rangoon* had public services and infrastructure on par with London.⁴⁰ The city was increasingly developed by the British as the colonial administrative capital and the centre of international trade because of its location on the convergence of Yangon and Bago Rivers, some 30 kilometers (21 miles) from its mouth on the Gulf of Martaban..

During the colonial era the city was in effect divided into two major areas. First, the densely populated Central Business District located fronting Yangon River. This area is considered as the most important sector for commercial and economic activities. The British had laid out in a grid pattern around the Sule pagoda and constructed many western buildings, government ministries, and docklands and luxury hotels.⁴¹ It is also

* Yangon was founded as Dagon in the 500s by the Mon, who dominated the lower portions of present-day Myanmar at the time. Dagon was a small fishing village centered about the Shwedagon pagoda. In 1755, King Alaungpaya subjugated Mon rebellions, conquered Lower Burma, and renamed the town “Yangon” (meaning “end of strife” or “the enemy consumed”). After seizing the city, King Alaungpaya developed Yangon as the Andaman seaport instead of Syriam in order to eliminate the influence of the Mon in the delta.

³⁹ Available from: <http://www.bookrags.com/Yangon>

* Since 1852 to 1948, the British changed its name from Yangon to Rangoon.

⁴⁰ See in Serge Kreutz, *Myanmar/Yangon/the City*

⁴¹ Noel F. Singer, *Old Rangoon: City of the Shwedagon*, p. 4.

known as the downtown and the centre of Chinese and Indian settlements in colonial era. Second, the less densely populated districts north of the Central Business District including affluent neighborhoods for Europeans around the Royal (Kandawgyi) and Victoria (Inya) lakes. This area consists of largely irregular street alignment and is diverse in terms of housing, settlements and social class.⁴²



Map 10: City Planning in Grid System and Docklands in Downtown Yangon

Source: Google Earth Program Version 4.0.2736

In the colonial period, the majority of the population in Rangoon were foreigners, especially Indians (around 50% of the whole population) while the proportion of Burmans was around 30% and another 20% consisted of Chinese and Europeans. British policy encouraged Indian and Chinese immigration as well as Caucasian intermixing with the local Burmans to settle their communities in Rangoon to create a labor force for international trade and industry. The structure of population in this period made Rangoon as the city of foreigners rather than the city of Burmese people.

As a British colony, Rangoon's main industries were rice and timber, although other goods, such as raw cotton, precious stones, cheroots, and ivory were also exported.⁴³ After the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, Yangon was the centre of international trade for British colony in Lower Burma with access to international markets. "The British introduced a westernized educational system in Burma,

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ See in Serge Kreutz, *Myanmar/Yangon/the City*

establishing major colleges, such as Rangoon College (modern-day Yangon University) and the Theological College for Karen (modern-day Myanmar Institute of Theology). In addition, many religiously-affiliated boarding schools were built in order to teach English, Anglo-Burmese and Christian Karen children.”⁴⁴ British commercial and educational policy in Burma significantly supported the rise of Rangoon and made the city one of the most cosmopolitan colonial capitals in Southeast Asia.

After Burma’s independence in 1948, Yangon functioned as the centre of government affairs, bureaucratic administration and security strategy for both civilian and military governments. It is also a sacred place where the Shwedagon pagoda is located and has long been recognized as a Buddhist pilgrimage centre. Generally speaking, Yangon is a city with cosmological as well as political, economic and strategic significance. Moreover, it is the largest city of the Union of Myanmar and the most important commercial centre of the country.

However, since the end of the Cold War in 1991, the continuous influence and threat of globalization has led to the decline of Yangon’s political centrality and dominance. Despite becoming a modern metropolis with a high potential for future economic development, it does not represent the historical pride of the Burmese nation because it was established by British colonialism. Moreover, foreign cultures brought in by globalization have also constantly decreased and decayed Burmese cultural identity inside Yangon. Most importantly, its peripheral location near the sea is geographically and strategically inappropriate as an effective command and control centre from the point of view of the ruling government. It is considered vulnerable to sea-borne attack and the government’s ability to exercise effective political and military control in the hinterland is weakened because it is not situated in the center of the country. Additionally, it has also been a centre of popular uprisings and democratic movements against the ruling junta.

Thus, Yangon cannot function as a seat of power or effective capital in the 21st Century. The end of its history as a capital city came in November, 2005, when the

⁴⁴ Quoted in <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yangon>

ruling military government led by Senior General Than Shwe relocated the capital to Pyinmana Naypyidaw at the southern edge of the dry zone in the Upper Sittang Valley. The new capital is geopolitically located at the center of the country around 320 kilometers north of Yangon.

Table 1: Important Capital Relocations in Burmese History

Capital Relocations (moved from.....to.....)	Year A.D.	Names of Rulers Duration of Reign	Main Factors and Reasons
1. Pagan to Toungoo	1486	Minkyinyo (1486-1531)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Military stronghold for Burmese refugees escaping Shan hegemony in Upper Burma after the fall of Pagan from the Mongol invasion in 1287. • Military and political stronghold of King Minkyinyo to compete with Shan hegemony at Ava and to establish the great second Burmese empire after the dissolution of Pagan. (In fact, Toungoo emerged as a city was around 1280 and was developed into an important city during the reign of King Soalu in around 1426-1437 but the establishment of Toungoo as a new powerful Burmese capital was brought about in 1486 by King Minkyinyo.)
2. Toungoo to Pegu	1540	Tabinshwethi (1531-1550)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Power manifestation of King Tabinshwethi and a mark of the Burmese victory over the Mon. • Religious significance of Pegu as a holy capital influenced by Buddha's prophesies. • Expansion of international maritime trade and commercial activities in the Gulf of Martaban.
3. Pegu to Ava	1600	Nyaungyan (1599-1605)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adaptation of security strategy to consolidate military power inland after the fall of Pegu in 1599. • Inland development and expansion of agricultural areas in the dry zone (Kyaukse).

4. Ava to Pegu	1613	Anaukpetlun (1605-1628)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Imitation of King Tabinshwethi and Bayinnaung by establishing the royal capital at Pegu. • Mark of the Burmese sphere of influence over the Mon and the delta.
5. Pegu to Ava	1635	Thalun (1629-1648)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paranoia regarding western culture in coastal cities on the Gulf of Martaban and return to the historical and cultural heartland of the dry zone. • Security threats and political fluctuation in the delta such as Mon rebellions and Siamese invasion.
6. Ava to Shwebo	1753	Alaungpaya (1753-1760)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Withdrawal of the army deeper into the mountainous regions of the Mu Valley and consolidation of military strength after the fall of Ava in 1752. • Inland development and expansion of agricultural areas in the Mu Valley.
7. Shwebo to Sagaing	1760	Naungdawgyi (1760-1763)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adaptation of military strategy to contain and invest Ava occupied by rebellious forces led by Meng Khaung Noratha (great mandarin)
8. Sagaing to Ava	1765	Shinbyushin (1763-1775)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Command of the Kyaukse area to ensure strong economic power during a time of warfare with powerful neighboring states • Power manifestation by moving a capital as comparable to the great ancient monarchs.
9. Ava to Amarapura	1783	Bodawpaya (1781-1819)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Influence of Buddha's prophesy, astrological predictions by royal Brahmans and kingly manifestation (the powerful king shall leave the old capital and build a new one). • Political instability in the court and paranoia of revenge from political rivals in the old capital.



10. Amarapura to Ava	1823	Bagyidaw (1819-1837)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Astrological influence of bad omens from the alighting of a vulture on the palace spire and the burning of a large portion of the city, including the court of justice and the palace campanile.
11. Ava to Amarapura	1838	Tharawaddy (1837-1846)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political instability in the court and paranoia of revenge from political rivals in the old capital. • A huge earthquake that shook much of Central Burma and heavily destroyed the city of Ava.
12. Amarapura to Mandalay	1857	Mindon (1853-1878)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Various factors, including security strategy, political conflicts in the court, Buddha's prophesy and astrology, inland and agricultural development, xenophobia and an anti-British colonialism policy.
13. Mandalay to Yangon	1886	British Army (1852-1948)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • International trade of the British, colonial administration and strategic naval bases in the Gulf of Martaban.
14. Yangon to Naypyidaw	2005	Than Shwe (1991.....)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Several factors different from the past and influenced by military ideology and post-Cold war circumstances.

2.8 Conclusion

Throughout the history of Burma, relocation of the capital has not been an unusual phenomenon. Burmese monarchs were inclined to shift their capital for several reasons. Military need, politics, and economics are important factors, while cultural and moral crises have also played a crucial role. Moving the capital was a practice of Burmese monarchs in times of crisis in order to transform military strategy, enrich monarchical power, escape political turmoil and bad omens, develop agricultural areas and preserve cultural identity from external influences.

In terms of location, Burma has been more inclined to relocate the capital into deeper seclusion, usually into the hinterland and the protective folds of mountainous regions. Ancient Burmese capitals (except Hamtavati), such as Toungoo, Ava, Amarapura and Mandalay were situated in the dry zone. Moving the capital to these locations symbolized a return to the traditional heart where the Burmese nation originated and evolved. Interestingly, no Burmese king made Yangon the capital throughout the history of Burma. It has never symbolized the pride of the Burmese race but in contrast, is a legacy of British colonialism. Pinyinana Naypyidaw, therefore, is the first capital established by incumbent Burmese rulers since Burma was under British rule and hence will attain some significance in its history.

In the following chapters, the author will evaluate and prioritize possible factors for capital relocation from Yangon to Naypyidaw. The hypothesis on capital relocation will mainly focus on military strategy and Myanmar's contemporary circumstances and will be divided into three main parts, comprising politico-military security, hinterland economic development and spiritual-cultural unity.