THE GOLDEN ROCK AT KYAIK-HTI-YO

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The Golden Rock ranks with the Shwedagon and the Mahamuni as a solid member of Burma's sacred triumvirate, yet its history is the most obscure. The hair relics of the Buddha believed to be inside the granite boulder are the objects of devotion, but the rock's sanctity owes as much to its rich legacy. How this 611.45 ton granite boulder balancing on a cliff side in a remote mountain range came to achieve national veneration is testimony to not only the tenacious continuity of old legends but also their remarkable elasticity. If myths are to survive and flourish, then they must be nimble and able to change with new circumstances.

The present modest and preliminary exploration sketches the major historical sources surrounding Kyaik-hti-yo and suggests how the Golden Rock grew to be one of Burma's most sacred sites. Its history is plagued by gaps, but its general outline can be pieced together.

The Kyaik-hti-yo tradition can be traced to an important fifteenth-century Mon myth centered on six hair relics the Buddha presented to six hermits. These unnamed recluses returned to their hermitages in locations between Rangoon and the Thaton area, but Kyaik-hti-yo was not among them. This basic Mon myth survived the loss of Pegu and Lower Burma to Burmese forces in the sixteenth century and provided a firm but fluid foundation on which many later myths in Lower Burma were constructed, often in unexpected ways. A hair relic became attached to the Golden Rock probably sometime in the seventeenth century, but the exact nature of the legend at that time is unknown. The myth permuted over the centuries until it attained its present shape in the early twentieth century, ingeniously bringing together many disparate elements in order to elevate the primacy of Kyaik-hti-yo.

The present article reflects the insights of a number of colleagues, principally U Tun Aung Chain and Patrick Pranke. Special thanks also are to Mathias Jenny who supplied English translations of sections from two Mon texts, *Uppanna Sudhammawati-rajawamsakatha* and *Gavampati*. Elizabeth Moore also provided an English translation by U San Win of a portion of unnamed Mon chronicle translated into Burmese in 1784 and a copy of an important forthcoming study by U San Win. Others with whom I have shared various drafts or discussed topics related to the present article include Benedicte Brac de la Perriere, Robert Brown, Jason Carbine, Jon Fernquest, Pamela Gutman, Justin McDaniel, and Elizabeth Moore. Nai Pan Hla prepared English translations of the fifteenth-century Mon inscriptions for me in 1987; Burmese translations of the same Mon inscriptions are cited in U Chit Thein, *Shei-huang Mon Kyauksa Paung-khyup* (1965). Most of the same fifteenth-century inscriptions are named, numbered and briefly described by H. L. Shorto in his *A Dictionary of Mon Inscriptions* (Shorto 1970); to facilitate cross references to Shorto and U Chit Thein, I have supplied the numbers that Shorto and U Chit Thein arbitrarily assigned to the inscriptions in their respective publications. This article is an expansion of a section on Kyaik-hti-yo for a forthcoming book, *Sacred Sites of Burma* (River Books, Bangkok).

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Fig. 1. The 611.45 ton granite boulder is thought to contain three hair relics of the Buddha, a Mon myth stemming from the fifteenth century.

The Kyaik-hti-yo legacy represents a completely separate tradition from that of the Shwedagon Pagoda which focuses on eight hair relics that the Buddha bestowed on two Mon merchants in Bodhgaya. Both myths took shape in the fifteenth-century among the Mon in Lower Burma and both underwent dramatic changes over the centuries. The Shwedagon legend, however, is rooted in a single spot, whereas the locations and the lore surrounding the six hair relics is far more diffuse and has been subject to greater and wider interpretations through the ages. The core of the Shwedagon legend (two brothers meeting the Buddha at Bodhgaya) was also anchored in the Pali Canon and its early commentaries, whereas early canonical literature never speaks of the Buddha visiting Lower Burma and dispensing relics (Pe Maung Tin).

Fig. 2. Thagyamin, center, with Tissa the Hermit, right, and Bo Bo Aung. Kyaik-hti-yo

The Legend Today

The current legend is contained in a publication issued by the Pagoda Trustees in 1997, which follows largely a statement by the Ministry of Information in 1949 (Aung Than: 25-26; Moore 2004: 163). It begins with the Buddha visiting Thaton and distributing six hair relics equally to three hermits who came to Thaton from three different nearby hilltops. Two of the three were brothers. The elder, often named Tissa, resided on Mt. Kyaik-hti-yo and was the foster-father of the King of Thaton. The Kyaik-hti-yo hermit kept his two relics in his topknot. His younger brother hermit, commonly called Siha, dwelt on Mt. Zingyaik where he deposited one hair in a stupa and the second relic on Mt. Zwegabin. This younger brother hermit living on Mt. Zingyaik was the foster-father of Gavampati, a boy who died in childhood and who became a disciple of the Buddha in India in another birth. Both Gavampati and his older brother, the King of Thaton, were born from eggs produced by a snake-maiden, or *naga-ma*, disguised as a lovely woman, who coupled with a wizard, or *zawgyi*.

The third hermit, often called Tila, lived on Mt. Kelasa where he interred one of his two hair relics in a stupa and kept the other. At the death of the hermit on Mt. Kelasa, the Kyaik-hti-yo hermit obtained the hair relic that was not placed in a stupa and added it to his two already secreted away in his topknot. As the Kyaik-hti-yo hermit himself neared death, his son, who was the King of Thaton, together with Thagyamin, or

Sakka (Pali), persuaded the Kyaik-hti-yo hermit to relinquish his three relics for enshrinement in a pagoda that could be worshipped by all. The recluse assented but demanded that Thagyamin locate a stone reliquary that resembled the shape of his head. Thagyamin scoured the universe and returned with the huge granite boulder in which he placed all three hair relics. The Kyaik-hti-yo hermit then died, gazing at the Golden Rock, his wish fulfilled.

This version was probably formulated in the early twentieth century but combined centuries-old elements in an ingenious fashion. The intricacies of the legend are far from the minds and hearts of the majority of pilgrims for whom it is enough to believe that a hermit enshrined one or more hairs relics in a rock that resembled the shape of the hermit's head, conveyed there by Thagymin.

The key locations and protagonists are outlined in the following table, a handy 'who's who' in the 'Kyaik-hti-yo Myth.' The names vary in accounts, both old and modern.

Hilltops, Hermits, Monks and Kings	
Mt. Kyaik-hti-yo	Hermit Tissa; two hairs, both in topknot; raised the future King of Thaton; obtained a third hair from Hermit Tila on Mt. Kelasa
Mt. Kelasa	Hermit Tila; two hairs, one in pagoda and one under worship
Mt. Zingyaik	Hermit Siha; two hairs, one in pagoda on Mt. Zingyaik, second in pagoda on Mt. Zwegabin; raised Gavampati who died in childhood, reborn in India
Monk Gavampati	Disciple of the Buddha and younger brother to the King of Thaton; hatched from a snake-egg, raised by Hermit Siha
Siha Raja	King of Thaton, older brother to Gavampati; hatched from a snake-egg, raised by the Kyaik-hti-yo Hermit
Snake goddess (*naga-ma*) and Wizard (*zawgyi*)	This couple produced Gavampati and King of Thaton

Kyaik-hti-yo Hill also became entwined with a popular regional *nat* known as Shwe Nan Kyin. Despite her negligible role in the narrative, as Queen of Thaton, her presence at Kyaik-hti-yo is pervasive, worshipped by peasants and generals alike. When exactly she became attached to the site is difficult to fix, but it probably occurred by the late nineteenth century. Her importance at Kyaik-hti-yo underscores the seamless blend of indigenous and Theravada traditions that so characterizes Burma and much of Southeast Asia.

Fig. 3. Tissa the Hermit dying, held by the king's minister. Thaton king on right. Kyaik-hti-yo

Fig. 4. Lower Burma. Principal sites.

An Annotated Chronology of Key Sources		
Source	Date	Details provided
Inscriptions	Fifteenth Century	Six hermits visited Thaton and received single hair relics; one strand was replicated twice for two more hermits; Gavampati and the King of Thaton are unspecified kinsmen in a past life. The hermits are unnamed and without biographies. Relic stupas ranged from the Rangoon area to the Thaton region. No reference to Kyaik-hti-yo; only Mt. Kelasa, near Thaton, can be identified as one of the six locations.
Ù Kalà's *Great Chronicle* (*Maha-ya-zawin-gyi*)	c. 1725	A donation at Kyaik-hti-yo ("Itharo") is made by King Pyei (1661-1672); no information on hermits, relics or boulder; earliest reference to Kyaik-hti-yo's importance.
Gavampati Chronicle	c. 1710	The hermit on Kyaik-hti-yo Hill is one of only three hermits who obtained hair relics; Gavampati and the King of Thaton are brothers, hatched from the eggs of a snake-goddess; two additional groups of recluses came to Thaton and accepted hair relics from the Buddha; a single hair relic was thought to be at Kyaik-hti-yo during this period.
Unnamed Mon chronicle	translated into Burmese in 1784	Six hermits connected to six hilltops, one of which is Kyaik-hti-yo; one hair relic per hilltop. List includes hills that become key in the modern myth, namely, Kyaik-hti-yo, Kelasa, and Zingyaik.
Taw Sein Ko	1891	Kyaik-hti-yo is one of three hilltops associated with hermits and hair relics (Kyaik-hti-yo, Kelasa and Kusinara); the modern myth differs from this greatly and was formulated after 1891, perhaps about 1900 or later.
Ministry of Information	1949	This version, perhaps dating to around 1900 or later, is the current one and is also reflected in a publication by the Pagoda Trustees, 1997. The hermit at Kyaik-hti-yo is the foster-father of the Thaton king; hermit's brother is a hermit on Mt. Zingyaik; third hermit is on Mt. Kelasa; all three hermits received two hair relics from the Buddha in Thaton; Kyaik-hti-yo hermit relinquishes his two relics and one belonging to Mt. Kelasa hermit to his adopted son (the Thaton King) and Thagyamin who interred the three hair relics in the granite boulder.
Note: The dates of these sources merely reflect the times at which the inscriptions were incised or the texts were compiled; the appearance of legends in inscriptions and chronicles should not be understood of course as the starting point of a myth but rather as the moment when a legend has attained a certain threshold of popularity and acceptance.		

The Six Hair Relics: the Inscriptions of Dhammaceti

The Kyaik-hti-yo myth stretches back into the fifteenth century when Lower Burma was in the hands of the Mon. The legend is known only from some ten epigraphs found between Pegu and the Thaton area, that is, within a wide arch facing the Gulf of Martaban (Chit Thein; Shorto 1971: xxx-xxxii). All are datable to the reign of King Dhammaceti (1470-1492), but only two have survived with specific dates, at Payagyi, near Pegu, and at Mt. Kelasa, near Thaton, both from 1486 (Chit Thein: nos. 87, 91; Shorto 1971: xxxi-xxxii, nos. 50, 72).

The formulaic inscriptions state that the Buddha was invited to visit Thaton by a monk named Gavampati in the eighth year following the enlightenment. The Thaton king, known as Sirimasoka, was Gavampati's kinsmen in a previous life in Lower Burma; after Gavampati's death in Lower Burma, he was reborn in India where he became a disciple of the Buddha. The fifteenth-century epigraphs do not specify the specific familial connection between Gavampati and the king, but in later Burmese and Mon sources they are always described as brothers, hatched from two snake eggs (more below). The Buddha converted the king and then distributed six hairs to an equal number of hermits in Thaton. No personal names or bits of biography are connected to any of the six recluses in the fifteenth-century inscriptions, unlike the later traditions. The hermits lived in forest hermitages and at least one hilltop, Mt. Kelasa, in the Thaton region (more below).

Fig. 5. Location of key mountaintops and Thaton. Mt. Kelasa is the only peak that can be tied to the fifteenth-century inscriptions with certainty.

Thirty-three Tooth Relics

After the Buddha dispensed the six hair relics to the six hermits in Thaton, the Thaton king then requested a relic from the Buddha for himself. The Buddha demurred but then promised the monarch a tooth relic at the time of his cremation. Based on this promise, the monk Gavampati retrieved a tooth from the funeral pyre and returned to Thaton where it multiplied thirty-three times; the local king, Sirimasoka, then established thirty-three stone pagodas in Thaton for each of the relics. Since most of these inscriptions in Lower Burma accorded equal attention to the hair and tooth relics but are incomplete with lacunae, it is impossible to determine if most of the incised stones commemorated a shrine dedicated to one or the other.

Restoration of Lost Tooth and Hair Relic Stupas by Sona and Uttara

A major theme in all of the fifteenth-century inscriptions is that the stupas dedicated to the hair and tooth relics fell into disuse, disrepair and eventually became lost in vegetation, signaling a withering of the faith. King Asoka therefore dispatched from India Sona and Uttara, two 'great elders,' or "*mahatheras*" (Pali), to re-establish Buddhism in Suvannabhumi, 236 years after the Buddha's demise and at the time of the Third Synod in India. The ruling king in Thaton at this later time was also called Sirimasoka.

Fig. 6. Two hermits ascending to the Kyaik-hti-yo pagoda, distinguished by special tapered hats.

The Thaton king pleaded with Sona and Uttara: "Since your arrival in our land, we have the *Dhamma* Gem and the *Sangha* Gem to worship … to be happy at heart, the Buddha Gem we would like to worship…. shall our lords [Sona and Uttara] search for us?" (U Chit Thein: 93; Shorto 1971: xxxii, no. 70). The Three

Jewels, or *tiratana* (Pali), were therefore incomplete without bodily relics of the Buddha. It was this plea on the part of the Thaton king that prompted Sona and Uttara to locate and restore the lost pagodas. The same formulaic wording is found in the Shwedagon Inscription where Sona and Uttara discovered the lost ruins of the Shwedagon stupa and then restored it with Sirimasoka (Pe Maung Tin: 19).

Mt. Kelasa: the only known fifteenth-century hair relic pagoda

Lacunae in the inscriptions preclude identification of all of the six spots devoted to stupas containing a hair relic. The only hilltop that can be identified is Mt. Kelasa, a peak situated about thirty miles northwest of Thaton. There were likely other mountains, but these are lost in effaced portions of the stones. Likely candidates are Mt. Zingyaik and Mt. Zwegabin, in light of their sanctity and proximity to Thaton, but there is no certainty. Two hermitages in the Rangoon area were "at the middle of the forest of Randa-naguir " and the other "at the east of the city of Asitanjana-naguir [Asitanjana, or Rangoon] (Chit Thein: nos. 91-92; Shorto 1971: xxxii, nos. 72-73). [1]

Kelasa is also referred to in passing in the Kalyani Inscription, as the "*ceitya* on Mt. Kelasa", or "Kelasabhapabbatacetiya" (Taw Sein Ko 1893: 16). In the Mon version of the Kalyani Inscription, the mountain is called "Kelasapow" (Blagden 1928: 185). There is also a two-part fifteenth-century inscription on Mt. Kelasa, which mentions Kelasapow, thus corroborating the identification of this mountain with one of the stupas connected to one of the six hair relics (Chit Thein: nos. 91-92; Shorto 1971: xxxii, nos. 72-73). This hilltop is the only confirmed original location for one of the six hair relics from the fifteenth century; Mt. Kelasa probably remained associated with one or more hair relics, including to the present. No evidence, however, suggests that Kyaik-hti-yo Hill was one of the six locations in the fifteenth century.

The long ridge on which Mt. Kelasa is located was also the site of two important early Mon epigraphs from the time of the King Kyanzittha (c.1084-c.1113), which recorded restorations of two shrines (Luce 1969-1970: I.56). However, no conclusive evidence indicates that Mt. Kelasa, the peak within this ridge, was itself was under worship during this same period. The two inscriptions were found some distance from Mt. Kelasa itself on the ridge and the term Mt. Kelasa does not appear in the two epigraphs. However, Mt. Kelasa is found in Kyanzittha's Myakan Lake inscription from near Pagan, described as the abode of the hermit-cum-deity, sage Bisnu ("*risi Bisnu*"), the future founder of Sri Kshetra (Duroiselle: 139). The context

[1] Asitanjana, lifted from early Pali sources, appears in a number of fifteenth-century Mon inscriptions where it has been taken to be Rangoon (Pe Maung Tin). Randa cannot be yet identified but was perhaps just north of the Shwedagon, Rangoon, if it can be identified with a reference in a later Mon text, *Slapat Rajawan datow smin ron.*
(Halliday: 86). In this chronicle, the relics for the Shwedagon were said to be bathed at Ranna-naguir, a "hill to the north of Singuttara [Shwedagon Hill] " (Halliday: 86).

implies that Mt. Kelasa is the famous legendary hill situated in the celestial realm, well known in Buddhist and Hindu literature, and not the hill of the same name in Lower Burma.

Fig. 7. Tissa the Hermit, center, with King of Thaton, left, and Thagyamin. Kyaik-hti-yo.

Location of the Tooth Relic Pagodas

Sona and Uttara also re-discovered the lost and derelict stupas connected to the Thirty Three Tooth Relics that were created in Thaton at the time of the Buddha's visit. These tooth-relic stupas, however, were not restored like the hair-relic stupas in their original locations but the teeth were distributed by Sona and Uttara throughout the realm. The only site which can be positively identified with any of these dispersed tooth relics was the Shwemawdaw Pagoda in Pegu, in the fifteenth century (Thet Tin: 9-22, 54-55; Stadtner, 2007a). Another tooth-relic stupa inscription was found at Thaton itself, likely belonging the Shwezayan Pagoda, but the true location of the pagoda at Thaton is uncertain (Chit Thein: no. 94; Shorto 1971: xxxii, 70).

Fig. 8. Shwemawdaw, Pegu. Its fifteenth-century myth centered on a tooth relic was eclipsed by a hair-relic legend modeled on the Shwedagon. The earlier myth was only uncovered by a chance discovery in the 1950s.

The Shwemawdaw was the paramount stupa in the Mon capital, thus signifying the cardinal importance of this tooth-relic tradition. Indeed, the Shwemawdaw and the Shwedagon were the two most sacred sites in Lower Burma for the Mon in the fifteenth century. Moreover, the distribution of tooth relics by Sona and Uttara in Lower Burma played a key role in the definition of Mon polity, an issue fully explored by H. L. Shorto (1963, 1967).

This fifteenth-century myth connected to the Shwemawdaw in Pegu, centered on a tooth relic, was completely eclipsed at some point following the Mon loss of Lower Burma. It was replaced by a legend based on two brothers from near Pegu who ventured to India and received two hair relics from the Buddha at Rajagaha. They returned home and established the Shwemawdaw, with the help of Thagyamin (Browne). This current myth is modeled on the Shwedagon myth, with a few modifications.

That the earlier Mon myth was essentially erased from the pages of history suggests how even potent myths connected to sacred sites can come and go with astonishing alacrity and often without leaving a trace (Stadtner, 2007a). This is not at all to suggest that they are deliberately suppressed but rather the new myth, or a variation on an old one, becomes so dominant that the former myth(s) is completely concealed beneath new layers. Pagan provides countless examples of this lasting phenomena, but more recent examples are the Sule and the Botataung pagodas in Rangoon, whose earlier myths were largely buried in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, respectively (more below).

This tradition of dispersing the thirty-three teeth was scarcely forgotten however, even though its association with the Shwemawdaw were forgotten. A Burmese Buddhist text from the late eighteenth century recorded that all of teeth were recovered from a single stupa on an unidentified mountain named Inda-danoo, northeast of Thaton, and were distributed throughout Lower Burma, eleven to Hamsavati, eleven to Pathein and eleven to Mottama (Bigandet: 391).[2]

All of the fifteenth-century inscriptions imply that these restored hair relic and tooth relic shrines were patronized by Mon kings in a continuous fashion from the time of Sona and Uttara up to and including the reign of Dhammaceti. A few of the epigraphs refer to refurbishments of stupas in the historical past, with references to earlier Mon kings, such as Banya-U (1369-1384) and Rajadhiraj (1384-1420) (Chit Thein: no. 87; Shorto: 1970, xxxi, no. 66; Thet Tin). In chronological terms, a huge gap between the time of Sona, Uttara, and King Sirimasoka and the fourteenth-century Mon kings in Pegu is understood but unstated.

Six Hair Relics Become Eight

According to the fifteenth-century inscriptions, one of the six recluses returned to his forest retreat where two junior hermits declared: "But two of us got no such object of worship … the senior hermit replied to the

[2] The three correspond to the administrative divisions in the fifteenth century referred to in the Kalyani Inscription: Kusimandala (Pathein) Hamsavatimandala (Pegu) and Muttimandala (Mottama) (Taw Sein Ko, 1893: 34).

two junior hermits, 'Let us pray and make a vow.' They made a solemn vow, '… let this one hair relic become three for the three of us to worship'. " The senior hermit, the middle hermit and the younger hermit then enshrined their relics in individual stone stupas, presumably in their shared hermitage. These three hermits are always said in the fifteenth-century epigraphs to dwell "at the west of the middle forest," an unidentified location (Chit Thein: no. 88; Shorto, 1971: xxxii, nos. 76-77). In total, eight hair relics were thought to be enshrined in separate stone stupas worshipped by the eight hermits, based on the fifteenth-century epigraphs.

Fig. 9. King Okkalapa miraculously restored four hair relics stolen from Tapussa and Bhallika en route from India. Eight hairs eventually were placed in the Shwedagon. Botataung Pagoda. By U Ba Kyi (1912-2000).

This 'sub-story' devoted to the replication of one hair was perhaps devised in order to match the same number of hair relics given to Tapussa and Bhallika by the Buddha in India, or was added to account for eight important pre-Dhammaceti-period hair-relic pagodas that needed to be incorporated into the legend. Or this incident of the replication may have been added simply to enhance the potency of the hair relics and the spiritual prowess of the hermits, much like King Okkalapa who famously restored four stolen hair relics that belonged to the original eight intended for the Shwedagon. That this replication is mentioned in all of the inscriptions touching on the hair relics (and tooth-relics) suggest its importance, but there is no reason to associate this episode in any way to Kyaik-hti-yo in the fifteenth century.

Fig. 10. Sacred tooth concealed in the headdress of princess Hemamala, fleeing from Kalinga to Sri Lanka, disguised as a hermit. Kelaniya Vihara. Near Colombo. Mural, Solias Mendiz, c. 1936– 1946.

Sources for the Six Hair Relic Legend

The sources for the 'six hair relics' legend are obscure, unlike the Shwedagon myth whose roots can be traced fairly easily in the Pali canon and its commentaries (Pe Maung Tin). One undated Pali text, the *Chronicle of the Six Hair Relics*, or the *Chakesadhatuvamsa*, has few similarities with traditions in Lower Burma, apart from the same number of hairs that the Buddha proffered, in this case to disciples in Rajagaha (Strong 2004: 82-85). This text of uncertain date was probably composed in Sri Lanka and appears to have exerted no impact in Burma.

One possible source for the Mon tradition was the *Mahavamsa*, the ancient Sinhalese Pali chronicle, where the Buddha gave an unspecified number of hairs to an important local deity named Mahasumana who resided on Samanakuta, or Adam's Peak. This occurred on the Buddha's first visit to the island (Geiger: 5). This episode may have provided an indirect impetus for the Thaton legend, but glaring dissimilarities make it an unlikely source.

Similar legends from neighboring Thailand approximate numerous elements in many of the legends in Lower Burma, but none closely resemble the 'six hair relics' episode. One myth with some parallels involves a

single hair relic presented by the Buddha to a newly converted family of ogres whose son, Wasuthep, enshrined it on the famous Doi Suthep, the towering peak on the northern outskirts of Chiang Mai named Doi Suthep (Swearer, Sommai 1998; Swearer, Sommai, Phaithoon 2004: 72).[3]

On balance, the tradition of the six hair relics (the Buddha granting six strands to six hermits outside of India) probably arose *sui generis* in Burma during the fifteenth century, if not before. The theme of the Buddha's gift of hair relics to hermits survived in Lower Burma and gave rise to numerous separate traditions following the Mon defeat in the sixteenth century. New sets of hermits were created and the circumstances altered, but the basic narrative of the Buddha's visit to Thaton and meeting hermits remained constant. Whether all or only a portion of the many myths recorded in Dhammaceti's inscriptions emerged during his reign or if they were developed much earlier is difficult to say. Common sense would argue that these myths had already matured over a long period in Lower Burma before the reign of Dhammaceti, but no hard proof has survived (Stadtner 1990; 1991).

Fig. 11. The hermit Wasuthep, center, enshrined a hair relic, obtained from the Buddha, on Doi Suthep, the sacred peak just north of Chiang Mai. Wasuthep began life as an ogre, converted, and became a monk before becoming a recluse. Doi Suthep, Chiang Mai

[3] This hair relic has been overshadowed by another relic at Doi Suthep, a bodily relic brought from Sukothai; another single hair relic, given by the Buddha to a king in Thailand multiplied itself eight times (Swearer, Sommai, & Phaithoon 2004: 53, 71-72).

Family Matters: the *Gavampati* chronicle, c. 1710

The King of Thaton and Gavampati are described in the fifteenth-century inscriptions as merely kinsmen in a past life, but their biographies were embellished following the Mon defeat in Lower Burma in the sixteenth century.[4] The two fullest and probably earliest sources treating their relationship are two Mon texts, a Thaton chronicle named *Uppanna Sudhammawati-rajavamsakatha*, the *Story of the Royal Family of Sudhammavati* [Thaton] and a text entitled *Gavampati*, attributed by Shorto to c. 1710 (Shorto 1970). Since the latter text can perhaps be dated to the beginning of the eighteenth century, then its contents were likely current during the seventeenth century, if not before.

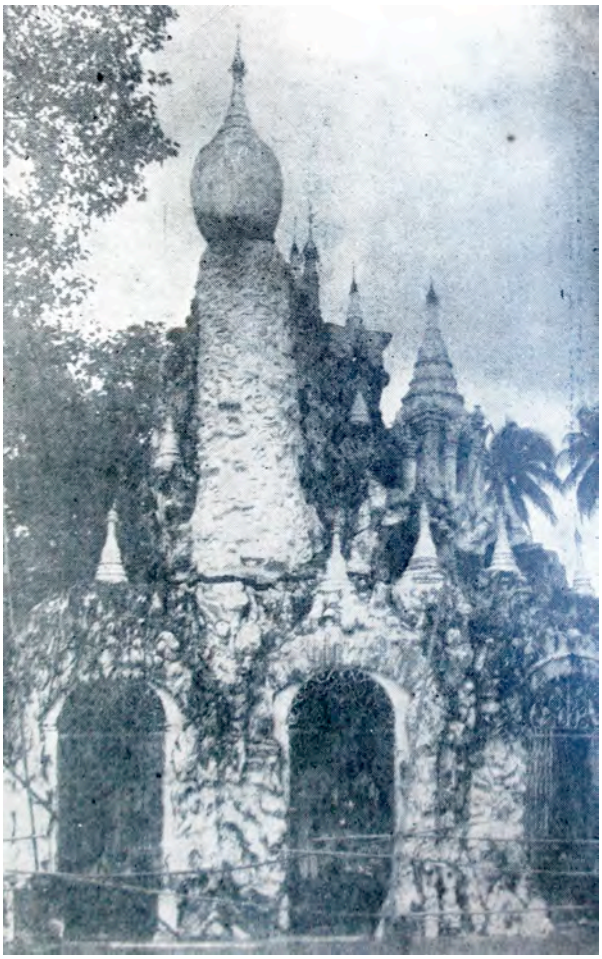

Fig. 12. The Shwedagon and the Golden Rock were closely linked even in the late nineteenth century. This replica on the Shwedagon platform came down probably in the 1950s or 1960s (after Aung Than, fig. 7).

The story in these early Mon texts begins with two princes who renounced their father's court in Thaton for forest hermitages on separate mountaintops. The elder prince, sometimes called Siha, settled on Mt. Zingyaik, a towering peak eighteen miles south of Thaton. Here he discovered on its northern slope two eggs left by a snake-goddess who had mated with a wizard (Mon: *wijadhuin*; from Pali: *vijjadhara*) (Shorto 1970:19). The eggs were abandoned when the wizard discovered that his consort, a lovely woman disguised as a snake, had produced not children but eggs. The wizard ran off in fright and disgust, while his serpentine partner then disappeared into the earth, forsaking her two eggs on Mt. Zingyaik.

From the eggs in possession of the elder hermit on Mt. Zingyaik hatched two sons. The elder hermit raised the elder child, Suriyakumara, who became King of Thaton (also called Siha-raja in many sources). The younger child, named Candakumara, was presented to the hermit's brother who inhabited a sacred hill eight miles south of Pa'an in neighboring Karen State called Mt. Zwegabin, or the Duke of York's Nose in colonial times (Shorto 1967:134).

Candakumara died at the age of six and was reborn in India where he became Gavampati, a disciple of the Buddha. Meanwhile, his brother, in a later rebirth, assumed the throne in Thaton. It was this Thaton king who was converted by the Buddha after coming to his court at the request of his brother, Gavampati.

These two Mon chronicles add that Gavampati returned from India to Suvannabhumi to search for his mother from a previous life who was then living in a village close to Thaton and near Mt. Zingyaik; Gavampati's mother had been reborn there as a seven-year old girl. To convince the populace of their former familial descent, Gavampati caused milk to spring from the child's breasts into his mouth (Shorto 1970: 18-21).

These two Mon chronicles are in general agreement about the parentage and biographies of Gavampati and his older brother, the Thaton king. The two hills near Thaton, Zingyaik and Zwegabin, were therefore homes to the brother-hermits and their two adopted sons hatched from eggs (Gavampati and the King of Thaton). These two sacred hills later come to play an important role in the current Kyaik-ht-iyo legend, but no firm evidence proves that these two hills were venerated in the fifteenth century.[5]

This basic story, that was probably current sometime in the seventeenth century, survived in lore and in Buddhist chronicles. For example, it is repeated in the late eighteenth-century *Vamsadipani*, and in the nineteenth-century *Sasanavamsa*, with minor variations (Pranke: 130-131; Law: 40-41).

[5] A monk on Mt. Zingyaik is said to have composed the Mon text, *Nidana Arambhakatha*. If Shorto's dating of this text, sometime after 1538 but before 1661, is correct, then it would suggest the early importance of Mt. Zingyaik. This text has nothing on the transmission of Buddhism or the hair relics in Thaton (Shorto 1961: 64).

The Hair Relics: the *Gavampati* chronicle, c. 1710

In this aforementioned *Gavampati* chronicle, attributed by Shorto to c. 1710, there appears a key early reference to Kyaik-hti-yo Hill. The chronicle described three sets of hermits who received hair relics in Thaton from the Buddha and then returned home to their hermitages and enshrined their relics. The names of the hermits in the first two sets are not mentioned but are included in the last set. Most of the locations cannot yet be identified. These three groups of hermits represent separate but related traditions that were brought together in a unified narrative in this text, suggesting how the legend had already altered by the seventeenth century. Its fifteenth-century core remained the same, that is, hermits receiving hair relics in Thaton and returning to their hermitages and establishing stupas, but the hermits had multiplied and Kyaik-hti-yo was now included.

Fig. 13. The Buddha presented eight hair relics to Tapussa and Bhallika, two merchant brothers from Asitanjana, or Rangoon, enshrined in the Shwedagon.

Three Groups of Hermits (based on the *Gavampati* chronicle, c. 1710)
First Group – Three hermits

The first group of hermits that received single hair relics from the Buddha at Thaton numbered three. One enshrined his relic in the "Celasa Shrine", probably Mt. Kelasa, the peak near Thaton and also the site of a hair relic in the fifteenth-century inscriptions. Another deposited his treasure in the Hair Relic Shrine Tamniut, located in Lagun, an old Mon word for modern Rangoon. This stupa cannot be identified today in Rangoon. The third enshrined his relic in a shrine at Muh Kruk (Mon, meaning 'Mango Edge'), also an unidentified location. Since this group of hermits met the Buddha first, this may imply that that this group outranked the other two. Moreover, two of the identified locations, Lagun, or Rangoon and Mt. Kelasa, were clearly important during the period when the *Gavampati* text was compiled.

Second Group – Three hermits

The second group holds the key for tracing the Kyaik-hti-yo legend:

> Then a group of three other hermits came to the Omniscient One [following the first group] and after listening to his sermon asked for objects of worship [at Thaton] … One of the hermits came and went back and enshrined one hair relic on Jayabhummi Hill, north of Jray Bhum [Jayabhumi].[6] The place is called Mahaceti Kesa Shrine [Kesa, or hair, Pali]. One of the hermits was called Siridamayakkha. He went back to enshrine one of the hair relics on the hill called Tambajayya. This hermit had two younger brothers, one of whom was called Sirimuni, the other one called Siribhavan. The younger brothers also wanted to enshrine [a hair relic]. The three of them concentrated their spiritual strength and they got three hair relics which they could enshrine. One was called Siridama Hair Relic Shrine [in Mon, Siri Dama Sok, which was Siri Dhamma Sok, or Siridhammasoka, another name for king of Thaton]. One was called Siri Muni Shrine, and one was called Siri Bhavan Shrine. All three shrines are still there to be seen. *One of the hermits carried the hair relic which he received on his head and took it back to enshrine on a big hill called Kutapabbata. Because the hermit carried the hair relic on his head, the place was called 'Shrine of the [relic] which the hermit carried on his head' ("kyaik-isi-yiuw", Mon)* [*kyaik (shrine), isi (hermit), yiuw (carried on head)*, Mon; or *Kyaik Hti Yo*, Burmese]" (italics mine).

[6] Jray Bhum is Jayabhumi or 'Place of Victory' (Mathias Jenny, personal communication, August, 2008). Perhaps Jayabhumi was considered Thaton and the Maha Kesa Shrine might be the one on Mt. Kelasa. The Kelasa range is northwest of Thaton.

Only the Kyaitk-hti-yo location can be identified with much certainty from this list above. The replication of the single hair relic into two echoes the version cited in many of the Dhammaceti inscriptions from the fifteenth century, but here the three hermits are described as brothers. Although only Kyaik-hti-yo Hill can be identified in this list, it is possible that this list featured only sites in the Thaton-Bilin area. The name *Kuta-pabbata* (Pali), or literally Mountain Peak, probably served as a formal term for Kyaik-hti-yo, a common device associating important local spots with Pali terms.

Third Group – Six Hermits

A third and final group approached the Buddha for hair relics during his visit to Thaton, following the second group's audience with the Buddha. This group numbered six hermits and each was listed with his name and the location of his hermitage. Most of the six locations cannot be yet identified. One is said to be hermit Bhagiyya on Kutapabbata Hill, which is likely the Kyaik-hti-yo Hill (see above). Other locations are Payiuw Gnin Hill near Motttama and a site situated between Moulmein and Thanbyuzayat. And one hermit named Lomamajihma enshrined his relic on Singhuttara Trihakumbha Hill in Lagun (the 'Shwedagon Hill,' Rangoon). The geographical range in this list is therefore extensive, from Rangoon to the Moulmein area, from urban shrines to remote Kyaik-hti-yo, or Kutapabbata.

Fig. 14. Lore asserts that the boulder never really rests on the cliff side but hovers just above. It was once thought to be much higher, brought down by the present "degenerate days" (Forbes 1878: 206).

Ù Kalà and King Pyei

An important early historical reference to Kyaik-hti-yo appears in Ù Kalà's *Great Chronicle* (*Maha-ya-zawin-gyi*) compiled in c. 1729. In a section detailing the benefactions of King Pyei (1661-1672) is the following: "He also donated *makutas* to the Shwemawdaw Pagoda [in Pegu], the Itharo Pagoda [Kyaik-hti-yo] and the Pyinnat Pagoda [in Mottama]."[7]

The *makutas* (Pali), or crowns or crests, should likely be interpreted as spires, or *htis*. These donations were perhaps made at the time of the king's victorious campaign in the Mottama area in 1662-1663 against invading forces from Ayutthaya. The etymology of 'Itharo' in Kalà's text reflects a Burmese corruption of the Mon *isi*, or 'hermit' (from the Sanskrit *rsi*), combined with *iwo*, or 'a load carried on the head.' This connection with a relic 'carried on the head' is also a distinguishing feature of the Mon version recorded in the *Gavampati* chronicle during approximately the same period (see above). Even if this reference to this seventeenth-century king's donation at Itharo (Kyaik-hti-yo) is erroneous, it nevertheless provides strong evidence that Kyaik-hti-yo was well known by Kalà's day, even in Upper Burma.

It is also probably safe to assume that it was the huge granite boulder at Kyaik-hti-yo that was the object of devotion at Kyaik-hti-yo in the seventeenth century; but there is no absolute certainty. Unfortunately, Kalà associated no specific myth or relic with Itharo, but it was surely the site of an important shrine, almost certainly associated with a hair relic, said to be carried on the head of a hermit.

Fig. 15. Shwedagon Inscription. Mon, Burmese and Pali text, reign of Dhammaceti (r. 1470-1492). Six hairs were enshrined, the derelict pagoda was 'discovered' and restored by Sona and Uttara, a role later played by Sule Nat, King Okkalapa and Thagyamin. Stones originally found on the east slope, by Forchhammer.

[7] This translation and discussion of the etymology was provided by U Tun Aung Chain (personal communication, October, 2008). This passage is also translated in Than Htut (2000: 83).

Mt. Zingyaik and Mt. Zwegabin: sixteenth – seventeenth century Burmese Poems

Two Burmese poets following the Mon defeat in the first half of the sixteenth century have described two sacred peaks south of Kyaik-hti-yo and Thaton. This information puts many of the mythic elements surrounding Gavampati and the King of Thaton in sharper historical perspective.

The earlier poet is the famous Nawaday-gyi, from Hamsavati, who included a description of Mt. Zingyaik in three of his works. The poems mention a pagoda on Mt. Zingyaik named Kyaik Brannat, or 'Pagoda of the Female Naga' (Kyaik Grannat, Mon). The name of the pagoda incorporated *kyaik*, the well-known Mon word for pagoda, or stupa, and *brannat*, or female *naga*. Moreover, the hill was also spoken of as the location of a hair-relic pagoda. Another of his poems dealt with nearby Mt. Zwegabin, near Pa-an, southeast of Thaton, another sacred hill that belonging to the later modern Kyaik-hti-yo legend.

The later poet, who accompanied Anauk-hpet-lun (r. 1606-1628) in his military campaign to Mottama (Martaban), also mentioned the same pagoda at Mt. Zingyaik ("*Brannat-hpaya*") and referred to it as containing a hair relic.[8] Although there is no indication in Dhammaceti's fifteenth-century inscriptions that Zingyaik or Zwebagin were among the locations tied to the six hair relics, it is certainly very possible that these two peaks were included among the six sacred spots, in light of their veneration from an early period.

Significantly, Kyaik-hti-yo is absent in the works of these two early Burmese poets, perhaps suggesting that the site came to be widely worshipped only during the second half of the seventeenth century, corresponding to the reign of King Pyei in which there is the first recorded donation at Itharo (Kyaik-hti-yo). In any case, these poems and the references to King Pyei's donations suggest the degree to which Burmese kings were patronizing sites throughout the former Mon area.[9]

The two mountains, Zingyaik and Zwegabin, were probably accessible on the trade routes to Mottama and easily visible, whereas Kyaik-hti-yo lay in an isolated mountainous area. Its remoteness somewhat resembles the Shwesettaw pilgrimage site, near Minbu, which also received royal patronage in the seventeenth century.

[8] Information on these two poets is drawn from a forthcoming work by U San Win that was kindly supplied to me by Elizabeth Moore (San Win).

[9] As Lieberman observed, "Taung-ngu kings sought to advertise their piety in ecumenical fashion by consulting a mixture of Burmese, Mon and Shan on ceremonial occasions" (Lieberman 1978: 461).

Fig. 16. South entrance, Shwedagon. Souvenir glass-painting, c. 1905. Private collection, Rangoon.

Unnamed Mon Chronicle, 1784

Additional important information on Kyaik-hti-yo is preserved in an unnamed Mon chronicle translated into Burmese in 1784 during the reign of Bowdawpaya (1792-1819).[10] It adheres to the basic narrative of the Buddha coming to Thaton and distributing six hair relics to six hermits but includes 'new' hills that were not included in the aforementioned Mon texts.

[10] I wish to thank Elizabeth Moore for providing me U San Win's translation of this text (personal communication, August, 2008).

This grouping is important for the modern Kyaik-hti-yo legend, since the names of some of the hermits and hills are included in the current myth (see table).

Hermits and Hills in the Current Kyak-hti-yo Myth	
Hermit	Hill or "Mountain"
Tila	Kelasa
Buddanana	Kyaik-hti-yo
Tissa	Zingyaik
Siha	Zwegabin
Dibbacakkubaya	Kusinara
Meilon	Meilon
Note that both Kusinara and Meilon are located in Bilin Township, close to Kyaik-hti-yo.	

It was this tradition that was partially tapped for the modern Kyaik-hti-yo myth, but with significant modifications.

Kyaik-hti-yo in National Chronicles

Despite the local interest given to these related hair-relic pagodas in Lower Burma, the six hair relics and thirty-three tooth relics were accorded scant attention in major historical and religious chronicles, such as the *Glass Palace Chronicle* (*Hman-nàn maha-ya-zawin-daw-gyi*). Such neglect was partly because these broader national chronicles highlighted the Buddha's introduction of Buddhism to Burma through his visit to the Sandalwood Monastery, the Shwesettaw and the Hpo-U Hill and his predictions about Sri Kshetra and King Dattabaung. Tribute was also paid to Anawrahta's capture of the Pali canon at Thaton and the establishment of the faith at Pagan and so on. The six hair relics and thirty-three tooth relics of Suvannabhumi appear in these descriptions but are referred to only in passing, as afterthoughts. For example, Gavampati, his brother King Siharaja of Thaton, and the Buddha's visit to Thaton are introduced in the *Glass Palace Chronicle*, but only as background to King Manuha who is captured by Anawrahta; there is no reference to hermits or hair relics and only the briefest reference to the thirty-three tooth relics (Pe Maung Tin & Luce: 79).[11] The *Vamsadipani*, a late eighteenth-century Buddhist chronicle, followed much the same outline and also omitted any reference to hair relics and hermits (Pranke: 130-131). Only the nineteenth-century Pali *Sasanavamsa* mentions the six hair relics, but it only does so in passing and does not provide either the names of the hermits or their mountaintops (Law: 42).[12]

[11] The number of teeth are said to be thirty-two and not thirty-three.

[12] The earlier *Thathanalinkara Sadan* (1831) essentially repeats the information recorded in the Pali *Sasanavamsa*. I wish to thank Patrick Pranke for providing me a translation of this passage (personal communication, August, 2008).

Fig. 17. Golden Rock hovering above cliff side reflects persistent lore. Souvenir glass-painting, c. 1905. Private collection, Rangoon

The First Half of the Nineteenth Century

Few specific notices of Kyaik-hti-yo appear after the late eighteenth-century Mon chronicle (see above). This long hiatus only ends again when a Mon monk named Thwarn-phyu Hsayadaw resided on Kyaik-hti-yo Hill in the 1820s. Selecting Kyaik-hti-yo as his base was scarcely accidental, suggesting a continued importance of the site.[13]

[13] This information about the Thwarn-phyu *hsayadaw* is taken from a booklet about Kusinara that draws upon sources I have been unable to check independently (Cetana: 1997b: 13).

This same *hsayadaw* was also influential in 'discovering' and restoring a spot near Kyaik-hit-yo, on Mt. Kusinara. It is located only eight miles from Bilin and therefore closer to the main route leading south to Thaton and Mottama and therefore less remote than Kyaik-hti-yo. Kusinara was included in the Mon manuscript of 1784 discussed above.

For Mt. Kusinara the Thwarn-phyu *Hsayadaw* had a dream in 1828 in which a white monkey, a turtle and a snake appeared to indicate the location of a boulder that contained a hair relic. This rock, after it "emitted Buddha's rays," was cleared of jungle and then restored. At the same time the monk 'discovered' two stone statues of Sona and Uttara who were thought to have died on this spot (Cetana 1997b: 13).

The site was called Kusinara, since it marked the location where Sona and Uttara are said to have died, modeled after Kusinara where the Buddha's death occurred in India. Classical Pali literature says nothing about the death of Sona and Uttara in Suvannabhumi, and their demise on this mountain appears to be an indigenous addition by the early nineteenth century. It is unlikely that this hill was the site of a hair relic in the fifteenth century. The hill may have been among those mentioned in the *Gavampati* chronicle, c. 1710, but known by a different name. It was restored by the government in the 1990s but is greatly overshadowed by Kyaik-hti-yo.

That Kusinara may have enjoyed regional popularity is perhaps suggested by a reference in a Thai chronicle compiled during this same period in the early nineteenth century. In this text, focused on the famous Mt. Suthep (Doi Suthep) outside of Chiang Mai, the Buddha is said to have journeyed within northern Thailand and then to Rangoon (Takong) and thereupon to Kusinara. The context of the passage, long before the Buddha's old age, implies that it was Kusinara in Lower Burma rather than Kusinara in India (Swearer, Sommai, Phaithoon: 39, 43). If this identification in the Thai chronicle is correct, then it illustrates that Kusinara enjoyed a regional reputation in the first part of the nineteenth century and that it was more well known at that time than Kyaik-hti-yo.

Figure 18. Kyaik-hti-yo had entered the national pantheon of key sacred sites by the early 1880s, with the Shwedagon and the Mahamuni (after Temple: pl. XVIII).

Whatever the role of this *hsayadaw* living at Kyaik-hti-yo in the first half of the nineteenth century, it is clear by the end of the century that Kyaik-hti-yo had firmly entered the pantheon of national sacred sites. Its popularity probably began in earnest in the 1870s and accelerated greatly in the next decade.

Fig. 19. *Zawgyi* and his disguised *naga*-consort may be the figures in the lower right. Mahamuni Temple, Mandalay, c. 1892. Murals, south corridor.

Kyaik-hti-yo & Taw Sein Ko, 1891

The trail of evidence picks up again at the time of Taw Sein Ko's tour of old 'Ramannadesa' in the cold season of 1891, which appeared in his report issued the following year in the *Indian Antiquary*. By his visit in 1891 the Golden Rock had long since become a national pilgrimage site, evinced by its prominent appearance among the murals at the Mahamuni Temple in Mandalay from about 1892 and descriptions in the 1880s (Forbes: 270 – 275). Taw Sein Ko first visited Mt. Kusinara where he noted the same two stone images of

Sona and Uttara that the *hsayadaw* had discovered in the 1820s; these can still be seen today. He also noted a stone vessel "reputed to contain a hair of Gautama Buddha" (Taw Sein Ko 1892: 381).[14] After visiting Mt. Kusinara he moved on and inspected Mt. Kyaik-hti-yo and Mt. Kelasa, the two other famous locations for hair relics at the time in the region.

Taw Sein Ko recorded that the hair relics were only associated with three hill tops, Kusinara, Kelasa and Kyaik-hti-yo, and three individual hermits (Taw Sein Ko 1892: 382). These three hilltops were among the six that appeared in the aforementioned Mon text of 1784; the remaining three hills mentioned in the Mon text were dropped by Taw Sein Ko's visit.

The three hermits on these three hills had no personal connection or contact with each other, according to Taw Sein Ko.[15] In a different part of the report Taw Sein Ko also observed that the foster-father of the Thaton king was thought to be a hermit on Mt. Zingyaik; he had no connection with the hermits on the other three hills and was not associated with a hair relic. This entire configuration was to change soon after his visit.

Fig. 20. Two brothers returning from India with two hair relics, for enshrinement in the Shwemawdaw, a myth modeled on the Shwedagon legend. Shwemawdaw platform. By Aung Hlaing Oo.

[14] The peak in Taw Sein Ko's day was also called Kokthennayon (Taw Sein Ko 1892: 381-382). In some of the later Mon texts it is sometimes named Siripabbata, or Great Mountain.

[15] A single hair within the rock was reported by Shwe Yoe in the first (1895) and second (1895) editions of *The Burman*. The same information passed into the last edition (1909) but by then the number of hairs had changed to reflect the altered myth (Shwe Yoe: 168). By the late 1899s observers noted that the rock contained two hairs, more in keeping with the modern story that was probably evolving at that time (Ferrars: 190).

The Kyaik-hti-yo Legend Today

Sometime following Taw Sein Ko's visit in 1891, the myth underwent a fundamental shift that brilliantly tied together three key hermits, the most sacred mountaintops in the region and the king of Thaton (see below). This new version became the 'standard myth' current today but the exact circumstances surrounding its formulation are as yet unknown. It probably emerged at the turn of the century when increasing numbers of pilgrims visited the Golden Rock. It was probably the increased number of pilgrims and donations that led to the creation of a Pagoda Board of Trustees in 1903. Around this time there was likely a need to codify the myth in a new local chronicle, or *thamaing*. Whether the structuring of the modern myth was devised self-consciously by a single individual or even by a group cannot yet be determined. Or perhaps the formulation reflected commonly held ideas in the region of which Taw Sein Ko was unaware. A single surviving *thamaing* from the early twentieth century would certainly fill in much of this missing information.

A hunch is that an influential monk at the turn of the century wove together various mythic threads in the region touching on the hair relics, sacred peaks and the story of the King of Thaton and his foster-father living on Mt. Zingyaik. The degree to which the modern myth differs from Taw Sein Ko's rendition of 1891 suggests the great extent to which the legend was embellished.

The Twentieth-century Reconfiguration

The most common modern version of the Kyaik-hti-yo myth begins with the Buddha coming to Thaton, at the request of Gavampati, and converting the king. The Buddha divided six hair relics equally among three hermits who had collected in Thaton, unlike the fifteenth-century traditions that spoke of six hermits (Aung Than: 25-26; Moore 2004: 155). Then follows a brilliant reassignment of hermits and mountains to elevate the importance of Kyaik-hti-yo and to pull in the King of Thaton. This version tied together in a single stroke the Thaton royal family, the hair relics, the most sacred local peaks and Mt. Kyaik-hti-yo.

One hermit resided on Mt. Kyaik-hti-yo, while the others on Mt. Zingyaik and Mt. Kelasa, the three most sacred peaks in the entire region. The Buddha bestowed two hairs to each of the hermits who returned to their hermitages.

The Kyaik-hti-yo hermit, named Tissa, becomes none other than the foster-father of the king of Thaton. This was accomplished by shifting 'Tissa The Hermit' from Mt. Zingyaik, where he was known to be in the Mon chronicle cited above, to Kyaik-hti-yo. This brings in this key hermit with familial ties to the King of Thaton. Tissa, the Hermit of Kyaik-hit-yo, did not enshrine his two hair relics within a stupa, but retained both in his topknot.

In this modern rendition, Tissa's younger brother hermit has been shifted from Mt. Zwegabin to Mt. Zingyaik; his home was Mt. Zwegabin in the Mon chronicle cited above. He enshrined one hair on Mt. Zingyaik and the other on Mt. Zwegabin, thus underscoring the sacred status of these two revered

mountains. The third hermit, often named Tila, lived on Mt. Kelasa where he interred one of the hairs in a stupa but kept one for private worship. Tila's association with Kelasa also the same in the earlier Mon chronicle. When the Mt. Kelasa hermit passed away, then Tissa from Kyaik-hti-yo obtained the relic that was never enshrined; this current version allowed Mt. Kelasa to retain its sanctity, since it remained in possession of one sacred hair.

The hermit Tissa now carried three relics within his topknot, and then resumed his life as a recluse on Kyaik-hti-yo Hill. As Tissa's death approached, the king in Thaton (his adopted son) and Thagyamin begged the hermit to give up his three relics for enshrinement. Tissa would only relent if Thagyamin was able to locate a stone repository resembling the shape of the hermit's head.[16]

These important changes not only put the Kyaik-hti-yo hermit in the epicenter of the myth but also connected him to his son, the Thaton king, the first patron of the Golden Rock. It also created for the first time the family drama between the dying Kyaik-hti-yo hermit and his son who had convinced his father to relinquish his three hair relics for the common good. At the same time, it elevated and linked together three nearby sacred mountains, Kelasa, Zingyaik and Zwebagin. It is a tightly structured myth that draws in all of the principal protagonists, the major relics, important local sacred hills and the King of Thaton, the royal patron.

The modern myth concludes with Thagyamin flying through the air and locating a boulder, sometimes said to be at the bottom of the ocean, which resembled the shape of the hermit's head. Today at Kyaik-hti-yo a large boulder, with a flat top crowned by a pagoda, is taken to be the barge on which the Golden Rock came to Kyaik-hti-yo. This flat rock is located along the track leading to the summit and is called Kyauk-thampan.

With his magic dagger, Thagyamin then bore a hole at the top of the rock into which the three relics were placed. As the work finished, the hermit Tissa died peacefully, gazing at the rock, which was thought to have levitated high above the cliff side.

[16] Placing relics in a top-knot or headdress is reminiscent of Dona, the brahmin, who in some stories absconded with one or more relics at the time of the cremation of the Buddha in his turban (Strong 2004: 120-121). It also is recalls the famous story Hemamala, the Kalinga princess, who hid the famous tooth-relic within her headdress while en route to Sri Lanka, disguised as a hermit.

Different Versions Today

One recent official government source maintained that the Buddha dispensed two hairs to each of six hermits, for a total of twelve relics. The Kyaik-hti-yo hermit placed his two relics in the Golden Rock, together with one relic belonging to a hermit from Mt. Kelasa, for a total of three (*New Light of Myanmar*, 20 March 2001). Yet another official version claimed that the Kyaik-hti-yo hermit deposited only a single hair in the rock; this is recorded on a metal plaque near the causeway leading to the rock, dated 19 March 2001, the day the most recent *hti* was raised. That even the number of relics enshrined inside the rock can differ in two state-sponsored versions issued during the same week in 2001 suggests the fluidity of the myth.[17] Indeed, pilgrims often tell very different stories about the relics, but all agree that one or more hair relics are deposited in the rock. The details are irrelevant for worshippers.

The Pagoda Platform and Lore

Life-size modern tableaux on the huge concourse spreading out beside the balancing rock bring to life episodes from the drama. One shows the Kyaik-hti-yo hermit, with his tall tapered leather hermit-hat, collapsing from joy while gazing at the rock, held by a minister with the Thaton king nearby.

One old tradition surrounding Kyaikh-hti-yo is a belief that the rock once levitated, due to its relics. Old depictions of the boulder show it hovering above the cliff side. There was also an opinion, recorded in the late nineteenth century, that the rock descended closer to the "table rock" because of the current "degenerate days", and that it was now "only possible to pass a hair between the two" (Forbes 1878: 207). Many pilgrims today maintain that a string can be passed between the rock and its shelf.

[17] In the account issued by the Trustees in 1997 there is some confusion if there is one hair or three hairs contained within the boulder (Moore 2004: 163).

Shwe Nan Kyin: From an Egg to a Queen

Fig. 21. The King of Thaton and his queen, Shwe Nan Kyin. She plays a minor role in the narrative but is a major focus of worship today. Kyaik-hti-yo.

Fig. 22. Shwe Nan Kyin, amidst her family and court. Pavilion dedicated in 2001 by Sect. I. Khin Nyunt. Kyaik-hti-yo.

Kyaik-hti-yo Hill is now inextricably linked to the fate of Shwe Nan Kyin, a legendary queen wed to the King of Thaton. A reference to her and the Golden Rock appeared in the early 1920s, but her unhappy fate probably became attached to the rock sometime during the preceding century, if not earlier (Enriquez: 60). She plays a minor role in the basic narrative, solely as a wife to the king, but her presence at Kyaik-hti-yo is everywhere. Her main centers of worship are two large pavilions located on opposite sides of the walkway approaching the rock, just steps below the wide main platform. The hall on the right was renovated at the same time the new pagoda crowning the rock received its *hti*, in March 2001. The hall's donative inscription pays tribute to Khin Nyunt and an influential monk in the region named the Kyaikhtisaung *Hsayadaw*.

Life-size models inside depict the goddess and her extended family, including Tissa The Hermit and a standing Buddha figure shown bestowing a hair relic. The opposite pavilion, though much smaller, is more popular, and features the deceased queen, recumbent on the floor and surrounded by family members. Pilgrims make donations and massage with both hands the recumbent sculpture of Shwe Nan Kyin. Such displays were in existence by the 1920s and probably were in evidence in the nineteenth century (Enriquez: 60). On the platform itself are large tableaux depicting her and the king set in faux court scenes. She is also

shown with her husband in a series of large modern sculptures near the top of the hill, next to Tissa, Thagyamin and Bo Bo Aung.

Despite Shwe Nan Kyin's importance at Kyaik-hti-yo, she finds no mention in the standard local histories or chronicles. Her tragic story is best appreciated in a series of painted panels and miniature sculptures on the west side of the Shwedagon platform inside Daw Pwint's pavilion. These panels, repainted many times, were likely in existence by the 1930s, if not before (Aung Than: fig. 28).

Fig. 23. The snake-goddess prepares her lotus bed for the *zawgyi*, left. *Zawgyi* tussles with her after discovering she is a snake in disguise. Daw Pwint's Pavilion., Shwedagon, c. 1930s. Recently refreshed.

Fig. 24. One egg hatches to become Shwe Nan Kyin, later raised by a Karen couple. Daw Pwint's pavilion. Shwedagon . c. 1930s. Recently refreshed.

Her story also opens with a wizard who coupled with a woman disguised as a snake-goddess. This match up resulted in two daughters, not sons. The eggs were also abandoned once the wizard realized that his charming consort was in realty a serpent in disguise. The sisters were raised by separate hermits, thus echoing the biographies of Gavampati and the Thaton king. The hermits gave the youngsters not to hermits to raise, but instead to two Karen couples; Shwe Nan Kyin went to a simple couple in the countryside and her sister to a Karen leader. Shwe Nan Kyin and her family are shown always in traditional Karen attire at Kyaik-hti-yo. Both daughters were eventually betrothed to the ruler of Thaton who became enamored after spotting them on a pilgrimage to Kyaik-hti-yo. The role of female *nagas,* their offspring and their connections to royalty in Burma is treated briefly in a recent study (Brac de la Perriere).

Fig. 25. Disgruntled Karen failing to topple the Golden Rock, turned into monkeys in some stories. Daw Pwint's Pavilion, Shwedagon, c. 1930s. Recently refreshed.

There are many different versions of Shwe Nan Kyin's fate after her marriage, but each ends in tragedy. In one variant Shwe Nan Kyin was unhappy at court and the king therefore sent her home. A tiger attacked her travel party and she died attempting to outrun the beast. The specter of tigers in this very area was real, since a "tiger pulled one of our men out of the shed, though the fellow let out such an unearthly yell that the poor tiger dropped him and fled [in the 1920s]" (Enriquez: 59). The father of the slain Karen queen, furious with the king for sending his daughter home, gathered the local Karen and attempted to pull the Golden Rock off its ledge, with ropes. Not only did the rock refuse to budge, but the villagers also turned into monkeys (Enriquez: 60). Other stories claim that the Karen turned against the Golden Rock after so many Burmese pilgrims came to the region and inadvertently trampled their crops, a version among the Shwedagon painted panels and described in its caption.

Fig. 26. Shwe Nan Kyin, second from right, with her Karen family. Kyaik-hti-yo.

Fig. 27. Tissa the Hermit, amidst the family and court of Shwe Nan Kyin. Shwe Nan Kyin's Pavilion, dedicated in 2001. Kyaik-hti-yo.

Fig. 28. Shwe Nan Kyin worshipped by pilgrims. Her death is usually associated with a tiger. Such tableaux were at Kyaik-hti-yo at least as early as the 1920s.

Other stories claim that Shwe Nan Kyin was happy at court but failed to heed her family's wishes to return home to make offerings to a mountain-deity, or *nat*, popular among the Karen. For rebuking her parents and for neglecting the local *nat*, she paid the price by dying from exhaustion during the tiger-chase. She expired, gazing at the Golden Rock. Another account maintains that she fell ill at court after failing to perform a Karen ritual at the time of her marriage. Pregnant and with her foster-father and younger brother, she returned home from the court to propitiate the offended spirit. It was too late, since the spirit sent a tiger to scare the life out of her. When she died, her body turned into stone and resisted cremation (Tun Aung Chain & Thein Hlaing: 89). An inscription in one of her two pavilions declares that the hall was renovated in 2001 in the desire that "the effect of Shwe Nan Kyin's past deeds and sins be extinguished."

Fig. 29. Golden Rock in upper left. The flat rock with a stupa represent the 'barge rock' which transported the Golden Rock to the hilltop, after Thagyamin located it on the bottom of the ocean. Souvenir glass painting, c. 1905. Private collection, Rangoon.

In yet one more variant, the Thaton king met Shwe Nan Kyin at the Golden Rock at the time of a pilgrimage. It was love at first sight, but he broke his vow by never returning to marry her. Angry at this snub, Shwe Nan Kyin's father then retaliated by trying to topple the Golden Rock, the object of the king's devotion. Before this sacrilege could be committed, he was transformed into stone. This version is depicted at Inle Lake, at a pagoda beside the famous Shwe Yan Pye Monastery, near the entrance to Nyaungshwe, from the late nineteenth century. Three Burmese cartouches explain the action, one identifying her as a Karen. The father, now turned into a 'stone-man' in a tree, speaks to his daughter below; her father was transformed into stone for the attempted sacrilege toward the Golden Rock. Her brother is shown on the far right, coming to

avenge the family honor. In the Burmese caption she is called 'Nan Shwe' and the king is named 'Sihayaza,' who is the Thaton king named Siharaja in the basic legend.

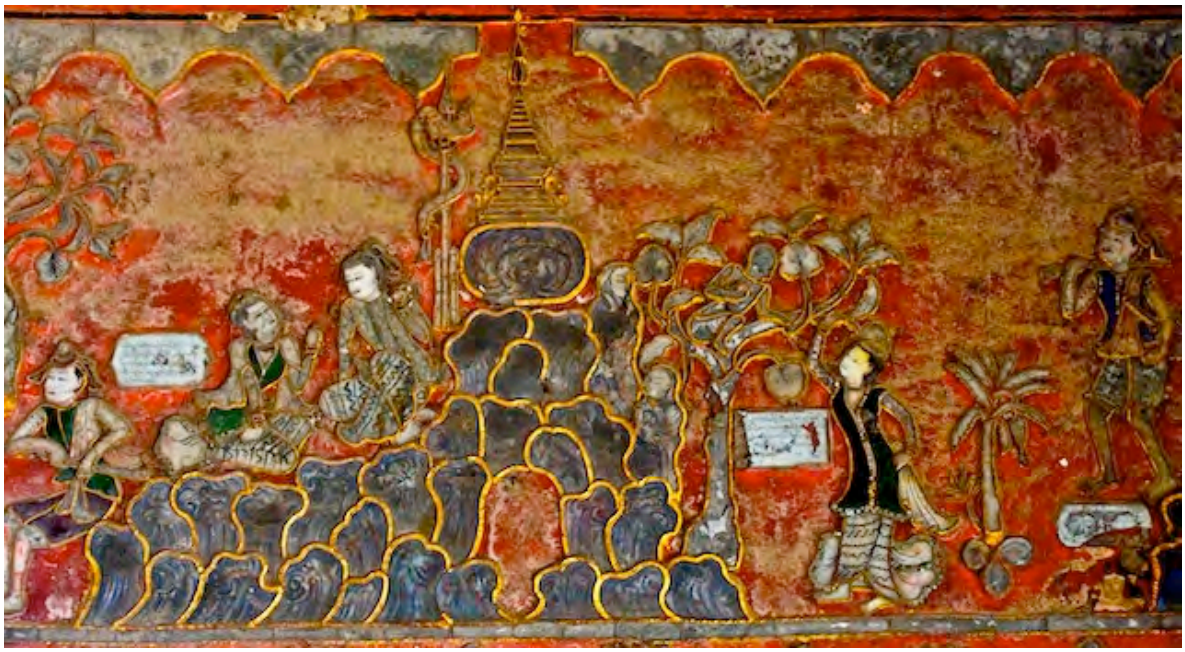

Fig. 30. King of Thaton and Shwe Nan Kyin, courting, left. Shwe Nan Kyin's father turned to stone and talking to his daughter from the tree, Shwe Nan Kyin's brother enters from right. Shwe Yan Pye Pagoda. North entrance to Nyaungshwe. Inle. Late nineteenth century.

Shwe Nan Kyin should be considered a female *nat*, inasmuch as she met an unnatural death and is propitiated today. Her biography also underscores the time-honored virtues of devotion to parents, husband and to local gods. Also, there is the message that one cannot fool about with solid family values – even if one is a queen. Another theme is the role of loyalty and protection that falls to male family members.

Parallel themes were treated in a popular play, *The History of Thaton*, written by Saya Yaw and published in 1877 (Maung Tin Aung: 112). There is no mention of hair relics or pagodas, but the chief character is a woman raised by a non-Burmese tribe. She later became the queen of Thaton but was transformed into an ogress, through no fault of her own. She was then slain by her husband but came back to life as a *nat*; her brother and her son nearly killed the king, to avenge her death. These obvious similarities should not be viewed as direct influence of the Shwe Nan Kyin story but rather reflect deeply held cultural values. These themes continue to resonate in Burma, to judge from the success of a posthumously published novel, *Not out of Hate* (1991) by Ma Ma Lay (1917-1982). In this tale set at the end of the colonial period, the pregnant heroine fled from her oppressive husband to attend her father's funeral, contracted tuberculosis, returned home to her husband and died in his arms, un-reconciled. Although she died in the presence of her

husband, the disagreements with him and her alliance with her father underscore the social values that so many of these tales share.

The roots for Shwe Nan Kyin perhaps represents a conflation of two themes found in a well-known Mon chronicle, the *Lik Smin Asah*. In this account, for example, the legendary king of Thaton wed a woman who had been adopted by a Karen couple, a direct echo of Shwe Nan Kyin; she was not born from a snake egg but a pumpkin (Halliday: 178). The second theme relates to the mother of the famous Samala and Wimala, the two brothers who became the first kings of Hamsavati. Their mother was a snake-goddess in disguise, but she was poisoned by the king after her venomous snake-nature was revealed (Halliday: 159).

Shwe Nan Kyin's position in the Thaton court is her only meager link to the basic Kyaik-hti-yo legend, suggesting that she was grafted on to the narrative later, probably in the nineteenth century.

Inasmuch as so many of the tales end with Shwe Nan Kyin's father and the local Karens attempting unsuccessfully to dislodge the rock, her presence at the site also likely reflected tensions between the Burmese Buddhist community and Karen Christians in the late nineteenth century. For example, the Karen National Association (KNA) was formed in 1881 at a time of great strife between Burmese and Karen. A recent study exploring this pernicious conflict during this phase of colonial rule noted that "To the Burmans, the Christian Karen supported the foreign [British] demolition of the kingdom and the humiliation of Buddhism" (Gravers: 240). The folklore of Karen villagers intent on demolishing one of the country's most sacred sites sends a strong message. Their transformation into monkeys is seen as a humiliating but just punishment. Such anti-Karen sentiments enjoyed a long history. It was recorded, for example, in the 1920s that the rock "did not in fact touch the ground until the Karens tried to pull it down" (Enriquez: 61). These factors, however, are not meant to imply that Shwe Nan Kyin's presence at the Golden Rock can be reduced to simple ethnic and religious conflict. After all, that the vast bulk of worshippers there are Burmese Buddhists suggests the rich and complex social and religious milieu.

The Popularity of the Golden Rock

The Golden Rock became an important pilgrimage destination only during the second half of the nineteenth century. The unification of Upper and Lower Burma in 1886 must have enhanced the flow of pilgrims, but the real fillip to Kyaik-hti-yo's fortunes started in 1907 with the completion of the Pegu-Martaban railway line. Pilgrims were then able to halt at nearby Kyaikto and start the ascent from there, about eight miles. It was visited by thousands of pilgrims annually in the 1870s, long before Taw Sein Ko's visit in 1891 (Forbes 1878: 205-210). When the first small stupa was placed on top of the Kyaik-hti-yo rock is difficult to say, but all of the old photographs of the boulder, beginning in the early 1890s, if not before, show a small stupa perched on top (Temple: 361, pl. XVIII). A depiction of the rock occurs among the frescos of the Mahamuni Temple in Mandalay, probably from around 1892, in the south corridor. Below on the right are possibly the wizard and the snake-goddess, amidst the forest. This depiction is part of a series covering other major

Burmese pilgrimage spots, such as the Shwesettaw near Minbu and the Shwezigon at Pagan. This example and the representation of the rock in the Inle Lake area cited above prove that by the late nineteenth century the myth had entered the pantheon of national shrines.

Following the Thwarn-phyu Hsayadaw's residence at Kyaik-hti-yo and his restorations at Mt. Kusinara in the 1820s, the area attracted the great Ledi *Hsayadaw* (1846-1923) who is said to have meditated at Mt. Kusinara (Kyakhtisaung *Hsayadaw*: 16). Later, restorations of local monuments were undertaken in the 1920s by the Danubyu *Hsayadaw*, U Wimala (d. 1974) whose base of operations was also Mt. Kusinara (Cetana 1997b: 15).[18]

The rock's fame grew steadily and by the early twentieth century it was ranked together with the Shwedagon and the Mahamuni. This relationship is revealed in a glass-painting from probably around 1905. Laminated posters today routinely represent all three sites together, a sacred triumvirate. There also arose a complicated numerical reckoning of the numbers and planets associated with the syllables in the names of both Kyaik-hti-yo and the Shwedagon (Moore 2003: 157). Such connections express a bond between the two monuments transcending time and place for worshippers and thus enhancing the power of both. As a measure of how these two shrines are linked is a miniature depiction of the Shwedagon on the vane attached to the new *hti* at Kyaik-hti-yo in 2001. There was even once a huge replica of the Golden Rock at the Shwedagon, in the northwestern quadrant of the platform, in the 1930s and 1940s (Aung Than: fig. 7).

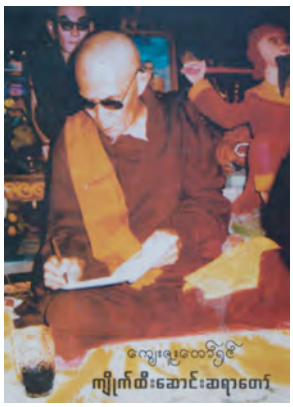

Fig. 31. The Kyaikhtisaung *Hsayadaw* (b. 1928) was instrumental in reviving interest in the discovery and renovation of the 'six hair relic' tradition. He resides in Zothoke, near Bilin. Cover page of his autobiography.

[18] This information regarding the Ledi *Hsayadaw* and the Danubyu *Hsayadaw* was drawn only from the autobiography of the Kyaikhtisaung *Hsayadaw* and Cetana booklet on Kusinara; it has not been checked against other references.

A Revival of the Six Hair Relic Pagodas

A recent resurgence of the 'six hair relics' pagodas in the 1970s was spearheaded by a local monk named U Baddanta Pannadipa (1928-), better known as the Kyaikhtisaung *Hsayadaw*, named after the Kyaikhtisaung stupa that the same monk refurbished outside the small town of Zothoke, five miles from Bilin. His mission was to restore the "sacred hair relic pagodas which were covered by the bushes in the jungle for years," according to his autobiography (Kyaikthisaung *Hsayadaw*: 14). He continued to restore pagodas in the vicinity of Bilin in the 1980s and 1990s, concentrating on those associated with the six hair relics. In 1995, Lt. Gen. Maung Hla, a former member of the State Law and Order Council (SLORC), visited the Kusinara complex and then organized the refurbishment of the pagoda and the construction of a road, in cooperation with the Kyaikthisaung *Hsayadaw* (Cetana: 1997b, 18). In the late 1990s, the *hsayadaw* joined forces with the indefatigable Khin Nyunt whose countless pagoda-restorations throughout Burma regularly filled the pages of the *New Light of Myanmar* and the airwaves on state television. These refurbishments in the Bilin area focused mainly on pagodas connected to the six hair relics.

A strong theme in the official announcements was the discovery and restoration of ruinous pagodas associated with the Buddha's visit to Suvannabhumi. The model was the legendary king of Thaton who restored pagodas that had fallen into disuse since the visit of the Buddha and thereby revived Buddhism at the time of Sona and Uttara. Renewal of the faith by discovering and refurbishing old and abandoned shrines is a theme enshrined in Theravada traditions and embraced by today's junta (currently called the State Peace and Development Council). One recent example was the 'discovery' of an old reclining brick Buddha in the immediate vicinity of the Shwethalyaung in Pegu, covered with vegetation and 'lost.' Restored in concrete, its cornerstone stakes were driven in 2002 and supervised by Khin Nyunt (*New Light of Myanmar* 14 August 2002).

Fig. 32. First-millennium stupa base, Zothoke, now enveloped in the 'six hair relic' tradition, beginning in the 1970s, promoted by the Kyaikthisaung Hsayadaw.

Even new pagodas could be added to the list of six that received hairs at the time of the Buddha. Not surprisingly, the Kyaikhtisaung stupa in Zothoke was among them, marking the location where the Buddha gave a hair relic to two reformed ogres. The huge laterite base of the Zothoke pagoda belongs to the first millennium, providing an example of how many ancient monuments, whose original legends or relics are unknown, have acquired new legends, centuries after their creation. Another is the Kyaik Deyone Pagoda, on a hill called Doe Yoon, about nine miles from Bilin. The hair relic was given to a hermit named Doe Yoon, and the Kyaikthisaung *Hsayadaw* restored its pagoda in 1975. In 2006, the *hsayadaw* privately issued "*The History of the Nine Sacred Hair Relic Pagodas*," a pamphlet listing all of the former six locations, plus three new additions (Kyaikthisaung Hsayadaw 2006). The basic myth therefore continues to stretch into new directions, adding three hairs to the original six. These sites are all in the vicinity of Bilin and the Golden Rock, a restricted region compared to the wide enshrinement of hair relics in Dhammaceti's time, from the Rangoon area to near Thaton.

The Jewel in the Crown in these modern refurbishments, however, was the rebuilding of the stupa placed on top of the Golden Rock in 2001. It appears small in comparison to the boulder below, but it weighs in at approximately five tons. This new pagoda was prompted by a visit to the rock by Khin Nyunt who decided that the existing stupa, erected in 1936, required renewing. The *hti* was hoisted in March 2001.

Sacred Narratives: centripetal and centrifugal forces

The theme of the Buddha visiting Thaton and bestowing sacred strands to hermits was elastic and could be stretched to include new and old shrines following the fifteenth century. The 'six hair relic' myth fostered new groups of hermits and sacred sites, evinced by three distinct groups of hermits found in the *Gavampati* chronicle, c. 1710. These three groups, totaling fourteen hermits and an equal number of hair relics, likely represented coeval sub-traditions that the *Gavampati* compiler brought together into a continuous narrative. The other Mon text, the *Uppanna Sudhammavavati Rajavamsakatha* refers to only a single group of six hermits, but their names and locations are virtually identical to the last group cited above from the *Gavampati* text. Which of these two Mon texts is the earlier awaits further investigation.

Fig. 33. The Buddha in Thaton, dispensing two hair relics to a chief hermit, Kyauk Gauk, who deposits one in Kyauk Kauk Pagoda, Syriam, and the other in the Kyaikkasan Pagoda, Rangoon.

Fig. 34. Hermit Kyauk Gauk worshipping the hair relic he obtained at Thaton, now enshrined at Kyaik Kauk Pagoda, Syriam, Kyaik Kauk Pagoda platform.

This type of myth-creation is most easily understood by examining monuments whose legends became modeled on the Shwedagon legend. It became such an influential force following the fifteenth century that it served as a model for at least two key pagodas in Lower Burma. At their core were two lay merchant brothers who obtained hair relics from the Buddha in India (Shwemawdaw, Pegu) or in Burma (Shwesandaw, Pyei). These certainly replaced older myths in Pegu and in Pyei for which there is now no trace. In these examples, the basic myth is borrowed, with some modifications, and attached to a 'new' site, unrelated to the Shwedagon narrative.

In other cases, the myth is not borrowed as a model but is stretched to form 'satellite' sites. The Shwedagon again provides the clearest case study. The Sule Pagoda, for example, only entered the Shwedagon's orbit in the mid-nineteenth century when the new British city plan designated the Sule as the new urban hub. It became at that time tied to the Sule Nat whose assistance was critical in locating the lost relics on the Shwedagon Hill. The Sule Pagoda was important for centuries, but no evidence suggests that it was associated with the Shwedagon before the 1850s. The Botataung joined the Shwedagon narrative as late as the 1950s when the U Nu government reconstructed the pagoda after its destruction during the war. It became known at that time as the spot where King Okkalapa welcomed the brothers back from India and where the hair relics intended for the Shwedagon were guarded by the king's one thousand soldiers.

However, as late as the 1930s, the Botataung was known mainly as a memorial stupa for the cremation of King Okkalapa's son. The prince had drowned following a tragic love affair with the daughter of a legendary king ruling at Syriam named Bhogasena. The one thousand soldiers believed today to have guarded the Shwedagon relics were earlier said to be used only in building the commemorative stupa for the drowned prince. The cremation of the king's son has been completely forgotten among residents today, but one element of the story (the one thousand soldiers) was transferred seamlessly to the new myth centered on guarding the Shwedagaon hair relics (Lloyd: 105; Bird: 156-157; Pearn: 93).

The Shwedagon myth was largely localized to Rangoon but could expand to even distant areas, such as a popular pilgrimage site near Cape Negrais at the western edge of the delta. A pagoda there was thought to mark the spot where the two brothers returning from India with the eight hair relics were robbed of two of the strands by Jayasena, a snake-king.

This shrine became 'attached' to the Shwedagon at least by the time of the composition of the *Glass Palace Chronicle* in the early nineteenth century (Tun Aung Chain & Thein Hlaing: 1). Such satellite sites were never threats to the popularity of the major core shrine. To the contrary, these diverse sites instead enhanced the Shwedagon's prestige and formed even more compelling narratives, as the roles that the Sule and Botataung play in the Shwedagon myth today.

Modern 'chronicles,' or pagoda-pamphlets, describing the Shwedagon have conflated all of these satellite sites, including the one at Cape Negrais, into a continuous narrative, overlooking the fact that the various shrines were added to the overarching myth at widely different times. In this way, disparate sites have come to be thematically related.

These examples reveal that the Shwedagon did not so much spawn lesser shrines as much as lesser sacred sites successfully attached their histories to the Shwedagon. The same was true for the tradition associated with the six hair relics. This explains not only the multiple groupings of hermits but also why very popular and revered sites, such as Mt. Kelasa, reappear in more than one list, or cluster of sacred peaks in different chronicles. This process of expansion still takes place, as the case of Zothoke's inclusion in the 'nine hair relic' legacy promoted by the Kyaikhtisaung Hsayadaw (Kyaikhtisaung Hsayadaw 2006).

Fig. 35. Kyaik-hti-yo in the mid-1960s. By Maung Saw Maung, Mandalay, c. 1965. Shwe Indein Pagoda, Indein, Inle Lake. c. 1965.

The Buddha's visit to Thaton and his meeting with one or more hermits provided therefore a mythic springboard for new but related traditions. Another example surrounds the Kyaik Kauk pagoda located outside modern Syriam, or Thanlywin. This stupa was founded by a hermit, or *yathe*, named Yathe Gauk, who left his hermitage in Syriam to obtain a hair relic from the Buddha in Thaton, according to a nineteenth-century source. No reference to fellow hermits is made, but the basic outline of the story clearly derived from the fifteenth-century template. It is hard to say when this myth became attached to this very old laterite stupa outside of Syriam, but the story is probably no older than the eighteenth century (Furnivall: 148).

Fig. 36. Sule Nat's intervention was pivotal for locating the relics of the previous Buddhas, lost on Mt. Singuttara (Shwedagon Hill). Sule Pagoda, Rangoon.

Other separate traditions associate the same hermit from Syriam with the Kyaikkasan Pagoda in Rangoon. In one version, Yathe Gauk returns from Thaton with two hair relics, one deposited at the Kyaik Kauk in Syriam and the other at the Kyaikkasan. This pairing perhaps occurred when the Kyaikkasan was being rebuilt in 1839, according to a stone inscription on the pagoda platform.

The basic myth about the Buddha, hermits and Thaton could be stretched to the point where its basic structure was nearly blurred completely. For example, an unnamed Burmese chronicle from the nineteenth century contended that the Buddha flew to seven different locations in Lower Burma where he distributed nine hair relics in total. Two relics went to two hermits living on Mt. Zingyaik. Another was given to a recluse on Mt. Kelasa and another to a hermit on Mt. Zwegabin. One strand went to a hermit for the sacred Kyauk Kauk Pagoda in Syriam. Two hairs went to two brothers who began the Shwesandaw in Twante. Another hair relic was given to an unnamed hermit residing on Kyaik-hti-yo (Lloyd: 93-94).

These later traditions were never based directly upon the original myth recorded in the fifteenth-century stone inscriptions but rather a familiarity with its general outline, that is, the Buddha's visit to Thaton or Lower Burma and his bestowal of hair relics, a theme which has continuing relevance to worshippers.

This survey is testimony to the enduring nature of myths in Burma, their remarkable transformations over centuries and their continued relevance in the twenty-first century. Closer inspection of Mon and Burmese chronicles, local histories and travelers' accounts will likely reveal with more precision the steps by which the myths from Dhammaceti's fifteenth-century world were preserved and transformed and then later focused on the Golden Rock. This preliminary appraisal is to sketch a basic outline of the site's history; further study may well modify or reverse the tentative conclusions presented here. Southeast Asian myths are like Gordian Knots, with interwoven strands that resist unraveling.

The Golden Rock also underscores the importance of relics, as much for devotees as for royal or state patrons who require relics to fulfill their role as promoters and defenders of the faith. The *Dhamma* and *Sangha* were not enough for Buddhism to flourish, as the king of Thaton pleaded when he requested the Buddha for relics, as revealed in the fifteenth-century Mon inscriptions. His terrestrial realm required relics, or *Buddha-ratana*, to complete the Three Jewels. The original locations associated with the six hair relics in Dhammaceti's day are unknown today, apart from Mt. Kelasa, but they were once spread between Rangoon and the Thaton area and were not clustered in the Thaton area as they are thought of today. Also, none of the legendary hermits in the fifteenth century were associated with engaging biographies nor did the Thaton king play a role in establishing any of the hair-relic pagodas. The Thaton king simply hosted the six hermits when they collected in Thaton to receive the six hair relics.

If Dhammaceti were to find himself today in his old Suvannabhumi, he would surely be astonished to learn that three of the six hair relics are currently thought to be inside the Golden Rock. He would also be surprised to know that more hairs and more locations have been added to the list of six and that the hermits were now draped in colorful personal stories. Dhammaceti would be pleased to read in the *New Light of Myanmar* about the vaunted efforts of the government to safeguard the faith by restoring pagodas associated with the tradition that began in his reign over four hundred years ago. But this former king would probably sense that the Three Jewels have been pushed out of balance recently, weighted far too heavily toward *Buddha-ratana* at the expense of *Sangha-ratana* and *Dhamma-ratana.*

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