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Annotation	The author read this paper at a Burma Historical Commission conference on 11 February 1978. It analyzes a rare Myanmar book on Myanmar: "A Concise Account of the Kingdom of Pegu, Its climate, produce, trade and government..." It was written by William Hunter, an army surgeon in the service of the East India Company, and published in 1785. The author evaluates Hunter's views of the Myanmar Kingdom of Pegu, its climate, trade, government, and the folklore of Myanmar.	
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A rare and little known work on Burma*

Dr. Yi Yi

The work I wish to introduce to you is a very rare and little known eighteenth century account of Burma. It is *A Concise Account of the Kingdom of Pegu, its climate, produce, trade, and government; the manners and customs of its inhabitants, interspersed with remarks moral and political*. The author of this little book was William Hunter an army surgeon in the service of the East India Company. This work was first published by John Hay of Calcutta in 1785 and was again reprinted in 1789 by J. Sewell, Cornhill, and J. Debritt, Piccadilly, London. The 1785 edition is used here.

First of all I would like to tell you something about the author which has been gleaned from his work. Then I shall describe the division of his book into chapters with their contents. I shall then make a study of the work under the following heads: political, administrative, economic, social and cultural. It will have to be admitted at this point that as the author was preoccupied with commercial matters a good portion of our discussion will be taken up with economic affairs.

Let us see what we have learnt about the author from his own words. As we have said before the author, William Hunter was an army surgeon. According to the title page of the book he had received the degree of A.M. but we don't know from which University. He was on his way from Bengal to join the detachment of troops in the Carnatic when the ship on which he was aboard — the *Success Galley* was totally dismasted in a storm in July and had to put in at Rangoon to refit. He was therefore in Rangoon for about two months August–September 1782.

He knew that two months was too short a time to acquire a sufficient knowledge of a new country. So regarding the material on which his account was based, he said:

And, first a great many of the facts he learnt by actual observation;... and secondly, he was informed of others, by conversation, both with the natives, who are very communicative, and many of them, speak the language of Hindustan, and with foreigners, of different nations, who had been settled in that country, for many years. From the short time he resided there, his information, with respect to many circumstances, was, unavoidably, imperfect; but, where this was the case, he has always frankly confessed his ignorance, and never ventured to assert, as a matter of fact, any thing which he was not, either, an eye-witness of, or, informed about, on enquiry, from the most unquestionable authority.¹

* This paper was read at this department on 11 Feb 1978.

1. *A Concise Account of Pegu* XIV–XV

He states his reasons for writing this book clearly and lucidly. Europeans had only a superficial knowledge of Pegu which they frequented but little. This was due to the fact that the three dominant motives which had attracted Europeans to distant lands had been

the rage of conquest, zeal for propagating religion and the spirit of commerce. Pegu had never become the object of the first, with any European power; and though a few missionaries may have been sent there, for the purposes of the second, they never were able to gain such a footing as to be able to give us a distinct account of the country, or of its inhabitants. Besides, even when they had an opportunity of knowing the truth, a prejudice in favour of that religion whose interest they came to promote, and a desire to render the professors of every other as odious as possible, has led them into frequent misrepresentations. Lastly, the trade to Pegu has never been esteemed a national concern; it has been, always, very limited, and carried on by a few private adventurers; who were, in general, such as had not a capital sufficient to begin any other branch of commerce...

THAT the commerce of Pegu has not yet become an object of greater attention, will, I hope, appear, from the following pages not to be owing, so much to its want of importance, as to other accidental circumstances; and I do not despair of convincing the impartial reader, that it is both worth our while, and practicable in itself, to remove these obstacles, and from putting our intercourse with Pegu on a more respectable footing, and extending it on a larger scale, to derive a great national advantage.

VIEWED in this light, the information we have been able to collect, with regard to this country, is a matter of some importance to the politician; but differently considered, the philosopher may perhaps find something in it not unworthy of his attention, as furnishing materials for completing the history of the human mind.¹

He then goes on to express his hopes in connection with writing the book.

He hopes that his having communicated the little information he has been able to collect, will induce some person, who has had better opportunities of being informed, to give to the world a more complete account of the matter; and, in the mean time, he will be under the greatest obligations to any Gentleman, whose observation has been more accurate, or more extensive, than his own, if he will condescend to correct him where he has erred; or communicate any certain information, with respect to those points, where the author has been able to give nothing better than doubt, or conjecture.²

1. *A Concise Account of Pegu* VII-XI

2. *A Concise Account of Pegu* XIV-XVI

Hunter was a man of some erudition. He was acquainted with the Mosaic Law, the Bible, Latin and old Anglo-Saxon customs. For instance while discussing the merits and demerits of trial by ordeal he says:

This kind of trial is founded on the belief in a just and all-mighty being, who will, they think, certainly interpose in such doubtful cases, for the protection of innocence and the discovery of guilt. The earliest instance of it that we meet with in history, is the practice ordained in the Mosaic law, for determining the guilt or innocence of a woman suspected by her husband of adultery, and minutely described in the book of Numbers, chap v. In this case, there was a particular interposition of Providence for the *discovery of guilt*, as the water which was given the woman to drink, could not, from any natural cause, have produced the effects that are there related. In many cases, on the other hand, the supernatural power was supposed to be exerted in the behalf of *innocence*, and the laws of nature to have their usual course, if the person suspected was guilty. Of this kind is the story of the vestal who dragged a ship up the Tiber, to prove her virginity; and in the same class we may place the trial used by our ancestors, in which the party accused was to walk, blind-folded and bare-footed, across a number of red-hot plough shares, laid paralld to one another, at unequal distances, and the proof of innocence was his escaping unhurt. But there are other cases, where it is certain that a crime has been committed, and we only want to discover the author of it. Where there were no circumstances that limited the suspicion to a small number, the ancients used, for coming at the truth, a method, which depends on the same principle with all the others; I mean the casting of lots, which we see exemplified in the 7th chap. of Joshua.¹

The author in his discussion of the arts calls agriculture the first art of mankind. In tracing its origin Hunter shows his knowledge of prehistory as it was understood in his times as well as the later development of agriculture.

THE first employment of mankind, in every age and country, that could be called an art, has been the culture of the earth. As soon as societies began to be formed, and men, tired of the wandering life they had formerly led, looked out for fixed habitations, they quickly found that the sources from which they had before derived their subsistence, that is, the flesh of wild animals killed in the chase, and the spontaneous fruits of the earth, were insufficient to maintain them, now that their numbers were increased, and their situation more confined. Hence they were obliged to have recourse to the breeding of tame cattle (the pastoral life) and to those productions of the earth which they found best suited for nourishment by *Agriculture*. But though necessity made this the first art which employed their attention, yet it has always been among the last in being brought to perfection. For this requires an intimate acquaintance with the operations of nature in the production of vegetables, which cannot be obtained but by long and accurate observation; a multitude of facts must be collected, and

the reasoning faculty must have been improved by long exercise, before those facts could be applied to useful purposes. Besides, it has happened, unluckily for this art, that it has been very late in becoming the object of attention with men who were capable of improving it on rational principles. Even among the enlightened nations of Europe, after philosophy had been applied with success to almost every other art, we see it was a long time before men of science turned their enquiries to the improvement of agriculture.¹

Hunter also had something to say about architecture. In his discussions on its origin and early stages of development he expressed his opinion about the pyramids which is by no means flattering.

The simplest idea, and that which would most naturally occur to mankind, just emerging from the savage state, for the construction of their first huts, is that of three or four sticks fixed with one end in the ground at some distance from one another, so as to include a square or triangular area, tied together by the other ends, and covered with straw, leaves, or some other materials of that kind. This would form a pyramid; and the same shape would naturally be given to the first buildings of stone, before the properties of the arch, or the use of pillars in architecture, came to be known. And accordingly, we find that this was the form of the most ancient edifices we know, which are built while the art was yet in its infancy; I mean the pyramids of Egypt. For I cannot agree with a certain learned author [Goguet], in thinking that buildings so incommotions in their construction, can afford a proof that the art had arrived at any great perfection; though their size and solidity are monuments of the power of the monarch by whose orders they were erected.²

Hunter was also aware of the value of studying what were to Europeans primitive cultures. He said:

The moral philosopher has been furnished, by those uncultivated nations, with facts, which he would have looked for in vain among people whose minds had been made, by habitual intercourse, to deviate from their natural bent, and conform themselves to the artificial rules, prescribed by custom.

IT is a curious, and a pleasing task to trace a resemblance between some of the customs that prevail in those remote and uncivilized countries, and those of nations to whose manners we have been more habituated, and it is, also, a task, from the prosecution of which we may derive no contemptible improvement. There are many things established by custom, nay, in some instance, stamped with the sanction of law, and practiced everyday, among us, which, in the eye of an impartial observer, are unreasonable and absurd: having been accustomed

1. *A Concise Account of Pegu* 68 - 9

2. *A Concise Account of Pegu* 73 - 5

from our infancy to see them, we become totally insensible of their impropriety; yet, place before our eyes the practice of a distant, and barbarous people, which agree with our own in every essential point, and only varies in a few inconsiderable circumstances: the absurdity strikes our sense at once, and is thence reflected on that custom of our own which we had formerly looked on without any disapprobation. It is also in the history of those nations where society is yet in its infancy, that we must look for the natural and undisguised operation of the human passions, for, in vain should we expect to find the genuine effect of those emotions in a race of men among whom refinement has introduced a studied conformity of conduct on all occasions.¹

From what has been said above it is clear that Hunter was a man of some learning.

Perhaps it was his wide knowledge which made him an open minded man for his day. While writing of the *sangha* he noted that they had the power to save the lives of condemned criminals and expressed his disapprobation of the practice as encouraging vice. Then he continued

But, at any rate, let us not trespass against that impartiality which is required of any person who undertakes to relate matters of fact, by leaving the reader impressed with an idea that the Talapoys extend their protection only to the guilty.²

Moreover after deploring the cost incurred by people seeking justice in Rangoon which almost amounted to injustice he said:

Yet, however absurd this may appear, it is perhaps, nothing more than a prejudice, arising from the force of habit, that makes us look with contempt and indignation on these mercenary retailers of justice, and yet feel no similar emotions, when we see, in a country famed for the wisdom of its Government, a poor man, by appealing to the laws of that country, in a cause where equity is plainly on his side, reduced to ruin; merely because his antagonist is rich.³

In one place while he deplored the Burmese suspicious treatment of foreigners which had rendered the foreign trade of Pegu less than it should have been, he admitted;

and yet, if independence is the greatest good that a nation can enjoy, we must confess their present conduct to be the wisest they could have pursued, as being the best calculated to preserve that invaluable possession.⁴

1. *A Concise Account of Pegu* XI - XIII

2. *A Concise Account of Pegu* 40

3. *Ibid* 45 - 6

4. *A Concise Account of Pegu* 88

He then went on to state frankly the deplorable methods by which European powers had gained their possessions in India, a thing rarely done by Europeans of those days.

Any man who is acquainted with the means by which the European powers have obtained their establishments in Hindostan will be convinced of the truth of this assertion. Under the pretence of trade, they obtained permission from the sovereigns of the districts they visited, to build factories and forts, and to keep in pay a body of troops, both which they strengthened, and augmented by degrees, under various pretexis, 'till they reduced to a state of dependence those very princes, to whose indulgence they are indebted for all their possessions.¹

Hunter then admits his understanding of Burmese reluctance to welcome the commercial interest of foreigners.

Is it then at all surprising that the Birmahs should be unwilling to encourage an intercourse, which they have seen to produce such fatal effects, and rather chuse to resign the advantages they might derive from an extensive commerce, than endanger their existence as an independent people?²

Hunter should be admired for his ability to see the viewpoint likely to be held by a philosopher regarding the Burmese nation while yet admitting what the opinions of a citizen of a commercial state are likely to be.

Happy nation! who are contented to enjoy the wealth which nature has, with liberal hand, bestowed on your soil; and know not the desire of foreign riches, and foreign luxuries, which has tempted others to relinquish the more substantial blessings of liberty and independence. May you long continue to preserve, with jealous care, this your most precious birth-right, and reject, with disdain, the most splendid allurements if they tend, in the least, to put it in danger. Such may be the language of the philosopher, who stiles himself a citizen of the world; but the member of a commercial state, has different sentiments: And juster sentiments his certainly are, in the present instance; for though the Birmahs may boast a national independence, yet personal freedom is a stranger to every individual, except the King, if indeed he can be accounted free, who is in continual apprehension, from the cabals of his nobles, and the just resentment of his people. Our citizen, then will enquire what advantages his nation may derive from an intercourse with this people; what sources of wealth may flow from their trade; and whether, in time of war, his country can strengthen herself by their alliance, or procure from them stores, for the equipment of her fleets and armies. He will next examine the probability there may be of over-

1. *A Concise Account of Pegu* 88 - 9. See also D. G. E. Hall: *Europe and Burma* 78

2. *Ibid* 89

coming their repugnance to the commerce of strangers, and endeavour to find the best means for effecting this end.¹

Now that we know something of the author let us turn our attention to his work. *A Concise Account of Pegu* has an advertisement,² an introduction,³ and eight chapters comprising ninety-six pages. The chapters have no titles but the contents of each chapter is given viz.

Chapter I

Situation and extent of Pegu
A short account of the revolutions in its government
Description of the capital
Of the coast
Face of the country
Climate

Chapter II

Description of the inhabitants
Their Persons
A remarkable badge worn by the Birmahs
Dress
Manner and disposition
Military character

Chapter III

Of the religion of Pegu
Its objects
Of the Priests, or talapoys
Of their places of Worship
Anniversary festivals

Chapter IV

Of the government of Pegu
Its form
Regulations of the Police
Of the four principal magistrates
The Meoon [Myowun]
The Reoon [Yewun]
The Cheekaw [Siike]
The Shabundar
Of the dignity and power of the King of Ava
History and character of the present King

1. *A Concise Account of Pegu* 89 – 90

2. *A Concise Account of Pegu* V-VI

3. *Ibid* VII-XVI

Chapter V

Some Account of the laws
Of punishments
Trial by Ordeal
Laws regarding marriages and debtors

Chapter VI

State of the Arts in Pegu
Language of the Birmahs
Their manner of writing
Their music

Chapter VII

Of the products and commerce of Pegu
Trade of teak wood
Tin
Beeswax
Gold
Nitre
Areca
Cachow [cutch]
Petroleum
Grain
Animals
Fruit
Money

Chapter VIII

Of the treatment of foreigners who trade to Pegu
Reasons for the conduct of the Birmahs in this respect
Proposal for putting the Commerce on a better footing than at present

In our study of *A Concise Account of Pegu* let us first see what Hunter had to say about the political history of Burma. We will have to bear in mind the fact that he was only acquainted with matters relating to the province of Pegu. He said:

THIS country was formerly subject to a prince of its own, who did not acknowledge a dependence on any other power; but about forty years ago, there happened a great revolution, by which, this once powerful kingdom was reduced to the state in which it now remains, that is to say, nothing more than a province of the kingdom of *Ava*, governed by deputies sent from thence, who may be removed at the pleasure of their sovereign. The particulars of this revolution I have not been able to learn;¹

He however managed to learn something about the naval engagement in which the French ships participated and were worsted during the battle of Syriam in

1. *A Concise Account of Pegu* 18

1755.¹ Although there is some truth in it we know that his story is not an accurate one. Pegu had been incorporated into the Burmese Empire since the days of Tabin Shwehti and Bayinnaung in the sixteenth century. As such it remained until 1740 when the then Myowun—Governor—of Pegu, Nga Tha Aung revolted against Ava. Following the troubles sparked off by this rebellion Pegu became an independent kingdom which lasted until 1757 when Alaungmintaragyi or Alaungpaya as he is more commonly known, captured the city of Pegu together with its king. From that time onwards Pegu again became a province of the Burmese Empire.

The only thing he knew about Ava was its palace revolutions which brought Badon or Bodawpaya to the throne.

... in the seven months immediately preceding our arrival at Pegu, had been subject to three different sovereigns, two of whom were deposed and murdered, by their relations, who aspired to the throne. The present king is uncle to the former, whom he had put to death from these ambitious motives. He then banished from his Court all those who held any office under his nephew;²

The three sovereigns mentioned by him were Singu, Phaunggaza and Badon. His statement that Badon banished from his court all those who held office during Singu's reign is too sweeping by far.

Hunter mentions in passing the fate of the Yewun's eldest son "who filled a place of great honour" near Singu.

After being wounded fighting in his defence, he was obliged to seek his own safety, for a while in concealment; is now rendered incapable of any employment, and reduced to a level with the meanest of the people And though the eldest son is now restored to his father's house, yet all the train of attendants, and all the respect, that he was naturally entitled to; by his birth-right, are become the portion of his younger brother.³

Hunter also explains why the Yewun in spite of his son's disgrace held his high office. He had sided with Badon and had come down to Pegu with a body of armed men to establish Badon's authority there.

for which service he had been rewarded with the important office he at present holds in that province:⁴

The people of Pegu province who had a taste of independence rebelled against the central authority many times. One of these occurred after Hunter had written this book and so information regarding it had to be incorporated in a footnote. It said:

1. *A Concise Account of Pegu* 18—20
2. *A Concise Account of Pegu* 55—6
3. *Ibid* 56
4. *A Concise Account of Pegu* 56

Since the above account was written, a ship arrived at *Caringa*, from *Rangoon*, bring accounts of another revolution having taken place there; the antient Peguers having risen against the Burmah Government and expelled them from the place. The town is said to have been almost totally burned down, in this commotion, which is thought to have happened between the 5th and the 15th of September, 1783. This is not the first attempt the Peguers have made to recover their independence, but they were never so successful before. There can be no doubt that the King of Ava will endeavour, with his whole force, to bring them again under subjection, and what the result of the contest may be, time only can determine...

By later information, I find that the Peguers only kept possession of Rangoon for three days; the Burmahs having, at the end of that time, reduced them, and recovered their authority.¹

The above in short is what Hunter had to say about the political history of Burma.

Let us now turn our attention to Hunter's relation of administrative matters. He thought the Burmese government despotic. He castigates it thus:

IN the Government of this country, we see despotism prevail in its full extent; and despotism too of the worst kind;²

Other Europeans have also said the same but we know from our own records that Burmese kingship in theory and practice was not so inspite of the fact that there were a few exceptions to the rule. He also said that the sovereign was highly venerated by his subject.

And indeed, they look on him as the greatest of men, or, perhaps, something more than human.³

Hunter continues with a categorical statement that arbitrary thrones were insecure.

But, it is a truth, established both by reason and experience, that an arbitrary throne was far from being the most secure. There are no laws to give it stability, no constitution to guard its rights; The pillars which support it are mere brutal force, and the dread of a tyrant's vengeance. When these prove unable to resist the torrent of indignation that takes its rise from the distresses of an injured people, the whole fabric is overturned in an instant. Another reason why a despotic crown totters on the head of its owner, more than any other, is this, that if a competition arises, the body of the nation has neither any interest in the dispute, nor any certain rule to determine its choice. This we see exemplified in the kingdom of Ava;⁴

Calling Badon a usurper he said:

THE usurper, since his accession to the throne, has established some new regulations, or rather enforced some old laws, which had fallen into disuse, of such a nature as would lead one to think that he

1. *Ibid* 21

2. *A Concise Account of Pegu* 44

3. *Ibid* 54

4. *Ibid* 54 - 5

had turned devotee, or, at least, finds it convenient to wear the mask of hypocrisy, to palliate, in the eyes of the world, the violence he had done to the rights of loyalty, of nature, and of humanity. One of these prohibits the killing of beef, which is founded on the religious worship paid by Gentoos, to the Ox;¹ and it is the only resemblance between their religion and that of the Birmahs. The second forbids the use of wine, or spirituous liquors of any kind, under no less a punishment than death itself. This last regulation has been attended with very good effects, as the Birmahs were formerly very much addicted to drunkenness; but with such strictness are punishments inflicted here, that not an instance of intoxication is to be seen; if any one of them is prevailed on to take liquor, he is at infinite pains to remove the smell from his mouth, by every means in his power.²

It is only natural that Hunter was more thoroughly acquainted with provincial government especially with that of Rangoon. He writes:

THE principal magistrate of this place is the *Meoon*, who presides in council, and is, indeed, in great measure arbitrary there; as I believe, there is hardly an instance of any point being carried against him. He can give absolute orders about public works, or the employment of public stores. The present one is of the blood royal of Ava; but whether this is a necessary circumstance or not, I cannot pretend to determine. The inhabitants look up to him as to a deity; and such is the veneration for his person and office, that no one is permitted to come into his presence without taking off his shoes. If you are permitted to sit, it is on the ground, where you must keep your face turned towards this petty monarch, and above all things, be careful not to present to him the sole of your foot, so that your posture is not a little inconvenient. Yet, this man, when he goes to the Court of Ava, which he is obliged to do once a year, is treated by the sovereign with no more regard than the meanest slave; and must, if required, perform the most menial offices about his person.

THE person next to him in the Government of Pugu (*sic*) is the *Reoon*. His particular office, independantly of his being the second in Council seems to be the administration of justice; as complaints are generally laid first before him; though when doubts arise, or the matter is of greater consequence than usual, the other members are called to give their sentiments upon it.

THE third officer is *Cheekaw*, of whose particular department, if he has any distinct from his seat in Council, I know nothing; and

THE fourth is the *Shabundar*, who presides over the customs on goods exported or imported, and over everything that relates to shipping, arrived or sailing from the Port. When a vessel comes off the

1. By Gentoos he means the Hindus but the prohibition of killing beef was not founded on Hinduism.

2. *A Concise Account of Pegu* 56 - 8

bar, it is usual to send a boat up to town for a pilot, and the Shabundar is the person applied to for that purpose. When she arrives, it is required to deliver a list of her cargo and stores to the same person; his officers are put on board to prevent any contraband trade; and when she is ready to depart, he orders a pilot to conduct her down the river. A pilot who should carry a ship without this order, would expose himself to the severest punishment. The present Shabundar is an Armenian; and indeed, a foreigner is generally pitched on for this office, because, most probably, none of the natives are qualified for the task. All public orders are made out in the name of these four principal Officers.¹

Hunter also mentions that there were other officials connected with the government of Rangoon and he thinks their conduct of affairs disgraceful.

There are about twenty persons concerned in the Government of Rangoon, who, though one is subordinate to another, and though matters of the first consequence are determined in a council of the whole, can yet act separately; and anyone member of this body can, by his own authority, give out orders, which no inhabitant of Pegu dares to disobey. These orders, may be contrary to the sense of the whole body, in which case, they are indeed, reversed in council; but then, there are instances, and I myself observed one, of such orders being, notwithstanding, repeated, more than once, by the same person, and obeyed, each time till they are again reversed; nor was any redress obtained by the party aggrieved, or any effectual measures taken to prevent such a contempt of authority for the future.²

Hunter in common with other European writers said that Burmese officials were rapacious because they were practically unpaid.

... the inhabitants are under the absolute power of a set of petty tyrants, who are themselves nothing more than slaves to the King of Ava. As they have little or no emolument, except what they can raise by extortion, it is exercised in the most unlimited manner.³

Although he had hardly a good word for the Burmese government in general, he has nothing but praise for the police who in addition to their duties of keeping the peace acted as the fire brigade.

YET, bad as the government of this country is in many respects, we meet with some circumstances in the regulation of their police, which may deserve the attention, perhaps the imitation of more enlightened nations. There is here a body of men always ready to appear in arms

1. *A Concise Account of Pegu* 51 — 4

2. *A Concise Account of Pegu* 46 — 8

3. *A Concise Account of Pegu* 44

on the least alarm, so that if any tumult arises, it is quelled immediately. They are also useful for another purpose: From the nature of the materials of which the houses in Rangoon are constructed, accidents from fire are very common; and when ever this happens, the people above mentioned (who from this have got the name of *Fire-men*) are instantly assembled to extinguish it. In short, their office is much the same with that of watchmen among us, but with this difference, that the former execute their offices much more effectually than the latter: For we have never heard of rioters being able to overpower and beat the watch at Rangoon though nothing in more common with us than such adventures. We shall presently have occasion to speak of the strictness with which the laws are enforced in Pegu, and of their great efficacy in restraining the inhabitants, even from vices to which they had contracted the strongest propensity, from long habitude, before these laws which prohibit them were made. But, it will not be amiss just to mention here an instance, that places in a striking point of view, the vigour, with which all measures regarding the police are carried into execution in this country. It is wellknown how incorrigible and impatient of restraint an English seaman is, especially when just landed, with his pockets full. In such a case, we know, it is no easy matter to restrain him from excesses, even in Europe, where he is perfectly aware that the laws will be put in execution against him. It must then be still more difficult where he thinks he has got among naked savages, and has been for some time accustomed to a country where the inhabitants are terrified at the very sight of a European; which is literally true with regard to those parts of India, where our principal settlements are formed. Yet, we have seen, at Rangoon, that the crew of an English vessel,¹ the number about fifty, who were carried there after having suffered shipwreck, notwithstanding they had treated their own officers with contempt, and, totally disclaiming their authority, they had plundered the wreck of many valuable jewels, were very soon taught to behave themselves quietly; and from that time, while they continued there, which was for the space of about two months, they never were the authors of any riot or disturbance.²

Hunter had quite a lot to say about the administration of justice in Rangoon. In this connection he says

HERE we are naturally lead to speak of the laws. but this is a subject which it is impossible for any person, from a short residence to obtain much knowledge of; and besides, the only law, properly speaking, that exists here, is the will of the prince. However, there are certain ancient customs, which are observed as general rules, when they do not come in competition with this sovereign will; and I shall endeavour to communicate whatever knowledge I have been able to pick up concerning these.³

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1. *The Earl of Dartmouth*, Indiaman, lost on the island of Carnicobar, on her passage, from Madras homewards.
 2. *A Concise Account of Pegu* 48-51
 3. *A Concise Account of Pegu* 59

In cases of high treason the author thinks that the punishments were too severe and uncivilized.

THE end of all laws is the prevention of crimes, but among the means which may be used for attaining this end, there are some, which, though very powerful in themselves, have so much injustice in their nature that the more civilized nations have rejected their use. I mean, those punishments, which, altho' the offender himself may have got beyond the reach of the law, yet touch him in his nearest concerns, his family, and relations. This principle has its influence, at present, even in our own laws; by which a young person, born and brought up in affluence, is reduced, without any crime of his own, to the lowest ebb of misery and want, because his father has been guilty of high treason. But among us, however much the crime of one person may affect the *fortune* of another, it can expose to *personal suffering* no one but the delinquent himself; but, in Pegu, where the nicer principles of justice and humanity are less attended to, the mode of punishment we have been talking of is exercised in its greatest extent. If a person commits a capital crime, and escapes before he can be brought to punishment, his wife, his children and his nearest relations are put to death without mercy.¹

Foreigners writing on Burma almost always have something to say about trial by ordeal which is called (ကမ္ဘာ့၇၄၆) in Burmese. Hunter too had a contribution to make on this matter. He confirmed that this method was used only in cases where the judges cannot determine which party was in the right.² In connection with this practice he cited examples from the Bible, Latin literature and Anglo-Saxon history which we had quoted in the earlier part of this paper. He also noted a similar practice used in India—that of chewing raw rice for the purpose of determining the thief when the culprit cannot be discovered in cases of theft.³ He compares the water ordeal that he witnessed with that of trial by combat during the age of chivalry in Europe and ridiculed it.

In particular, we must refer to this head, the practice so frequent a few centuries ago, of judicial determinations by single combat; and of the same kind is the trial now used in Pegu. The two parties are obliged to dive into a pond set aside for that purpose; when he who can remain the longest under water is pronounced innocent, and sentence past in his favour. The practice appears to be, and certainly is, in itself, absurd; as the proof of innocence is rested on a man's ability in an art which depends on his corporeal powers, and is to be acquired by frequent exercise; but yet, were we to grant the principle before mentioned, on which it is founded it would be perfectly just: and it is, undoubtedly, quite as much so as the method that

1. *A Concise Account of Pegu* 59 — 61

2. *Ibid* 61

3. *Ibid* 63

was used, all over Europe, in the days of Chivalry. For if an expert diver may now easily prove his innocence in Pegu, a vigorous combatant enjoyed the same advantage, not long ago in Europe.¹

The punishment for theft, Hunter says, is always death. This is too sweeping a statement because lighter sentences were also given. According to him

The most common way of executing a capital sentence was beheading, which they perform, very dexterously, with a sabre, while the criminal is in a standing posture.²

Hunter criticizes dishonest officials who try to make money out of disputes.

They take cognizance of all disputes between individuals, that come to their ears, without the case being laid before them by either of the parties; and on whatever side the cause is determined there is a never failing charge brought in against both, for *justice*, as they express it; and the price of justice, is often three or four times greater, than the value of the matter in agitation. An instance of this kind fell under my own observation, in a trivial dispute, which happened between two English Gentlemen, when the judges condemned each party to pay tripple the sum contested, for justice, which neither of them had ever thought of seeking at such a tribunal.³

Our account also contains something on Burmese war craft.

....they are in reality, a formidable nation: Numerous, brave, possessing great strength of body, and capable of sustaining fatigue; they only want a regular discipline to render their power truly respectable. Their principal weapons are the spear and scimitar, both of which they handle with great dexterity. But the use of gun-powder is not unknown to them, for they often employ muskets with matchlocks. They are frequently at war with the Siamese, over whom they have been often victorious. The prisoners taken in these expeditions they detain, and employ in the occupations to which they are brought up....For carrying any desperate enterprize into execution, they have a set of people, who, very probably have been criminals reserved for the purpose, to whom it may be death to return without having effected the business that they were sent on. This appears a strange piece of policy, as one should imagine, that those men, whom we cannot suppose to be bound by any principle of honour, or actuated by any affection for the state to which they belong, lie under great temptations to join the enemy. What means are used to prevent so probable a consequence; whether they are accompanied or commanded by men, who are more worthy of trust.

1. *A Concise Account of Pegu* 63 - 4

2. *A Concise Account of Pegu* 65

3. *Ibid* 44 - 5

and able to restrain them; or encouraged by the hope of rewards on their return with success, I have not been able to learn. Be this as it will, it is very well known, that the Birmahs are not singular in this practice, which is adopted by many of the despotic powers of the East.¹

Now that we have seen what Hunter has to say about Burmese administration let us turn our attention to the economic and commercial products of the country as reported by him. Rice was the principal agricultural product of the country then as now. Regarding its mode of production, he said:

...we cannot observe without some degree of surprise, that those people, however ignorant we may esteem them, have long known and practised an operation, to the good effects of which we have till very lately, been strangers; I mean the transplanting of grain. As soon as the rice is sown, they take care to cover the ground three or four inches deep with water through which the blade springs up, and it is soon after transplanted into another field, where it is suffered to grow and ripen. The same method is practised in all other parts of India.²

Hunter was impressed with the fertility of the country and nature's bounty towards it.

This country is very plentifully supplied with all the necessaries of life. Rice is produced in abundance. The fruits are much the same with those in Bengal; such as pine-apples, water melons, plantains, &c. They have great quantities of honey, but of a strong taste, which is not very agreeable; and it is said, if used too freely to produce intoxication. They have plenty of poultry and game, particularly deer and wild hogs. The forests abound with wild elephants, buffaloes and tigers; but, if we may believe the report of the natives, there is not a single jackall to be found in the country, which is a singular circumstance, when we consider in what numbers they are found in all other parts of India. They have a small breed of horses, which are much esteemed for their hardiness and patience of fatigue. Their head is somewhat large and thick, their mane and tail bushy.³

Pegu produces both silk and cotton cloth as well as a mixture of silk and cotton. Hunter writes;

The natives of Pegu have not only the art of making cloth which has a firm texture of each of these materials separately, but they often combine them both in one piece; and they dye the thread used for weaving, of various colours, so that the cloth made in this manner very much resembles that worn in the Highlands of Scotland, usually known

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1. *A Concise Account of Pegu* 33 - 5
 2. *A Concise Account of Pegu* 70
 3. *A Concise Account of Pegu* 83 - 4

by the name of Tartan. But the only cloth manufacture in Pegu that is valued by foreigners is that of towels, which is esteemed for a roughness, a kind of knap, that is peculiar to them.¹

The principal economic product that interested European merchants was teak wood ²whose uses and advantages were stated thus:

It is of the most universal use, all over India not only in making of furniture, but, more especially, in the construction of ships; and it has this advantage over every kind of wood employed in Europe for this purpose, that it is much less corruptible in the water. Accordingly we find that vessels built of this wood last much longer than any others.³

But we are told that though teak was more abundant and cheaper in Pegu than elsewhere it was not of the best quality being inferior to the teak from the Balagate mountains. ⁴

He is rather vague about the location of the teak forests but he is more informed on how they arrive at the port.

...the wood is not produced within many miles of Rangoon: The great nurseries from which it is brought are among the mountains in the very heart of the country: The wood which is cut there is floated down the river Syriam, and often consumes several months in making the voyage. It is put up, for the sake of a better conveyance in the form of rafts, and a great number of these generally arrive together.⁵

1. *Ibid.* 71-2

2. "THE principal object of Europeans who frequent this part, is the trade of Teak-wood. which is produced in greater plenty, than in any other part of India. This is a tree which grows to a very considerable size; and in its texture, excepting that it is more flexible and not quite so hard "resembles the Oak." *A Concise Account of Pegu* 81.

3. *A Concise Account of Pegu* 81-2

4. "for, from the moisture and richness of the soil, it grows up faster, and consequently acquires less solidity than in parts which are dry, bleak, and exposed to the force of the winds. And this is the reason why ships built at Bombay, where they are supplied with wood from the Balagate mountains, are less subject to decay than those constructed at Pegu." *A Concise Account of Pegu* 82. This however is not true.

5. *A Concise Account of Pegu* 92

The other economic products which interested Europeans were tin and beeswax which were

articles of commerce. The former, in particular, is a very considerable one. Gold is produced in no contemptible quantity, but the exportation of it is not allowed, nor is it used, among the people, for money. . . The same prohibition is extended to *salt-petre*, which might be prepared in abundance if permission could be got to export it. The country produces, in plenty, the *Areca Nut*, and *Cachow*, which is prepared from a plant of the *Mimosa* kind (by a process very minutely described in the *London Medical Observations and Enquiries*) and, as well as the former, is chewed by the natives of India, along with their Betel. There is found here, swimming on the surface of the water in certain wells, a kind of Petroleum, or Naphtha, which is used like oil, for burning; and also for making unctious compositions, for paying the sides of vessels.¹

Hunter also had something to say about Burmese money.

THE principal money of this country is silver, which was not coined, but paid by weight. The smallest denomination is the *Tycal*; one hundred Tycals make one *Viss*; and these are used in weighing goods as well as money. But another circumstance to be attended to, is the purity of the silver, of which there are three degrees, established by law, or by custom; the 25 percent, the 50 percent, and the 75 percent. The first has one fourth part; the second, one half; the third, three fourths of alloy; and one Tycal of twenty-five percent, silver is esteemed equal in value to the Bengal Sicca Rupee. This diversity in the fineness of the current money renders it impossible for a stranger to receive it in payment, without being subjected to continual imposition; and therefore, all money matters are conducted by a particular set of men, who are ensurable for the quality of the silver which they receive on account of their employer, and are there by entitled to a certain allowance percent. For the payment of smaller sums, they use money of lead, which is weighed in the same manner as the former.²

Hunter wrote about some of the crafts practised by the people. Of these, a few, e. g. agriculture, weaving, the extraction of timber and mining have already been mentioned. Here is what he had to say about ship-building and navigation.

THEY are very well acquainted with the arts of *Ship-building* and *Navigation*; but in what measure they are indebted to strangers for their knowledge in those respects, it is hard to determine.³ As the wood pro-

1. *A Concise Account of Pegu* 82-3

2. *Ibid* 85-6

3. "many of the ship-builders at Rangoon are Siamese, who have been taken in war."

A Concise Account of Pegu 34

per for the construction of ships is found here in greater plenty than any where else, Europeans often repair to this place, for that purpose. But from whatever source the inhabitants may have derived their skill, it is certain that they have now among them excellent carpenters; ...The only peculiarity about their vessels, is the substance of which the rigging, of every kind is made. This is the bark of a tree, and the ropes made of it are very strong, but much less flexible than those made of *Coir*, or the fibrous substance that incloses the cocoa-nut, which is well known to be used for this purpose in all other parts of India.¹

Now let us see what he has to say about Burmese skill in the working of metal.

IN the same Pagoda [Shwedagon], and the smaller ones round about it, we find a specimen of the skill which the natives have in *Metallurgy*, at least in one branch of it, the working in gold. As this is generally found in its metalline state, it must have been the first discovered of any; and we see, in the instance before us, that the natives of Pegu are no strangers to its wonderful ductility, nor to the application of that property to useful purposes: For, from the great extent of those buildings, the roofs of which are covered with the metal, we must naturally conclude that covering to be very superficial; and according to the best information I could obtain, those roofs have only a very thin coat of gold. They also know very well how to work in Silver, and they have the art of covering utensils made of a particular kind of earth, however irregular their form may be, with thin plates of that metal, so as to be taken for solid silver, till their lightness discovers the mistake. They are now acquainted with the method of working in *Iron*, but as that metal is not obtained from any mines in the country, I must look on this as one of the arts that have only been introduced at Pegu since the arrival of the Europeans there.²

Hunter's observations regarding iron is wrong. Even if iron was not mined in Pegu then, it was produced in Arakan and several places in Upper Burma at that time. Moreover iron working had been known to the people since Pyu times.

The generally accepted view concerning Burma's sea borne trade is that though many foreign ships frequented Burmese ports Burmese ships rarely ventured to foreign ports. But Hunter says very definitely that Burmese ships

managed by crews who are natives of the country, visit all the ports in India.³

1. *A Concise Account of Pegu* 76-7

2. *A Concise Account of Pegu* 75-6

3. *Ibid* 77

and this statement is collaborated by other original sources.

Hunter deplored the English India Company's lack of interest in the trade to Pegu. In his day the people who ventured to Pegu were those who did not have enough capital to enter into other branches of commerce.

Any man, who could find money enough to purchase a small vessel on the Coast of Coromandel, might by carrying a little tobacco, some blue cloth, and a few iron nails, to the island of Carnicobar get, in exchange for those articles, which had cost him almost nothing, a ship-load of coco-nuts: for these, he could procure, at Pegu, a cargo of wood, which he afterwards sold, to great advantage, either on the Coast, or in Bengal.¹

European merchants trading to Burmese ports almost always complained of the treatment suffered by their ships. Hunter is no exception.

SHIPS that frequent this port, on purpose of trade, meet with a treatment, which in many circumstances is extremely mortifying. As soon as they come to anchor, the guns and rudder are carried on shore, and not delivered again, till the business is concluded, and the ship has obtained permission to depart.

This practice however is not confined to Pegu alone. It was prevalent all over South East Asia and in the Chinese ports too. He also complains of the malpractices in connection with trade and criticizes them.

It frequently happens that difficulties are thrown in the way, by some individual in power, which detain the trader much longer than would be necessary to finish all his commercial transactions, and besides, he is often obliged to bear with patience, because without any prospect of redress, the most shocking personal indignities. As this behaviour has rendered the trade of Pegu much less considerable, than it otherwise would have been; and retarded the advancement of the country, both in richness and civilization, it will, doubtless, appear to be very impolitic.²

In connection with Pegu trade Hunter examines the advantages and profits that the British may derive from trading with Burma and whether it would be of use in war time. He discusses it thus:

LET us now consider the subject a little in this view. And here, the circumstance that presents itself first to our attention, is the trade of wood, which is so much the more important on this account, that

1. *A Concise Account of Pegu* IX

2. *Ibid* 87-8

it is not only a considerable branch of commerce in itself, but is absolutely necessary to the carrying on of all the others. Pegu is the only source, to the eastward of *Cape Comorin*, from which a regular supply of this commodity can be obtained, and consequently, if the scene of a naval war should be laid in the Bay of Bengal, that nation which could procure wood from Pegu, would have the great advantage of being able to refit her ships much sooner, and more effectually, after an engagement, than the enemy could do.¹

He then goes on to show that the purchase of teak at the ports was uncertain and discusses ways and means of procuring the best quality teak.

But, to be properly supplied with this valuable article, it is not sufficient to send our ships to purchase it at the port; this method is very uncertain; and by it, we can never be sure of having stores of the quality that may be wanted; ... As the time of their arrival is uncertain, it is evident that persons on the spot must be the best supplied; and consequently, we see the propriety there would be in having Agents appointed to reside here constantly, and to choose from among the wood, on its arrival, that which is of the best quality, and the dimensions, that may be wanted. This end would be still more effectually answered, if permission could be obtained to send to those parts, in the neighbourhood of which the wood is cut, proper persons, who might receive their instructions from those who reside at the port.

Hunter was also interested in Burmese gold and tin.

IF these people could be prevailed on to permit the exportation of their gold, it would, no doubt, become a valuable branch of commerce; as the Malay coast is, at present, the only part of India, from which it is procured, and this in no considerable quantity. We should thus be able to extend our trade with China, and the ballance of that trade would be less against the mother country than it is on its present footing. The exportation of tin from Pegu, is already great, but it might, undoubtedly, be much encreased.²

He then goes on to say that though at the moment the Burmese were very reluctant to increase their intercourse with Europeans there was reason to think that this obstacle could be overcome.

... from the fondness that is shown by the natives for observing and imitating the customs of strangers, we may judge, by analogy, that they might soon be brought to form to themselves new wants, which they would be obliged to supply by a commerce with their neighbours. Next, we know, that *opium*, which is already become a staple commodity in

1. *A Concise Account of Pegu* 91-3

2. *Ibid* 93

the trade to this country, and will, in all probability, be still more in request, if the law against the use of spirituous liquors continues in its present force, is entirely furnished by our territories in Bengal.¹

Hunter said with regards to European interests at Rangoon that the Imperial Company had a factory there which was surrounded by a wall on which the Company's colours were hoisted.² He, then said that the English East India Company once had a factory at Negrais which they were obliged to relinquish. He also gives the reasons for the Negrais massacre - reasons which have hardly ever been admitted by British historians of later generations.

... this appears to have been more the fault of those entrusted with the administration of our affairs at that place, than of the inhabitants, who had suffered many instances of oppression, before they resolved to assert their rights by violent means.³

Yet in spite of such experiences of the past

The present Government of Pegu express sentiments of the highest respect for the English East India Company; and they gave an example of it in the treatment of the *Success Galley*, which, because she was loaded on account of that Company enjoyed much greater indulgence than any other foreign vessel that ever entered the port of Rangoon.⁴

He also expressed his opinion that any power who could mediate between the Mons and the Burmese would be highly respected by both parties as though there was racial strife in Burma. This opinion was no doubt based on what he had seen in India. However we know that he had misread the situation and the question of mediation did not arise at all in Burma.

As is usual with all travelogues Hunter describes the people who inhabit the country. Let us begin with his account of the Burmans.

THE inhabitants, as I have observed, are of a muscular make; their stature is about the middle size and their limbs, in general, well proportioned. Their complexion is swarthy, being a medium between that of the Chinese and of the Inhabitants of Bengal. In features, they resemble the Malays; their face is broad; the eyes, large and black; the nose, flat; the cheek bones, prominent, and the mouth, extremely wide. They wear, on the chin, a tuft of hair, of unequal lengths; and shave the rest of

1. *Ibid* 94

2. *A Concise Account of Pegu* 94-5

3. *Ibid* 95

4. *Ibid* 95-6

the face. Their teeth are always of a jet-black,¹ which, however disgusting it may be to a European-eye, is, among them, esteemed a great ornament; and accordingly they are at very great pains to accomplish it.²

He then goes on to describe the phetleik nadaung³ worn by the Burmans although he did not know it by this name.

THEY wear various ornaments in their ears, many of them in common with other eastern nations; but one that appears to be peculiar to this people, is a thin plate of gold, rolled up in the form of a quill, about the thickness of a finger, which is thrust into a hole made in the usual part of the ear, large enough to receive it. The foregoing description is chiefly applicable to the *Birmahs*, that is, the natives of Ava, or their descendants, who are now very numerous here, as the Government is entirely in their hands.⁴

The Burmese practice of tattooing the thighs⁵ is also described:

The thigh of every Birmah, including the hip and knee, is of a jet-black which has a very singular appearance: and this mark they receive in their childhood. It is made by the repeated application of an instrument with a great number of sharp points, placed close together, something like that used in carding wool, 'till the part is entirely covered with drops

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1. The method used for making 'black' in India was as follows: the pulp of full grown myrobalans 20 parts; green vitriol 3 parts; iron fillings 6 parts; blue vitriol $\frac{1}{10}$ part; small unripe myrobalans $\frac{1}{2}$ part; gum arabic 1 part, mustard seed oil 5 parts. "Macerate the myrobalans for a night in 80 parts of water; In the morning, squeeze out the water, and put it on the fire to boil. Pulverize the other ingredients (except the oil) and add them to the infusion while it is boiling. When it acquires a thick consistence add the oil.

"This preparation is spread on a leaf of Betel, and applied, at bed-time, to the teeth, where it is suffered to remain till morning.

When they wish to give it a redish tinge, they add to these ingredients a certain preparation of *Buckum*; a porous wood of a red colour, which it communicates to water, by infusion.

"There are many other formulae, but the above is sufficient for a specimen. The basis of them all, is a vegetable astringent combined with some preparation of iron." *A Concise Account of Pegu* 27-8

2. *A Concise Account of Pegu* 26-7

3. ဟင်လိပ်နားဘောင်း

4. *A Concise Account of Pegu* 28

5. "The Birmahs, however, who pique [*sic*] themselves on being descended from the conquerors, and wish to be distinguished from the nation they subdued, use a badge for that purpose which we must conclude they value very highly, from the sufferings they undergo to obtain it." *A Concise Account of Pegu* 29

of blood. After this, they apply a liquid, of which galls is a principal ingredient. This excites a considerable degree of fever; and it is computed by the natives themselves, that about two children out of five, perish, in consequence of the operation. Some persons of higher rank, have, instead of this, their thighs covered with the representations of tigers, and other wild beasts, imprinted by a process similar to the former. I would not be meant, by any thing that has been said, to insinuate that this practice was first instituted on the conquest of Pegu, by the Birmahs; on the contrary, I believe it to be of much greater antiquity; and all I mean to say, is, that the accidental circumstance of its preserving a separation between them and the original natives of the country, has undoubtedly enhanced its value in their esteem. It is not easy to conjecture what has given rise to an operation, which occasions so much pain and danger to the person who undergoes it; but it is not altogether peculiar to this people: for we meet with practices similar to it among other nations. That which resembles it the most, is the operation of *tattaowing*, used by the natives of Otaheite.¹

There is also a short description of the Mons:

The original inhabitants of Pegu, have faces more nearly approaching to the oval form, their features are softer, more regular, and seem to express greater sense and acuteness, than those of the Birmahs, with whom, in other respects, they nearly agree.²

The dress of the people was described thus:

THE men have long black hair, tied on the top of the head, over which some wear a white handkerchief, in form of a turban, others go with their heads bare and decorated with flowers. They wear about their loins, a piece of party-coloured silk, or cotton cloth, which is afterwards passed over the shoulder, and goes round the body. Those of higher rank have this cloth so long as to hang down, over their thighs and legs; which, among the lower class of people, are bare. The women have a kind of short jacket, to cover the upper parts of their bodies; and the remainder of their dress is a piece of cloth, which is fastened round the loins, and hangs down to the ankles. This is doubled over, a few inches, at the fore part, where it is open, so that the thigh is discovered, in walking, thro' its whole length.³

1. *A Concise Account of Pegu* 29-30

2. *Ibid* 28-9

3. *A Concise Account of Pegu*. 31 He next mentions the origin of the women's nether garment a story beloved of European writers. "This mode of dress, they tell us, was first introduced by a certain Queen of Ava, who did it with the view of reclaiming the hearts of the men from an unnatural and detestable passion, to which they were, at that time totally abandoned: and succeeded so well, that she is remembered at this day, with gratitude, as a public benefactress to the kingdom" pp. 31-2

Hunter was extremely impressed and surprised at Burmese behaviour towards foreigners. He also says that they were fond of imitating aliens. Moreover he spoke warmly of their hospitality.

IN their behaviour to strangers, they are obliging, and show a degree of frankness that one would by no means expect to meet in a nation, whom we have been accustomed to look upon as barbarous. They express a great curiosity to see the manners of strangers, which makes them often come into their houses, and observe all that is doing, without appearing to be under any constraint. They also take pleasure in imitating the dress and behaviour of those who come among them, and appear highly delighted when a stranger imitates any of theirs. In return, if you go into their houses, you are received with great hospitality; the people are eager to find something that may give you satisfaction, and seem very happy when you show any marks of being pleased. They have none of the strictness which distinguishes the other eastern nations; but will themselves conduct you, with the greatest alacrity, thro' every part of their dwelling. The merit of their compliance is so much the greater on this account, that it cannot, in any degree, be ascribed to fear, as a stranger is here entirely in their power, and the people have a very high idea of their own military force and prowess.¹

The Burmese being broadminded permitted their womenfolk to marry foreigners but they were however prohibited from carrying their families out of the country. This is what Hunter has to say on the subject:

A FOREIGNER may marry one of the natives, on which occasion, he pays a certain stipulated sum to her parents, but if he leaves the country, he is not permitted to carry his wife along with him: So strict is the law, in this particular and so impossible it is to obtain a dispensation from it, that some men who have had great affection for their wives, have been obliged, on their departure, to carry them secretly away in jars, which were supposed to be filled with water. However, if the stranger, on going away, leaves a sufficient allowance to maintain his wife, and returns in the space of three years, he can claim her again; but if he prolongs his absence beyond that period, she is at liberty to marry another.²

Hunter also notices the institution of debtor slavery. A person who could not pay his debts could be sold by his creditor as a slave and take from the proceeds of the sale the amount due to him.³ Thus when a man marries he is obliged to pay the bride's debts if there are any

unless he would chuse to resign her person into the possession of her creditors.⁴

1. *A Concise Account of Pegu* 32 - 3

2. *Ibid* 65 - 6

3. *A Concise Account of Pegu* 66

4. *Ibid* 66

Let us now see what Hunter has to say about the religious beliefs and practices of the people. We shall have to state at this point that he was rather ill informed on this subject, and made some wrong statements. Nevertheless we obtain from his account an idea of how ordinary Europeans had misunderstood the religious practices of Burma.

THEIR Religion bears some analogy to that of the Gentoos; particularly in the adoration which they pay to certain consecrated bullocks, and in their abstinence from eating beef, or, to speak more properly, from killing cattle in order to eat them; for they differ from the Gentoos in this, that they will sit down to table with any one, and partake of whatever is set before them, without excepting that species of viand we just now mentioned; and if one goes into their houses, they never fail to request he will eat along with them.

THE *Objects* of their *Worship* are numerous, and among the rest, they pay adoration to an evil deity, to whom they make presents after any thing unlucky has happened, in order to appease his resentment, to which they ascribe the misfortune.¹

Hunter then says that the places of worship were called pagodas and gives as a description of the Shwedagon which he calls the Golden Pagoda.

THEIR places of worship, as well as those of the Gentoos, are called Pagodas; but they differ in form from those that we meet with in other parts of India. To give an idea of the whole, it will be sufficient to describe, in a few words, the *Golden Pagoda*, which is the most remarkable, and stands about three miles from Rangoon, on an eminence, to which you ascend by a flight of stairs. The Pagoda is a round building, or rather a Polygon with a great number of sides, about thirty feet high, terminated above by a round spire of a very great height, which ends in a point, but differs from a cone in this respect, that a line drawn on its surface, between the apex and base, is not a straight one, but forms a curvature inwards so that the whole approaches to the form of a speaking trumpet. This spire is covered with gold, from which the Pagoda takes its name; and at the top is a ring, round which are hung a number of bells, that make a continual jungling noise, by the agitation they receive from the wind. The building below is hollow, and there is one passage which leads into it; but this is shut up by an iron gate, which is only opened when some religious ceremony is to be performed within. Round the building are placed, on the ground, a number of figures, cut in stone, representing wild beasts of enormous size. Close to this Pagoda is another, similar to it, but inferior in size; and no person is allowed to come within a certain distance of these, without pulling off his shoes. In the neighbourhood of the eminence on which the two large Pagodas stand, there are many small buildings of the same form, enclosed with iron rails, and the roofs of these also are covered with gold. We at first supposed them to be tombs, from their number, and the smallness of their dimensions; but the inhabitants assured us of the contrary, and

said, they were servants or attendants to the great one. ... Two great festivals are annually solemnized at this Pagoda; the first and principal one is on the day of the full-moon immediately following the vernal equinox; and the other, on that full-moon which happens in the month of August. Multitudes of both sexes flock from all quarters to the celebrations of these, particularly of the first, to which they tell us, there often come visitors even from the confines of China.¹

The first festival is that at the fullmoon of Tabaung and the other at the fullmoon of Thadingyut.

Hunter had quite a lot to say about the Sangha. He begins with a description of their habit and their morning alms round.

THE Priests, the ministers of this worship, are called *Talapoy*s,² and are easily distinguished by their dress, which consists of a yellow cloth, negligently thrown over their bodies. Their heads are shaved and constantly bare. This order is not, like that of the *Bramins*, confined to any particular cast, or tribe, but any man who will confine himself to the rules of the society, may become a Talapoy. He is thereby bound to celibacy; but to compensate for this, he is abundantly supplied with all the other enjoyments of life, without any trouble or care of his own. Every morning before the rising of the sun, the Talapoys walk in procession thro' the streets, carrying in their hands a box to receive the contributions of the people, and many of them are attended by servants, with baskets, for the same purpose. All the inhabitants wait at their doors, and put into these boxes the finest rice, and provisions of various kinds, while the Talapoy takes no notice of them, but walks slowly on with his eyes turned upwards, like one whose thoughts are employed on concerns of a higher nature, and who looks on sublunary things as unworthy of his attention.³

Hunter then goes on to state the immense influence which the sangha have over the people and State.

This body of men is very numerous, and has a considerable influence in the state. If a man, who is in danger of prosecution from the laws of his country, flies to the Talapoys, and they chuse to give him an asylum, the ministers of justice dare not touch him there; and even when a criminal is condemned to death, if those priests interest themselves in his favour, they can prevent the execution of the sentence.⁴

1. *A Concise Account of Pegu* 41 — 3

2. Talapoin. A word used by the Portuguese, and after them by French and other Continental writers, as well as by some English travellers of the 17th century, to designate the Buddhist monks of Ceylon and the Indo-Chinese countries. The origin of the expression is obscure. *Hobson Jobson* 890

3. *A Concise Account of Pegu* 37 — 8

4. *Ibid* 38

He then makes some unfavourable comment on this immense influence of the sangha. He said that such action amounted to the obstruction of justice but adds that in Pegu such a power was nevertheless necessary.

thus, among those unenlightened nations, where superstition reigns with unbounded sway, and where this great truth, that god is a lover of order and not of confusion is either totally unknown, or which is equally bad, is neglected; the persons who as ministers of his worship, and interpreters of his will, hold in subjection the consciences of the people, have always been found to obstruct the administration of justice; and thus give encouragement to vice, instead of conducting men into the paths of virtue. That the impunity which the Talapoys sometimes ensure to crimes must have these bad effects, cannot be doubted; and yet, where the Government is so rigorous as it is in Pegu, we must allow, that such a lenient power, if lodged in proper hands, and used with moderation, may often be the means of preserving a useful member to society, by affording an asylum to those who may have offended against the laws, or incurred the capricious displeasure of a tyrant, more thro' ignorance than from any ill intention.¹

Hunter however has nothing but praise for the hospitality of the sangha:

be it ever remembered to their honor, that they have often received into their houses, and treated with the greatest hospitality strangers, who have suffered ship wreck on their coasts.²

He next speaks of the *thilashin*³ whom he calls priestesses.

Besides these, there is also a society of Priestesses, or female Talapoys, who undergo the same tonsure, wear the same habit, and are enjoined celibacy as well as the others.⁴

There is a great deal of similarity, Hunter thinks, between the sangha and the clergy of the Catholic faith.

It is curious to observe the agreement which subsists, in many circumstances, between those priests, and the clergy of the Romish church, especially when they were in the plenitude of their power, two or three centuries ago. It would be superfluous to trace the particular instances, as they must be obvious to every reader.⁵

1. *A Concise Account of Pegu* 38 - 40

2. *Ibid* 40

3. သီလရှင်

4. *A Concise Account of Pegu* 40

5. *A Concise Account of Pegu* 40-1

Hunter had rather a poor opinion of the arts of Pegu. The following is his comment on the subject.

THERE is no circumstance that enables us to judge the advances that a nation has made towards civilization, better than a knowledge of the progress which the arts have made among them; nor is there anything that has a greater effect on the manners and customs of a people. However, a very short discussion will suffice for this part of our subject, for it must be owned that all the arts, except one or two, which have probably owed their improvement to Europeans, since they began to visit this country, are in a very rude state in Pegu; and we may venture to say that this will long continue to be the case, as the cultivation of arts is not esteemed an honourable employment, every idea of that kind being annexed solely to the profession of arms.¹

His views on architecture are equally uncomplimentary. After saying that all houses in Pegu were built of wood, he said:

it may be concluded that this art [Architecture] is yet in its infancy there, and likely so to continue for a long time, for it never makes a rapid progress in a country where wood is the principal material for building. In Pegu there are no buildings of stone except those consecrated to their worship; and these are of that form which appears to me to have been the most ancient of any, that of a pyramid or cone.²

The Burmese language as commented upon by Hunter is interesting.

THE language of the Birmahs abounds with a nasal sound, which has a disagreeable effect on the organs of one who hears it for the first time; but this gradually becomes familiar, and then, you can perceive that the frequent occurrence of liquids and vowels produces a degree of softness, which is by no means displeasing. They seem to be fond of compounding words, in which, I doubt not, one thoroughly acquainted with the language would perceive a great deal of regularity: For example, in these words, *Lay a*, hand; *Lay-maa*, thumb; *Lay-chnew*, fore-finger; *Lay-Lay-a*, middle finger; *Lay-psegua*, ring-finger, *Lay-psan*, little finger; the radical word seems to be *Lay-a*, and the others to be compounded from it, by the addition of words, which probably relate to the situation or use of the different fingers.³

Hunter gives us a rather good description of Burmese characters, and the writing materials—pe (palm leaf) and parabuiik.

THE characters are written from left to right, contrary to the practice of most eastern nations, and have all a circular form, some being

1. *Ibid* 67-8

2. *A Concise Account of Pegu* 72-3

3. *Ibid* 78

confined within the limits of the line, while others project above or below it, or both. This writing is commonly performed on *Cajans*, the leaves of the toddy tree, by means of an iron-pen with a sharp point, and in this way all public orders are written: But, besides this, they have a black paper made from the bamboo, on which they form the characters with a pencil, made of a stone of the kind called *steatites*, which has exactly the appearance of white bees-wax; and these characters may be rubbed out by a wet cloth, leaving the paper fit to be used again in the same manner.¹

Hunter also had something to say about Burmese music in which he expressed surprise at its melodiousness.

THEY are fond of music, which makes a great part of their entertainment; and there is a sweetness in their's, that one would hardly expect to meet with among a people who have made so small a progress in civilization. Their instruments are principally of the stringed kind; one is like the guitar in form, and is used in the same way; another has four strings, and is played on with a bow, like a violin, which, except that it is narrower, it resembles in shape.²

Now that we have seen what Hunter had to say on the various aspects of Burmese life, let us see what else he had to say about the country. First of all let us study his description of Rangoon and its environs.

It [Rangoon] consists of two parts, the one of which is enclosed by a high stoccade, and furnished with gates; but without a wall on which guns can be mounted, and this is called the fort. The other part extends a considerable way down the river, and is entirely open. The houses are all constructed of wood, and raised on pretty high pillars, which is a necessary precaution, as the flowing of the tide lays most of the town under water. The streets are not paved; and are only passable by means of a plank, which is laid along from one end to the other, so, that when two persons meet, one of them is often obliged to step into the mire.

THE whole country is low, and the land can only be seen at a very small distance from sea. Add to this, that the water is shallow, a great way off from the Coast, so that one gets into three or four fathoms, before one is within sight of land. Thus a person who is unacquainted, is much at a loss, and a circumstance which, unless he is aware of it, will encrease his confusion, is this, that the chart published in our English directory, in even the latest editions, lays down the entrance of the river twelve miles too much to the southward. Hence it comes, that, after a man has got into the latitude of the place, by the chart, he is surprised to find no land within the reach of his eye. This error is rectified in a new chart of Pegu, which is inserted in the last edition of the French *Neptune Oriental*.³

1. *A Concise Account of Pegu* 78-9

2. *Ibid* 79-80

3. *A Concise Account of Pegu* 21-3

He then describes the high tides in the Rangoon river and what happened to his ship, the *Success Galley*.

The tides, near the bar, at the new and full Moon, rise about twenty feet perpendicular, and their flow is amazingly rapid. When the *Success Galley* came out of the river *Syriam*, in September 1782, she gradually shoaled her water, 'till the man at the lead called out *two fathoms and one foot*, which was less by two feet, than the draught of the ship: She was, consequently, aground, but the mud is so soft here, that it gives no resistance for a fathom under its surface. She deepened, by degrees, into three fathoms, when an anchor was let go; and, the flood coming in, the water rose, in a very short time, to six fathoms and a quarter.¹

The climate, Hunter had originally thought, would be unhealthy as the country was flat and marshy. Yet he found that he was mistaken. He said that the climate was extremely salubrious even for Europeans. This is an important point as coming from a surgeon, for Europeans in general regard the climate of Pegu as unhealthy for them and had written so again and again.

FROM what has been said concerning the situation of this country: and still more, from the prospect one has, in going up the river, which is lined on both sides, with thickets and marshes; one is naturally led to suppose, that it must be very unhealthy; and yet, there are the strongest reasons to believe, that the person who should suppose so would form a most erroneous judgment. The natives are, perhaps the most robust and muscular race of men that we meet with any where in India; they are seldom attacked by disease; and, what is still more to the purpose, Europeans, who have lived here many years, enjoy an uninterrupted good health. A person that has resided, even for a short time, in Pegu, would also join the testimony of his own sensations to all these other proofs of its salubrity. Even during the rains, which all over India make the most disagreeable and sickly time of the year, the air in this place, is temperate, and has an elasticity, unknown, at the corresponding season, in any other part; which gives vigour to the whole animal system, and enables it to support a great degree of fatigue. Perhaps the rapid motion of the tides may account, in some measure, for this unexpected healthiness of the climate; at least, I know of no other cause to which it can be ascribed.²

In resumé we first of all gleaned everything we could learn about the author from his own words. He was a surgeon in the employ of the English East India Company and was on his way to the Carnatic when his ship, the *Success Galley*, was dismasted and had to put in at Rangoon for repairs. While he was there he gained a certain amount of knowledge about the country and its wealth. One of the reasons why he wrote his book was to interest the East India Company in the Pegu trade which he felt they had neglected.

1. *A Concise Account of Pegu* 23-4

2. *A Concise Account of Pegu* 24 - 5.

He was a man of some learning—acquainted with the Mosaic Law, the Bible, Latin, and old Anglo Saxon customs. He also knew something of prehistory, ancient history and the value of studying primitive cultures. Moreover he was a broad-minded man for his times and showed it by his comments on various subjects: the power of the sangha to save criminals; the cost incurred by the People in seeking justice, the foreign trade of Pegu, the deplorable methods used by Europeans to acquire possessions in India, his admittance of his understanding of Burmese reluctance to welcome European commercial interests, and his ability to understand the viewpoint of the philosopher. Then we mentioned that Hunter's book was divided into eight chapters and what their contents were.

We next examined what Hunter had to say concerning political matters. He knew pretty little beyond the fact that Pegu which was once an independant kingdom had been incorporated into the Burmese Empire. He also knew something about palace revolutions which brought Badon to the throne and the uprisings in Pegu.

Hunter had more to say on administration. He thought the Burmese government despotic but noted that the people venerated their sovereign highly. He mentions Badon's prohibition of the slaughter of cattle and the use of spirituous liquor. As is natural he knew more about the government of Rangoon and mentioned the principal officers who administered it. In common with other Europeans he said they were rapacious and deplored their conduct. Yet he was all praise for the police which he said was extremely efficient. He even thought that other nations should emulate them. The punishment for high treason was thought to be too severe and uncivilized. Trial by ordeal which he thought was absurd was also touched on by Hunter and he likens it to the trial by combat practised during the Age of Chivalry in Europe. Neither did he approve of the way in which officers settled disputes, saying that the cost of justice was often higher than the value of the case itself. He also said something of Burmese warcraft. He said that the Burmese nation only needed regular discipline to make their military power truly redoubtable.

Since the purpose of writing the book was to arouse the interest of the English East India Company in the Pegu trade, Hunter had quite a lot to say about its economic products. He was impressed with the fertility of the land and nature's bounty towards it. The principal agricultural product was rice but what interested European traders were teak wood, tin, beeswax, saltpetre, areca-nut, catch and petroleum. He also noticed that the Burmese did not use currency. With regards to arts and crafts Hunter mentioned weaving, mining, ship-building, navigation and metal work. An important point made by him was the fact that Burmese ships manned by Burmese crews visited all Indian ports. While deploring the East India Company's lack of interest in the trade of Pegu he remarked that the people who traded to Pegu then were people who did not have enough capital to enter other branches of commerce. He also complained about the treatment suffered by foreign ships in Rangoon: a common practice of European traders visiting the port. In examining the advantage to be gained from the trade he urged that it (the trade) was also useful in wartime as timber was essential in the building of new ships and refitting old ones. He suggested that it was not enough to send ships to Pegu to buy timber but that there should be permanent representatives in Pegu to purchase the best timber. Moreover he tried to find ways and means of overcoming Burmese prejudice against intercourse with European traders. He also suggests the export of a larger quantity of opium to Pegu. Moreover he mentions that the English East India Company once had a factory a

Negrais but had to evacuate it and that the fault lay with the Company's employers who oppressed the people beyond endurance. He admitted that the *Success Galley* received excellent treatment in Rangoon.

Hunter also had something to say about the people. He described the Burmese their features, their use of phetleik nadaung and the habit of tattooing. He also described the Mons. Then he gives us a description of male and female attire. Burmese hospitality towards foreigners was praised and he said that Burmese women were permitted to marry aliens but they could not be taken out of the country.

Hunter did not know much about Buddhism beyond the fact that the places of worship were called pagodas and he gives us a description of the Shwedagon. He had something to say about the sangha, their robes, their alms round, their influence over the people and State and their hospitality towards strangers. He also made mention of an order of priestesses.

In writing about Burmese culture he said that the arts were in a rude state and that architecture was yet in its infancy. With regard to the Burmese language he thought that they were fond of compounding words. He also gives us a description of Burmese characters and the writing materials. Burmese music Hunter found melodious.

Hunter also had some comments on the geography and climate of Pegu. Rangoon and its environs were described in which he says that the country was flat and the tides of the Rangoon river high. The climate was very salubrious not only for the natives but also for Europeans as well. The above in short was what Hunter had to say about Pegu. One gets the impression that Hunter had come with a preconceived idea that the people were only little better than savages and that he would find nothing worth while in the country. It is evident from his narrative that he found them in many ways much more cultured than he had thought.

It must have been noticed that the paper is full of quotations—what some people would term a scissors-and-paste job. This I freely admit. However I had done it on purpose because I wanted not only Hunter's observations but his own words as well to be known.