SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS ASPECTS OF ROYAL POWER IN MEDIEVAL BURMA
FROM INSCRIPTIONS OF KYANSITTHA'S REIGN, 1084-1112 *)

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It is with the social and religious aspects surrounding kingship rather than the monarchy's own political structure that this study is mainly concerned. Kyansittha emphasised certain legendary aspects of his origins and by examining these, as they appeared in his inscriptions, it is possible to explore their wider significance for his contemporary society, and to make some deductions about the nature of that society and its relations with the court.

In approaching these questions chiefly through the medium of the inscriptions, it may be possible to reduce the danger of viewing them by the standards of a different age and a different society. This danger is, however, very difficult to avoid when one is dealing, as here, with a society whose sense of time and causal relations is as fluid as the medieval Burmese. Rituals, names and events constantly refer to the past and to the future in order to emphasize their solemn importance for contemporary society. One vehicle for this was the Buddhist cycle of birth and rebirth; another was Kyansittha's skill in bringing together major symbols of former empires, or earlier religious cults, into a new synthesis which was subservient to the Buddha but paid due respect to old and disparate loyalties.

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The inscriptions used are: the Myazedi (Kubyaukgyi) inscriptions at Myinkaba, the great inscription on the Shwegizon Pagoda at Pagan, the Shwesandaw inscription at Prome and the Tharaba Gate inscription, Pagan—The Blagden and Duroiselle translations of these inscriptions have been adopted in most cases. Any departures are indicated in the next by the use of square brackets.

Selecting the inscription which refers to the earliest legendary origin of Kyansittha’s royal power (though not necessarily the earliest inscription in point of time) one finds, in the great inscriptions of the Shwezigon Pagoda, the following account:

“Therefore (1. 13) at what time did the Lord Buddha make manifest (and) show forth the coming into being of King Śrī Tribhuvanādiyadhammarāja [Kyansittha]? It was once upon a time when the Lord Buddha saw that which was to come (to pass) thereafter for the advancement of the Lord Buddha’s religion, (namely) the coming of King Śrī Tribhuvanādiyadhammarāja in the city of Arimaddanapūr [Pagan], a thousand six hundred and thirty years should have elapsed after the Lord Buddha’s attaining Parinirvāṇa. (And) consequently, the Lord (l. 20) smiled” ²).

In this way, the King’s powers are represented as part of a divinely composed order of events. They are not, however, represented as divine themselves, their importance being “for the advancement of the Lord Buddha’s religion”. The time context in which this prediction is set already foreshadows the fluid time and spatial concepts which emerge more fully from the following passage:

.... (Lord Ānanda asks the reason [for the smile]).

“Thereupon the Lord Buddha spake (l. 30) to the Lord Anan thus: ‘Anan, hereafter a sage named Bīṣṇu [Viṣṇu], great in supernatural power, great in glory, possessing the five transcendental faculties, together with my son Gāwampati and King In [Indra] and Bissukarmadewaput and Katakarmmanagarāja, shall build a city called Sisit [Prome, a vernacular form of Sri Ksetra or Sri Kset]. After that the sage Bīṣṇu (l. 34) departing from thence, shall go up to Brahmālok; (and) departing from Brahmālok shall come to be in the city of Arimaddanapūr, (and) shall bear the name of King Śrī Tribhuvanādiyadhammarāja, (and) shall