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Imperial Kingdoms in Southeast Asia: The Case of Bagan (Pagan)

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1) Introduction

Any study of empires in early Southeast Asia will have to take into account the peculiar position of the region between the two India and China, which both exerted tremendous influence upon it. India provided her superior culture to the region – writing systems, calendars and computation of time, rituals and religions, art and architecture – while China's economic and technological leadership were accompanied by its claim to political hegemony, which relegated any neighbouring state or ruler to a tributary or otherwise inferior status. In recognition of this situation, this paper will employ Kulke's term of the "imperial kingdom" instead of "empire", as the term captures both the kingdom's 'internal' achievements (rising from a chieftaincy to an early kingdom and beyond) and its relative insignificance especially vis-à-vis China or India.[1]

In this article, the kingdom of Bagan in Myanmar[2] will serve as an example for such an imperial kingdom. The kingdom, named after its capital, rose to prominence in the mid-11th century and flourished until the end of the 13th century, when it collapsed under the impact of a Mongol attack. The city was a centre of Theravada Buddhism, which is reflected in the more than 2000 religious buildings (almost exclusively Buddhist temples, stupas and monasteries) that were built at the capital alone.[3] Building upon and expanding Kulke's reflections, this article will concentrate on the following features that usually characterise an expanded state, an imperial kingdom or an empire[4]:

a) the extension of the realm of the chieftaincy/early kingdom into culturally (linguistically, ethnically, etc.) distinct areas by way of military conquest, and (ideally)

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[1] Kulke 1986, p. 1-22.

[2] In this article, the new names and revised spellings have been used throughout: Myanmar for Burma, Bagan for Pagan, etc.; the exception being the term "Burman" which denotes the dominant ethno-linguistic group inhabiting the country. Note, however, that 'Myanmar' is in fact an adjective but used here as a noun (for the country) as well.

[3] For the political and religious history of Bagan, the following studies can be consulted: U Than Tun 1978 (originally submitted as a dissertation in 1959; very broad and encyclopaedic); Luce 1969-70 (a comprehensive survey of the period until 1174 CE); Aung-Thwin 1985 (focussing on the relationship between the state/kingship and religion/ideology, this book argues that the kingdom declined because religious donations eventually weakened its economic foundation); Frasch 1996 (a critical analysis of Aung-Thwin's thesis which shows that the monasteries of the city were generally too small and too short-lived to become economically or politically influential forces. For further flaws in Aung-Thwin's argumentation, see Frasch 2014b. Stadtner, 2005, is a lavishly illustrated survey of Bagan's art and architecture.

[4] For the broader context of these definitions, see Gehler and Rollinger 2014 and Rahn 2016.

the capacity to repeat this conquest on further occasions. In other words, the imperial king and his successors can retain their capacity to intervene within an area larger than their original domain;

b) a spatial definition of the realm and its geo-body, which may refer to different layers: a polity with man-made boundaries, a geopolitical unit with natural borders (incl. rivers), or even a claim to global superiority. Ideally, the geo-body of an imperial kingdom is congruent with the extent of the area within which a ruler was able to intervene;

c) the gradual and often strategic penetration of the conquered areas with administrative staff coming from the centre, which replace previous and existing power holders of these areas. Transport and communication lines (mainly roads and waterways) can physically manifest as well as sustain the dominance of the imperial king;

d) a sacro-political centre, often built on a cosmo-magical plan and equipped with places and spaces (palace, temple, plaza, forum, …) for state rituals and functions. The performance of such state rituals at the centre is intrinsically potent to create among the population religious allegiances, which align with or even exceed political allegiances;

e) reliable agricultural production to ensure ample nutrition of the people and the army, possibly providing for a growing population as well. Secure agricultural production will be backed up by a system of storage and redistribution to prevent famines in years of poor harvests. As far as agriculture depends on irrigation, a proper irrigation and water management system are crucial requisites;

f) an imperial ideology suited to provide cohesion across different ethnicities, languages or religions, often by way of emphasizing socio-economic benefits of the larger unit through concepts such as 'welfare state', 'commonwealth', 'co-prosperity sphere', etc.;

g) the standardisation of weights, measures and laws (codices), which may lead to a degree of rationalized economic production and public administration. Where a predominant religious doctrine (or state religion) exists, this also tends to become standardized.

2) An Outline of the History of Bagan

Bagan's transformation from a regional principality to an imperial kingdom is generally attributed to an able ruler-cum-general, Anawrahta (Aniruddha), who could however draw upon certain economic structures, which were in place by the time he set out on his military campaigns in the mid-11th century. Central Myanmar is semi-arid, and the cultivation of wet-rice (*padi*) – the highest yielding food grain in the tropics – is only

possible with the help of irrigation. The Pyu people, the predecessors of the (ethnic) Burmans in central Burma, had established their settlements in areas where a stable (and perhaps even increasing) agricultural production could be achieved by way of irrigation, mostly using perennial rivers for this purpose. Major Pyu cities are accordingly found in the Yin-Sun-Yabe valley (Beikthano), Mu valley (Halin), Kyaukse district with the Samon, Panlaung and Zawgyi rivers (Maingmaw), and the Nawin river with Sri Ksetra (Prome). The Pyu civilization was held together by a common language and script, a pre-eminence of Buddhism (which was, however, not the only religion), cremations and urn burials, and the use of iron, though it may not have formed a coherent, structured state. Rather, we should see it as a federation of city states. By the mid-9th century, this political structure and with it, Pyu civilization altogether began to dissolve under a double or possibly triple challenge. Along Myanmar's southern coast, the Mon people consolidated their realm; in the north, Nan-chao invaders raided one of the Pyu cities and abducted its inhabitants; and very likely around the same time the ethnic Burmans completed their migration into central Burma. This latter question is a moot point, and the relationship between the Pyus and the Burmans needs further exploration before anything certain can be said about it. At any rate, the Burmans adopted much of the Pyu culture they encountered in their new habitat including their settlements.[5] Bagan, the emerging capital, was probably one of these settlements.

The city of Bagan appears to have owed its rise to a strategically advantageous location. The city sat about halfway between two of the most important irrigated areas, Kyaukse district upriver and Minbu district further south, with the Irrawaddy moreover providing a crucial transport and communication link both with China and, via the ports of Lower Myanmar, with the Bay of Bengal and the wider Indian Ocean world. Bagan was also situated close to the junction of an ancient land route, which ran from China along the Irrawaddy to Halin and on to the Chindwin River, where it bifurcated. One branch followed the Chindwin towards Manipur-Assam (India), while the southern section continued southward along the Irrawaddy River. By the late 10th century, the city was fortified with walls, and also around that time the first historical rulers can be named. [6]

However, it was the said king Anawrahta (c. 1044-1078), who turned the fortified small-town into the capital of an imperial kingdom. He led a military campaign across the country and conquered an area by and large congruent with the boundaries of modern Burma. A century later, one of his successors would even state the borders of the kingdom in detail: it bordered on China in the north, on India and the sea in the west, it

[5] For the history of Myanmar in the first millennium see Stargardt 1991, Moore 2007, and, for the immediate 'pre-history of Bagan' Hudson (2004).

[6] For the overland route, see Frasch 1996, p. 58; the dating of the wall follows Grave and Barbetti 2001; for early rulers Pyusawhti (10th c.) and Saw Rahan (11th c.), see Luce (1969-70), vol. 1, p. 8-11.

reached as far as Tenasserim in the south, while the Salween River formed the boundary between the realms of Bagan and Angkor.[7]

Anawrahta's other achievement came in the field of religion. He is credited with introducing a monk from Lower Myanmar, who was a champion of the Theravada fraternity, to oversee a purification of the Buddhist *sangha* (monks' order) in order to eliminate unworthy and undisciplined monks. The king also made contact with Ceylon to ensure that his kingdom became part of a wider Theravada ecumene. This measure unified and in a way streamlined Myanmar Buddhism – which was on the way to becoming a mass religion by then – and made it a kind of 'state religion', though other cults (e.g. Hinduism) persisted.[8]

Some minor military engagements apart, the history of the Bagan kingdom after Anawrahta seems to have been overall peaceful and free from conflicts. His successors could therefore concentrate on the consolidation and intensification of their rule rather than on expansion, which would have been difficult anyway, given the country's geopolitical situation with a long seacoast all along the western border and a chain of high mountains in the north and east. The 12th century was marked by a considerable expansion of the kingdom's agricultural area by way of colonization (mostly drainage of swamps and flood plains) in the Lower Chindwin area. The new agricultural tracts (called *taiks*) may not have matched the productivity of the existing irrigated districts (the *khayaings*), but they provided the rulers of Bagan with an additional source of income from land revenue as well as with an increased number of fiefs they could hand out to their retinue.[9]

This economic expansion went along with attempts to raise the level of political and administrative integration. Specialized court officials looked after the land register, revenue collection and the administration of justice, and kings tried to standardize weights and measures (ascribed to Alaungsithu, 1113-1168) and codify laws (probably under Jeyyasingha-Nadaungmya, 1211-1230s). In addition, the number of courtiers holding a district town as fief steadily grew throughout the 13th century. It should be noted, however, that this did not result in a fully rationalized, bureaucratic (or in this sense, modern) state with specified ministerial portfolios and uncontested power of the centre. Appointments to court offices depended on a personal relationship between the ruler and the individual and often resulted from the requirements of the occasion, whilst in vast areas of the kingdom local power holders (such as village headmen) managed to retain a good deal of political autonomy vis-à-vis the centre. Lower Myanmar is a case in point here. Despite having come under the sway of Bagan by the mid-11th century, the region provided relative safety to a member of the royal family

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[7] Luce and U Pe Maung Tin (comp.) 1933-1956, vol. 1, pl. 19 (hereafter quoted in the format "Pl. I 19").
[8] For Anawrahta's role as a pan-Buddhist ruler, see Goh 2015. For the iconography representing various religious beliefs, see Luce, 1969-70, vol. 2.
[9] On the irrigated areas, see Aung-Thwin (1986), p. 98-108 (with numerous mistakes); Frasch (1996), p. 57-72; Lieberman 2003, p. 112-115.

who had rebelled against the king still in the 1230s. It was only in the 1270s that the integration of the area reached a point where the rulers of Bagan could begin to replace local power holders with governors sent from the capital.[10]

Language was part of the measures taken by the Bagan rulers to integrate the state. As Old Myanmar was still in its formative stages in the 11th century, kings would use Sanskrit, Pali and Old Mon to sign votive tablets (the major form of written texts from that time), with Old Mon emerging as the preferred language under king Kyanzittha (1084-1113). However, the youngest inscription in Old Mon found so far dates from the 1130s, and thereafter Old Myanmar became the standard language for recording religious donations or the outcomes of legal quarrels. Besides Burmese, Pali became the language of higher education and Buddhist scholarship and also served a *lingua franca* for the various monastics from abroad residing at the city.[11]

In addition to language, the rulers of Bagan attempted to unify and integrate their kingdom through the standardisation of weights and measures, as well as legal codices. The Myanmar chronicles attribute a reform of the former to king Alaungsithu (1113-1168), but the first epigraphic evidences all date from the 13th century, when a "royal overseer of measures" (*tañ̃-taw-klañ̃*) is mentioned several times. There is no detailed description of him (or her, as the office-holder appears to be female on at least one instance), so nothing can be said of their powers or duties.[12]

The legal system was allegedly reformed by king Jeyyasingha-Nadaungmya (1211-1230s), who is said to have created the position of a chief judge with the power to adjudicate cases finally. Interestingly, the only mentioning of a law code (*dhammasat*) for the Bagan period also dates from the reign of this king. Again, no further details are known, but it seems that this codex was more a showpiece than a practical guideline for the administration of justice.[13] That the reign of this king brought a change of the legal structure of the kingdom is also indicated by the considerable number of lawsuits (about one third of the two dozen cases on record) dating from the 1220s. It should however be noted that despite this important change, the appointment of judges continued to depend on the personal relationship between ruler and courtier(s), and did not result in a specialized judicial department with professional law officers, as stated above.

The most impressive and lasting of these measures of integration and consolidation was doubtlessly the transformation of the capital into a sacred centre by way of architecture. Approx. 2500 religious monuments, almost all of them Buddhist temples, stupas and monasteries, were built in and around the city walls of Bagan in a period of some 250

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[10] Frasch (1996), p. 132 and 141 (the growth of fief-holders), p. 221-231 (the administration of justice), p. 74-76 (integration).
[11] See Luce (1969-70), vol. 1, passim. For the role of Pali at Bagan, see now Frasch (forthc.).
[12] Frasch (1996), p. 104.
[13] Frasch (1996), p. 217-220.

years.[14] These buildings were works of merit, created to help their donors out of the cycle of rebirths (*samsara*) by way of achieving complete vanishing (*nibbana*). Generosity was one way to accumulate merit, and in this Buddhists follow the principle that the wealthy man who gives a lot will earn as much merit as the poor man who contributes his mite. Kings, the notional "owners of all land and water", would therefore spend their wealth on much larger monuments than courtiers or ordinary people, and indeed the major temples at Bagan are all royal foundations. This implies that every Bagan king built at least one major temple or stupa: Anawrahta the Shwezigon, Kyanzittha the Ananda temple, Alaungsithu the Shwegu-gyi, Narapatisithu several of them including the Gawdawpallin and the Thabinyu temples, Nadaungmya the Mahabodhi and the Htilominlo temples, Kyazwa the Pyatthad-gyi, and Narasihapati (the last king of imperial Bagan) the Tayokpye temple.

What is more, some of these monuments went beyond fulfilling a solely religious purpose by making a political statement – they became imperial temples (or Reichstempel) in the best sense of the word. King Nadaungmya's Mahabodhi temple is perhaps the best illustration for this. Completed around 1215-1220, the Mahabodhi was a replica of the eponymous temple at Bodhgaya (India), which marked the spot where Gautama Buddha had attained enlightenment. After Muslim invaders overran the Ganges valley in the early 13th century and destroyed many of the religious sites they found there, the transplantation of the Mahabodhi temple to Bagan may have been a measure to safeguard the temple's integrity. At the same time, it signalled that the kings of Bagan not only took their role as champions of Theravada serious, but also that their capital served as the new centre of Theravada. The building of this replica was a unique royal action, but the kings, courtiers and commoners from Bagan continued to look after and maintain the Bodhgaya temple throughout the Bagan period and even beyond it.[15]

The temples display a spectacular architecture, beginning with the use of the true vault – a unique feature in Oriental architecture – which allowed the construction of spacious interiors and high chambers to house the main image. The temples were magnificently decorated with stuccos and (sometimes glazed) terracotta plaques, while their internal walls often bore polychrome paintings. The main large Buddha images, made of brick and plaster, were usually painted and often gilded. Canopies and costly woven curtains surrounded their thrones, and smaller images made of gold, silver, bronze or wood as well as other artefacts filled up niches in the wall or the space in front of the main statue. Even though the statues and decorations have now mostly disappeared from their original places, the temples are still as impressive today as they were in the 13th century. Indeed, it is clear that Bagan attracted numerous visitors: some of them belonged to the imperial bureaucracy who visited the city on official tours, whilst others

[14] For the art and architecture, see Stadtner (2005).

[15] For the 'special relationship' between Bagan and Bodhgaya, see Frasch, 2000.

came to Bagan as pious pilgrims. They visited the sacred places and frequently made donations to them, as attested by the inscriptions they left behind.[16]

In fact, by the 13th century Bagan had become an international centre of Buddhism, a kind of "world capital of Theravada", which attracted not only Myanmars, but visitors from India, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, the Malayan peninsula and other foreign countries. As mentioned above, relations between Bagan and Sri Lanka were particularly intensive. Monks and royal messengers travelled in both directions to exchange texts and letters, artefacts and style sheets, or to transfer ordination lineages and monastic traditions. A sizeable group of Lankan monks resided permanently at Pagan and took part in the city's religious and scholarly life. Bagan maintained equally close relations with sites in Northern India, esp. with Bodhgaya, where several missions were sent to venerate and maintain the temple, including the mission that resulted in the construction of the replica temple at Bagan. As recent research has shown, visitors from Cambodia were also present at Bagan from the mid-13th century. This included at least one monk, who participated in an ordination ceremony and a recitation of the scriptures.[17]

The reasons for the swift decline of Bagan at the end of the 13th century are a controversial subject for historians. There is agreement that the ultimate cause were the Mongols who conquered Upper Burma around 1290, occupied the capital Bagan and made the kingdom part of their empire (which had by then become based in China).[18] But it has also been argued that by then the numerous religious constructions and accompanying donations of land and serfs had exhausted the kingdom's resources and eroded its very economic foundation, as the kings ran out of taxable land or recruitable soldiers.[19] This theory, however, appears to overstress the size and strength of the "monastic landlords" considerably, because the monasteries of Bagan were normally too small and too short-lived to amass or retain wealth on a scale that could threaten to the state. Moreover, the army and notably the elephantry raised against the Mongol invaders were still substantial in number and strength. The Bagan army might indeed have succeeded had not the Mongols used fire to terrify the elephants. Rather than referring to such structural reasons, it seems that king Narasihapati's decision to abandon the capital and flee to a hideaway further south not only violated one of the fundamental royal duties (which explains why the king was killed by his son soon after),

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[16] For the origin and the possible meaning of the vaults, see Frasch, 2015. For administrators coming together at Bagan see Frasch (1996), p. 191-192. The topic of pilgrimage to Bagan has hardly been studied so far, but a few inscriptions recording donations made by people apparently not residing at the capital suggest that the sacred sites they visited, e.g. the Shwezigon stupa or Mt. Tuyin with its stupa of the tooth relic, were the same places still visited by pilgrims today.

[17] For the Theravada Buddhist ecumene, see Frasch, 1998a. Links with Cambodia and the role of Pali as a *lingua franca* are shown by Frasch (forthc.) and Frasch (2017). Goh (2015) makes no substantial contribution to this subject other than highlighting the role of king Anawrahta.

[18] This is both the narrative of the (later) Myanmar chronicles and of the Chinese histories. For the latter, see Huber 1909, and Wade 2009.

[19] Aung-Thwin (1986), passim, as well as in all his later publications.

but also threw the city open to the desecration and the deprivation of its cosmological symbolism, which was the result of the Mongol occupation.[20] It took almost half a century until a suitable site for the new capital was found at Ava, but both the new capital and the state it oversaw were a far cry from the size, splendour and strength of Bagan and its imperial kingdom. But despite this political decline Bagan continued to function as a Buddhist centre, for which donations to monasteries and literary production bear ample evidence.

3) The components of an imperial kingdom

As shown, king Anawrahta's conquests created a generally coherent geo-body for the Bagan kingdom. Except for the regions in the south, which remained a kind of frontier zone, rule over which was contested between the kings of Bagan, local power holders and possibly the rulers of Angkor as well, this geo-body possessed recognizable borders and boundaries. These were topographic or rather geopolitical by nature. In the west, they were formed by the seacoast, in the north and northeast by the high mountains, whilst in the east the Thanlyin (Salween) river formed the dividing line. Unsurprisingly, the kings of Bagan referred to these boundaries to describe how far they saw their power reach. The first king to give the kingdom a clear geo-body was king Narapatisithu, who, in his Dhammayazika inscription of 1198 CE, mentioned the following boundaries: "In the South, up to Tavoy, Sa-nyat, Thindok, Tenasserim, Takua, Salinkye (…); in the West up to Missagiri and Bahuvunna hills as well as Pateikkaya (East Bengal); in the North to Tagaung, Ngahsaungchan (Bhamo) (…); in the East up to the east bank of the Thanlwin river…".[21] These boundaries remained in place for almost a century and in fact even survived the end of the kingdom: in 1292, king Saw Nit (a ruler under Mongol supervision) still claimed to rule over "Upper Myanmar as far as Bhamo, Lower Myanmar up to Tenasserim and Tavoy, in the West to Missagiri and in the East to the Thanlwin river."[22]

The most interesting of these boundaries is the one formed by the Salween river, as it seems to acknowledge the predominance of the Angkor empire over most of what is modern-day Thailand. The upper reaches of the river may indeed have formed an impenetrable boundary, but the region on both sides of its estuary was more a frontier zone that allowed for all sorts of exchanges. Clearly, the river did not prevent people on both sides from crossing it, as the inscriptions both from Bagan and from Angkor illustrate. There is evidence for Cambodians (*kyun*) staying at Bagan from the 1230s, which include the monk Subhuticanda, "scion of the royal house of Cambodia", and an anonymous "monk from Cambodia" (*thakin kyun*).[23] The latter appears to have been

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[20] Frasch (1996), p. 341-347.

[21] Luce and U Pe Maung Tin (comp.) 1933-56, vol. 1, pl. 19, lines 6-10 [hereafter quoted in the form "Pl. I 19 (1, p. 65)"]. See U Tin Htway (1974).

[22] Pl. III 276a, lines 1-2.

[23] Pl. III 302. This is a badly damaged and therefore difficult to read Pali inscription found in the area of the Dhammayazika stupa. For some preliminary remarks, see G.H. Luce and U Tin Htway 1976, p. 207.

supported by a princess, who received the nickname "Princess Cambodia" (Acaw Kyun) for the monastery she built for him.[24] In the opposite direction, a brahmin at the court of Angkor claimed to have come from Bagan, where he had been in the service of king Narapatisithu (r. 1174-1211).[25]

However, these boundaries of the kingdom, no matter whether real or imagined, do not per se indicate the actual extension of the royal realm nor they speak of the of the intensity of rule, i.e. a ruler's ability to enforce his power at any time and in any area deemed to be part of the kingdom. The former refers to a king's capacity to intervene, e.g. in case of a rebellion, the latter to the penetration of the kingdom with loyal administrative staff, who would make the suzerainty of the ruler permanent and absolute. The two maritime provinces of Lower Myanmar and Rakhaing (Arakan) may serve as examples to illustrate this.[26]

The extension to the south began with king Anawrahta, who led his army through Lower Myanmar as far as Tenasserim and Tavoy (as evidenced by the votive tablets he left behind), but even though the Ayeyarwadi (Irrawaddy) river provided relatively easy access to Lower Myanmar, this campaign did not establish the dominance of the Bagan kings permanently. With the exception of the king and court of Thaton, who were abducted to Bagan, local rulers were reinstated in their former positions, usually after taking an oath of loyalty. This loyalty could of course wane: Already in the 12th century, rebellions broke out,[27] and when in the early 13th century king Nadaungmya faced a rebellion in connection with his accession, one of the rebels fled to Tavoy, where he was apparently out of the king's reach. It was only during the second half of the 13th century that princes and courtiers invested from the capital replaced local powerholders to govern the region.[28]

Rakhaing was a different case, as access to the region from central Myanmar was anything but easy. There was only one land-route across the Rakhaing ridge via the pass of Am, which was steep, densely forested and malaria-infested.[29] It may have allowed an army to cross (as king Alaungsithu is said to have done),[30] but it formed a bottleneck for permanent communication that prevented the integration of Rakhaing into the kingdom. This situation is also reflected in the few references to Rakhaing in the contemporary epigraphy as well as the somewhat vague reference to the region in the list of Bagan's borders, where "Missagiri" (*Macchagiri*) appears to denote the Chittagong

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[24] Pl. II 164, l. 1-2. However, her monastery and temple do not display any features pointing to foreign influence of any kind. If the monastery was indeed meant to house a monk from Cambodia, its donor made little effort to make him feel at home.
[25] See Coedès 1968, p. 173.
[26] For the following, see Frasch, 2002.
[27] Luce and U Pe Maung Tin, 1923, p. 118-119.
[28] Frasch (2002) 61.
[29] Cp. Leider, 1994.
[30] Luce and U Pe Maung Tin (1923), p. 121-122.

Hill tracts, which had to be crossed *en route* to Bengal, rather than Rakhaing proper, the coastal strip further south.

The degree of governmental penetration of the kingdom and the intensity of central rule depended considerably on the cooperation of the local elites and power holders. In the early stages of Bagan's expansion, they were often allowed to rule over their former dominions as before, after expressing their loyalty to the new overlord (and probably they had to make an annual appearance at the court of Bagan to present tributes). This created a somewhat delicate power balance between the imperial court and the local or regional governors, and the imperial kings could only gradually tip the scale in their favour. Like other states of the period, the Bagan kingdom was feudal in nature. The king, "owner of all land and water", could hand out parts of his possessions to relatives, courtiers and other such worthies for their subsidy, in return for administrative services and a share of the revenues. Such fiefs, called "great gifts" (*mahādān*) in Bagan, were personal and could be revoked when the relationship between the ruler and the fief-holder ended. King Kyazwa's accession in 1235 CE was the most striking of those instances, as the king seized all *mahādān* lands in Upper and Lower Burma, but feoffed these again in a great ceremony held two years later. The king's reasons for this drastic measure are unknown, but one may speculate – his succession seems to have been disputed – that he intended to break the economic power of the supporters of his competitor(s) and instead reward those who remained loyal to him.[31]

As said, many of the fief holders in the early phase of the Bagan kingdom will have been the local headmen and magnates living in the areas controlled by the king. After taking an oath of loyalty, they were reinvested with their previous estates, which thereby became fiefs. The most common titles of local administrators from the 11th century, *kalan* and *thambyin* (*saṁpyaṅ*) are not even Burmese words, suggesting that the Bagan kings took over the terms from the Mon or Pyu people they had subjected.[32] As the kingdom, and more specifically its bureaucracy expanded, these local and reinstated power holders were increasingly replaced with personnel sent from the capital. The Bagan kings put emphasis on the central towns, which functioned as administrative and ceremonial centres of their respective districts. When a courtier received one of these towns to "eat", as the contemporary expression ran, he (or she, as there were several women among them) would attach the word "*thi*" ("holder") to the name of the place. The number of such town or fief-holders grew continuously during the 13th century: There were three of them under kings Jeyyasingha-Nadaungmya (1211-c. 1230) and Kyazwa (1235-1248) respectively, and five under the last king before the Mongol intervention, Narathihapati.[33] Similarly, the influence of the state over Lower Burma grew considerably during the 13th century. The earliest office-bearers there appear to

[31] See Frasch (1996), p. 161-163.
[32] For *kalan* and *thambyin* on votive tablets from Anawrahta's time, see Luce (1969-70), p. 50. For their status, see Frasch (1996) 196-197, and U Than Tun (1978), p. 40-41.
[33] Frasch (1996), pp. 117, 132 and 141.

have been local *kalan* and *thampyin*, who had had their positions confirmed by the new overlords, but towards the end of that century, we find princes as governors of Pegu and Yangon (Henbo).[34]

But while the royal grip on the intermediary administrative level – the *taik* and *khayaing* districts and their central towns – tightened, the lowest stratum of the imperial administration, the villages (*ywa*) and circles (*kwin*) retained a large degree of autonomy under their usually hereditary headmen. The headmen oversaw all civil affairs, administered justice, kept records and probably organized the collection of revenues as well.[35] Direct contact or communication with the court at Bagan was occasional and normally restricted to special administrative requirements. Most likely, this would be a trial at the "High Court" of Bagan, where more complicated cases as well as crimes carrying capital punishment had to be tried or reviewed.[36] Regularly, such cases required the judges on duty to leave the capital in order to make their enquiries, check records or interrogate witnesses in the villages concerned. These judges and investigators, rarely as they would appear, as well as the occasional "village inspectors" (*ywa-shu*) – who probably surveyed the fields and checked the revenue records – were as much as a villager in the Bagan kingdom would see of his government during his lifetime.[37]

Yet underlying these occasional contacts between the central government and the capital and the village, was an economic structure that safeguarded the material needs of court and capital. These included the necessities of life such as the staple food rice or wood for construction and fuel, but also luxury items such as coral or gems. As mentioned, the kingdom was situated in a semi-arid zone where agricultural production depended on irrigation. Two of the most important agricultural areas, both probably predating the Bagan period proper, were the *khayaings* of Kyaukse and Minbu to the east and the south of the capital respectively. In the course of the 12th century, these were augmented with newly cleared tracts (*taiks*) in the Lower Chindwin valley and along the Ayeyarwadi River.[38] Chronicles as well as the few existing inscriptions attribute the colonisation of the *taiks* to two 12th century rulers, Alaungsithu and

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[34] Frasch (2002), pp. 61 and 74-5.

[35] See Frasch (1996), p. 188-203.

[36] For the basic features of the legal system of Bagan, see Frasch (1996), p. 209-231, and U Than Tun (1959). Less accurate is Aung-Thwin (1985), p. 123-135, who claims that a fully developed judicial system with trained judges, attorneys and pleaders existed at Pagan. As my survey of the "judges" at Pagan has shown, most of them were ordinary courtiers who took up appointments on an *ad hoc* basis and returned to their normal duties once the case had been adjudicated.

[37] For the relations between the court and the village, see Frasch (1996), p. 221-231. There is little evidence to prove the existence of a professional, 'modern' judiciary as Aung-Thwin (1985), p. 123-125, does.

[38] For an overview of the irrigation of Burma, with data mostly from the colonial period applied to precolonial Burma, see Michael Aung-Thwin 1990.

Narapatisithu, who are also credited with the construction of temples in the area.[39] Some of the *taiks* are listed in an inscription from the year 1139,[40] and a "headman of the *taik*" (*taik-thu-gyi*) is mentioned for the first time some thirty years later,[41] showing that the new agricultural lands indeed provided the rulers with additional resources to augment the kingdom's growing bureaucracy.

As not all the rice would be consumed immediately, the surplus had to be stored for times of want. Accordingly, a network of granaries and rice stores (*ki*, mod. Burmese *kyi*), some of them explicitly termed "royal granary" (*ki-taw*), was established throughout the heartland of the kingdom. The granaries were put under the supervision of overseers and guards, though it is not known if these men were recruited from local people or from the court at Bagan.[42] In either case, the growth of these offices attests the increasing bureaucratic penetration of the kingdom, notably during the 13th century.

The flow of resources from the kingdom's production centres to the capital, no matter whether in cash or in kind, formed the foundation of the city's religio-architectural landscape. Almost 2500 monuments eventually dotted the capital area at the end of the 13th century; among them were some 50 major temples. As stated above, each king of Bagan built at least one huge temple or stupa, which not only displayed his wealth and magnificence, but would also express his imperial ambitions as supporter and protector of Theravada. In addition, such monuments could serve as focal points of state ceremonies, beginning with the consecration (*abhisheka*) of the king. There is evidence that the inauguration of temples could take place by way of a huge festival with music, dance and bestowing of gifts.[43] In other cases, religious ceremonies provided the context for the construction of the monument. King Narapati's Dhammayazika is a good example for this: the stupa not only enshrined relics brought over from Lanka, it was also in the vicinity of this stupa that formal gatherings of monks from all over the Theravada world took place. Inscriptions in Pali, the *lingua franca* of Theravadins, found in the immediate vicinity of the stupa, attest that possibly two such Buddhist synods (*sangayana*, probably consisting of a joint recitation and possibly an ordination ceremony) were held at Bagan; on one occasion, no less than 12,000 people were present. Sinhalese monks attending the ceremony moreover had a number of monasteries built for their residence in a short distance from the stupa.[44] Bagan clearly

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[39] Cp. Frasch (1996), p. 104. Both the chroniclers of Myanmar and the monk-scholars who copied the inscriptions frequently mixed up the names of the two kings, as both end with –sithu. However, as both kings reigned during the 12th century, the time of the colonization of the area seems fairly certain.
[40] Pl. IV 476.
[41] Pl. IV 365a (1171 CE); Pl. I 12 (1191 CE).
[42] Pl. I 19 (1198 CE), appears to be the earliest reference to a granary and its guards. Pl. I 63, has a "royal granary".
[43] Pl. I 34; see Frasch 1998b. The find spot of this inscription seems to indicate that it was the Htilominlo temple, which was opened with such splendour.
[44] The relics are mentioned in the inscription written to record the building of the temple (Pl. I 19-20); the Buddhist convention is mentioned in the Pali inscription Pl. III 302, while two more and unedited Pali

was a ceremonial centre of an imperial kingdom and its predominant religion, but the continued presence of Buddhist monks and other visitors from outside the country indicates that, during the 13th century, the city was also the most important centre – one may call it the "world capital" – of the Theravada Buddhist world.

4) Conclusions and Comparisons

In the research on both the state and its formation and the evolution of empires, the states of early Southeast Asia have hardly received the attention they deserve. A major project with multiple volumes on the subject, conducted in the late 1970s, contained a single contribution on Southeast Asia,[45] and around the same time, American scholars of Southeast Asian history began to explore the early state formation in the region systematically and conceptually.[46] This focus on the state and its approach through epigraphy has meanwhile been superseded by archaeological investigations,[47] which have revealed complex and comprehensive social, economic and political transformation processes taking place in the states/empires-to-be, which also challenged the significance of external input provided by Sanskrit inscriptions, Indian temple models or Chinese bureaucratic models. But these debates usually referred to the formation of states in Southeast Asia and left the 'imperialism' of China and India unquestioned.

At first sight, the first kingdom of Myanmar, Bagan, bears the hallmarks of a fully developed empire, including the territorial expansion beyond a core area to its natural or geo-political borders; a reliable agricultural system strong enough to sustain imperial rule in times of crisis and/or pay for the maintenance of imperial army and bureaucracy; the gradual penetration of the subdued areas with administrative staff invested by the centre; a cosmological centre, where state functions (audience days, royal investiture, …) took place and which attracted subjects to assemble; and an imperial culture, viz. the Myanmar language and Buddhism, which superseded local languages and belief systems (although the latter incorporated various local beliefs, not to risk an alienation of the people). But on the other hand, China and (in respect of culture) India served as a yardstick against which Southeast Asian empires such as Bagan have to be measured; hence the preference for the term "imperial kingdoms" over "empires". After all, the Bagan kingdom fell after rejecting an embassy sent by the Chinese emperor (curiously, an invader himself – the Mongol Khan) demanding submission and the payment of tributes.

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inscriptions have been found in the area some 15 years ago. For their contents and the residency of Sinhalese monks nearby (notably the Tamani monastery), see Frasch (in print).

[45] Winzeler 1981. Further volumes from this project include Claessen and Skalnik 1978 and 1987.

[46] Results of this research includes, among other works, the papers edited by Hall and Whitmore 1976 as well as the works by Aung-Thwin (1986) and Hall 1983.

[47] The concept of the 'state' has meanwhile itself become questioned, see e.g. Davies 2003.

What made and makes the Southeast imperial kingdoms stand out in comparison to contemporary European and in fact global empires is their capacity to mobilize and coerce labour. Political power in Asia generally and no less so in Southeast Asia refers to rule over people, not over territories, and this rule over men could translate into military power as much as it could produce the architectural masterpieces that are the temples of Bagan and Angkor. The demographic power of the imperial kingdoms was derived to a large part from an irrigation-based agrarian economy that allowed the cultivation of wet rice (*padi*). *Padi*, the world's highest-yielding food grain anyway, renders two harvests under favourable conditions plus an additional crop of vegetables and dry crops such as peanuts or millet. This kind of food security not only tends to create relatively stable societies, it also allows for and sustains – moderate – population growth (but note that reliable demographic figures for Southeast Asia are not available; recent estimates have raised the figures for Angkor city alone to up to 1 million and for Bagan to probably 100.000 inhabitants).[48] More importantly, rice cultivation is gendered as women do most of the work in the fields between ploughing and threshing, and sophisticated irrigation systems may further minimize the amount of male labour required to produce staple harvests. In other words, 'smart cultivation' of wet rice is capable of freeing up a crucial amount of male labour, which can be utilized for other purposes – from warfare to public administration, and not to forget to build the palaces, mausoleums or other political and religious monuments indispensable for the expression of imperial power.

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[48] For Angkor, see Fletcher, (2000-2001) 7-8: "population no larger than 700.000-1.000.000 people". Figures for Bagan do not exist so far, but given that the city is smaller than Angkor and less well irrigated, its population would hardly have exceeded 100.000.

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