

Buddhism in Sriksetra with the Reference to Terracotta Votive Tablets

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Abstract

Many kinds of Buddhist evidences of Pyu period were discovered from Sriksetra old city. They are religious buildings, Buddha images and gold palm leaves which were inscribed the Buddhist literature. Among them terracotta votive tablets were found at that site abundantly. It can be seen that they were concerned with Mahāyāna and Theravāda Buddhism. This paper attempts to classify that which votive tablets were concerned with Mahāyāna or Theravāda by the reference of Buddha images style and "Ye dhammā hetuppabuavā" stanza. Moreover, it also discussed the unusual or reverse *Bhumiphassa mudra* (gesture) Buddha image of terracotta votive tablets.

Key words: Buddhist evidences, terracotta votive tablets, Mahāyāna and Theravāda, *Ye dhammā hetuppabuavā*, *Bhumiphassa mudra*

1. Introduction

Sriksetra is one of ancient Pyu cities and situated on the east bank of Ayeyarwady, near Pyaw modern city. Religious evidences which concerned with Hinduism and Buddhism were discovered from that site. It can be known that Buddhism was the most popular religion of that city by the archaeological evidences. Terracotta votive tablets are a sign of Sriksetra Buddhism but had not yet been found at other Pyu cities: Beikthano, Halin and Maingmaw (Pinle).

In Myanmar, terracotta votive tablets evidences are found at Sriksetra, Tagaung, Bagan, Twintay, Thaton and Kautgon caves near Pha-Am in Kayin state numerously. A large number of terracotta votive tablets were being found at Sriksetra museum and they are concerned with Mahāyāna and Theravāda Buddhism. There are four Cetiya in the Buddhist tradition: *Saririka* (bodily relics of the Buddha) Cetiya, *Paribhoga* (a thing used by the Buddha) Cetiya, *Uddissana* (a thing made sacred by dedication) Cetiya and *Dhamma* (a memorial in honor of the Law) Cetiya (Dr Than Tun, 2002). Therefore, Sriksetra people might be made the terracotta votive tablets as *Uddissana* cetiya.

The practice of making of votive tablets might be reached Myanmar as part of the adoption of Buddhism from India by pilgrimages (Hanthawady Newspaper, 4.2.1973). Some assumed that the art of making of votive tablets came to Myanmar in the 7th century A.D from early Pāla Bengal (G.H Luce, 1969). Votive tablets were made of clay. It is needed just a mould to make a large amount of votive tablets. Therefore, all Buddhists whether poor or rich, commoners or kings can make the votive tablets easily (Dr Naing Pan Hla, 2011). The Ancient Pyu might be used the moulds for the making of terracotta votive tablets. A bronze mould of Bagan period, 1 inch high, oval shaped, was discovered in Sriksetra (U Mya, Vol.I, p.74, 1961). Professor G. Coedes suggested that the practice of making clay votive tablets was confined only to the Buddhist (Dr. Than Tun, 2003).

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Figure 1. A bronze mould of votive tablet discovered at Sriksetra(From U Mya, 1961)

Sriksetra votive tablets have different forms and styles. In analyzing the forms of votive tablets, the following points are significant. There are seven forms in Sriksetra Pyu old city.

1. oval
2. oval with pointed top
3. square
4. circular
5. rectangular
6. rectangular with pointed top
7. rectangular with rounded top (Dr. Than Tun, 2003)

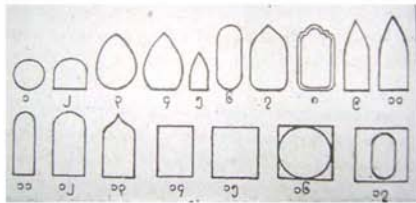


Figure 2. Types of terracotta votive tablets(From Dr. Than Tun, 2003)

Some assumed that oval shape and oval with pointed top of votive tablets were imported from India. Circular and square shapes may have been made locally during the old city of Sriksetra. Oval, oval with pointed top and circular shapes are most common. Generally the length and width of the votive tablets are 3.6"×4", 4"×3", 2.25"×1.75" or 5"×3" (U Mya, Vol.II, 1961).The smallest votive tablets are oval or circular, 1.5" in diameter. It can be found that some of these kinds of votive tablets were not yet been baked. The largest are square shaped tablets, 7.5" high and 6" wide. Moreover, it can see the larger size terracotta votive tablets at the museum of Maung Tee Pagoda of Twinte. In measurement, the height is 2' 7", the wide is 1' 5" and the thick is 6" (Khin Ma Mu, 80th anniversary of YU, 2 Dec 2000, P.3). But, they are not concern with Pyu period. Although some Pyu tablets have frames some are without frame.



Figure 3. Largest and smallest votive tablets of Sriksetra

Sriksetra votive tablets showed that the two styles of *Bhumiphassa mudra*:

- (1) Left hand on the lap and right hand touching the earth (usual *mudra*)
- (2) Right hand on the lap and left hand touching the earth (Unusual *mudra*)

Unusual or reverse *Bhumiphassa mudra* terracotta votive tablet was discovered from Sriksetra. Unusual *Bhumiphassa Mudra* stone image was discovered in Be Be temple, Sriksetra. The style of this image is used to give a 7th century A.D date (E.H Moore, 2007). U Mya and G.H Luce thought that this image belonged to 9th or 10th century AD (Dr.Than Tun, 2006). Some scholars assumed that the above reverse *Mudra* (Unusual *Bhumiphassa mudra*) images were wrongly made by pioneer sculptors of Sriksetra (N.R Ray, 1946). But, such images were also found at Hanthawady period (14-15 AD) and Ananda temple in Bagan period (Cao Htun Hmat Win, *Mr Buddhist Iconography*.p69). Therefore, that kind of *mudra* was made intentionally during the Pyu period. But it did not know exactly the purposes of making of these *Mudra* style Buddha images.



Figure 4. Unusual *Bhumiphassa Mudra* votive tablets, Sriksetra



Figure 5. Unusual *Bhumiphassa Mudra* Buddha image, Be Be Temple

In 1927-28, Mons Charles Duroiselle discovered many hundreds of terracotta votive tablets at the excavated mound near Muhtaw village, Sriksetra. All of them, a votive tablet which portrayed the two miniature stupas flanking the Buddha image was discovered. Each of these ornamental stupas is supported by a lotus on its stalk, and is shaded by an umbrella. The Buddha is in the common earth-touching attitude, seated within a trifoliated arch surrounded by a flamboyant design. Of the three panels forming the pedestal, the middle one contains a lion face; the other two have each a flower-bowl placed on a stand (ASI, 1927-28). The stanza "*Ye dhammā hetuppabuvā*" was inscribed in the upper part of votive tablet.

Moreover, on the reverse of votive tablet inscribed a line of Pyu characters. The Myanmar translation of this Pyu line is “*bâ: carke*” presumably the name of the donor (G.H Luce, 1985). It is 5" high and 1" wide. U Mya suggested that the date of this votive tablet may be between 8th and 9th century A.D (U Mya, Vol.II, 1961).



Figure 6. Votive tablet with two miniature stupas

Numerous votive tablets with Buddha figures and containing Pali formula of “*Ye dhammā hetuppabuavā*” have been discovered from Sriksetra. This formula was uttered by arahant *Assaji* when he told *Sāriputta* the keynote of the Buddha’s teaching. It runs:

Ye dhammā hetuppabuavā tesañ hetuñ Tathāgato āha tesañ ca yo nirodho, evaṃvādī Mahāsammano.

The conditions which arise from a cause, of these the Tathāgata have stated the cause, also the way of suppressing these same: this is the teaching of the Great Ascetic (Dr. Than Tun, 2003).

In this stanza it can be found the essence of Theravāda Buddhism. Dr. San Tun, Professor (Head) of Department of Philosophy, Dagon University, also expressed that the strong intangible evidence of Theravāda Buddhism is the principle of “*Ye dhammā hetuppabbhavā*” (Universities Research Journal, vol.2, No.9, 2009). Therefore, votive tablets which inscribed the “*Ye dhammā*” stanza by Pali language were might be concerned with concept of Theravāda Buddhism.

Moreover, during the king Kanishka (c.200 B.C) the Buddhist religion was divided in two sects: Mahāyāna and Hinayāna in India. Language is the main distinction of these two sects (P.V.Bapat, 1956). Mahāyāna sect used the Sanskrit language but Theravāda sect used the Pali language in the recording of religious literature (U Myint Swe, 1968).

A large number of votive tablets were discovered from a mound on the south of Ngashintkan-kone, Sriksetra. Among them a votive tablet with flat base and pointed top was discovered. A Buddha image is sitting on the lotus throne at the centre of tablet. The two hands are placed on the chest. It can be seen a letter line faintly at the foot of throne. By the comparative study of other votive tablets these alphabets were formula of “*Iti pi so bhagavā*”. These alphabets are similar to Telegu-Canarese writing system used in Southern India about 5th -7th century A.D. Therefore, the date of this votive tablet may be 5th -7th century A.D (U Mya, Vol.II, 1961). This formula extracted from *Mahāvagga* Pali, *Digha Nikaya, Suttanta* Pitakas (Daw Than Swe, 1992) and composed of Buddha’s attributes.



Figure 7. Votive tablet with “*Iti pi so bhagavā*” formula(U Mya, 1961)

Terracotta votive tablets which are concerned with Mahāyana Buddhism were also found in the Pyu period. A votive tablet with Bodhisattava figure was discovered from Hmawza. The leg style of Bodhisattava is *Rājātilasana* and sitting on lotus pedestal. The stanza “*Ye dhammā*” was written by ancient Nagari character at the edge of votive tablet. It might be made during 8th and 9th century A.D. Some researcher assumed that this figure may be Avalokitesvara (or) Lokanahta (Dhamma Yokesone Magazine, No.6/96, 1996). On the reverse of this tablet inscribed the name *SrīNālandāya*. If that is the correct reading that it might mean some sort of link between Nālanda and Sriksetra (Dr.Than Tun, 2003).



Figure 8. Avalokitesvara (or) Lokanahta votive tablet and *SrīNālandāya* letter (U Mya, 1961)

An interesting Mahāyana votive tablet was also discovered from a field near the Taung Lone Nyo village. In the size, the height is $4\frac{1}{2}$ " and the shape is similar to a small cave. There are three images at the centre of votive tablet. The middle one is wearing the headgear and sitting down on the lotus throne like a preaching style. The flanked images are also portrayed the preaching style and sitting down on the face of opposite side of the middle image. They were also wearing the headgears. The date of this image may be 9th or 10th century A.D (U Myan, Vol.II, 1961).



Figure 9. A Mahayana votive tablet from Taung Lone Nyo Village(U Mya, 1961)

During the Pyu period votive tablets of ordinary Buddha image which was flanked by Bodhisattavas were also discovered. Such kind of votive tablet was found at Mathaw village, on the south of Ngashintkan mound, Sriksetra. The shape of this votive tablet is circle. The leg style of Bodhisattava is *Rājalīlasana* royal ease with the left knee raised and right leg folded loosely. Lokanahta (Dhamma Yokesone Magazine, No.6/96, 1996). The stanza “*Ye dhammā*” which was written by Nagari character was inscribed under the ordinary Buddha image (U Mya, Vol.II, 1961).



Figure 10. A votive tablet with Buddha image flanked by Mahayana deities (U Mya, 1961)

2. Conclusion

Many kinds of religious evidence have been discovered from Sriksetra by the archaeological excavations and chance. These are structures, stone, bronze and gold images and terracotta votive tablets. Sriksetra people made the terracotta votive tablets as *Uddissana* cetiya. Terracotta votive tablets have not yet been found in other Pyu cities. Therefore, it can be said that terracotta votive tablets are just concerned with Sriksetra and generally assumed that these were might be made in later part of Pyu period. It can be seen three kinds of votive tablets. The first two are concerned with Theravada and Mahayana, and last one is concerned with both sects. The figures of Buddha and Bodhisattava images differentiate the sect of Theravada or Mahayana. Although Theravada votive tablets were portrayed the ordinary Buddha images, Mahayana images were portrayed the Bodhisattava, Arimaitaeya and Avalokitesvara etc. The last kind of votive tablet was portrayed the Buddha images flanked by Mahayana deities. Therefore, it can be assumed that Sriksetra people might be accepted the concepts of Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism. But, it had a problem in differentiate of what kind of votive tablet by the alphabetical ground. Because, the formula “*Ye dhammā*” was inscribed by both of Pali and Sanskrit languages. In ancient India, Mahayana sect used the Sanskrit language but Theravada sect used the Pali language in the recording of religious literature. Therefore, it did not exactly express that a votive tablet with “*Ye dhammā*” formula was concerned with Theravada or Mahayana Buddhism. But, the main theme of “*Ye dhammā*” formula was to escape from rebirth (*Samsara*) which is the main purposes of Theravada Buddhism. Therefore, votive tablets with “*Ye dhammā*” formula without Mahayana deities might be concerned with Theravada Buddhism. In the compare of votive tablets, it can be known that Theravada Buddhist votive tablet might be earlier than 5th century A.D and Mahayanavotive tablet later than that date. Therefore, it can be suggested that Theravada Buddhism was advanced in Sriksetra old city before the Mahayana Buddhism based on the terracotta votive tablets.

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