

# Arrival of Early Catholic Chaplains in Myanmar before Nyaungyan Period

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## Abstract

Most of the people, inhabiting in Myanmar professed Buddhism since the 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D in Pyu era. In 13<sup>th</sup> century when the Mongol invaded Myanmar, the westerners who professed Christianity serving, in the Mongol army reached Bagan. The mural paintings in Bagan period show the arrival of chaplains who ministered the westerners. Soon after Vasco de Gama had discovered the sea route to India in 1497, Pope Alexander passed the Bull in which the Portuguese took the charge in evangelizing the peoples, inhabiting in the oriental countries including Myanmar. This paper was based on the sources in Myanmar and English and a field trip made to the Churches. This research paper will give those who learn history on how the chaplains struggled for the spread of their religion. The early Catholic chaplains who arrived in Myanmar were seen not to be successful in founding the Catholicism in Myanmar.

Key words: Myanmar, profess, Catholic, chaplains, peoples

## Aim

To understand the chaplains who faced the dangers and difficulties for the spread of Catholic *Sasana* in Myanmar and to evaluate the failure of their activities in converting the natives into their religion before Nyaungyan Period.

## Introduction

In 1497, Vasco da Gama's discovery of sea route to India opened the commercial and diplomatic relations between the East and the West. With the flourishing of trade, the Westerners especially Portuguese adventurers and traders came to the East for their gains. When the Pope's authority was at height in Europe, the papacy at Vatican sent the bishops and chaplains to unknown countries in order to convert the heathen into their faith. So the chaplains who ministered to the Portuguese traders and adventurers in their journey came to the East. However the chaplains who reached Myanmar before Nyaungyan Period merely introduced the Christianity to the people inhabited in Myanmar.

## Research Questions

1. Why did the Myanmar kings accept the Westerners especially Portuguese, Dutch, French and British?
2. What was the Myanmar monarchs religious toleration?
3. Why were the early chaplains unsuccessful in their evangelistic effort in Myanmar?

## Research Method

In writing this paper "Arrival of Early Catholic Chaplains in Myanmar before Nyaungyan Period" the sources, written in Myanmar and English were used. Many of these sources were taken from Sacred Heart Cathedral (Mandalay) and some suggestions were also taken from the Fathers of the Church. Interviews, Questionnaires and Survey Methods are used.

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### Literature Review

There are many papers on arrival of the Roman Catholic Churches in Burma (Myanmar), arrival of Europeans in Burma from Journal of Burma Research Society, books which aimed to the spread of Christianity published by the Christian Churches, Chronicles of Taung-U, the Great Chronicles written by U Kala, Royal Order of Burma compiled by Dr. Than Tun, Myanmar historian and other research papers and history of Burmese Nationalism and Christianity for Ph.D (dissertation). It is found that in most of these papers and books the arrival of Roman Catholicism in Myanmar is assessed in view with the political, economic and military affairs. However, the early chaplains and the priests merely introduced their faith to the natives, inhabited in Myanmar. Their attempt for the spread of the Catholicism in Myanmar was in vain due to the local peoples who profoundly professed Buddhism and animism. Later, the Christian missionary efforts were seen to be considerably successful due to the Myanmar monarchs' religious toleration towards them. In addition, the then Myanmar monarchs looked to the development of the country with their help. Therefore, today Christianity, Islam and other religions remain in Myanmar due to the Myanmar monarchs' religious toleration.

### Findings and Discussion

The commercial and diplomatic relations accelerated between the East and the West after the Portuguese conquest of Goa in India in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The crusade wars which broke out between the Christian and Muslim in the 11<sup>st</sup> and 12<sup>nd</sup> usually had put an impact on the Papacy. Although the crusade war was over, the Popes who were appointed through ages wanted to spread their faith in many corners of the East where the Muslim religion had already been firmly established. However, the turning point took place in 1497 when Vasco da Gama, Portuguese adventurer discovered the sea lane to India around the Good Hope in South Africa. The sailing to India from Europe resurrected Papacy dreams do come true. Coincidentally, Portuguese controlled Goa, India and many archipelagos in Indian Ocean soon after the discovery of sea lane to India.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the chaplains accompanied by the Portuguese adventurers, traders and mercenaries came to the East to diffuse their faith there. In the field of literature review, the five key factors will be presented on the arrival of early Catholic chaplains in Myanmar.

#### 1. Arrival of Portuguese Envoys to Myanmar

In 1511, Albuquerque, the Chief of Malacca sent Ruy Nunez d'Ancunha to Taninsarim, Matarban, and Pegu to establish trade between the two countries.<sup>3</sup> The Portuguese imported guns and artilleries to Myanmar at that time. In 1550 Silver Doribe Ebro de Basa and Phillip de Brito served as commander in Rakhine King Minyazargyi.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, Portuguese in Asia was not a purely mercantile venture. They came to East as crusaders, conquistadors as well as traders. The Portuguese were already trading with the Mon and Rakhine along the Indian Ocean coast. At that time, Portuguese were the main marine super power in the East. Myanmar kings wanted to establish diplomatic and commercial relations with Portuguese in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

The first Portuguese official contact with Arakan (Rakhine) was to establish trading between the Rakhine and them since the growing of their presence in Southeast Asia. In 1518 Don Jao da Silveira negotiated with Minyazargyi, the Arakan king for commercial treaty.

<sup>2</sup>Aung Nyunt, U, "Catholic *Sasana* in Mandalay and *Bayingyi* Villages," Mandalay Catholic *Sasana*, Mandalay, 2014 (Henceforth; Aung Nyunt,2014) p. 12

<sup>3</sup>Myint Swe, James, "Early Portuguese (16<sup>th</sup>& 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries)," National Church History of Myanmar, )," National Church History of Myanmar, Yangon, 2014 (Henceforth; Myint Swe,2014) p.17

<sup>4</sup>Aung Nyunt,2014 p.12

Minbin, King of Mrauk-U erected the Mrauk-U fortress (MyoHyaung) with the help of the Portuguese mercenaries. In 1519 a commercial treaty was signed between Anthonio Correa, Portuguese envoys and the Matarban (Madama) governor.

In Duarte Barbosa's account of Indian ports there are some reference to trade with Pegu and the Far East. He notes as follows;

Many ships of the Moors which pass from China, Maluco, Peeguu (Pegu), Malaca, Camatra, Benguala (Begal) and Ceilam (Ceylon?) towards the Red Sea touch at these islands to water and take in supplies and other things needful for their voyage. At times they arrive here so battered that they discharge their cargoes and let them go to the bottom. And among these isles many and rich vessels of Moors are cast away, which, crossing the sea, dare not through dread of our ships finish their voyage to Malabar (Madras?).<sup>5</sup>

According to his account, Moors had already dominated the Eastern trade and their faith had spread far and wide in the East. Therefore, Portuguese adopted the commercial policy together with religious penetration on the relation with the East. From that onward, Moors became the Portuguese main rival.

## 2. Portuguese's role in political reunification in Taung-U period

In 1547, during the reign of King Tabinshwehti the royal army under the command of Bayinnaung consisted of Mons, Karens, Shans with more than seven hundred Portuguese cannon soldiers and gunners. In fighting against Siam, hundreds of Portuguese led by Diogo Pereira helped Bayinnaung. With their help, Bayinnaung seized Siam.

On the other hand, some who accompanied by the king's hunting game enjoyed the high ranking officials as body guard of the king in those days.<sup>6</sup> According to the Taung-U chronicle, Tabinshwehti became a drunkard due to the alcohol, made by the Portuguese. Later the administrative affairs were rested to Bayinnaung, his brother-in-law, commander of the army. They also served under Myanmar King Tabinshwehti. They were being accompanied by some Jesuits, some Banarbites, and some Dominicans for their spiritual assistance.

## 3. Military Service in Myanmar royal armies

In 1519, they began to open the custom office at Syriamin Lower Myanmar. Then they expanded their trade at Martaban, Tavoy, Tenassarim and cape of Salin (Ceylon).<sup>7</sup> In this way, the Portuguese continually reached Myanmar collectively or personally under illegal or legal ways. Especially they began to serve Arakan kings as mercenaries. Later they served Mon kings, Bamar kings through ages until the late Konbaung Period.

As spice trade<sup>8</sup> developed between the East and the West besides the Portuguese the Dutch, Spaniards came to the Asian countries. Though the struggles for the supremacy in the Eastern trade among the European countries accelerated they all hold a common stand for the spread of the Christianity in the oriental countries.

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<sup>5</sup>Furnival, J.S, "Europeans in Burma," Fiftieth Anniversary Publications No. 2, Selections of Articles from the Journal of the Burma Research Society, Rangoon, 1960 (Henceforth; Furnivall, 1960) p.61

<sup>6</sup>TunNyo, U, "MahayazawinThit (Taung U Set)," New Great Chronicle (Continuation of Taung-U Dynasty), YarPyay Press, 2012, pp.68-69 (Henceforth; TunNyo, 2012)

<sup>7</sup>Yaw Han Tun, Dr., "Arrival of Portuguese in Upper Myanmar During the reigns of Myanmar monarchs," Historical Research Papers, submitted to the Memorial ceremony for 500 Years, Myanmar Catholic Bishops Association, Yangon, p.12 (Henceforth; Yaw Han Tun, 2014)

<sup>8</sup>Hall, D.G.E, "Studies in Dutch Relations with Arakan," Fiftieth Anniversary Publications No. 2, Selections of Articles from the Journal of the Burma Research Society, Rangoon, 1960

LopoSoares de Albergaria, governor of Goa deeply wished to establish diplomatic relation with Myanmar. There were rival feudal kingdoms between Mon, Arakan and Myanmar in those periods.<sup>9</sup> Therefore the Portuguese served for these rival kings as mercenaries, palace guards and king's body guard. Their military service played an important role in evangelizing the natives in Myanmar.

#### 4. Attempt to conversion of Natives

Christianity is said to reach in Myanmar during the Bagan period according to the mural paintings in Kyansittha cave and Kubyaukgyi pagoda. Two mural paintings in Bagan can presumably be taken as example that some Christians might have come there in the 13<sup>rd</sup> century. The two paintings can be found in Kyansittha and the Ku-byauk-gyi pagoda. These paintings represent "depiction of the Last Supper."<sup>10</sup> In Kyansittha cave the Rome cross and Greek cross were found.<sup>11</sup>

It is thought that some Christians must have set foot in the city of Pagan early enough to leave traces of their presence in these works of art. These Christians are conjectured to be Indian Christian artists who had previously settled in Thaton of the Mon ethnic group, who were taken captive later on by King Anawrahta when he conquered and ransacked the Mon city in AD 1057.

Before the spread of Roman Catholic religion in Myanmar Portuguese came to the East with three main purposes as follows;

1. to earn the fortunes
2. to spread Roman Catholic religion and,
3. to wage Crusade war against the spread of Islam.<sup>12</sup>

In circa 1500 the Portuguese established factories (trade zones) at Myanmar seaports. The chaplains were accompanied by these traders who ministered to them.

#### 5. Early Arrival of Catholic Chaplains

In 1554-1557, Catholic priests named Caspar de Cruz and Bomferrus<sup>13</sup>, Pieere Bonfer<sup>14</sup>, Fr. Peter Paschasius<sup>15</sup>. They set afoot at Syriam, Bassein and Malamein, Pegu. They began evangelizing the natives especially Mons. Bomferrus is said to have studied the Mon

<sup>9</sup> Edward, Fr, "The Arrival of the Portuguese in Burma (Myanmar): How they participated in rebuilding Myanmar in

the 1500-1600's, National Church History of Myanmar, Yangon, 2014, p.17 (Henceforth; Edward, 2014)

<sup>10</sup> Monica, Daw, "Myanmar Catholic Association From Historical Sources (1287-1900)," Historical Research Papers, submitted to the Memorial ceremony for 500 Years, Myanmar Catholic Bishops Association, Yangon (Henceforth; Monica,2014) p.23

<sup>11</sup> Khin Htwe Yi, Daw, "Anglican Church and Sayagyi U Pe Maung Tin's Activities for Development of the Country," Historical Research Papers, submitted to the Memorial ceremony for 500 Years, Myanmar Catholic Bishops Association, Yangon (Henceforth; Khin Htwe Yi,2014) p.55

<sup>12</sup> Zam Khat Kam, Burmese Nationalism and Christianity in Myanmar: Christian Identity and Witness in Myanmar Today, Ph.D. (Dissertation), Faculty of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Department of Systematic Theology, 2015

pp.24, 25 (Henceforth: Zam Kha t Kam,2015)

<sup>13</sup> Yaw Han Tun,2014 p.12

<sup>14</sup> Kaung, Maung, "The Beginning of Christian Missionary Education in Burma, 1600-1824," Fiftieth Anniversary Publications No. 2, Selections of Articles from the Journal of the Burma Research Society, Rangoon, 1960 (Henceforth; Kaung,1960) p.119

<sup>15</sup> Myint Swe, James, "Early Portuguese (16<sup>th</sup>& 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries)," National Church History of Myanmar, )," National

Church History of Myanmar, Yangon, 2014 (Henceforth; Myint Swe,2014) p.47

language. They attempted to convert the Talaings into their faith. In 1557 they left Pegu, declaring they would rather preach to pigs like St. Anthony.<sup>16</sup> Their failure on the conversion of natives into their faith was assessed as follows;

Burmese pride and feeling of superiority as a challenge to the Gospel. There are two challenges that confront the church in Myanmar. The first challenge is the Burmese people themselves --- and the second challenge is Theravada Buddhism. The people, inhabited in Myanmar did not want to assimilate any other religions because they strictly adhered Buddhism and Hinduism. Their attitude on Buddhism was a constant challenge to Christian missionaries.<sup>17</sup>

Therefore, in the first quarter of 16<sup>th</sup> century Portuguese were able to dominate the Indian Ocean and the Eastern trade. The chance grasped by Portuguese in the East pushed the Pope to send out their priests there.

Roman Catholic religion spread in Myanmar through the political and trade contacts. Especially, the Portuguese monopoly of the Eastern trade and their check against the spread of Islam gave the opportunity to founding of Roman Catholic religion in Myanmar. There were different Roman Catholic missionaries. The prominent missionaries were Jesuits, Dominican, Oblate and Banarbite which all reached Myanmar. All of these missionaries represented the Roman Catholic religion.

Prior to founding of Roman Catholic religion in Myanmar in 1600s, Oblates of Franciscan Missionaries, O.F.M arrived at Ava, Pegu, Bassein, Syriam, Martaban (Madama) and Tavoy for spiritual diffusion.<sup>18</sup>

The list of Oblates of Franciscan Missionaries, O.F.M was as follows;

**Table - 1**

No.	Arrival of Year	Name	Palce
1.	1555-57	Fr. Pierre Bonfer	Pegu, Bassein
2.	-----	Fr. Peter Paschasius	-----
3.	1594	Fr. Alpothonse Cyprin	Pegu
4.	1594-99	Fr. E. de Santiago	Pegu
5.	1594?	Fr. J. de Corda	Pegu
6.	1599?	Fr. Francisco Landeyro	-----

In addition to OFM, Dominican Missionaries reached in Myanmar during the Nyaungyan period.<sup>19</sup>

The list of Dominican priests who reached in Myanmar was as follows;

**Table -2**

No.	Arrival of Year	Name	Place
1.	1604	Fr. M. da Luz	Pegu
2.	1604-10-16	Fr. F. d'Annunciacao	Syriam

<sup>16</sup>ZamKhat Kam,2015 p.26

<sup>17</sup>ZamKhat Kam,2015 p.24

<sup>18</sup>Myint Swe,2014 p.47

<sup>19</sup>Myint Swe,2014 p.48

3.	1604	Fr. A. Olivares	Pegu
4.	1615	Fr. Gonzalo	Ava
5.	1615	Fr. Manoel Fereyra	Ava

It is seen that most of Roman Catholic missionaries focused on Lower Myanmar than did on the Upper Myanmar before De Brito founded Catholicism at Syriam. The Lower Myanmar is accessible to the world due to its sea-outlets. Therefore, many of missionaries wanted to penetrate its religion from the Lower Myanmar. However, the success did not completely satisfy their aspiration.

### Research Findings

This research paper “Arrival of Early Catholic Chaplains in Myanmar. Before Nyaungyan Period,” is well assessed in studying other research papers and books on the Christianity and interviewing with not only the historians but also the Fathers. In the field of research finding, different kinds of missionaries performed based on the political, economic and social affairs. The missionaries found difficulties as the natives profoundly professed Buddhism and Animism. Nevertheless, they were seen as industrious priests in order to spread their faith in Myanmar. The Myanmar Kings accepted the westerners especially Portuguese, Dutch, French and British to help political, economic and military needs of the Myanmar Kingdom. The Myanmar Monarchs’ religious toleration was that they let the people to freely worship although they were the Buddhists. The early chaplains were unsuccessful in their evangelistic effort in Myanmar because of the less help of the Myanmar kings and unbelief by the commoners.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, Portuguese introduced the Roman Catholic religion in Myanmar in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The introduction of Catholic religion mainly based on the diplomatic and commercial relations at the beginning. Then with Portuguese mercenaries’, taking the vital role in royal army of Myanmar kings, the Catholic priests probably were favored by the natives and the ruling classes. However, in the early period, the chaplains did not establish their church in Myanmar. In truth, their penetration began at Lower Myanmar. At that time, Talaings were dominating at Lower Myanmar. As the Lower Myanmar is easily accessible by land and sea, westerners including Catholic chaplains were more interested in it. However as many of natives especially Talaings were already Buddhists, the chaplains’ attempt to convert them into their faith was in vain before Nyaungyan Period.

In Myanmar only Bamar, Mon and Rakhine were able to establish their dynasty. Among those, Bamar could found the First, Second and Third Myanmar Empires respectively from 11<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> century. This naturally made the Burmese (Bamar) feel superior to other races including the Westerners and their chaplains. Therefore, the Burmese (Bamar) see no reason why they should listen to the Catholic chaplains preaches about their religion. Thus the historical heritage of the Burmese is a challenge to the Christian Gospel. But after the conquest of Syriam in 1613 the Roman Catholic religion began founding in Upper Myanmar because Ava King had allowed the Portuguese decedents to settle at the areas, located between Chindwin river valley and Mu river valley.

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