

A Brief Comparative Study on Warfare of Monarchical Myanmar and Medieval Europe

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Abstract

Feudalism is generally considered to have developed in Europe in between 500 and 1500 AD. This period is generally coincided in Myanmar with dynastic eras of *Bagan* and *Inwa* kings. Warfare under Myanmar kings through the successive dynasties largely unchanged up to the ultimate fall of the dynasty in 1885 and accessibility to sources concerning with early periods is a rarity. In Europe, with the invention of fire-arms and effective use of gunpowder in battlefield the general pattern of feudal warfare considerably changed to new forms in the latter part of medieval period in Europe. Therefore, in presenting activities of Myanmar and European warfare, exact comparison cannot be available and general context of both feudal periods are put under study. The aim of this paper is to analyse the warfare tactics between monarchical Myanmar and medieval Europe.

Key words: castle, *Bayinnaung*, war-elephant, stockade, trench, magic, gunpowder

Introduction

Throughout the long span of years feudal states in Europe had been struggling for supremacy within each respective locality and occasionally for rivalry with other countries. The European Christians, on grounds of religion, participated in unison in waging series of long wars crossing vast terrains to get back their Holy Land from the hands of the Muslims. The most momentous events of warfare during this period included the Crusades (1096-1291), Hundred Years' War (1337-1453) between England and France and Wars of the Roses (1455-1485) in England. Myanmar under kings in successive dynasties also did the same with those of European states. Myanmar army had to face with invading Chinese army (one by Mongol in the *Bagan* Period under *Narathihapate* and the other by Manchu in time of *Myedu Min* in the *Konbaung* Period) and expeditions for many times on its neighbouring states- Thailand in its southeast and Assam and Manipur in its northwest. Knights and chivalry played a vital role in feudal warfare of both European and Myanmar.

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The castle was of first importance in feudal European warfare. The castle site was chosen for its inaccessibility. The ideal situation was to be surrounded by water, on the spur of a hill, or on firm ground in the midst of a bog. If so located, the castle was safe from the siege-machines. In the open country safety was insured by surrounding the castle by moats or ditches. Castles were first made of wood, later of stone. The stone wall and the moat were developed in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. In the later Middle Ages castles were often quite large.¹ Contrary on the other hand, strategic site was usually chosen to be seat of the local lord in Myanmar having sufficient food supply and easily accessible to water for crop growing and useful as natural barrier of defense. Practice of building castle did not prevail in Myanmar and its instead, royal seat was surrounded by moat and city walls and there was usually inner city walls as citadel.

Varieties of weapons for slashing, piercing and throwing were used modifying from time to time and depending on necessity in European warfare. Most famous among them included the battering ram which consisted a heavy timber, typically with a metal knob or

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¹ Mott and Dee, *Middle Ages*, New York, Barnes & Noble, Reprinted 1952, p. 145 (Hereafter cited as Mott & Dee, *Middle Ages*)

point at the front. Such devices were used to batter down the gates or walls of a besieged city or castle. The ram itself, usually suspended by ropes from the roof of a movable shed, was swung back and forth by its operators against the besieged structure. The roof of the shed was usually covered with animal skins to protect the weapon's operators from bombardment with stones or fiery materials.¹

Another kind of famous medieval weaponry was catapult which was a mechanism for forcefully propelling stones, spears, or other projectiles, in use mainly as a military weapon since ancient times. The ancient Greeks and Romans used a heavy crossbow like weapon known as a ballista to shoot arrows and darts as well as stones at enemy soldiers. The term catapult too can refer to these weapons, but more often it designates a larger engine that is used to hurl stones from a single long arm swinging through the vertical plane. Nearly all catapults employed in ancient and medieval artillery operated by a sudden release of tension on bent wooden beams or of torsion in twisted cords of horsehair, gut, sinew, or other fibres. An exception was the medieval trebuchet, powered by gravity. In this formidable weapon, the long end of an arm on a pivot was hauled or winched down and then released, allowing a heavy counterweight at the short opposite end of the arm to drop and swing the long end upward through a vertical arc. Modern mechanisms using hydraulic pressure, tension, or other force to launch gliders, aircraft, or missiles are also called catapults.²

During the long struggle between England and France (the Hundred Years' War of 1337 to 1453) the British use of longbow and pike could challenge the ascendancy of mounted knights. A longbow man could loose up to ten arrows a minute, compared with the crossbow man's two.³ With the introduction of gunpowder the importance of the castle (in Europe) diminished. Castle walls would no longer withstand the improved implements of war.⁴ Black powder is thought to have originated in China, where it was used in fireworks and signals by the 10th century. There is, however, some evidence that the Arabs were the first to develop black powder. By 1304 the Arabs had produced the first gun, a bamboo tube reinforced with iron that used a charge of black powder to shoot an arrow. Black powder was adopted for use in firearms in Europe from the 14th century.⁵

In time of Myanmar kings there was no practice of keeping regular or standing army. It was the same in case of feudal European countries but in both cases each feudal estate had its own army. Each vassal in Europe was required to serve in the lord's army for a fixed period each year. Each vassal was obliged to equip himself and pay his own expenses. This system of recruiting an army had serious drawbacks. The vassals were bound to serve the king for only a limited period. Many refused to follow the king in a foreign war claiming they were bound only to defend the king. There was no real unification of command. There was no unitary organization of supply- very vital factor in any warfare. Economic activity was seriously interfered with during a war, as the soldiers were also the executives in the economic scheme. The feudal system of warfare delayed the development of a standing army- a necessary component of a strong government.⁶

In his revolt against *Sawlu* (the king of *Bagan*) *Nga Raman* made a ruse with strips of bamboo he fashioned false arrays of elephants and horses, and placed them in swampy and muddy places, and set howdahs thereon, and framed also human figures to hold shields of

¹ Encyclopædia Britannica Ultimate Reference Suite, Chicago, 2011 (Hereafter cited as Britannica, 2011)

² Ibid

³ Dennis Sherman & Joyce Salisbury, *Experience Western Civilization, Volume I: to 1715*, New York, Mc Graw-Hill, 2012, p. 206

⁴ Mott & Dee, *Middle Ages*, p. 145

⁵ Britannica, 2011

⁶ Mott & Dee, *Middle Ages*, p. 46

every kind, round and embossed, oblong and convex. His stratagem proved successful. The royal elephant of King *Sawlu*, who was with *Kyanzittha's* army, fell into the mud and stuck, whereupon the whole army fled.¹

In 1531 CE the *Shan* domination of Central Myanmar came to an end with the emergence of *Tabinshwehti*. He was greatly helped in his campaigns by his foster brother *Bayinnaung*. The latter first showed his mettle in attacking *Pyay*. *Bayinnaung's* scouts stumbled across a greatly superior *Mon* force on the other side of a stream called *Naungyo*. Other commanders would have promptly retreated, but *Bayinnaung* had already discovered, as every good leader discovers in a third-rate environment, that numbers do not matter, it is spirit that counts.²

In 1551 *Bayinnaung* became king. He had to begin by killing a usurper in single combat and sacking *Bago*. After that he conquered the *Shan* states and then, with the vastly increased manpower at his disposal, he set out to invade Thailand, on which country his predecessor had already made an indecisive attack in 1549. He captured Ayutthaya in 1564 and again, after it had rebelled, in 1569. But in neither case was the Thai capital taken by storm: it surrendered the first time out of terror of the noise made by the Myanmar king's Portuguese gunners, and the second time it fell through treachery.³ When *Tabinshwehti* invaded Thailand in 1549, it was observed that he wore a breastplate and bejeweled gold chains covered with charms to secure invulnerability, also a crown engraved with *yantras* for the magic purpose.⁴

Campaigns in time of Myanmar kings were undertaken almost only in the dry season, when tracks were dry and granaries full. When a campaign was contemplated, it was, of course, necessary to begin by mobilizing the forces. The rank and file however, do not appear to have been mobilized at all willingly.⁵ In time of emergency the king through the *hluttaw* issued orders to the governors to send a force of fixed number on a fixed day. The number was fixed in proportion to the population of the province and the population is estimated in accordance with the number of registered houses. The common method in raising levies is that one house has to give two or three more soldiers. Regulars have some sort of uniform. But conscripts do not seem to have had any issue to them. Probably they tie some pieces of red cloth round their heads.⁶

Myanmar soldiers were sometimes tattooed with the image of *Kalmasapada* (man-eating king of the *Mahathutathoma Jataka*), assimilating themselves to the man-eater by chewing a piece of raw human flesh while undergoing the operation. By this they thought to acquire invulnerability, enormous strength and courage, and the power to jump very high and very far. Myanmar medical prescriptions for obtaining invulnerability and perhaps invisibility include (1) a compound of the livers of a man, monkey, black dog, goat, cobra, owl, and lizard pounded together at midnight; (2) a mixture of black pepper, zingiber, and honey, over which incantations (mantras) have been said.⁷

Charles Duroiselle described a pageant of King *Mindon* which took place in 1865 as exhibiting a display of the forces in full dress of the Myanmar standing army at its

¹ H. G. Quaritch Wales, *Ancient Southeast Asian Warfare*, London, Bernard Quaritch Ltd., 1952, pp. 115-116 (Hereafter cited as Wales, *Southeast Asian Warfare*)

² Wales, *Southeast Asian Warfare*, p. 117

³ *Ibid*, p. 117

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 133

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 127

⁶ Than Tun, *A Modern History of Myanmar (1752-1948)*, Yangon, Loka Ahlinn Publishing House, First Edition, August 2010, pp. 114, 117 (Hereafter cited as Than Tun, *Modern Myanmar*)

⁷ Wales, *Southeast Asian Warfare*, p. 134

headquarters at *Mandalay*... a Myanmar battalion or regiment consisted of four units- 1st infantry, 2nd cavalry, 3rd war-chariots, and 4th elephants, according to the division so well-known from *Pali* writings.¹

The Myanmar army has no special unit for food supplies. Apart from the food supplied by the government for the first two or three days' journey, the local authorities were ordered to make their people provide sustenance for the army. Supplies were brought to the camps by convoys of women, as well as in requisitioned carts. Further afield it was necessary for the men to live off the enemy country, and it seems to have been a constant preoccupation after pitching camp for many of the men to bust themselves with marauding.² But, during the long siege of Ayutthaya in 1767 (in time of *Myedu Min*), some soldiers were assigned to cultivate the fields around the city.³

Weapons of Myanmar soldiers consisted of bows, crossbows, lances, spears with curved heads, javelins, and swords. Defensive armour was mainly confined to leather shields and caps of leather or plaited bamboo.⁴ In Myanmar army one company has 100 men and 13 officers and as equipment this company 111 swords, 10 small gongs for *akyats* (leader of ten men), one medium sized gong for *thwaythauk-gyi* (commander of fifty men), gong painted three parts red and one part gold for *Tat-hmu* (commander of 100 men), one red umbrella for *thwaythauk-gyi*, one red umbrella with gilt fringe for *tat-hmu*, 10 spears and 40 guns.⁵ The high officers rode either richly caparisoned elephants or horses, according to choice and terrain. They were always accompanied both by their parasols of rank and by their standards for rallying their troops.⁶ Originally elephants carry howdah (open seat or under canopy) from which spearmen and archers fought. One to three inches calibre guns were put on each elephant. Seven musketeers were stationed around each elephant. Elephants, horses, and foot soldiers were used in the ratio 1:10:100.⁷ Not like in the European warfare Myanmar army was always attached with war-elephants as formidable source of attacking and crushing the enemy. Elephants which had been specially trained for use in battle were called ယတြာရစစ်ဆင် (well-trained war-elephant).⁸

At the auspicious moment, sound the great gong, play the flute, beat the drum, and all cheer loudly. Then let the great army march, unfurl the standards of victory! In the van go the chief elephants when the army marches away, then go the other elephants, the cavalry, and the carts. Let them march along the jungle trail until they come to a suitable place to encamp.⁹

In time of Myanmar kings, military expeditions were generally made only after the harvest as levied conscripts had to be mobilized from general populace most of whom were the peasants. The use of magic in warfare and searching omen beforehand the battle of crucial decision were usually made by commanders of the both armies (Myanmar and *Mon* in their struggle for supremacy during the reign of *Mingaung of Inwa* and *Yazadirit of Hanthawady*) during the Forty-Years' War (1386-1422). An example of this kind can be seen in *Minyekyawzwa's* failure in his attack on *Dalla* in 1416. He was seriously wounded and thrown

¹ Ibid, pp. 141-142

² Ibid, pp. 142-143

³ Than Tun, *Modern Myanmar*, p. 117

⁴ Wales, *Southeast Asian Warfare*, p. 145

⁵ Than Tun, *Modern Myanmar*, p. 116

⁶ Wales, *Southeast Asian Warfare*, p. 144

⁷ Than Tun, *Modern Myanmar*, p. 117

⁸ U Thein Haling, *ခေတ်ဟောင်းမြန်မာ့သမိုင်း သုတေသန အဘိဓာန် (Dictionary for Historical Research on Ancient Myanmar)*, Yangon, Universities Historical Research Centre, First Published, February 2000, p. 137

⁹ Wales, *Southeast Asian Warfare*, p. 152

from his elephant named *Nga Chit Khaing*. But he had not been found until late and only after calculation of royal astrologer, he was found under an *Ohnhne* tree near a pond.¹

In passing through dense jungle the elephants should go first to clear the way, with the infantry and carts next, and the cavalry guarding the rear. If the way lies through thorny jungle, elephants should go first as before, but should be followed by cavalry and carts, then porters, and lastly the infantry and cannon. If the route is through a rocky mountain gorge, infantry should march along both sides of the gorge, then elephants and carts should follow, and lastly the cavalry. Over a plain of tall grass and shrubs the cavalry should be sent first in order to beat down the vegetation, the infantry following and then the carts. These are all purely practical arrangements, probably learnt from the experience of repeated incursions into foreign lands.²

Of the Myanmar armies in their sixteenth century wars with Thailand, as recorded in *Hmannan*, Myanmar army, like the Thai, had wings, main army, van and rear guards, the king or commander-in-chief usually being in the centre or towards the rear, while princes sometimes commanded the other divisions, and that each division had infantry, cavalry, and elephants, though the cavalry were chiefly used for reconnoitering in advance. It is also stated, on one occasion, that the vanguard had 200 elephants distributed among the infantry.³ The soldiers marched along more or less in confusion. But loyalty and obedience was enforced through severe and effective methods. Men and officers leave behind their families as hostages and if they were found guilty of major faults their families as well were punished severely like themselves. An officer was held responsible for his charge and he had the power of life and death over his men.⁴

The favourite tactics used by Myanmar was the stockade warfare. Cavalry was placed on either flank of the main body to close in upon the enemy. If victory appeared doubtful, the army rapidly entrenched itself under cover of heavy fire from artillery and small arms. When the smoke was cleared, the stockade was complete and the men inside were ready to defend it.⁵ The Myanmar soldiers, in their usual mode of warfare, rarely meet their enemy in the open field. Instructed and trained from their youth in the formation and defence of the stockades, in which they display great skill and judgement, their wars have been for many years a series of conquest.⁶

The fundamental nature of feudalism both in Myanmar and in Europe was the same with prevailing decentralization of power and local lords or nobles were always obliged to keep their status or to raise by means of subjugation or friendship with lords of the other territories. Wars became so numerous that the church (in Europe) intervened and set apart certain days when there was to be no fighting. In Myanmar revered monks occasionally intervened (mostly at the request of the king) to sue for peace between the two warring powers. In European wars a period of this kind was called the “truce of God.” Law was enforced by threat of excommunication and this practice proved partially successful. Parts of the land were set off where no fighting was allowed in order to give the growers the chance to plant the crops.⁷

¹ Banya Dalla, *ရာဇာဓိရာဇ် အရေးတော်ပုံကျမ်း (The Struggles of Yazadirit)*, Yangon, Zwe Books, Third Published, November 1974, p. 345

² Wales, *Southeast Asian Warfare*, pp. 152-153

³ *Ibid*, p. 160

⁴ Than Tun, *Modern Myanmar*, p. 117

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 117

⁶ J. J. Snodgrass, *Narrative of the Burmese War*, London, John Murray, 1827, p. 21

⁷ Mott & Dee, *Middle Ages*, pp. 46-47

In Myanmar the tactics of digging tunnel to the foot of the gates of the walls and setting fire to scale down them was used in besieging the formidable city of the enemies. An earlier example of using this tactics can be seen in King *Anaukpetlun*'s raid on *Thanlyin* where Portuguese adventurer Felip de Brito had been establishing enough strength to defy the Myanmar power. The story in brief was as follows:

An attack was made on the city (in January 1613). Because pitch and pepper water was poured from the top of the city stockade and grenades fired, there were many casualties and the attacking forces had to withdraw to the camp. Because the city did not submit despite the attacks, the generals and commanders made their men dig a tunnel from the camp to the city. When the tunnel reached the foot of the city stockade, it was reported to *Anaukpetlun*. He issued the order to all the forces, "Tonight, scale the city stockade. In the tunnel, tug away the stockade pillars with rope."

Carrying out the order, past midnight, on early Wednesday, 8th waxing day of *Tagu* (27 March 1613), the commanders and deputy commanders had their men scale the stockade but, because many fire-pots were dropped, they were unable to scale it. Meanwhile, within the tunnel, the stockade pillars were tugged with ropes. Three pillars were uprooted and, entering the city, the elephantry, cavalry and infantry forces captured the Lord of *Thanlyin* and the whole city.¹

In short, the following points can be extracted from the comparison of warfare developed in Myanmar under monarchical rule and its contemporary of medieval Europe:

- (1) weaponry of different kinds mostly made of iron were used for combat, assault and defence such as bow, spear, sword, dagger etc.
- (2) special kind of weaponry such as battering ram and catapult were used in European wars but in Myanmar the methods of digging tunnel and scaling down the gates were practised in attacking the stockades
- (3) there was no use of elephant in European warfare whereas in Myanmar this animal was particularly dependable for use as strategic weapon
- (4) a similar point to note is that there was no standing army kept in both European and Myanmar feudal states and only the system of emergency recruitment was practiced. But in Europe military duty was prescribed for common people on annual basis
- (5) In Myanmar traditional belief in magic power, finding of omen and consulting with astrologer for gaining victory etc. beforehand the campaign or battle were commonly seen but the practice of this kind was not found in European warfare
- (6) with the invention of fire-arms and effective use of gunpowder in battlefield the general pattern of feudal warfare considerably changed to new forms in the latter part of medieval period in Europe. In Myanmar the unchanged condition of monarchical type of military organization had to face with serious defeat in waging wars with imperialist army having advanced weaponry and discipline.

Conclusion

The period of European feudalism is termed as age of chivalry and even called the age of darkness. The latter term is made on the fact that the progress of mankind in fields of politics, economics, being social and culture that developed in this period was much behind the achievements gained in its preceding period- the age of Greco-Roman civilization. But, with changing conditions of the time, general characters of European feudalism including those in

¹ U Kala (Translated into English by Tun Aung Chain), *The Great Chronicle (1597-1711)*, Yangon, Myanmar Knowledge Society, First Published, June 2016, p. 76

warfare had to change from time to time and eventually entered into new phase of exploration, discovery and overseas expansion. The situation in Myanmar on the other hand, was still lagged behind in feudalistic monarchic characters even until its engagement with expansionist imperialist powers of the West.

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