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The Colophons of Burmese Manuscripts

1. Looking through editions of the texts of Buddhist scriptures in Pāli and through catalogues of manuscripts from Theravāda Buddhist countries, it appears that, as a rule, the final remarks in Burmese manuscripts are not mentioned. They are not found in descriptions of manuscripts given in editions of the texts or included in the entries for a codex in catalogues of manuscripts. This can be ascribed both to the editors' and revisers' insufficient knowledge of the Burmese language and to their reluctance to invest too much time and effort in the elucidation of passages forming no part of the text at the end of manuscripts along with final remarks which can be understood as colophons in the stricter sense. Usually, there is merely a note of the formal data, and the title and date of completion of writing.

The three volumes of the catalogue *Burmese Manuscripts*¹ contain detailed descriptions of manuscripts in German libraries. Thanks to the ruling that the beginning and end of manuscripts are to be reproduced in

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¹*Burmese Manuscripts* (*Bur. MSS*), Part I, compiled by Heinz Bechert, Daw Tin Tin Myint, Daw Khin Khin Su (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1979); Part II, Catalogue numbers 156–431, compiled by Heinz Braun, Daw Tin Tin Myint, with an introduction by Heinz Bechert (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1985); Part III, Catalogue numbers 432–735, Heinz Braun, compiler, assisted by Anne Peters; Heinz Bechert, ed. (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1996). This essay is based entirely on the material in these volumes of this catalogue of manuscripts. The reader is therefore requested to consult the introduction to Part I for further information. As regards the abbreviations used here, see the List of Abbreviations in Part 3. [Since this article appeared, Part IV, Catalogue numbers 736–900, has been published: Anne Peters, compiler; Heinz Bechert, ed. (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2000).]

exact detail, it is now possible to look more closely at the colophons of a great number of codices from the point of view of form and content. This essay is an attempt to bring some order into the series of partly formulaic final remarks so that we can establish what means were at the disposal of the scribe when he either followed set rules or inserted his own remarks.

2. The volumes contain 735 catalogue numbers, which represent an equal number of manuscripts with a single text in which the beginning and end are usually clearly recognizable. In this context it is of no importance whether a text is a work complete in itself, a chapter of a work, or part of a group of texts. One hundred and fifty manuscripts have to be left out of this study

because the manuscript description did not include an account of the colophon,

because the colophon is not available due to the fragmentary state of the manuscript,

or because the text ends without any final remarks.

3. Of the remaining 585 codices considered in this study, 52 lack dates. The scribes end the text either by simply citing the name of the text [349]² or by adding one of the formulae of aspiration below (see 3.3–5) to indicate the end [527, 689], or they are content with the comment

... *prīḥ i / saññ* (ပြီး ၏ / သည်) [692(6)], ... *apriḥ suḥ rok prīḥ* (အပြီး သို့ ရောက် ပြီး) [607]

... is ended

which in many cases is no more than a translation of the preceding *niṭṭhito, -tā, -tam* [618] that is usually found at the end of Pāli texts. Only a few manuscripts have quite differently formulated Burmese additions from which the end of a text may be inferred.

3.1. There are 533 manuscripts (approximately 72% of the studied

²Numbers in square brackets are catalogue numbers from *Bur. MSS I–III* that have been arbitrarily selected to serve as examples.

material) that are dated. Only 42 manuscripts have incomplete indications of time (10 have only the year [224]; 11 only the year and month [240]; 14 have the year, month, and day of the fortnight [154]; 7 have all the information apart from the time of day [649]). The remaining 491 codices offer the precisely formulated date apart from the time of day which is typical of Burmese manuscripts, for example:

sakkarāj 1245 khu na-yun la chanḥ 2 rak 2-nanḥ-lā ne ne 3 khyak tīḥ akhyim tvañ Chanḥ nisya kui reḥ kūḥ rveḥ prīḥ i. [668 with slight emendations]

သက္ကရာဇ် ၁၂၄၅ ခု န ယုန် လ ဆန်း ၂ ရက် ၂ နင်း လာ နေ့၊ နေ့ ၃ ချက် တီး အချိမ် တွင် ဆန်း နိဿျ ကို ရေး ကူး ၍ ပြီး ၏ ။

On Monday (*2-nanḥ-lā³ ne*), the second day (*2 rak*) in the half month of the waxing moon (*la chanḥ*)⁴ of the month April/May (*na-yun*) of the year 1245 (1245 *khu*) of Burmese chronology (*sakkarāj*)⁵ [= A.D. 25 April 1883] at the time of three strokes [= 3 o'clock p.m.] I [the scribe] completed (*prīḥ i*) the setting down (*reḥ kūḥ rveḥ*) of the text *Chanḥ nisya* [word-for-word translation of the *Vuttodaya* text].

About three fifths of the colophons have this form, while in two fifths the writers qualify their activity by adding the verb '*oñ mrañ saññ*' (အောင် မြင် သည်):

[*Name of text*] *kui reḥ kūḥ rveḥ prīḥ 'oñ mrañ saññ.* [131]

— ကို ရေး ကူး ၍ ပြီး အောင် မြင် သည်။

I have successfully completed the setting down [of the text so-and-so].

Apart from occasional deviations in the wording, only the following variations in the form of the final remarks are regularly found:

³Cf. *Bur. MSS*, Pt. I, p. xxvii (a).

⁴Fortnight of the waning moon: *la chut* (လ ဆုတ်), full moon: *la praññ* (လ ပြည့်), new moon: *la kvay* (လ ကွယ်).

⁵See *Bur. MSS*, Pt. I, p. xix (d).

the day of the week may occasionally be missing, as the day of the corresponding fortnight has already been given [13];

instead of *sakkarāj* the following may be found:

ī cā prīḥ lac sakkarāj kāḥ ...

ဤ စါ ပြီး လစ် သက္ကရာဇ် ကား ...

As far as [the year of] Burmese chronology in which the setting down of this work was completed is concerned ... [560].

This beginning of colophons in four-syllable verse form [228, 565] was so familiar to the writers of at least 83 colophons, that they took it over for their prose versions.

The order in which the individual dates and times are given — namely, the year, month, fortnight (waxing or waning moon, full moon, new moon), day in the fortnight and its corresponding designation, and the time of day as well as the final remarks on the completion of the setting down of a text — are components of a fixed formula with which the writers usually ended their work. This is the case, at least, for the 300-year period which it has been possible to survey up to now. Only a very few manuscripts (in the material to hand, only 10 manuscripts) have final remarks, for the most part undated, which deviate entirely from the usual form.

3.2. Apart from a final remark which only gives the time of completion of writing, the scribe may refer in a verse and a few set phrases to his skill and to his own personal concerns, namely the expression of the religious merit inherent in the act of writing (*P. puñña*, Burmese *koṅḥ mhu*, ကောင်းမှု), and his hopes and desires regarding his own progress and that of his family, or even of all beings, toward salvation.

The following Pāli verse is found at the end of almost all manuscripts:⁶

⁶Saddhamma-s, *JPTS* (1890), p. 65 (noted by Peter Skilling, Bangkok). English translation by B.C. Law, *A Manual of Buddhist Historical Traditions (Saddhamma-Saṅgaha)*, 2nd rev. ed. (Calcutta, 1963), p. 96.

*akkharam ekamekañ ca Buddharūpasamaṃ siyā,⁷
tasmā hi paṇḍito poso likheyya piṭakattayam.* [97]

Every letter should be like a statue of the Buddha, therefore only an educated man should write the Tipiṭaka.

Skills related to the production of a religious object enjoyed particular esteem for that reason alone. The production of a book — in Burma mainly a palm-leaf manuscript — and the setting down of the words of the Buddha, which were considered to be immeasurably valuable, were regarded as particularly respected activities. It therefore goes without saying that only someone who knew the teachings and had writing skills would have been considered qualified to undertake it.

3.3. As a rule after the date, but often immediately after the end of the text, there is a set phrase which shows that the process of writing was a religious act whose aim was earning *puñña* [707]:

nibbānapaccayo hotu. [705]

May [this religious duty, the writing of the text,] be a means of [my attainment of] Nirvana.

3.4. The following formula serves the same purpose:

pu di āḥ (ပု ဒိ အာ) [482] or *pu, di āḥ nḥaṇ praññ cum pā lui ṭi.* (ပု ဒိ အာ: ၵင် ပြည်. စုံ ဝါ လို ၵိ) [699]

The syllables *pu*, *di* and *āḥ*⁸ are abbreviations for the concepts *pubbenivāsānussati* (“knowing one’s past abodes”), *dibbacakkhu* (“the divine eye”) and *āsavakkhaya* (“destruction of the taints”) which, with three further concepts, form the group of the so-called *abhiññā*⁹ or six “higher spiritual powers”. Those named here are also known as the

⁷In Burmese texts: *akkharā* [nt. pl.] ... *Buddharūpaṃ samaṃ*.

⁸Cf. *Burm MSS*, Pt. 1, p. xxv (a); *pubbenivāsa* is to be corrected to *pubbenivāsānussati*.

⁹Cf. Nyanatiloka, *Buddhist Dictionary*, 3rd rev. ed. (Colombo: Frewin & Co., 1972), s.v. *abhiññā*.

tevijjā (“threefold wisdom”), the realization of which is identical to the attainment of salvation. Thus, the set form of words may be translated as follows:

May the knowledge of my past abodes, the divine eye, and the destruction of taints [in me] be completely accomplished.

3.5. The last of the stock phrases is the following:

nat lū sādhu khō ce sov. (နတ် လူ သာဓု ခေတံ စေ သောဝိဏ္ဏံ) [456]
May gods and men call out, “Well done!”

This set phrase is occasionally expanded by the scribe by naming people who are near to him so that they may share in his religious merit (*puñña*) [384]. From time to time he may also refer to the “gain” or “advantage” (*akyuih*, အကျိုး) which he can acquire from setting a work down [419]. Or he may express the wish to be born again at the time of the future Buddha Metteyya (Maitreya) to achieve release as his disciple and with his help [312]. Wordings such as *Arimadera* (အရိမဒေရ) [419] or *Arimideyya* (အရိမိဒေယျ) [312] occasionally require a second look in order to recognize that the reference is to Metteyya.

3.6. The three *patthanā* or aspirations just mentioned are almost always found next to the date. There is no preference for one set phrase rather than another nor any particular order in which they are found:

no set phrase: 146 colophons [1]
only *nibbānapaccayo hotu*: 69 colophons [66, 254]
only *pu di āh* or *pu di āh nḥaṇ praññ cum pā lui i*: 90 colophons
[102, 108]
only *nat lū sādhu khō ce sov*: 21 colophons [721]
nibbānapaccayo hotu and *pu di āh*, etc.: 86 colophons [554]
nibbānapaccayo hotu and *nat lū sādhu khō ce sov*: 26 colophons
[708]
pu di āh, etc., and *nat lū sādhu khō ce sov*: 21 colophons [77]
all three phrases together: 32 colophons [505]

3.7. Apart from the set phrases referred to, many colophons contain not only quotations from the Pāli Canon in addition to verses from the Paritta literature and lists of *paccayas*, *dasa asubhāni*, *dasa kasiṇāni* [723 (6)], etc., but also additions in verse or prose that vary a great deal in length. As they are individually formulated by the writers, they are not considered in this context.

4. With the help of the information in the introduction to the first volume of *Burmese Manuscripts* and the survey given in this essay, even someone unfamiliar with the Burmese language should have no difficulty in understanding the colophons of set phrases found in approximately three quarters of all Burmese manuscripts.

Heinz Braun