

Book Review

The Thiri Rama. Finding Ramayana in Myanmar

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Having visited Myanmar for religious pilgrimage many times in the last years, this book gives me the opportunity to gain deeper knowledge of Myanmar culture and heritage. Myanmar is full of beautiful places with impressive temples, pagodas, monasteries and caves that will surprise travellers. The wonderful plains of Bagan (also known as Pagan¹), with its rich archaeological zone, shows the religious devotion of Myanmar rulers and people over centuries. Bagan has more than 2,000 temples, stupas and pagoda. It suffered the big earthquake of July 1975 and more recently another in August 2016.

The book *Thiri Rama* (Great Rama) offers a unique version, illustrated one, of the Ramayana story in Myanmar. It was written for court performance. The first pictorial evidence of the Ramayana known in Myanmar is from the early Bagan period. This Indian epic came to Myanmar through Hindu traders and merchants that created communities in the country, especially in Mon state in Lower Myanmar. Mon people from Lower Myanmar or Indians or both contributed the diffusion through oral tradition of the Ramayana story in Bagan (Pagan) from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries. The Ramayana story can be found, for example, in beautiful and rich plaques at Ananda temple in Bagan. This temple was built in 1105 AD during the reign of King Kyanzittha (1084–1113).

The narrative tells the story of a conflict between the Good –represented by Rama, Sita, Lakshmana, Hanuman and the monks- and the Evil –represented by Dathagiri and the ogres. The story ends with the Good defeating the Evil. Myanmar Ramayana can be enjoyed as a narrative tale in prose and poetry, as royal court drama and also in painted frescoes, wooden carvings and stone sculptures.

The book also includes essays on the history and tradition on Ramayana in Myanmar, detailed descriptions of costumes and masks of the main characters in the Myanmar Ramayana (Dathagiri, Rama, Lakshmana, Sita, Hanuman, Bodaw), analysis of the cultural context, the Thai influence as well as the story of court dance. To enrich the text, the book includes beautiful illustrations and plaques of the Thiri Rama story.

The book will be of interest to scholars, researchers and students of South and Southeast Asian art, art history, culture, literature and theatre.

The Thiri Rama. Finding Ramayana in Myanmar

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ From the 9th to the 13th century, Bagan was the capital of the Kingdom of Pagan. This kingdom was the first one to unify the territory that is now Myanmar and establish Theravada Buddhism