

The Sacred and the Secular: Symbolism in Sriksetra's Pyu Coinage

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Abstract

This paper studies the economic and cultural transformations of early Myanmar society by analyzing Pyu silver coins discovered from the ancient city of Sriksetra (a UNESCO World Heritage Site), which flourished between the 2nd century AD to the 9th century AD. The study emphasizes how the Pyu people transitioned from a barter system to a stamped silver coinage system to facilitate, stability and convenience in trade. Srivatsa, Bhadrapitha, conch, sun, and moon motifs on Pyu coins represent religious, symbolic iconography, and royal symbolism that integrate with the Indian culture and indigenous traditions and beliefs. This paper analysis the existence of strong regional economic, trade networks and the existence of shared culture within Pyu city states by comparing the four types of coins discovered at Sriksetra with other coin types discovered from other Pyu ancient cities as Halin, Beikthano, and Pinle (Maingmaw).

Keywords: Srivatsa; Bhadrapitha; Sriksetra coins; Pyu coinage; early Myanmar society

Introduction

Pyu civilization was the earliest urban cultures in Myanmar. Among Pyu ancient cities, Sriksetra (Thayekhittaya in Burmese) is the largest and most elaborately constructed city of the Pyu, lies in Nawin River valley in Pyay Township, Pyay District, Bago Region. It is roughly circular in shape, with a north-south diameter of 4.44 kilometers and an east-west diameter of 3.96 kilometers. Its walled area embraced a vast area of 1880 hectares (Ministry of Culture, Department of Archaeology and National Museum, 2013: 32). As the evidence of an archaeological studies, Sriksetra was flourished from the 2nd century A.D to the 9th century A.D. In ancient Myanmar chronicles, it is mentioned that Sriksetra had 32 large gates and 32 small gates. It is known that the Chinese "Chronicle of the Tang Dynasty" mentions that Sriksetra had 12 gates on its city wall (Tun Foundation Bank Literary Committee, 2016: 340). According to this record, Sriksetra had 12 gates, which is close to the 9 gates that have been discovered to until today.

The first person to conduct archaeological research at Sriksetra was Dr. E. Forchammer, who was the first appointed archaeologist in Myanmar. Reports on Sriksetra can be found in the 1882-83 and 1883-84 British-Myanmar administrative reports. In 1907, Leon De Beylic, carried out archaeological work at Sriksetra together with Mr. Taw Sein Ko. In the same year, Leon De Beylic, Mr. Marshall, Dr. Konow, Mr. Taw Sein Ko, Mons Charles Duroiselle, and U Lupe Win all conducted excavations at Sriksetra, and their work continued up until the period

just before the Second World War (Aung, 1998; Aung, 1993: 112). In 1963-64, Due to the necessity of carrying out systematic scientific excavations at Sriksetra, the Department of Archaeology carried out a scientific excavation and research at Sriksetra under the name of HMA (HMA means Hmawzar) (Aung, 1998; Aung, 1993: 112). At present, 67 sites including city walls and moats, gateways, palace compound, palace wall, religious structures, residential buildings and ritual monuments. Archaeological discoveries at Sriksetra have provided a wide range of material culture, including architecture, inscriptions, religious monuments, and coins. These artifacts provide crucial insights into the Pyu society's organization, belief systems, and economic practices.

The Origin and Development of Currency in Early Myanmar

As urban societies were first established, people developed a system of using currency for transactions. Before the invention of currency, people relied on a barter system, exchanging their agricultural products for goods of equal value. However, this system had many challenges such as lack of stability, differences in the size and condition of items, and the challenge of storing goods for long periods. To solve these problems and to ensure stability and convenience in trade, people began using materials such as gold, silver, lead, and other metals as mediums of exchange. Eventually, coins were invented and used as money. Coins became the main medium of exchange in the country's trade system (Davies, 1994: 27-32).

Among coins produced in Myanmar, the earliest discovered were Pyu coins. These were found not only in three Pyu cities of Sriksetra, Beikthano, and Halin but also in areas influenced by Pyu culture, such as Pinle (Maingmaw) Myittha Township, Rakhine State, and Mon State (May Su Ko, 2018: 211-226). Indian cultures spread to the region through Indian traders who arrived in Southeast Asia. While the coinage system was adopted in India, Southeast Asian countries adopted a barter system. After the spread of Indian culture, coins were minted and used in Southeast Asian countries in the 4th and 5th century AD (Gutman, 1978: 8-21).

Pyu Coins: General Features and Symbolism

Pyu coins are generally circular silver pieces that closely resemble one another in shape and design. Coins unearthed from Sriksetra, Beikthano, and Halin are commonly referred to as Pyu coins. Coins were classified into types based on the markings of Srivatsa (auspicious mark) on the front side, and Bhadrapitha (throne-stool) on the reverse. Research indicates that four types of coins have been found in Sriksetra, three types in Halin, and three types in Beikthano (Maung Thar, 2024).

Srivatsa was the most frequently used symbol on pyu coins. "Srivatsa," derived from the Sanskrit words "Sri" mean the goddess of prosperity and "vatsa" mean beloved or dear, indicates auspiciousness, prosperity, dignity and purity. The "conch" (shankh) symbolizes the "weapon" of the Hindu god "Vishnu." Many religious ceremonies and royal coronal rituals were performed when this conch shell was used. The shankh symbol is some early pyu coins produced in this time period. In later coins, other symbols were replaced for the shankh symbol on pyu coins. Similarly, the symbols of the sun and the moon are always present on Pyu coins. The sun represents glory, strength, and authority, while the moon represents peace and tranquility (Maung Thar, 2024). The sun is placed to the right of Srivatsa, and the moon is placed to the left.

The reverse side of Pyu coins generally features Bhadrapitha is believed to resemble a throne or a seat. Bindu dots that always appear on Pyu coins have been interpreted in various ways. Bindu dots located at the top of Bhadrapitha are interpreted as representing five Buddhas

of this world. Meanwhile, the wavy lines at the bottom of Sriksetra coins represent water, which is cool and is the lord of life in the living world (Maung Thar, 2024).

Pyu coin designs show that a strong integration of religious, cosmological, and royal symbolism. Their iconography not only provided decorative purposes but also forwarded messages of legitimacy, authority, and divine blessing. These coins served two roles: as mediums of economic exchange and as carriers of cultural and ideological meaning.

Typology and Characteristics of Sriksetra Coins

Among the ancient artifacts found at Sriksetra, one of the most significant are the small stamped silver coins, known as Pyu coins. They are called Sriksetra coins because they were discovered in Sriksetra. Similar types of coins have also been found in Beikthano and Halin. Collectively, coins discovered from these three cities are referred to as Pyu coins (Aung, 1998: 150-152; Aung, 1993: 152).

At Sriksetra, coins were found in 4 types, but their characteristics are not the same. They are found to be similar in form but vary in certain details. Based on these differences, Sriksetra coins can be classified as follows:

- Type 1:** On the front side of the first type, a conch is depicted within Srivatsa symbol. On the reverse side, Bhadrapitha and Bindu dots can be seen (Aung, 1998: 150-152; Aung, 1993: 152). This design is similar to Halin type No. (1) coin. Although there are slight differences in the conch design, Sriksetra coin have five Bindu dots above Bhadrapitha, whereas Halin coin has only three Oil-lamps. Sriksetra type No. (1) coin is also basically the same as Maingmaw type No. (2) coin (Tun Foundation Bank Literary Committee, 2016: 358).
- Type 2:** On the front side of the second type, a stupa is seen surrounded by four Bindu dots within Srivatsa symbol. At the top are the sun and moon, on the sides are the thunderbolt and conch, and at the bottom are wavy lines. On the reverse side, Bhadrapitha and Bindu dots can be seen (Aung, 1998: 150-152; Aung, 1993: 152). This coin type has not been found in Beikthano, Halin, and Maingmaw (Tun Foundation Bank Literary Committee, 2016: 358).
- Type 3:** The front side of the third type is similar to that of the second type. However, the details are different. It has been found that, instead of the stupa, there are three Bindu dots within Srivatsa symbol. On the reverse side, Bhadrapitha and Bindu dots can be seen (Aung, 1998: 150-152; Aung, 1993: 152). This coin design is found to be similar to Beikthano type No. (2) coin and Halin type No. (3) coin (Tun Foundation Bank Literary Committee, 2016: 358).
- Type 4:** This type is the most different from all the previously described types. On the front side of this type has Srivatsa symbol. At the top are the sun and moon, on the sides are swastika and Bhadrapitha, and at the bottom numerous Bindu dots are densely arranged. On the reverse side, the rising sun motif is depicted within Bindu dots. There are also Bindu dots between the radiating sun rays (Aung, 1998: 150-152; Aung, 1993: 152). This coin design is similar to Halin type No. (2) coin, Maingmaw types No. (1), (3), and (4) coin (Tun Foundation Bank Literary Committee, 2016: 359).

The use of symbols such as Srivatsa, Bhadrapitha, sun and moon on Pyu coins reflects the integration of religious ideology and royal authority within the economic system. It has been observed that coins found at Sriksetra and those from other Pyu cities are basically the same, with only slight differences in detail. Therefore, it is assumed that coins were produced and used according to each city's own system. At the same time, the discovery of identical coins

in different locations also indicates the existence of strong regional economic networks and trade among the Pyu city-states.

Table 1: Comparison of Sriksetra Coin Types

Type	Front Symbols	Reverse Symbols	Similar Coins Found In	Notes
1	Srivatsa with conch	Bhadrapitha with 5 Bindu dots	Halin Type 1, Maingmaw Type 2	Bhadrapitha with 3 Bindu dots in Halin and Maingmaw coins
2	Srivatsa with stupa, sun, moon, thunder bolt, conch, wavy lines	Bhadrapitha with 5 Bindu dots	-	This coin type has not been found in Halin, Beikthano and Maingmaw
3	Similar with the second type, but stupa changed with 3 Bindu dots within Srivatsa	Bhadrapitha with 5 Bindu dots	Beikthano Type 2, Halin Type 3	Similar iconography
4	Srivatsa with sun, moon, swastika	Rising sun motif, Bindu dots	Halin Type 2, Maingmaw Types 1,3 and 4	most different types

Source: Adapted from Bob Hudson, *The Origins of Bagan* and Tun Foundation Bank Literary Committee, *History of Pyu Urban Civilization*, 2016.

Interpretation and Cultural Significance

Sriksetra coins are not only used for economic purposes and they serve as historical records of the beliefs, traditions, and cultural practices of Pyu civilization. Although the majority of the motifs on these coins are taken from Indian sources, there was also integrate of those motifs with local indigenous traditions and beliefs that contributed to forming the urban identity of Myanmar during that early Pyu period.

Srivatsa symbol was used on Pyu coins, these coins demonstrate that Indian cosmology and religious thought had an impact on Pyu coins. Other symbols found on Pyu coins include Bindu dots, Bhadrapitha, and wavy lines (water) and can be seen as local interpretations of Buddhist and animist beliefs demonstrating a syncretic religious culture. The symbolic sun and moon motifs on all types of Pyu coins, show the importance of cosmic balance, and royal legitimacy, and also the stupa, conch shell and thunderbolt are symbols of the spirituality related to Buddhist and Hindu iconography.

In addition to their spiritual representation, the coins conveyed power through the use of common designs and materials (for example silver) that validated those who held power over the economy, including production and commerce. Most of Sriksetra coins are marked with motifs such as Bhadrapitha (throne) on the reverse side of the coin and are interpreted to signify royal power or divine kingship, creating a connection between a ruler and the sacred cosmological order. The water depicted at the bottom of some of the coins further symbolizes the relationship between a king and the sun and moon, relating to kingship and cosmological power. The symbols such as Srivatsa, Bhadrapitha, sun and moon on Pyu coins demonstrates the integration of religious beliefs and royal authority within the economic system. As a result,

this coinage system was not only for economic purposes, but also served to connect cultural, religious and political legitimacy.

From an economic point, these coins were an important step in moving early Pyu society from a barter economy to currency. The discovery of coins in cities like Sriksetra, Halin, Beikthano, Pinle (also known Maingmaw), as well as other regions which were spread by Pyu culture, indicates that there were regional trade routes between cities. The identical coin types at all three major Pyu cities (Sriksetra, Halin and Beikthano) indicates the existence of strong regional trade and economic networks connecting between Pyu city-states.

Therefore, Sriksetra coins represent not only a spiritual symbol of cultural identity but also represent tangible evidence of the economic development of these cities. Because they can be compared to coins found in the neighboring Pyu cities (Halin and Beikthano), it is possible to see both regional organization and local variation in terms of coin usage. That similarity of coin use throughout most of the cities indicates the growth of trade networks and the existence of shared culture within Pyu city-states. The study of coins from Sriksetra has enhanced our understanding of how the currency developed in the early Pyu cities and the interconnections of regional trade, religious iconography and political legitimacy within the region. The interaction of economic activity, cultural and governance within Pyu region shows the importance of coins in developing the urban identity of Sriksetra throughout its history.

Conclusion

Coins played a significant role as the main medium of exchange in the country's trade system. It is assumed that the technique of coin production in Myanmar was arrived via India along with other cultures. It is also believed that India and Myanmar had trading relations in ancient times. Pyu coins are typically 3 centimeters in diameter and coins can be classified into types based on the markings of Srivatsa (auspicious mark) on the front side, and Bhadrapitha (throne-stool) on the reverse. Research indicates that four types of coins have been found in Sriksetra, three types in Halin, and three types in Beikthano.

Pyu coins discovered at Sriksetra provide as invaluable historical records that integrate the economic, religious, and political lives of early Myanmar's earliest urban civilization. Pyu people were able to facilitate, stability and convenience in trade within Pyu city states by transition from a barter system to a stamped silver coinage system. The motifs on the coins, such as Srivatsa, Bhadrapitha, and etc., provide that a cultural fusion (syncretism) where symbols of Buddhism, Hinduism, and local animist beliefs are intertwined to Pyu society. The symbols such as Srivatsa, Bhadrapitha, sun and moon on Pyu coins demonstrates the integration of religious beliefs and royal authority within the economic system. As a result, this coinage system was not only for economic purposes, but also served to connect cultural, religious and political legitimacy.

Coins from Sriksetra, Halin, and Beikthano were found to be basically the same, with only slight differences in detail. The shared iconography among coins found in Sriksetra, Halin, and Beikthano indicates the existence of a regional economic network. The incorporation of religious symbols into coin designs suggests that commerce and religion were closely linked, possibly under the supervision of royal authorities or share the same religion. Ultimately, these coins provide comprehensive understanding of the early development of currency in Pyu cities, as well as the important evidence for understanding the complex developmental history of early Myanmar.

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APPENDICES

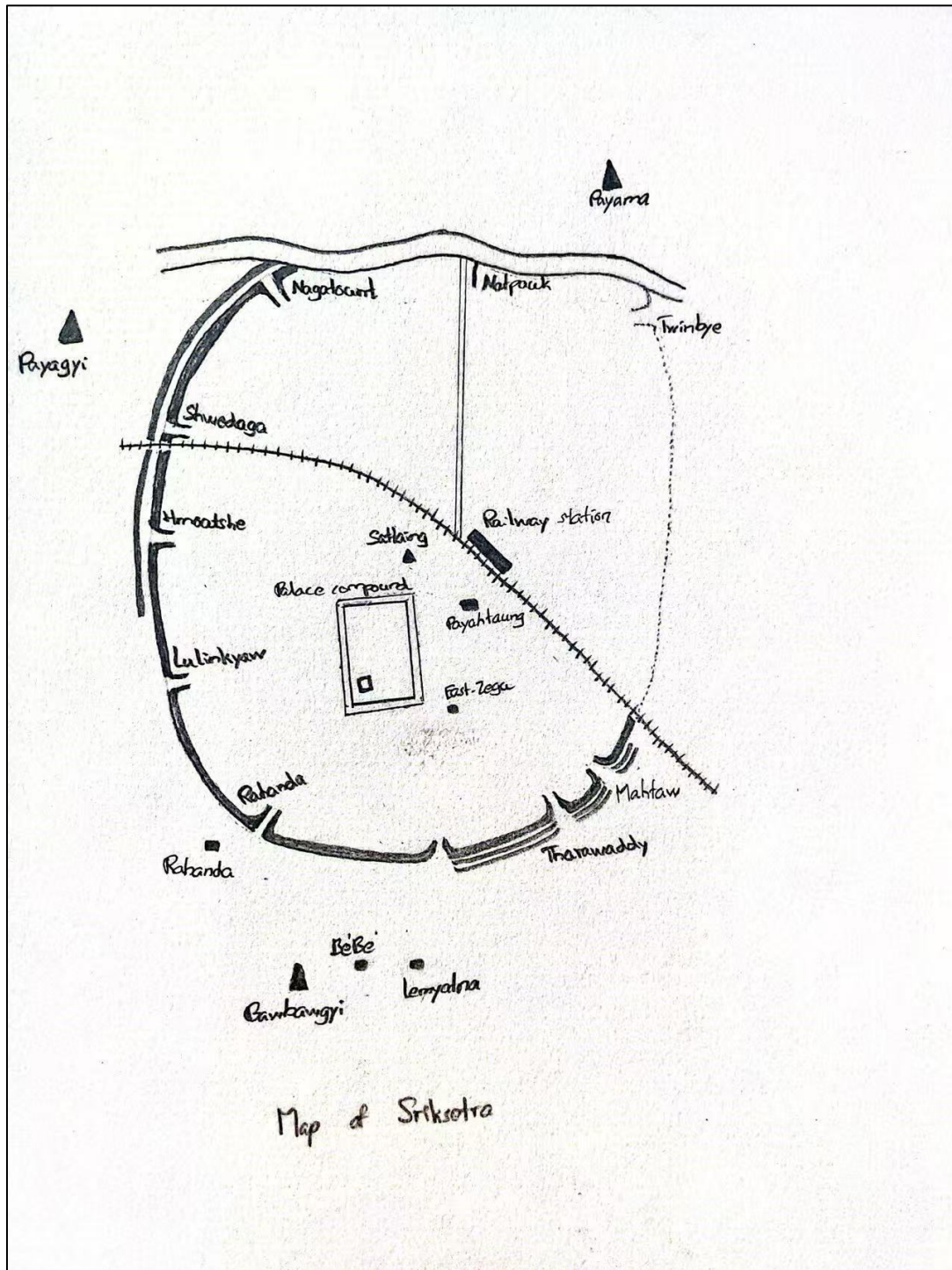


Figure 1: Report on the Excavation at HMA-34.
Source: Adapted from Department of Archaeology, Ministry of Culture, 1997-98.

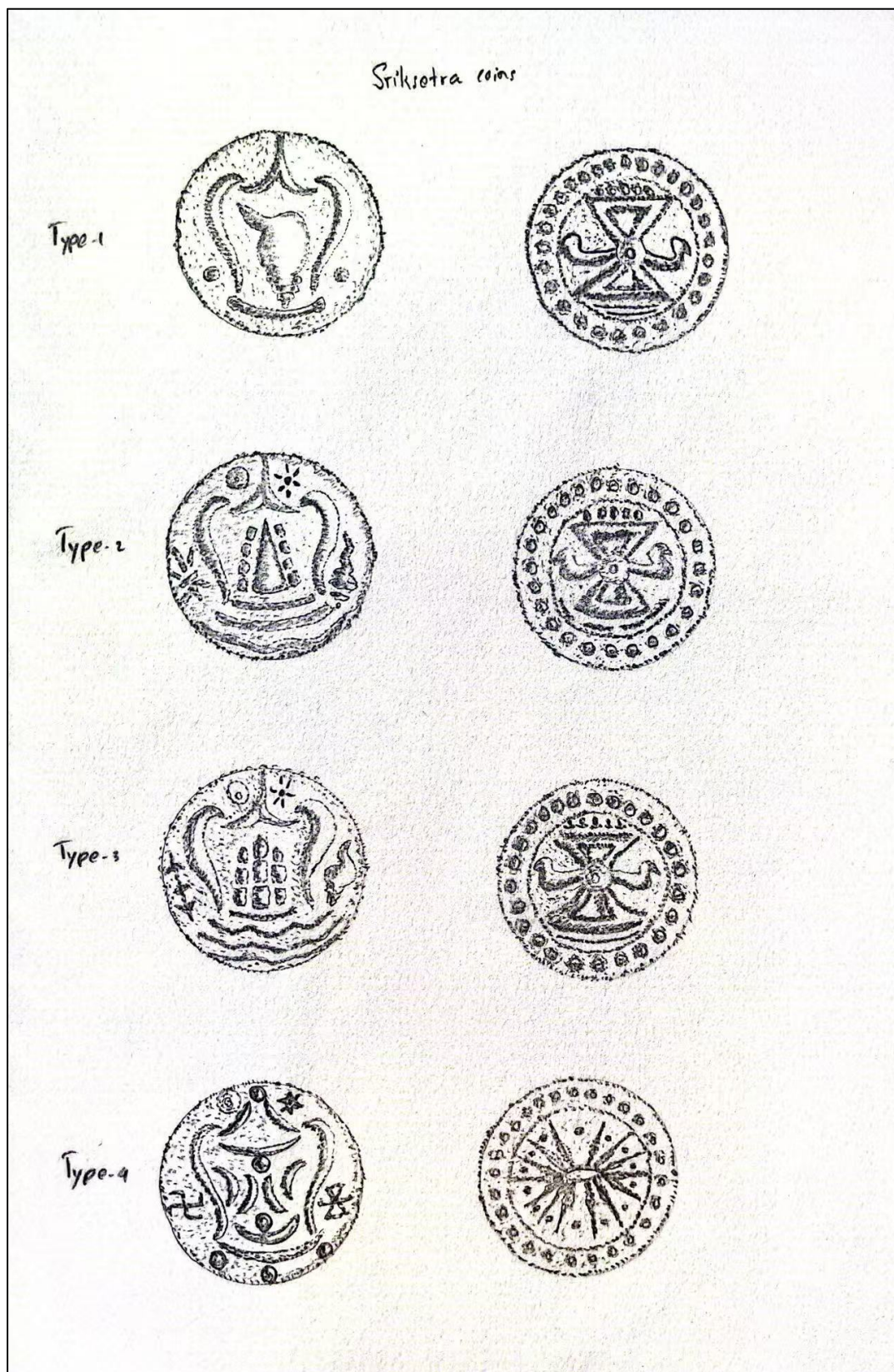


Figure 2: Sriksetra Coins.

Source: Adapted from Bob Hudson. *The Origins of Bagan*, p. 177.

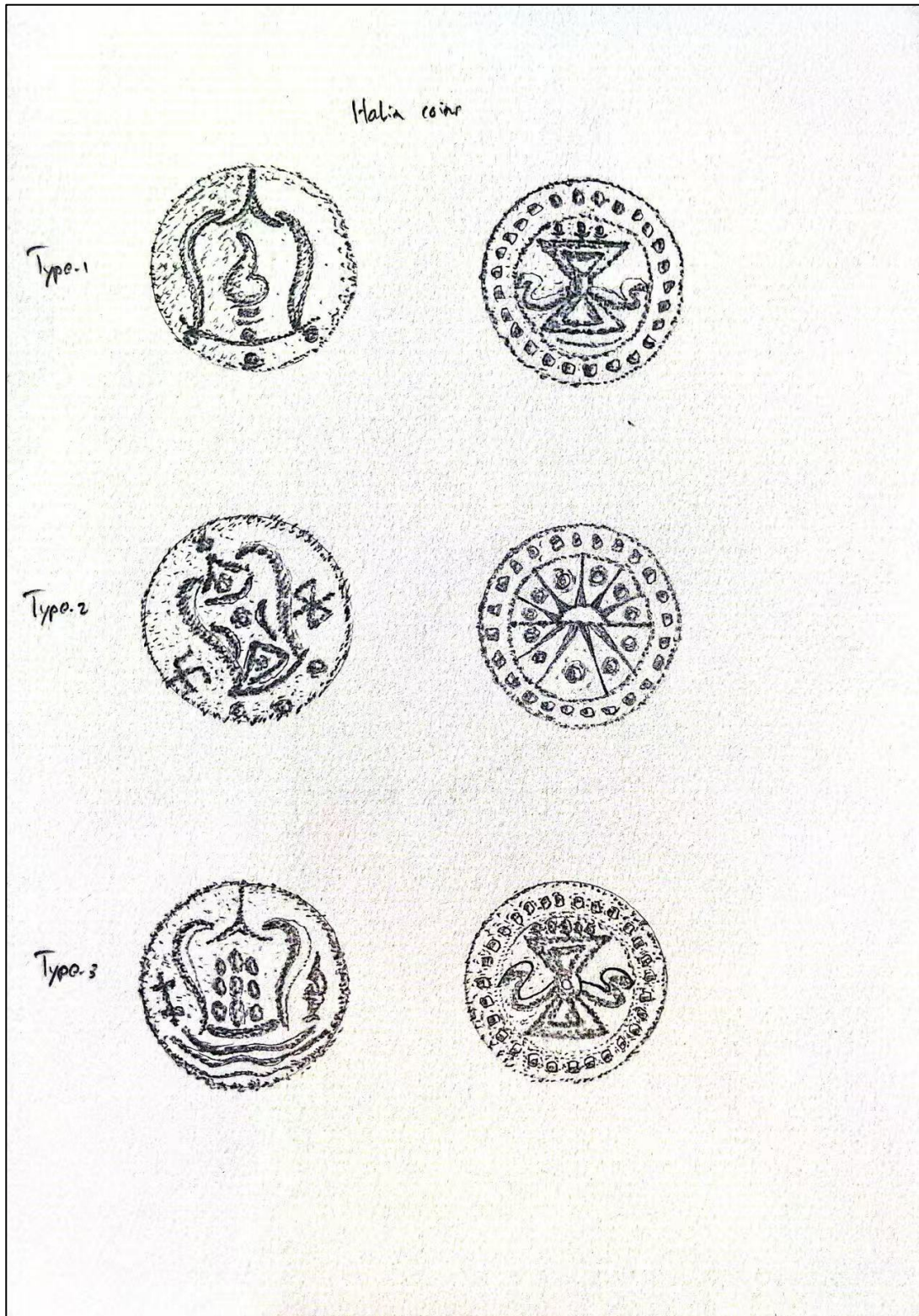


Figure 3: Halin Coins
Source: Adapted from Bob Hudson. *The Origins of Bagan*, p. 159.

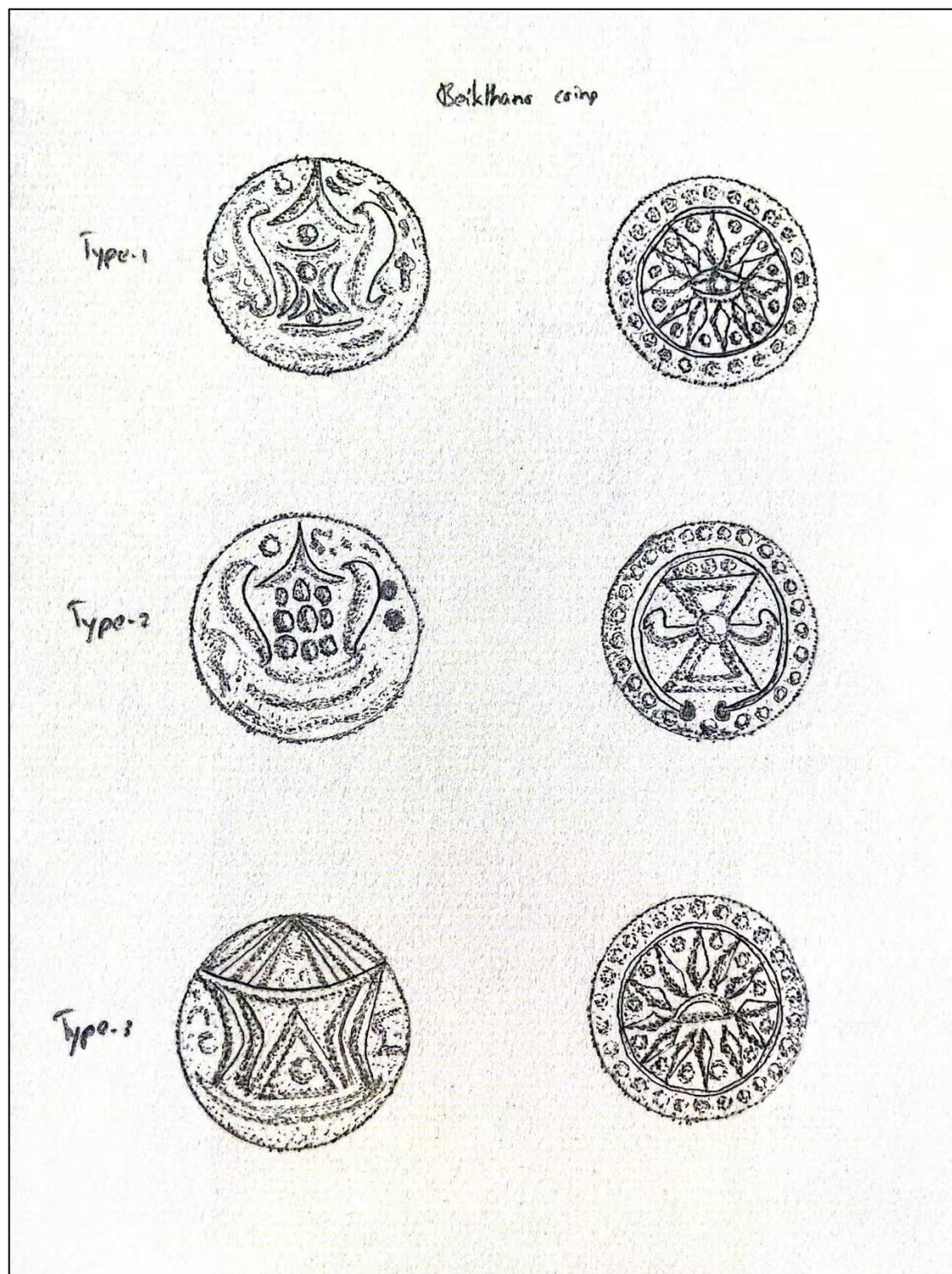


Figure 4: Beikthano Coins.

Source: Adapted from Bob Hudson. *The Origins of Bagan*, p. 164.

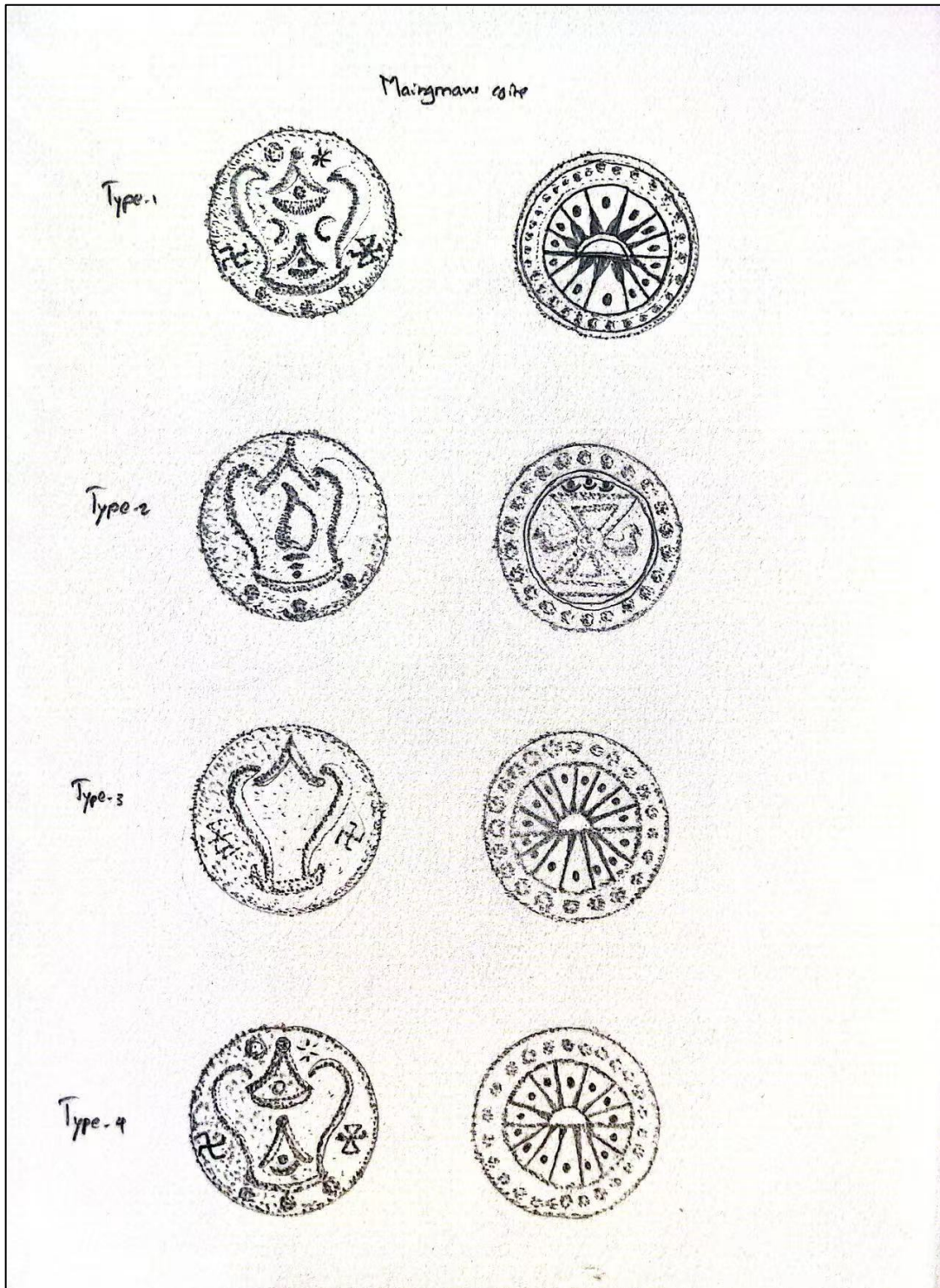


Figure 5: Maingmaw Coins.
Source: Adapted from Tun Foundation Bank Literary Committee. *History of Pyu Urban Civilization*. 2016.

