

AN OLD CHURCH IN THAN HLYIN¹

- Than Hlyin known as Syriam in the British Colonial times was once one of Myanmar's seaport towns which thrived on oversea trade and commerce. From the 16th to the middle of the 18th centuries it had commanded the sea lanes in the South East Asian waters, and its maritime importance was no less than those of its contemporaries Penang, Malacca and Jakarta. The Arabs, the Armenians, the Portuguese, the Dutch, the French and the English who arrived there one after another at different times, to trade, to repair or build galleons, to open factories or to serve under Myanmar kings and meddle in the local politics. But after King Anaukpet Lun besieged it and broke up the Portuguese stronghold there in 1613 and later King Alaungpaya suppressed his enemies there in 1756, this seaport town was relegated to the background.
- Among old monuments which still stand in Than Hlyin which is now easily reached in half an hour from Yangon by car on the Than Hlyin Bridge, is **an old Roman Catholic Church** in ruins on a hillock locally called Shin Mwe Lun Kone. Because the Portuguese had controlled Than Hlyin for 13 years (A.D. 1600-1613) the church is mistakenly thought to be an old Portuguese church. But the *two inscriptions* sheltered in a small brick house inside the church give us its history.
- One is a tombstone with inscriptions in Portuguese and Myanmar. The Portuguese says,

*Here lies Maria Dias, aged 48, mother of Antonio Fernande, expired in March 1732.
R. I. P.*
- Some portions of the Myanmar inscription have been weathered. A loose rendering into English is as follows:

*“ . . . year, second waning moon of Tabaung (March) on the 4th day (Wednesday)
. . . the mother of Preacher Yarnate. . . aged 48 followed the course of Karma
(passed away). ”*
- The other is a Latin inscription of 10 lines in relief letters on a metal plate of 34 inches by 22 inches, which says that the church is dedicated to Virgin Mary, and that it was built in 1750 by an Armenian Nicolai de Aguilar and Margarita, his wife. Below the floral frame of the plate are two lines of Armenian letters which tell us that the church was built in 1750 in ever loving memory of Agatt, the son of Mr. Nicholas and wife. The church and the tombstone are not associated with the Portuguese, neither are the two inscriptions

¹ <http://www.myanmar.gov.mm/Perspective/persp1996/10-96/old.htm> (accessed on 9 July 2010)

related. The Portuguese communities in Than Hlyin were deported upcountry after their gang-leader Phillipe de Brito was punished and put to death in A. D. 1613. The tombstone inscription is 18 years earlier than the church. When it was first discovered in the Burma Oil Company compound in the early days of the British Colonial Rule, it was removed into the church. It is not the tombstone of de Brito as the locals believe it to be.

- By Notification No. 303 dated the 10th August 1908, the Government had declared the old church to be a protected monument under the Ancient Monuments Preservation Act of 1904. Since then both the church and the two inscriptions have come into the custody of the Archaeology Department which has compiled a brief history of the old church as follows:

The church was erected in 1749-50 A. D. by Monseigneur Nerini, the second Vicar Apostolic of Ava and Pegu, and a member of the Barnabite Mission, which laboured in Pegu in the 18th century. The major part of the expenses of the erection was borne by Nicolai de Aguilar, a wealthy Armenian Merchant. The form of the building is thus described by Monseigneur G. M. Percoto, Missionary to the Kingdom of Ava and Pegu and Bishop of Massulis:

“In plan it consisted of a single nave, ornamented with arches and columns both inside and out. Its dimensions were as follows: Length 81, breadth 38, and 40 French feet. It was intended to have a domed roof, but the arrival of the Coromandel workmen, who were sent for to construct it, was prevented by the war, which arose, and the roof was therefore completed in another style. The whole building was a marvel to Peguans, but what they more especially admired was a spiral staircase going up inside the tower.”

- In *A Description of the Burmese Empire*, 1885, Rangoon by Father Sangermano, there is a note added by John Jardine, President of the Educational Syndicate of British Burma in which he quoted Monseigneur G. M. Percoto on the description and the service of the church as follows:

“. . . a rich Armenian and his wife finding the money, Nerini built a splendid church, with only one nave adorned with arches and columns within and without,” and with a bell-tower so high as to make the Peguans marvel. A Latin description of 1750 commemorated the Armenians, whose names were Nicholas de Aguilar and Margarita, his wife. The people met in the church at the sound of the bells; baptisms were performed with solemnity; they made processions and went singing psalms through the squares and the streets, and everything was done as in Italy. For the boys many schools were made of geography, arithmetic, navigation, and such sciences and arts as might be useful to them, and over all Father Nerini Presided, untiring, day and night.”

- Today only the shell of this old church remains with the two inscriptions housed inside it. Day trippers go to Than Hlyin to get away from the hurly-burly of Yangon and to recapture the heyday of the old seaport and imaginatively reconstruct the picture of a 246 year old² Armenian church of the Barnabite Order.

Tomb Inscriptions in Than Hlyin Church



² Counted from the year 1996 when this paper was written.

In Latin³

TEMPLUM HOC
BEATAE MARIE VIRGINI
SINE LABE CONCEPTAE
SACRUM
NICOLAI DE AGUALAR
NATIONE ARMENI
ET MARGARITAE CONJUGIS
AERE EXTRUCTUM EST
ANNO DOMINI SANCTO
MDCCL

In Armenian⁴

In Portuguese⁵

*AQUI ESTA SEBULTADO
O CORPO DE MARIA DIAS
MULHER QUE FOI DE
ANTONIO FERNANDES
(N)ATURAL DE SIRIAO DE
(I)DADE DE 48 ANNOS
(A Q)UAL FALLECEO EM
(?) DE MARCO DE 1732
REQUIESCAT IN PACE*

³ အေကိုလေး(မိုလု)၊ အင်းဂရောက် ခြေရာများ၊ ကက်သလစ် ရဟန်းဖြစ် တက္ကသိုလ်၊ ရန်ကုန်၊ ၁၉၇၄-၁၉၉၄၊ စာ ၁၀၂။

⁴ Due to lack of Armenian alphabets it is impossible to transcribe. (English translation: *The Church was built in 1750 in ever loving memory of Agatt, the son of Mr. Nicholas and his wife.*)

⁵ Transcribed by Mr. Antonio V. de SALDANHA (Ph. D), Professor of History in the University of Macau at Than Hlyin on 6.7.13, Saturday. (English translation : *Here lies Maria Dias, aged 48, mother of Antonio Fernande, expired in March 1732. R. I. P.*)



In Burmese⁶

(၁၀၉၃) ခုး တဘောင် လပြည့်ကျော် ၂ ရက် ၄ နေ့း
 ----တ် တိကျော်တွင် ဆရာယာနိတ် မွေသမိ
 (ခင်) အသက် ၃၈ နှစ်တွင် ကံနဲသည်။

⁶ Transcribed from the photo taken by Fr. Peter Sein Hlaing Oo on 6.7.13, Saturday.



Tomb Inscription found at Shwe Gu Gyi Pagoda in Pegu

Transcription in Latin

AEDEM HANC
AD FIDEM PROPAGANDAM
CLER^{CIS} REG^{BUS} S^{TI} PAULI
NICOLAUS DE AGULAR
ET MARGARITA CONJUX
AEDIFICABANT
ANNO DOMINI SANCTO
MDCCL

In Burmese⁷

စိန်ပေါလ်ဂိုဏ်းဝင် ဘုန်းတော်ကြီးများ သာသနာပြုရန်
နီကိုလတ်ဒီအဂ္ဂီလာ နှင့် ဇနီး မာဂရစ်တာ တို့မှ
ဤကျောင်းတော်ကို ခရစ်တော်၏ မွန်မြတ်သော
၁၇၅၀ ပြည့်နှစ်တွင်
ဆောက်လုပ်လှူဒါန်းသည်။



⁷ မောင်အေးသန်း၊ သင်္ချိုင်းစာများကပြောသော သင်္ချိုင်းအကြောင်းတစ်စေ့တစ်စောင်၊ ငွေတာရီ၊ ဩဂုတ် ၁၉၉၄၊ စာ ၈၅-၈၈။

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- မှန်နန်းရာဇဝင်တော်ကြီး၊ တတိယတွဲ၊ မြန်မာ့အလင်းသတင်းစာတိုက်၊ ၁၉၉၃၊ စာ ၈-၁၀၊ ၁၆၅-၁၇၂။
- သံလျင်မြို့၊ မြန်မာ့စွယ်စုံကျမ်း၊ တွဲ-၁၃၊ မြန်မာနိုင်ငံဘာသာပြန်စာပေအသင်း၊ ရန်ကုန်မြို့၊ ၁၉၇၃၊ စာ ၃၉၀-၃၉၄။
- မောင်အေးသန်း၊ သင်္ချိုင်းစာများကပြောသော သမိုင်းအကြောင်းတစ်စေ့တစ်စောင်း၊ ငွေတာရီ၊ ဩဂုတ် ၁၉၉၄၊ စာ ၈၅-၈၈။
- အေကိုလေး(မုံလှ)၊ အင်းဝရောက်ခြေရာများ၊ ကက်သလစ်ရဟန်းဖြစ်တက္ကသိုလ်၊ ရန်ကုန်၊ ၁၉၇၄-၁၉၉၄၊ စာ ၉၉-၁၀၈။
- သုတေသီတစ်ဦး (ရန်ကုန်)၊ ၁၇၅၀-ခုနှစ်က သန်လျင်ဘုရားကျောင်းနှင့်စာသင်ကျောင်း၊ မျိုးကြွသူ(ကက်သလစ်လစဉ်သတင်းလွှာ)၊ မတ် ၂၀၁၄၊ စာ ၅၄-၅၆။

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284 DESCRIPTION OF THE BURMESE EMPIRE

elephants, and that they could only be received in audience two at a time with heads uncovered and barefooted. The Cavalier suspected treachery, and refused to comply with such disgraceful conditions. The Bishop and the Fathers Mondelli and Conte advised them not to trust the short faith of the barbarians, but to get back to Syriam. They agreed to do this; but on starting they were taken by surprise and killed. 'They had hardly entered into the ship when out of the thick bushes that border on the river there came an ant's nest of soldiers, some on horses, but the most part on foot: and immediately the marsh was covered with armed men, crying for their death, and stopping their way with stones and arquebuses.' The ship could not go fast as the water was low and the tide on the ebb; the Cavalier and his men took to the shore, but made little speed in the thick jungle. 'After many conflicts they were beaten, and almost all were killed with the Cavalier, and only four crossed those savage places and reached Syriam to tell the sad news.' The bishop and the two priests were all killed in this slaughter.

Father Nerini thought it necessary to obey orders and put the mission in safety. He sent off Father Angelo to India, and soon followed *viâ* the Siamese port of Mergui to Pondicherry and Chandernagore. Nerini returned to Syriam in 1749; and—a rich Armenian and his wife finding the money—he built 'a splendid church, with only one nave adorned with arches and columns within and without,' and with a bell-tower so high as to make the Pegùans marvel. A Latin inscription of 1750 commemorated the Armenians, whose names were Nicholas de Aguilar, and Margarita, his wife. 'The people met in the church at the sound of the bell; baptisms were performed with solemnity; they made processions, and went singing psalms through the squares and the streets, and everything was done as in Italy. For the boys many schools were made of geography, arithmetic, navigation, and such sciences and arts as might be useful to them, and over all Father Nerini presided, untiring, day and night.' The King of Tavoy had sent for one missionary, and promised to build a church at his own expense; another was to go to Pegù to re-open the church there, and a third to the new English colony at Negrais. The Pope had made Nerini a bishop; and he was hard at work making grammars of the Burman and Pegù languages, dictionaries, and prayer-books. Every day seemed a thousand years to his ardent desires.