In 1886 the British Museum acquired approximately eighty Burmese manuscripts, now located at Or. 3403-80. These manuscripts formed part of the collection of Sir Arthur Purves Phayre, one of the most distinguished of Burma’s early administrators (fig. 1). Phayre’s life spanned the formative years of British colonial rule in Burma. He left England for the East in 1828, two years after Britain’s first acquisition of Burmese territory, the Arakan and Tenasserim provinces; he rose to high office as first Chief Commissioner of the newly created province of British Burma in 1862; and he died in 1885, just before Britain’s tripartite dismemberment of the Burmese kingdom was completed by the annexation of Upper Burma. Phayre’s last public pronouncement – a letter to The Times of 13 October 1885 – was in fact an endorsement of the policy of British intervention in Burma. But, though very much a product of the imperialist era, Phayre transcended his times. His greatness was more than just that of an enlightened colonial

Fig. 1. Sir Arthur Phayre (from H. Yule, Narrative of the Mission to Ava)
ruler. It lay in his scholarship and pioneering studies of Burma. From the time of his arrival in Burma, Phayre immersed himself in the study of Burmese language, archaeology and numismatics, geology, topography, religion, and history. Everywhere he went, he found time to collect manuscripts or to commission copies of the originals. The results of these endeavours constitute the British Library’s Sir Arthur Phayre Collection of Burmese Manuscripts.

The materials in the collection fall into three categories: palm-leaf manuscripts, paper folding books (parabaik), and manuscripts on European paper. The majority of the texts are historical or legal works, but there are also some literary and Buddhist texts in the collection. The texts are written in Burmese script and are nearly all in Burmese, though there are also some Pali texts and some Pali texts with Burmese Nissaya (interpretations). Burmese manuscripts rarely come with their title, authorship, and date of compilation conveniently supplied and thus often present the scholar, or cataloguer, with problems of identification. But, in some cases, Phayre himself has supplied a title, written on a piece of paper and threaded through with the palm leaves, or set down as an annotation on the paper manuscripts. Many of the paper manuscripts, too, have transcriptions of Burmese names and annotations in Phayre’s own hand, giving a glimpse of the genesis of Phayre’s scholarship. For these manuscripts constituted the raw materials from which Phayre compounded his major contribution to the field of Burmese studies, his History of Burma, published in 1883.

Phayre’s History established a groundwork for Burmese history that was accepted by subsequent generations of historians. Phayre’s nomenclature and chronology of Burmese kings has for the most part remained unmodified to this day and, above all, his periodization of Burmese history into ‘Pagan’, ‘Shan’, and ‘Konbaung’ periods is still accepted. The importance of Phayre’s work is that he was one of the first scholars to study indigenous sources, in particular, the Burmese Ya-zawin, or chronicles. His concept and presentation of history was shaped by these sources as much as by the historical conventions of his time. Thus, Phayre’s History is primarily a narrative of the fortunes of rulers, their wars and achievements. He did not, for instance, give much attention to such aspects of Burmese history as internal administration and government, or social and economic conditions and change. But nor did he concern himself with the Western intrusion and impact upon Burma – this is in marked contrast to a whole generation of scholars whose approach to South-east Asian history was ‘Euro-centric’, that is to say, viewed primarily in terms of European influence upon the area.

Phayre’s scholarly achievements appear all the more impressive when it is realized that he was largely self-educated. His literary output was shaped by the circumstances of his current administrative posting and is therefore perhaps best chronicled by brief reference to the stages of his career. Born in 1812 at Shrewsbury, Phayre left for India in 1828 to join the Seventh Bengal Native Infantry – and did not return to England for thirty years. His first contact with Burma came in 1834 when he was sent for a short time to Moulmein to raise a Talaing (Mon) corps for service in Tenasserim. In 1837, recalled from service in India, he was appointed Senior Assistant to Captain (later, Sir)
Archibald Bogle, the Commissioner of Arakan. Phayre remained in Arakan until 1846 when he was nominated Principal Assistant to the Commissioner of the Tenasserim Provinces where he served for two years. Then, after a year’s service with his regiment in the Punjab, he returned to Burma in 1849 as Commissioner of Arakan. It was during these early years, 1837-48, spent in isolated conditions, that Phayre laid the foundations of his administrative abilities and of his Burmese studies. His first article, ‘An Account of Arakan’, was published in the Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, in 1841. In it, Phayre gave a general geographic, ethnographic, administrative, and linguistic survey of Arakan, and included sections on the episodes leading to the first Anglo-Burmese War and on British administration of Arakan. This was followed in 1844 by his ‘On the History of Arakan’. This account was a translation of a historical compilation which Phayre had requested ‘a learned Arakanese Hsaya’ named U Mi to make from various ancient chronicles of Arakan. Phayre was aware of Burmese attempts since their conquest of Arakan in 1784 to eradicate Arakanese ‘nationalism’ and was concerned to preserve the documentary sources of their independent history. His article covered Arakanese history down to 1784 and ended with a note that his account would be continued in a further article. This never seems to have appeared and it is probable that Phayre became too swamped by administrative duties to continue this particular study. The original text of U Mi’s compilation which he translated is Or. 3465A.

Phayre’s next important contribution to the Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal did not appear until 1864. His career had advanced considerably in the intervening period. At the end of 1852, Phayre (now of Captain’s rank) was put in charge of the newly annexed Lower Burma territories, becoming Commissioner of Pegu. During this time, he accompanied, in November-December 1854, a Burmese mission to Calcutta which had been sent by the new King of Burma, Mindon, to convey greetings to the Governor-General of India and to ask for the return of their annexed territories. It was this request that occasioned the famous reply of Lord Dalhousie to Phayre: ‘You may tell the Envoys that so long as the sun shines, which they see, those territories will never be restored to the Kingdom of Ava.’ The Burmese account of this mission, written on a folding book, is Or. 3450B. Dalhousie, though unyielding, did, however, consider it important to maintain diplomatic relations and in 1855 he sent Phayre as his Envoy to the Court of King Mindon at Amarapura to negotiate a treaty formally ceding the Lower Burman territories to the British. An account of this mission was prepared and published by Phayre’s secretary on the mission, Henry Yule. Phayre supplied many of the details incorporated into Yule’s Mission to Ava, including descriptions of his audiences with the king and ministers (fig. 2). Yule was also permitted to draw upon Phayre’s private journal for his account. Yule’s account was published in a slightly different form from his original report which Dalhousie and Phayre had not wanted published lest it gave offence to the Burmese. The published account omits a paper written by Phayre entitled ‘Miscellaneous notices of members of the Royal family. Remaining members of the pure race of Aolompra; the Queens, the King’s children, the Crown prince’s chief wife; Tharawadee’s other sons; other members of the family; probable succession.’ A manuscript in the collect-
Fig. 2. Sir Arthur Phayre’s reception at the Court of Ava

tion, written on European paper, at Or. 3470 is probably an expanded version of this account. This manuscript is entitled: ‘A Historical Memorandum of Royal relations of Burmah hunters family from beginning to present 1228, A.D. 1866. Collected from Burman History and various parts. Best corrected by various Prince and Queen and old officials of this Burmah.’ This manuscript is a very detailed genealogy of the kings of Burma and their royal households from 1752 to 1866. Judging by the English of the title-page, it is most likely that Phayre had instigated research into the ancestry of the Konbaung dynasty and that the research was done for him by a Burmese. Phayre’s 1855 mission failed to conclude a treaty with King Mindon who was reluctant to formalize in writing what was already humiliating enough in reality. Phayre was told: ‘Friendship now exists between us, and we wish to remain friends; but it is against our custom to make any written agreement.’ Phayre made two further missions – in 1862 and in 1866 – to the Burmese Court, now transferred to Mandalay. The 1862 mission obtained a commercial treaty, but negotiations were broken off during the 1866 mission because of a rebellion at the capital.

In 1862 the British possessions in Burma, namely Arakan, Tenasserim, and Pegu, were formed into a united administration ‘British Burmah’ and Lieut.-Col. Phayre was
appointed the first Chief Commissioner. In spite of his heavy administrative and diplomatic duties, Phayre found time to write his lengthy ‘On the History of the Burmah Race’ which was published in instalments in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*. In this, Phayre gave an account of Burmese history from the earliest times to the reign of King Bayinnaung (1551–81). Phayre’s account was inspired by and based on the Glass Palace Chronicle of Burma which had been presented to Phayre by the king during his mission of 1855. The episode is related in Yule’s *Narrative* as follows:

King: Have you read any of our Maha-Radza-Weng (Chronicles of the Kings)?
Envoy: I have read portions of them, and am very anxious to read more.
King: Well, I will present you with a complete copy, and also a copy of the 550 Zats and the Mahan-Zats, and when you come again I shall expect to find that you have studied them.

At a later audience with the king, Phayre was told:

Read it [the Chronicle] carefully, and let it enter your heart. The advantage will be twofold. First, you will learn the events which have passed and the kings who have succeeded each other; and secondly, as regards futurity, you will gather from thence the instability of human affairs, and the uselessness of strife and anger.

Discussing the validity of the chronicles, Phayre wrote in his article as follows: ‘His Majesty is himself a man of learning, and the erudition from which the information presented is now derived, appears to have been compiled under his direction with careful research. Supposed errors of former editions are pointed out, and original authorities are in such cases quoted.’ The presentation of these chronicles to Phayre must have delighted him greatly. Hitherto, he had only seen sections of the Glass Palace Chronicle and he could not have attempted his *History of Burma* without the whole set. Unfortunately, the royal copies of this chronicle did not come to the British Museum, but the Sir Arthur Phayre Collection does include several portions of the chronicle on palm leaves and a full text of the Glass Palace Chronicle copied on to European paper and bound in eleven volumes. This text (Or. 3451–61) appears to have been Phayre’s working copy and contains extensive annotations in his hand. The 550 Jataka stories which the king also presented to Phayre found their way to the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris.

Phayre left Burma for good in March 1867, and two months later was made Knight of the Star of India. The British Library’s Phayre Collection includes a memorial presented to Phayre at this time by the Burman and Mon inhabitants of Moulmein expressing regret at his departure and their hope that he would soon return to Burma. The memorial (Or. 3446) is written on seven rectangular ivory sheets, and contained in an ivory case ornamented with gold floral designs and with the name Sir Arthur Purves Phayre inscribed on it in Burmese characters (fig. 3). Phayre spent the remainder of his life – except for a period, 1874–8, as Governor of Mauritius – in travelling round the East, America, and Europe and in retirement at Bray, Ireland. His scholarly output continued with the publication in three parts of his ‘On the history of Pegu’. His chief
authority for this account was the manuscript now Or. 3462–4. Phayre said of this source that: ‘The chronology of the narrative is very confused, though the most important date, that of the foundation of the city of Pegu, is correctly stated.’ This narrative was a translation into Burmese made by U Shwei Kyà in 1847–8 of a Mon account based on Mon chronicles written by Hsaya-daw A-thwa of Moulmein. Phayre compared this Mon version with Burmese and Arakanese sources and amended much of its chronology. The main text covered down to the end of the reign of Bayinnaung (1581). All Phayre’s articles formed the preliminary studies out of which grew his definitive History of Burma, including Burma Proper, Pegu, Taungu, Tenasserim and Arakan from the Earliest Time to the End of the First War with British India (London, 1883; reprinted by Susil Gupta: London, 1967).

Phayre’s History is a lasting monument to his love, understanding, and knowledge of Burma. His book was the first western language account of the history of Burma and of the relations between different regional powers and dynasties. The book was also his last published work. With the publication of this book Phayre had by no means exhausted the materials available for further scholarly works. His manuscript collection includes many items of great potential interest to the student of Burma. Among the sources which deserve scholarly attention are various sit-dan or administrative records (Or. 3409, 3410, 3416, 3418, 3442, 3449, and 3450C). Some of these have been published in J. S. Furnivall and Pe Maung Tin (eds.), Zambu-di-pá Ok-hsaung Kyàn (Rangoon, 1960), but the majority remain unexamined. Phayre’s collection also includes three works of the genre known as Nī-ti literature, or works on statecraft. These are Or. 3434, 3437, and 3480. The Burmese Nī-ti Kyàn and their relationship to the Pali Lokaniti is a subject still awaiting critical attention. Or. 3432 is particularly interesting in this connection because it is of Arakanese origin, and bears an early copyist’s date, 1791. Of the few literary works in the collection, the most important is Or. 3471. This is a Burmese life of the Buddha, entitled Ma-la-līn-ga-ya Wut-htū (Mālalāṅkara Vatthu). This text has been published in Burmese and in English translation, but the work has not been examined in the context of South-east Asian accounts of the Buddha’s life and little is known as yet of its inspiration and influence. It is interesting to note, in passing, that this text appears to have been closely followed by the painter of two Burmese illustrated folding books which are in the Department of Oriental Manuscripts and Printed Books.
The collection includes an exceptionally fine parabaik, or Burmese folding-book (Or. 3447A-B). This is an abridged text of the Manú-Akye Damathat, an eighteenth-century law code. The silver-gilt covers are decorated with embossed birds (figs. 4 and 5). Phayre's collection also includes several copies of inscriptions, either in the form of rubbings or copied from the original stone inscriptions on palm leaves. Some of these copies had been commissioned by Phayre and others by Burmese officials. The palm-leaf manuscripts at Or. 3434 contains forty-six inscriptions, dating mostly from the eleventh to fifteenth centuries, and copied from pagodas and monasteries in Pagan. The palm-leaf manuscript (Or. 3435) gives the text of ten inscriptions and contains a note in the margin which states that two royal heralds had commissioned the copying as an act of merit. The inscriptions in the collection are of particular
value because the originals have in some cases subsequently deteriorated so much that they are no longer legible.

Thus, the Sir Arthur Phayre Collection of Manuscripts, whilst comprising less than a quarter of the Department’s Burmese manuscripts, is nevertheless a collection of major importance for scholars. The collection was recatalogued in 1972-3 by the present writer and full details of it will be included in the Catalogue of Mainland South-east Asia Manuscripts which is in course of preparation by Dr. G. Marrison and colleagues of the Department of Oriental Manuscripts and Printed Books, the British Library.

A list of Sir Arthur Phayre’s published writings is appended. Many of his minor articles were drawn from materials in his manuscript collection.

LIST OF SIR ARTHUR PHAYRE’S PUBLISHED WRITINGS

In the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*:

1863 ‘Remarks on a stone inscription from the ruins of Pu-gan, on the Irrawaddy’, xxx, 267.
1863 ‘Memorandum on some medals and coins in the Museum of the Asiatic Society, found near Mergui on the Tenasserim coast’, xxxii, 271.
1864 ‘Memorandum upon some ancient tiles obtained at Pu-gan in Burmah’, xxxiii, 57–8.


In the *Proceedings* of the same Society:

1872 Letter regarding gold coins found on the island of Cheduba. Vol. for 1872, p. 3.
1876 Letter on stone weapons from Burma. Vol. for 1876, p. 3.

In the *Journal of the Society of Arts*:

1881 Paper on British Burma. 27 May 1881.

Separate works:

1 *JAS of Bengal*, x, pt. ii (1841), 679-712.
2 Ibid., XIII, pt. i (1844), 23-52.
5 Tinker’s introduction to Yule’s *Narrative*, p. xi.
6 H. Yule, *Narrative*, p. 117.
7 *JAS of Bengal*, xxxiii (1864), 1-30; xxxvii, pt. i (1868), 73-118; xxxviii, pt. i (1869), 29-82.
9 Ibid., p. xi.
10 *JAS of Bengal*, xxxiii (1864), i.
12 *JAS of Bengal*, xlII, pt. i (1873), 23-57 and 129-59; xlIII, pt. i (1874), 6-21.
13 Ibid., xlII, pt. i (1873), i.