This book was written just as Myanmar began to come out of the shell in which it had reposed for 50 years. During that period, historians and archaeologists had little contact with foreign scholarship. Some foreign archaeologists maintained contact with their counterparts, but they ran the risk of being condemned for appearing to support the military regime. There was a brief thaw in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when the Myanmar Historical Commission sponsored a number of international conferences. During that time, a number of scholars including such major prehistorians as Ian Glover and Charles Higham (and others including the author of this review) were invited to the site of Nyaung-gan in central Myanmar to inspect the first large excavated site of a late prehistoric burial. A reshuffle of leadership led to the end of this brief period of openness. This isolation and the dearth of funds devoted to historical and archaeological research have been correlated with looting of major sites such as Sri Ksetra (Prome) and hasty reconstruction of many important ancient buildings at early cities such as Sri Ksetra, Beikthano, and especially Bagan (formerly transliterated as ‘Pagan’ in English).

The Pyi School of Archaeology and the Department of Archaeology at the University of Yangon are two important institutions involved in the effort to rectify the neglect of archaeology that characterized the period of colonial rule, when Myanmar (as Burma) was governed as an appendage of India. While the new generation of archaeologists could still benefit from external help, they are rapidly becoming able to collaborate as equals. In 2014, the Department of Archaeology at the University of Yangon admitted its first undergraduate class in 20 years. This positive situation increases the likelihood that Myanmar will agree to more collaborative projects with foreign archaeologists in the near future, although this engagement is likely to evolve slowly.

Interestingly, in the brief interval between the time A History of Myanmar since Ancient Times was published in 2012 and the writing of this review in 2014, the greatest advances in our knowledge of premodern Myanmar have been made by archaeologists. No new discoveries have been made that would support the theory that Homo erectus once lived in hinterland Myanmar, nor has new light been shed on the Anyathian lithic industry, but the work of Myanmarese and foreign archaeologists at prehistoric sites has illuminated the beginning of the metal-using period there. Thus, future editions of this book could contain a much longer chapter 2 (“Prehistory”) than the ten pages devoted to it in the current version.

Although the Myanmar government successfully campaigned for the inscription of “Pyu cities” on the World Heritage List,
chapter 3 of this book, “The Urban Period,” abjures the use of the term “Pyu Period” for the era from 200 B.C. to the ninth century A.D. for the most archaeological of reasons: artifacts should not be equated with a particular ethnolinguistic group. There are also good historical grounds for avoiding the term “Pyu.” The old Chinese term Piao may not have meant the same as the Burmese term Pyu, a word that first appears in Old Burmese inscriptions of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, in reference to individuals, not groups. The Chinese Piao was a kingdom, not an ethnic group. Chinese texts note that the people of Piao called themselves something that can be transcribed as “Tircul,” a word found in Old Mon inscriptions of the twelfth century at Bagan. Aung-Thwin and Aung-Thwin thus call this the Urban Period, terminology that many archaeologists would approve.

The authors classify over twelve settlements stretching from Halin in the north to Winka, on the Gulf of Muttama in the south, from this period as “urban.” Most are located in the Irrawaddy River drainage. This development, which as the authors note is contemporaneous with the formation of similar sites in Funan, Champa, Dvaravati, Tambralingga, and Srivijaya, is said to be correlated with the inception of large-scale irrigation systems, though no conclusive evidence for this has yet been found. The authors follow Paul Wheatley’s (1983) approach in identifying urbanism. Their historiographical affiliation also lies firmly with a Braudelian approach in which material culture plays an important role. (For an example of the application of Fernand Braudel’s thought to Southeast Asia, see Reid 1988.)

In theoretical terms, the authors advance the principal hypothesis that Myanmar differed from “river valley cultures” due to the significant role played by the unique climatic region known as the Dry Zone where the dominant political centers in Myanmar existed for all but 60 out of 2000 years. This produced a phenomenon that they term “Dry Zone paramountcy.” They also invoke the “upstream–downstream” concept popularized by Bennet Bronson (1977) for Sumatra, but turn it upside down by arguing that in Myanmar, urbanization and civilization began in the upstream zone and moved downstream. They refer to the theory that hinterland cities tend to be orthogenetic and downstream cities tend to be heterogenetic, but nevertheless conclude that orthogenetic societies were the progenitors of the Urban Period, which “laid the foundations of the ‘classical’ state, and the ‘classical’ state was, in turn, the origin of the state of Myanmar” (p. 74). As I have argued, upstream areas were at least the equals of the downstream societies in driving sociocultural evolution in other places such as south Sumatra.

They are properly circumspect about the degree to which one or two of these early cities may have been successive capitals of an extensive area. They may have been “cultural exemplars” (p. 70). Nevertheless, during the seventh to ninth centuries the Dry Zone was characterized by cultural and technological (if not political) homogeneity. In conjunction with the Myanmar government’s ultimately successful efforts to have the early urban (i.e., “Pyu”) sites declared part of the world’s heritage, much restoration activity took place, in the course of which important archaeological discoveries including some radiocarbon dates were obtained.

These data help shed new light not only on architecture, but on other forms of technology, including importantly the development and distribution of new pottery types. These are not necessarily correlated with language or ethnicity, but they are the most useful type of artifact for gaining insight into a certain level of cultural and technical homogeneity. No detailed pottery typology or chronology yet exists for any country in Southeast Asia, so Myanmar is by no means alone in lacking one, but several younger Myanmar archaeologists have begun to develop expertise in this field, which creates hope that this facet of historical archaeology will evolve in the near future. The amount of Myanmar pottery being recognized in other parts of Southeast Asia, especially from the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries, highlights the importance of attaining a better understanding of this material for the reconstruction of cultural history beyond Myanmar’s borders, as well as for investigating theoretical concerns
connected with the spread of the craft of making high-fired glazed ware and the development of commercial networks.

Chapter 4, covering 30 pages, is devoted to “Pagan: The Golden Age of Myanmar.” Over a thousand inscriptions in Old Burmese logically constitute the majority of available data for this period, considering that both authors are historians. This chapter also briefly mentions 15 Pyu inscriptions that have never been deciphered and the Old Mon inscriptions dated to the 1090s found in Lower Myanmar, which were written in Old Burmese script for one king of Upper Myanmar “who for some reason wrote in a language that did not represent the majority of the people living in his kingdom” (p. 45). This phenomenon is indeed mysterious.

By the late eleventh century there were 2004 monasteries in Bagan. An inscription composed for King Kyanzittha mentioned 4108 monks in the capital (p. 91). The settlement archaeology of Bagan remains to be investigated; settlement pattern studies have not yet been widely applied to Myanmar, though one or two such projects have been initiated. Most historical archaeology in Myanmar has followed the paradigm that emphasizes temples and inscriptions as principle sources of data.

Chapter 5, “Ava and Pegu: A Tale of Two Kingdoms,” discusses Bagan’s successors in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. This era is usually depicted as a sort of medieval Dark Age following the classical Bagan era, ending with the renaissance of the sixteenth century, but these authors argue that it was a transitional period between classical and early modern Myanmar. Had the kingdom of Ava not formed when and where it did, the authors note, Thailand might have stretched from Cambodia to India (p. 117). Archaeology continues to figure briefly in chapter 6, “The ‘Early Modern’ Experiment.” Data from the excavation of Bayinnaung’s sixteenth-century palace at Bago is used to illustrate a new symbolism of palace construction: the palace–citadel had 20 gates named for subject areas, instead of the traditional 12, and faced west instead of east (pp. 136–137). But as the authors note, Bayinnaung’s palace is recorded in chronicles as having been burnt down in 1599 by the Arakanese and replaced by another; thus it is possible that the site represents a later period. Or perhaps, as the authors note, the palace was never burnt. The excavation of the site, like many others in Myanmar, was conducted with the principal goal of uncovering foundations that could be used to build recreations of the historic structures; little archaeological data was recorded.

The country has enormous archaeological potential, including Rakhine and Lower Myanmar as well as Bagan and Piao. Archaeological data of higher quality and variety are now being collected by Myanmarese archaeologists. Meanwhile, it is gratifying to find archaeology well incorporated into a general work about Myanmar history that should attract a large number of readers from various fields.

REFERENCES CITED

Bronson, Benneth

Miksic, John N.

Reid, A. R.

Wheatley, P.