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The Kuthodaw Pagoda Complex, Myanmar: collaborative conservation of a UNESCO Memory of the World site

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ABSTRACT

The invitation to project manage the conservation of the UNESCO-listed Kuthodaw Pagoda complex in Mandalay, Myanmar provided the opportunity to collaborate with the local Ministry of Culture, Department of Archaeology and custodians of the 5.2-hectare site. Conservation was a key component of the University of Sydney and Nan Tien Institute project to photograph, digitise and study the Pali Buddhist texts inscribed on 729 stone stelae at the Kuthodaw Pagoda, the 'World's Biggest Book'. This paper presents the story of the successful collaborative conservation project that saw the neglected site assessed, documented, conserved and provided with maintenance plans for the future. As part of this complex project Burmese staff and a volunteer conservation student were trained on site. The connection that was nurtured between all parties created a productive cultural dialogue that involved consideration of issues of Buddhist customs, traditional crafts, preservation and ongoing maintenance.

This site is highly significant in the history of Buddhist texts and as a place of current Buddhist practice. It is used as a local picnic spot, and is an increasingly popular tourist destination in a country emerging from political turmoil. These multiple purposes attest to the living national, cultural and religious importance of the site. They also create challenges for its preservation and ongoing management. The effect of climate and natural environment adds to the human impact.

Our approach to the site was multi-tiered. The natural and man-made material of the site as a whole with its human demands had to be considered. Within this context the condition of each of the mini-pagodas that individually house the stelae had to be assessed, but the stelae were the primary focus of conservation because the preservation of the texts was the principal purpose of the current project.

The respectful consultation between all parties resulted in an informed unity of purpose that accommodated all stakeholders within the framework of cultural preservation.

BIOGRAPHY

Wendy Reade is a conservator and archaeologist at the University of Sydney. She is employed at the Sydney University Museums. She also works in the field in the Middle East, Egypt, the Balkans and Myanmar on a range of projects, and lectured in Archaeology at the University for fourteen years.