

# Nomination form

## International Memory of the World Register

*The Golden Letter of the Burmese<sup>1</sup> King Alaungphaya to King George II of Great Britain*

2014-22

### 1.0 Summary (max 200 words)

The Golden Letter of the Burmese King Alaungphaya to King George II of Great Britain from the year 1756 is a unique attestation in world history as well as in the history of Burma and Europe in the eighteenth century and is of outstanding aesthetic value.

The content of the letter is a trade proposal from Alaungphaya to the English. By granting them a base in a favorable situation he would provide them with a strategic advantage over the rival French interest in exchange for military support against his enemies. The text was engraved on pure gold; the gold leaf decorated with 24 rubies is the sole surviving golden letter from Burma. The Golden Letter is of outstanding historical value at several levels: It reflects the shift of English-French rivalry from within Europe and North America to southern Asia and is therefore a key document for the early colonial history of Asia. It documents the rise and the importance of one of the most important potentates of Burmese history who assumed a position as an equal of a Western colonial power and acted with self-confidence. And - following England's reaction to the Golden Letter - it provides insights into the Eurocentric perception of European powers of the eighteenth century and provides references to the British-Hanoverian personal union. Besides the authenticity and the global importance, comparable criteria such as Time (the eighteenth century as a time of English-French confrontation overseas and the rise of Burma as a new regional power), Place (Burma as an object of colonial interest), People (Alaungphaya as a national myth) and Form (material and production method of the Golden Letter) are fulfilled.

### 2.1 Name of nominator (person or organization)

- 1.) ***Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Library – State Library of Lower Saxony  
(Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Bibliothek – Niedersächsische Landesbibliothek)***
- 2.) ***Ministry of Culture of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar***
- 3.) ***The British Library***

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### 2.2 Relationship to the nominated documentary heritage

- 1.) ***Owner***
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<sup>1</sup> The historical designation Burma is used where reference is made to the pre-colonial kingdom, e.g. in Lieberman, Victor, *Political Consolidation in Burma under the Early Konbaung Dynasty 1752-c. 1820*, in: *Journal of Asian History* 30, no. 2 (1996), p. 152-168; Charney, Michael Walter, *Powerful Learning Buddhist Literati and the Throne in Burma's Last Dynasty 1752-1885*, Ann Arbor 2006; cf. also: Leider, Jacques, *King Alaungmintaya's golden letter to King George II (7 May 1756). The story of an exceptional manuscript and the failure of a diplomatic overture*, Hannover 2009 (URN: <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:gbv:35-00000303-13>), p. 5. For this reason we speak in the context of the eighteenth century of Burma (adjective: Burmese). Where the present-day state is referred to, the official designation since 1989 Myanmar will be used.

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2.) *Country of origin*

3.) *Recipient country*

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**2.3 Contact person(s) (to provide information on nomination)**

1.) *Dr. Georg Ruppelt*

2.) *Aye Myint Kyu*

3.) *Andy Stephens*

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**2.4 Contact details**

1.)

<i>Name</i>	<i>Address</i>
<i>Dr. Georg Ruppelt</i>	<i>Waterloostrasse 8</i>
<i>Director</i>	<i>D – 30169 Hannover</i>
<i>Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Library</i>	
<i>– State Library of Lower Saxony</i>	

<i>Telephone</i>	<i>Facsimile</i>	<i>Email</i>
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2.)

<i>Name</i>	<i>Address</i>
<i>Aye Myint Kyu</i>	<i>Office No. 35</i>
<i>Minister's Office</i>	<i>Nay Pyi Taw</i>
<i>Ministry of Culture of the</i>	
<i>Republic of the Union of</i>	
<i>Myanmar</i>	

<i>Telephone</i>	<i>Facsimile</i>	<i>Email</i>
<i>+95 67 408038</i>	<i>+95 67 408038</i>	<i>ayemyintkyuu@gmail.com</i>

3.)

<i>Name</i>	<i>Address</i>
<i>Andy Stephens</i>	<i>96 Euston Road</i>
<i>Board Secretary and Head of</i>	<i>London NW1 2DB</i>
<i>International Engagement</i>	<i>United Kingdom</i>
<i>The British Library</i>	

<i>Telephone</i>	<i>Facsimile</i>	<i>Email</i>
<i>+44 20 7412 7269</i>	<i>+44 20 7412 7093</i>	<i>andy.stephens@bl.uk</i>

**3.0 Identity and description of the documentary heritage**

**3.1 Name and identification details of the items being nominated**

If inscribed, the exact title and institution(s) to appear on the certificate should be given

The object being nominated is the **Golden Letter of the Burmese King Alaungphaya to King George II of Great Britain of 7 May 1756** preserved at the **Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Library - State**

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**Library of Lower Saxony** in Hanover. This is the original letter of the Burmese King Alaungphaya (1752-1760), founder of the Konbaung dynasty which ruled until 1886, to the British King George II, dated in the Burmese calendar the 10th day of the rising moon of the month Kason 1118. The letter was written on gold foil 85 mm wide and 547 mm long and decorated with 24 ruby stones. As transportation receptacle an ivory box, in which the letter was rolled, was used.

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### 3.4 History/provenance

The Historical background of the Golden Letter is, on the one hand, the rise of Alaunphaya and his successful military campaign against the rule of the Mon Empire and, on the other hand, the relationship to the European colonial powers.

From 1752 Alaungphaya emerged as leader of a Burmese revolt against foreign rule of the Mon who hailed from the southern regions of the country. As a consequence of the wars, which he waged up to the end of his reign, Alaungphaya brought an end to the rule of the Mon over Burmese territory, reestablished sovereignty and created state structures.

At the same time the fleets of the English and French East India Companies rivaled each other in the Indian ocean - besides the competing trade interests we also observe here an ever increasing relocation of European theatres of war (the Seven Years War) to Asia: The Governor-General of the French settlement in India, Dupleix, supported Indian princes as well as the Mon rule with troupes in order to secure alliances for the French East India Company (Compagnie des Indes Orientales). The English East India Company copied this strategy, though with considerably more success. Alaungphaya, who desired to establish contact with the strongest power in the Indian Ocean in order to have the greatest possible advantage over his adversaries, decided with foresight in favour of the English as strategic partner.

In the letter Alaungphaya offers King George II and the English East India Company the establishment of a fortified base in the seaport Panthein. Since the English had at this time only a single settlement in a geographically disadvantaged location on the island Negrais, this offer represented a generous gesture. With a trading post in a strategically more favorable position, the English could secure access to teakwood, an important raw material for shipbuilding and, accordingly, have advantages over the French competitors. In return Alaungphaya hoped for arms deliveries from the English for his wars against the Mon.

The letter to George II was dispatched together with further letters to the superintendent of the English settlement in Negrais, the Governor of the East India Company in Madras and the Court of Directors of the East India Company in London; only the letter to the king was however written on gold foil and decorated with 24 rubies. After a journey that lasted one and a half years via Madras and around the African continent the letter finally reached king George, who however failed to confirm the reception of the letter (just like the directors of the company). Alaungphaya, embittered about the absence of a reaction, finally resorted to the destruction of the settlement in Negrais; until 1795 there were no longer official relations between Great Britain and Burma.

Instead George II sent the Golden Letter to his native library in Hanover, the institutional predecessor of the Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Library, together with the ivory container and an allocation rescript dated 28 March 1758. In this rescript, whose author was Privy Counsellor Gerlach Adolf von Münchhausen, the Golden Letter is incorrectly ascribed to an independent heathen Indian prince who nourished himself without meat and worshipped fire.<sup>2</sup> With this information the Golden Letter was more than a hundred years later finally included by Eduard Bodemann in his manuscript catalogue.<sup>3</sup> It was first through the research of the Luxembourg scholar of Burmese studies Dr. Jaques P. Leider that the true origin and importance of the letter became evident.<sup>4</sup> His research results are included as a computer print-out.

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<sup>2</sup> Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Bibliothek, Historische Akten der Bibliothek V15, f 29.

<sup>3</sup> Bodemann, Eduard, *Die Handschriften der Königlichen Öffentlichen Bibliothek zu Hannover*, Hannover 1867.

<sup>4</sup> Leider, Jacques, *King Alaungmintaya's golden letter to King George II (7 May 1756). The story of an exceptional manuscript and the failure of a diplomatic overture*, Hannover 2009 (URN: <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:gbv:35-00000303-13>).

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The Golden Letter was, according to the information of Bodemann, slightly damaged on the occasion of the visit of the Danish king Christian VII to the library in Hanover in 1768 when it was awkwardly replaced in the ivory container following viewing.<sup>5</sup>

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#### **4.0 Legal information**

##### **4.1 Owner of the documentary heritage (name and contact details)**

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Name	Address
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Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Library	Waterloostrasse 8 D – 30169 Hannover
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– State Library of Lower Saxony

(Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Bibliothek – Niedersächsische Landesbibliothek)

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Telephone	Facsimile	Email
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+49 511 1267-303	+49 511 1267-207	direktion@gwlb.de
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##### **4.2 Custodian of the documentary heritage (name and contact details if different from the owner)**

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Name	Address
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Telephone	Facsimile	Email
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##### **4.3 Legal status**

Provide details of legal and administrative responsibility for the preservation of the documentary heritage

The Golden Letter is preserved in the Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Library and is the property of the German Federal State of Lower Saxony.

In February 2013 the Golden Letter was entered in the Registry of Cultural Items of National Significance (Verzeichnis national wertvollen Kulturgutes) and thus enjoys protection against the removal abroad of German cultural assets. In accordance with paragraph (§) 1, section 4 in combination with paragraph (§) 5, section 1 of the Act for the Protection, and against the Removal abroad, of German Cultural Assets (Gesetz zum Schutz deutschen Kulturgutes gegen Abwanderung, KultgSchG), the removal of the object to outside the jurisdiction, even a temporary removal, requires the authorization of the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media. A relocation within Germany must, in accordance with (§) 9 of the aforementioned Act KultgSchG, be communicated to the Ministry of Science and Culture of Lower Saxony as the most senior state authority.

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##### **4.4 Accessibility**

Describe how the item(s) / collection may be accessed

The Golden Letter is preserved in the safe in the Department of Manuscripts and Old Prints in the

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<sup>5</sup> Bodemann, Eduard, *Die Handschriften der Königlichen Öffentlichen Bibliothek zu Hannover*, Hannover 1867, p. 98.

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Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Library and can be retrieved and exhibited for guided tours, presentations, etc. It is planned to show it in the context of the Lower Saxony State Exhibition 2014 marking the 300th jubilee year of the personal union between Great Britain and Hanover under the motto "When the Royals came from Hanover". As part of the new conceptual design of the Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Library as State and Research Library a new permanent exhibition of the Golden Letter on the premises of the library is envisaged from 2015.

In the spring of 2013 a 3-D digitization of the Golden Letter was realised by the firm Scanbull. From the data thus obtained all known output formats can be realised and so new forms of presentation have become available.

All access restrictions should be explicitly stated below:

Removal of the object out of Germany, including temporary removal, requires the authorization of the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media in accordance with paragraph (§) 1, section 4 in combination with paragraph (§) 5, section 1 of the aforementioned Act KultgSchG. For reuse of the data obtained from the 3-D digitization, corresponding rights of utilisation have been granted by the firm Scanbull.

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#### 4.5 Copyright status

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Describe the copyright status of the item(s) / collection

The Golden Letter is not subject to copyright restrictions.

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### 5.0 Assessment against the selection criteria

#### 5.1 Authenticity

The Luxembourg scholar of Burmese studies Dr. Jacques P. Leider has thoroughly researched the history of the Golden Letter and, in doing so, evaluated archival material in Myanmar, London and in the Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Library. The authenticity of the item is beyond doubt. In scholarship seven further Golden Letters are known, which were sent from Burma to the Emperor of China but which apparently were melted down by Imperial order.

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#### 5.2 World significance

The letter is an item of historical evidence is of global importance that documents both the assertiveness of the Burmese kingdom as well as the pre-colonial foreign policies of England and France. At the same time it is a testimony of European history, since the transfer by George II in London to his Royal Library in Hanover can only be explained against the background of the personal union of the British kingdom and the Hanoverian electorate (1714-1837). Its uniqueness has been proved by Dr. Jacques P. Leider.<sup>6</sup> It is the sole surviving Golden Letter from Burma; further letters, written to the Chinese Emperors, were melted down by Imperial order. The irreplaceability of the Golden Letter is accordingly obvious.

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#### 5.3 Comparative criteria

##### 1 Time

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<sup>6</sup> Leider, Jacques, *King Alaungmintaya's golden letter to King George II (7 May 1756). The story of an exceptional manuscript and the failure of a diplomatic overture*, Hannover 2009 (URN: <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:gbv:35-00000303-13>).

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The Golden Letter is at the same time an impressive testimonial of world history, of European history as well as of Burmese history of the 18th century.

In one respect it reflects the early history of the colonisation of Asia by the European powers England and France and, running parallel to this, an initiative of an Asian power: Burma sought an agreement with these new powers in Asia in order to secure and extend its own strategic interests.

George II's handling of the letter reveals however, notwithstanding the colonial involvement, a deeply-ingrained Eurocentric cultural conditioning of the European ruler. Since an important European conflict, viz. the Seven Years War, linked means and interests, Alaungphaya's request for military support in exchange for commercial privileges was ignored.

From a Burmese viewpoint also the Golden Letter represents an important contemporary document: With the foundation of the Konbaung dynasty and the expansion of the empire under Alaungphaya, Burma became an important power factor in the Asian region. The Golden Letter shows one of the most important statesmen in the history of Burma at the height of his power and documents Alaungphaya's desired contact as an equal with the British king.

## **2 Place**

In Burma, the country of origin of the letter, the overseas rivalry between the most important colonial powers England and France manifested itself as the continuation of the existing antagonism in Europe and North America. The most important actors were the trading companies, the French *Compagnie des Indes orientales* and the English *East India Company*, who, transcending commercial interests, willingly meddled in regional conflicts and intrigues in Burma.

## **3 People**

The Golden Letter is closely connected with the rise of Burma as a regional power centre in Asia. Following the conquest of the northern kingdom Ava by the southern kingdom of the Mon, the village chief Alaungphaya asserted himself against various local potentates, waged war successfully against the southern kingdom and emerged in the eyes of the European powers as an important power factor in south east Asia. In this situation he encountered the British king George II as an equal in that he offered the English a trading post in exchange for military backing and thus contradicted the usual picture of early colonial dependency. Furthermore, the reaction of Alaungphaya to the still outstanding British reply to his offer reveals a ruler who exercised power in his own right: He destroyed the previously existing British trading post in Burma.

As a founding father of a state and dynasty Alaungphaya became part of a national legend. Even today Alaungphaya is revered in the population as an important founding father of a dynasty and state and is still to be seen in the form of statues.

## **4 Subject and theme**

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## **5 Form and style**

The Golden Letter is of outstanding aesthetic and stylistic value and documents the highly-developed skillfulness in eighteenth-century Burma. The letter, engraved in almost pure gold, is the sole remaining golden letter and the only royal letter from Burma which is decorated with rubies;<sup>7</sup> it thus reflects the

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<sup>7</sup> The State Office for Preservation of Monuments in Lower Saxony established by means of a spectroscopic examination a gold content of 99%. The Department of Gemstone Research at the Institute for Geosciences

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greatness of the Monarch Alaungpha as well as the lustre and cultural richness of the Konbaung dynasty. The style of workmanship of the letter, the engraving of the written characters in excellent calligraphy, the number of similar jewels and the mounting of the rubies on the gold foil are highly remarkable. The material and type of fabrication document the fact that it was the intention of the author of the letter to make clear the importance that he attached to the letter.

## **6 Social/ spiritual/ community significance:**

The historical importance of the letter outweighs contemporary social, spiritual or community-building importance. However, the overwhelming reactions, with which the presentation of the Golden Letter in January 2011 was greeted in Asia, reveals a certain identity-endowing effect of the Golden Letter even more than 250 years after its creation.

## **6.0 Contextual information**

### **6.1 Rarity**

The object is the sole extant Golden Letter of its kind. Other golden letters sent from Burma to the Chinese Emperors were apparently melted down by Imperial order.

### **6.2 Integrity**

The object is undamaged and complete. Together with the ivory receptacle in which it was transported, it represents the postal document that in the year 1756 underwent its journey from Burma to India and on to London and, finally, was forwarded to Hanover. Alone the clumsiness of the Danish king Christian VII, who viewed the letter in Hanover in 1768, led to slight damage caused when he awkwardly replaced the letter in the hollow ivory receptacle.

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