

The City of Pegu

M. Cesar Fredericke, a merchant of Venice from his book about his voyages and travels, 1563
[Note: Pegu is now known as Bago, and is a city in modern Malaysia]

With the blessing of God we arrived safe at Pegu, which consists of two cities, the old and the new, all the merchants of the country and stranger merchants residing in the old city, in which is far the greatest trade. The city itself is not very large, but it has very great suburbs. The houses are all built of canes, and covered with leaves or straw; but every merchant has one house or magazine, called Godown, built of bricks, in which they secure their most valuable commodities, to save them from fire, which frequently happens to houses built of such combustible materials. In the new city is the royal palace, in which the king dwells, with all his nobles and officers of state, and attendants. While I was there the building of the new city was completed. It is of considerable size, built perfectly square upon an uniform level, and walled round, having a wet ditch on the outside, filled with crocodiles, but there are no draw-bridges. Each side of the square has five gates, being twenty in all; and there are many places on the walls for centinels, built of wood, and gilded over with gold. The streets are all perfectly straight, so that from any of the gates you can see clear through to the opposite gate, and they are so broad that 10 or 12 horsemen may ride abreast with ease. The cross streets are all equally broad and straight, and on each side of all the streets close to the houses there is a row of cocoa-nut trees, making a most agreeable shade. The houses are all of wood, covered with a kind of tiles, in the form of cups, very necessary and useful in that country. The palace is in the middle of the city, walled round like a castle, the lodgings within being built of wood, all over gilded, and richly adorned with pinnacles of costly work, covered all over with gold, so that it may truly be called a king's house. Within the gate is a large handsome court, in which are lodges for the strongest and largest elephants, which are reserved for the king's use, among which are four that are entirely white, a rarity that no other king can boast of; and were the king of Pegu to hear that any other king had white elephants, he would send and demand them as a gift. While I was there two such were brought out of a far distant country, which cost me something for a sight of them, as the merchants were commanded to go to see them, and every one was obliged to give something to the keepers. The brokers gave for every merchant half a ducat, which they call a tansa, and this produced a considerable sum, as there were a great many merchants in the city. After paying the tansa, they may either visit the elephants or not as they please, as after they are put into the king's stalls, every one may see them whenever they will.

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