

# Group hopes to preserve heritage of Myanmar's biggest city

By Elaine Kurtenbach  
AP Business Writer

**Y**ANGON, Myanmar — A Yangon historic-preservation group says Myanmar's largest city and commercial capital is facing its "last best chance" to save many crumbling architectural treasures dating back to the days when Myanmar was the British colony of Burma.

The Yangon Heritage Trust recently proposed a heritage strategy for Yangon, outlining a vision for making the Southeast Asian city more livable, modern, and affordable while preserving its unique landmarks and neglected green spaces.

Yangon, the former capital, has been razing old buildings as it widens roads and builds flyovers to help ease massive traffic congestion. Property developers are rushing in. A few of the many colonial structures in the downtown area have been restored to their past glory, but most are crumbling, paint blackened or peeling, turrets topped with emerald tufts of grass and bushes. Others are moldering away behind walls, engulfed by jungle.

"The city is at a tipping point and, without action, Yangon may become another of the region's urban disaster zones," the Yangon Heritage Trust said in its report, alluding to cities like Singapore that have lost most of their beautiful older buildings. It argues that making the city more livable is crucial to its future competitiveness.

Here are five takeaways from the

## Roman coins identified in Japanese ruins, but their origin baffles

By Mari Yamaguchi  
The Associated Press

**T**OKYO — The eyes of a visiting archaeologist lit up when he was shown the 10 tiny, tarnished discs that had sat unnoticed in storage for two-and-a-half years at a dig on a southern Japan island.

He had been to archaeological sites in Italy and Egypt, and recognized the "little round things" as old coins, including a few likely dating to the Roman Empire.

"I was so excited I almost forgot what I was there for, and the coins were all we talked about," said Toshio Tsukamoto of the Gangoji Institute for Research of Cultural Property in Nara, an ancient Japanese capital near Kyoto.

The discovery, announced in September, is baffling. How did the coins, some dating to the third or fourth century, wind up half a world away in a medieval castle on Okinawa, the island that was not part of Japan then. Experts suspect they may have arrived centuries later via China or Southeast Asia, not as currency but as decoration or treasure.

The 10 copper coins were unearthed in December 2013 at the 12th- to 15th-century Katsuren Castle, a UNESCO World Heritage site, during an annual excavation for study and tourism promotion by the board of education in Uruma, a city in central Okinawa.

While the find has yet to be submitted for publication in an academic journal, an outside expert is convinced the coins are real.

"There is almost no mistake" about their authenticity, said Makiko Tsumura, a curator at the Ancient Orient Museum in Tokyo, though she allowed that they could also be counterfeit versions from about the same time.

Four of the coins are from the third- to fourth-century Roman Empire, and a fifth one from the 17th-century Ottoman Empire. The remaining five are still being examined.

The coins, which are on display at the Uruma City Yonagusuku Historical Museum through November 25, were dug up from about one yard underground in a layer believed to be from the 14th to 15th century.

"At first, we didn't think they were coins. Those little round things, to us, seemed like armor parts," said Masaki Yokoo, a city official in charge of the archaeological



**LAST BEST CHANCE.** People walk by an old colonial building used by Myanmar Posts and Telecommunications (MPT) as an office in Yangon, Myanmar. The Yangon Heritage Trust says Myanmar's largest city and commercial capital is facing its "last best chance" to salvage and restore many crumbling colonial treasures. It has proposed a heritage strategy for the city that outlines a vision of how to make the city more livable, modern, and affordable, while preserving its unique landmarks and neglected green spaces. (AP Photo/Elaine Kurtenbach)

blueprint:

### Stop demolitions

The Heritage Trust calls for a moratorium on demolishing old buildings until basic, long-term plans are drawn up.

### Ensure good quality preservation

Both interiors and exteriors of old buildings need to be protected, to prevent landmark structures from being mere "facades."

### Make a master plan

Yangon, formerly known as Rangoon, risks losing its rich colonial and traditional Burmese heritage due to ill-coordinated property development and other construction. For example, pedestrian access to the waterfront from the riverside Strand Road is mostly blocked by a busy toll road.

### Shwedagon Pagoda

The gleaming golden spire of Shwedagon, an oasis of calm in an increasingly noisy and chaotic city, is surrounded by lush parklands that could be connected by walkways to make Yangon more welcoming to pedestrians and create more leisure space.

### Reuse, recycle, repurpose

One top priority is to reuse government buildings that were abandoned when Myanmar's political capital was moved to Naypyitaw, a new city to the north. The trust proposes using the decrepit former Ministry of Hotels and Tourism, built in 1905 and originally a department store, as a visitor information center and civic hall. These days, it looks more like a giant haunted house.



**MONEY MYSTERY.** People work at an excavation site where 10 coins, including a few likely dating to the Roman Empire, were found at Katsuren Castle in Uruma on Japan's southernmost prefectural island of Okinawa, in this 2013 photo released by the Uruma City Board of Education. The 10 copper coins were unearthed in December 2013 at Katsuren Castle, a UNESCO World Heritage site, during an annual excavation for study and tourism promotion by the Board of Education in Uruma, a city in central Okinawa. (Uruma City Board of Education via AP)

project. Details that were barely distinguishable emerged more clearly in x-ray analysis. One bears an image of fourth-century Roman Emperor Constantine I, and another shows a helmeted soldier holding a shield in one hand, while stabbing an enemy with a spear in the other.

The Ottoman coin is inscribed with the year equivalent to 1687, Yokoo said.

Tsumura said the x-ray analysis, photos, size, and weight match typical Roman and Ottoman coins, resembling those excavated in China, Indonesia, and India — places that had trade with Okinawa.

Tsukamoto said the coins might have been intentionally planted as a pacifying ritual at the castle, which was abandoned in 1458, similar to armor, jewelry, and other valuables buried in funeral rituals in Okinawa.

Further investigation, including analysis of the copper content and other artifacts found with the coins, may help identify the origin of the coins.

Researchers are also seeking an explanation for why coins from two distinct eras were found near each other, and how a 17th-century coin could have been in a layer believed to be 200 to 300 years older than that.

"There are still lots of unknowns," said Okinawa International University archaeologist Hiroki Miyagi. "Our findings this time are just the beginning."

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