

History of Wat Saket. (1)

BY

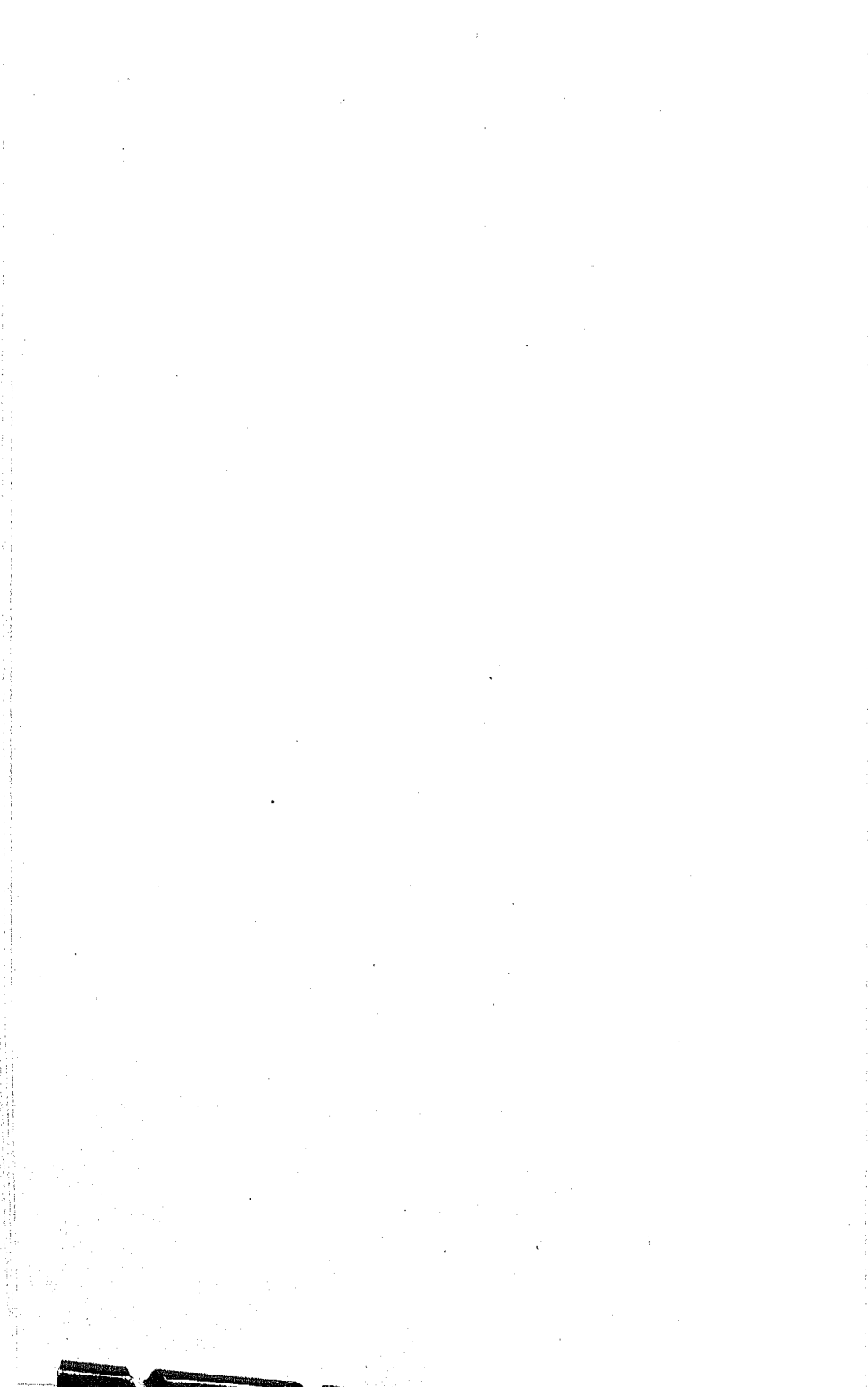
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Errata to Vol. XXIII, part 3.

HISTORY OF WAT SAKET.

- p. 125, line 29, *read*: , Kurz.
- p. 125, line 34, *read*: (5) Bodhārāma. Later called Jetavana.
- p. 126, line 29, *read*: "branches".
- p. 126, line 29, *read*: lines for berries.
- p. 127, line 8, *read*: title for little.
- p. 127, line 19, *after* patriarchs, *add*: since 1793.
- p. 128, lines 7 & 8, *delete*: (the residence of the Supreme Patriarch since 1793).
- p. 128, line 31, *read*: Anurādhapura.
- p. 129, lines 5, 7 & 18, the word *kuṭis* should be read *kuṭi* throughout.
- p. 129, line 7, *read*: south for north.
- p. 129, line 27, *read*: baddhasīmā.
- p. 130, line 32, *read*: Cāstā.
- p. 131, line 16, *after* the structure, *read*: covered a square area, measuring 100 metres on each side *and delete the end of the line.*
- p. 131, line 22, *read*: metres for months.
- p. 131, line 29, *after* the king, *add*: and where, *and delete there at the end of the line.*



History of Wat Saket. ⁽¹⁾

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R. LINGAT.

The history of this monastery ⁽²⁾ begins in the year of the foundation of Bangkok as the capital of the kingdom of Siam. It was known at that time as Wat Sakkē ⁽³⁾ and was, like the majority of the monasteries then in existence on the left bank of the Menam, of only moderate importance both as regards the number of its inmates and the character of its buildings. However, it possessed a bell of a very fine tone, and this was later judged worthy of being transported to the precincts of Wat Phra : Kēo, where it remains to this day.

It is said that in April, 1782, the Sōmdēt Chāo Phya Māhakra : sātśūk, commander-in-chief of the Siamese armies, who had returned in great haste from Cambodia with his army on the news of the outbreak at Thōnbūri, stayed at Wat Sakkē and underwent the lustration rites ⁽⁴⁾. He afterwards proceeded with great ceremony to the pavilion erected for him in front of Wat Phō ⁽⁵⁾ and then crossed the river to crush the rebellion.

(1) The following monograph on Wat Sacket is the first of a series to be published in this Journal, over M. R. Lingat's signature. These monographs, together with several others, not to be included in this series, will eventually form a book dealing with the more important religious establishments in Bangkok.

(The Editor.)

(2) My chief source is an article written by H. R. H. Prince Damrong and published in *จดหมายเหตุ คณะสงฆ์*, vol. XIII (B.E. 2468), pp. 185-201.

(3) "Monastery of the tree Sakkē", or Indian ash-tree, (*combretum quadrangulare Kurz*).

(4) This is probably a purifying bath, taken by the king on his return from a military expedition; the fact indicates that the commander-in-chief, though not yet invested officially with the supreme authority, already regarded himself as King.

(5) Called at that time Wat Phōtharam (Bodhārāma).

After assuming the supreme power, the new king decided to transfer the capital to the left bank of the Menam. The new capital was laid out on the same lines as Ayuthia. Especially it was to be entirely surrounded by water. To achieve this object a canal was cut along the east side of the town, passing behind Wat Sa:kë in a northerly direction to join the Bang Lämpu canal, which was already in existence. Another canal running eastwards branched off from the first a little to the north of Wat Sa:kë, so that the youth of the new capital might indulge, during the flood season, in aquatic sports and the traditional singing contests which had been common in the days of Ayuthia. This was the Mahānāga canal, a name taken from the old capital ⁽¹⁾. Ten thousand Cambodians were impressed to carry out the work.

When the cutting of the canal was finished, the king employed the labour thus available in restoring completely the Bôt of Wat Sa:kë. This monastery, which was henceforward under the royal patronage, was now first called by the name it bears to-day i. e. Wat Sa:ket, the Monastery of the lustration (*śau*) of the hair (*keça*), in commemoration of the ceremony which had taken place on the eve of the new king's accession, and to mark the scene of the first step towards the realisation of his new destiny.

The consecration of the new monastery, which lasted seven days, took place in November, 1801, shortly after that of Wat Phô. It was an occasion of great public rejoicing at which the king himself was present in a pavilion constructed on the bank of the Mahānāga canal. All the inhabitants of the monastery were entertained at the expense of the royal treasury. The ordinary people also shared in the largesse lavished on this occasion: "kalpa vṛkṣa" trees, from whose branches hung berries containing silver coins, were planted: there were displays of fireworks on land and water and gaily decorated crafts, full of singers and musicians,

(1) Mahānāga is the name of a monk of the wat of the Golden Mount (at Ayuthia), who assisted in the defence of the old capital in 1459 by digging the canal which bears his name.

passed two abreast along the canals which surrounded the monastery. These canals had been specially widened for the occasion. The eye-witness from whose account the details of the celebration are known to us has noted that the crackling of the burning sheaves and the joyous tumult of the crowds swept the clouds away, and the moon, appearing under her white parasol, was charmed by such a spectacle and halted in her path to observe it.

The abbot of the monastery, At, bore at that time the title of Phra : Brahmammi ⁽¹⁾; he was a barien (doctor of theology), born on the 9th of January, 1759. During the second reign he was promoted Phra : Vimaladhamma and then Sömdët Phra : Vanaratana, a title next in rank to that of Saṅgharāja. As a result of scandals which aroused grave concern as to the state of the Buddhist church, at the request of the king he wrote, in collaboration with the Saṅgharāja Mi, the Ovādānusāsani, an exhortation to the monks to adhere to their vows. When the death of the Saṅgharāja occurred, the abbot of Wat Sacket was by his rank entitled to succeed to that office and he was in fact appointed, in March, 1820, to be abbot of Wat Mahādhātu, the residence of the patriarchs. But he had himself been contaminated by the corruption which the slackness of discipline had fostered throughout the religious communities. His consecration had been at first delayed by a terrible epidemic of cholera : it was decidedly jeopardized by an accusation to which his doubtful behaviour with one of his younger disciples had given ground. Although the charges against him were not substantiated, the enquiry brought to light evidence sufficient to show that, if he did not deserve to be defrocked, at least he was not worthy to occupy any position of eminence. He was suddenly deprived of his rank and transferred to a humble monastery where he ended his days in obscurity. His successor at Wat Sacket was another barien, named Don, born on the 6th March, 1762. The new abbot had come from Wat Ham-

(1) In fact he may not have been appointed abbot until some time afterwards.

sa (on the right bank of the Menam) during the first reign and bore the title of Phra : Devamolī. His career was, up to a point, exactly similar to that of his predecessor. Like the latter he was appointed in succession Phra : Brahmamuni, Phra : Vimaladhamma and Sōmdēt Phra : Vanaratana, but he lived eventually to set a worthy crown on his career by attaining to the supreme dignity in March, 1823. He left Wat Sacket to go to Wat Mahādhātu (the residence of the Supreme Patriarch since 1793) and lived there until his death in 1842, in his 81st year.

The honours conferred during the second reign on the abbots of Wat Sacket show that the monastery was by that time considered to be one of the most important in the kingdom. A further mark of the esteem in which it was held is shown in 1818 on the return of the religious embassy sent three years previously to Ceylon to reopen with the Cinghalese Church the relations which had been interrupted since the fall of Ayuthia. On that occasion Wat Sacket was one of the three Bangkok monasteries which received a cutting from the Bodhi tree brought from Anurādhapura ⁽¹⁾ by the mission. The young shoot was planted in a small stone-work enclosure in front of the Bôt, where it may still be seen to-day.

The third king of the Bangkok dynasty, Phra : Nāng Klāo (1824-1851), who was a great builder of monasteries could not fail to take an interest in Wat Sacket. Almost until the end of his reign the monastery underwent considerable rebuilding and re-decoration and it then put on an appearance closely resembling that which it presents to-day.

The *kuṭīs* or dwellings of the monks and the annexes thereto, which were of wood, were entirely rebuilt in brick. The library alone, which dated from the first reign, was considered worthy of preservation in its existing form. This is a small building set on a

(1) The Anuradhāpura tree, according to Buddhist tradition, is itself a grafting of the true Bodhi brought from Gaya by Mahendra, the son of Emperor Aśoka.

raised platform of brick-work and constructed of panels of wood which are carved and painted. In the centre is a large cupboard made of lacquered wood whose four sides rise to meet the roof. Within this again are cupboards which hold the sacred texts. The *kuṭis*, which cover a fairly wide area, provide ample accommodation for over 300 monks.

To the north of the *kuṭis* the king caused a Meru to be built for the cremation of princes and high officials. This is a large square structure of brick, open on all four sides, with a space in the centre for the funeral. In addition it has, or had at that time, all the buildings that might be necessary for funeral ceremonies: a pavilion for the King, a hall for prayer, a chamber for the family of the deceased and another for the musicians. There was also a grove planted with poles, with wooden stands for displays of fireworks. It was the best accommodated site for cremations in Bangkok and was the one shown to Count de Beauvoir when he visited the Siamese capital in 1867. During the reign of King Chulalongkorn, this Meru and its spacious annexes were separated from the *kuṭis* by the extension of Sa: Pāthūm road: it appears to have fallen entirely from public favour and is beginning to suffer seriously from this neglect (1).

The Bôt itself was extensively restored and redecorated. The gallery or "cloister" dates from this period, as do the four pairs of chedis set outside. The gallery contains 163 statues of Buddha in a sitting posture, which are set in line along the wall, while four further statues in a standing posture are set one at each corner. The eight pairs of *buddhāsīma* or boundary stones marking the sacred enclosure were placed in small and graceful structures covered with mosaic work.

The Bôt itself was simply restored to its original condition. It is surrounded by a colonnade of square pillars which support the roof.

(1) One of the last noteworthy cremations which took place at the Meru of Wat Saket was that of Dr. Masao, the Japanese legal adviser.

The pediments bear ornaments in stucco or gilded wood representing Vishnu mounted on Garuda. In the interior of the Bôt is the great statue of Buddha seated in the attitude known as Samādhi (contemplation) with a statue of a kneeling disciple on either side. All is made of brick and plaster, with a covering of gold leaf, and was no doubt completely restored in the third reign. The beautiful paintings which decorate the walls are of the same period. Those behind the statue of Buddha depict the three worlds: the heavens, the earth and hell; those facing the statue represent the defeat of the armies of Mara and the vision of the goddess Earth. All these paintings are worthy of comparison with the frescoes which decorate the walls of the Bôt of Wat Phra Kéo. The upper half of the side walls is decorated with a triple line of gods at prayer, their faces turned towards the statue of Buddha. The twelve panels placed between the windows represent episodes of the last ten existences of Buddha. Finally the window shutters and the doors bear paintings of divinities and European, Hindu and Chinese warriors dressed in the fashion of the XVIIth century.

Outside the cloister and to the west of the Bôt, King Phra : Nāng Klāo had built a Vihāra in the same style as, but more lofty than the Bôt. The interior of this Vihāra is divided into two chambers, as is the case with the Vihāras round the Bôt of Wat Phó. In the south chamber a statue of gilded bronze, over nine metres in height, representing Buddha "calming the ocean" is set with its back to the dividing partition.

This statue was named Phra : Aṭṭhārasa and came from Wat Vihāra Thoug at Pitsanuloke, whence it was probably brought in 1829, at the same time as the Jinasīha Buddha now in the Bôt of Wat Pavaraniveça. Behind this statue is a niche with the figures of the two great disciples of the Buddha, Sariputta and Moggalana, on each side. The other chamber had been intended to receive the Phra : Cāstā, a statue, also from Pitsanuloke, which was at that time in Wat Phra : du at Nōndhāpūri. This scheme was never

carried out and the pedestal built for this famous statue remained for a long time unoccupied. In the fifth reign there was placed on it a bronze statue of Buddha from Wat Dūsīt (Tusita), which had been demolished when the Dūsīt Palace was built. The statue has on either side a statue of a disciple in a kneeling posture. In the north and south corners of the courtyard of the Vihāra, small buildings were constructed to contain statues of Buddha in rows.

Now, in the angle formed by the *kutīs* and the main building of the Bôt and the Vihāra, Phra: Nāng Klāo decided to erect a great Prang, which should correspond to the famous steeple of the Golden Mount at Ayuthia at the foot of which flowed the Mahānāga canal and whose mighty ruins still tower above the site of the old capital. This work was entrusted to Phya Çrī Vivadhana who had carried out the construction of the Meru: he played an important part in the politics of the third and fourth reigns ⁽¹⁾. The base of the structure was a dodecagon, each side being 100 metres long, the outer surface was of brick, while in the centre were heaped earth and blocks of stone. During the construction of the second storey the central mass subsided 18 metres and the brick-surface cracked and broke away. The huge structure was propped up with thousands of wooden beams, but while the repairs were actually in progress a further subsidence of 6 months occurred and on this account the work was abandoned.

In January, 1832, there were festivities in honour of the restoration of Wat Sacket and eight other monasteries in the capital which had been reconstructed or were in course of reconstruction at that time. The festivities lasted three days, for the greater part of the time at Wat Phra: Rājaorasa ⁽²⁾, which was held in special veneration by the king. A portion of his ashes was afterwards deposited there.

(1) He was promoted Sōmdēt Chāo Phya Bōrōmā Māhābhixāiyāt.

(2) On the right bank of the Menam. The reconstruction of this monastery had already been commenced, in the second reign, by the future Phra: Nāng Klāo.

It fell to his successor, King Mongkut, to complete those works which had been left unfinished ⁽¹⁾. The new king was determined to make use of the great heap of material which remained of the Prang begun in the preceding reign. He instructed the same Phya Çri Vivadhana to build it up into an artificial mount, provided with interior passageways and salas and niches holding statues of ascetics or figures of Buddha or small chedis. At the top was built a stupa which was reached by two stairways winding round the slopes of the mound, with a bridge boldly set midway. The structure now justified its name of Golden Mount (Phu Khão Thong), which had been bestowed upon it during the reign of Phra : Nāng Klāo in memory of the edifice at Ayuthia. Its official name is Paramaparvata, the Supreme Mountain. It was not until the beginning of the reign of King Chulalongkorn that the work was completed. In course of time the surface of plaster, which gave the Golden Mount the appearance of a great rock, fell away and the Mount was overrun and almost completely covered by vegetation with the exception of the original stairways trodden by the feet of so many of the faithful. The slopes were recently cleared of the bushes and trees which covered them and now the structure is to be restored to the condition in which it was at the beginning of the fifth reign.

The stupa at the top of the Golden Mount is built on a square platform supported by walls, which gives it the appearance of a fort or a monastery in Thibet. The platform is covered by a flat roof resting on the base of the stupa. The faithful have thus an enclosed gallery round which they may walk in meditation. Two doors north and south give access to this gallery. The stupa itself is of the type usual during the fourth reign; there are four entrances, which are normally closed with grilles, situated

(1) It was not until this time that the gallery which circles the Bôt was completed.

at the four cardinal points and connected one with another by a narrow passageway. In the centre of the stupa is a small gilded chedi with four niches holding diminutive statues of Buddha. This chedi contains a portion of the relics of the Buddha discovered in 1897 under the ruins of the famous stupa of Piprāwā⁽¹⁾, near the frontier of Nepal and not far from the supposed site of Kapilavasthu, the capital of the Sakyas. The discovery of these relics, the authenticity or at least the great antiquity of which is admitted by European authorities, aroused great interest in Buddhist countries and there was a general desire to accord to the relics suitable respect. The British Government decided to offer them to the King of Siam, with the request that they be distributed among the nations which had an interest therein. Phya Sukhuma (now Chāo Phya Yamarāja) was chosen by King Chulalongkorn to go and receive the precious relics and bring them to Bangkok. Delegations from Ceylon, Burma, Japan and Siberia came to share in the distribution. The remainder of the relics were brought in procession to Wat Sacket on the 23rd of May, 1899, and deposited in the small chedi of which mention has been made above. Once every year, in the middle of the twelfth month of the lunar calendar (November), the public is admitted to the interior of the stupa. For several days a continual stream of the faithful climb the steps of the Golden Mount to pay their devotion to the relics, while all round the Mount and in the adjoining streets are set up booths, theatres and restaurants which are patronised by a numerous and exuberant crowd. This is the time of the popular Wat Sacket fair, which is rivalled in Bangkok only by the fair of Wat Phō and Wat Sāmplām.

(1) The discussions to which the Piprāwā discoveries gave rise between European authorities on Indian culture were outlined by A. Barth in the number of the *Journal des Savants* for October, 1906, (*Oeuvres d'Auguste Barth*, V, 259-273).

During the first reign the monks of Wat Sacket were renowned for their knowledge of the mystic rites and were numbered among the Araññavāsī or "forest monks". It is this reputation and the presence of the precious relics which explain the great popularity which Wat Sacket enjoys.

