

HOMAGE TO THE ABBOT PRINCE PARAMANUCHIT CHINOROT

by

K.I. MATICS*

The residential area (*sangkhawat*) of Wat Phra Chetuphon ("Wat Po") in Bangkok includes the Wasukri dwelling which is open to the public only once a year, in December (figure 1). This was formerly the domicile of the eminent Supreme Patriarch and poet, the Abbot Prince Paramanuchit Chinorot. It is one of the largest buildings crowded among many others in the northwest corner of the *kuti* area.

Born with the royal name of "Wasukri", the Prince was the twenty-eighth child of King Rama I, and his mother was a member of the royal court. He proved to be an important personage whose life, from 1790 to 1853, spanned the first four reigns of the Chakri dynasty.

He joined the Buddhist Order as a 12-year-old novice in 1802. Ordained as a monk some eight years later, he gradually ascended the monastic hierarchy to become its highest-ranking member, the Supreme Patriarch, two years before his demise. As a young man at Wat Phra Chetuphon, he studied the scholarly writings of Phra Wanarat (1735-ca. 1814), his mentor and preceptor¹. In addition to archaic Siamese, the Prince was well versed in Khmer and Pali. Perhaps he is remembered most today as an outstanding poet of both sacred and secular verse; certainly his works have inspired subsequent writers, and his extensive literature is still studied in universities. King Rama III, his nephew, frequently called upon him to write, translate, and compile books. During his reign the monarch gave his uncle the ecclesiastical rank equivalent to a deputy patriarch of the Siamese monkhood, and he was in charge of all the monasteries within the capital. Despite such responsibilities, the Abbot Prince was a prolific poet, and he was very influential judging from the vast amount of his inscriptions to be found engraved at Wat Phra Chetuphon. This is especially pertinent to the royal conception of this *wat* serving as a comprehensive place of learning for all people².

* Doctoral candidate, Institute of Fine Arts, New York University.

¹ Somdet Phra Phonnarat (also called "Wanarat") was involved in the ninth Theravadin Buddhist Council of 1788. See Robert Lingat, "The history of Wat Mahadhatu", in *Journal of the Siam Society (JSS)* XXIV (1), 1931 p. 5. Also note Prince Dhani Nivat, "Reconstruction of Rāma I of the Chakri dynasty", in *JSS* XLIII (1), 1955, p. 36, for additional references to his writings.

² The Abbot Prince reassembled the ancient text, *pathom somphothikatha*, from random Pali fragments. He also wrote *praratcha phongsawadan krung si ayutthaya*, and he composed histories of the reigns of King Taksin and King Rama I, his father. See David K. Wyatt, tr. & ed., "The abridged Royal Chronicle of Ayudhya of Prince Paramanuchitchinorot", in *JSS* LXI (1), 1973, pp. 25-50. Examples of his writing include the following: (a) a version of an ancient poem called *kritsana song nong* based upon the Indian epic, the *Mahabharata*, in which Kritsana exhorts her younger sister how to be a good wife to one husband, while she herself pleases seven husbands—this eventually became a manual of behavior for palace ladies; (b) completion of the then unfinished romance called *samutthakhot*, which was adapted from one of the folktales of the *Paññasa-jataka*, said to date from the reign of King Narai; and (c) the heroic poem entitled *talengphai*, which celebrates King Naresuan's victory over the Burmese in 1590 when he slew the Burmese crown prince. Note Phra Thamma Kosachan, ed., *sombat ratana kawi chin ek* (Bangkok, 1970); and Phra Dharmakosacharya, *phra kiatt bang prakan nai somdet phra mahasamanchao kromphra paramanuchit chinorot* (Thon Buri, 1964), biography, pp. 1-28; *samutthakhot*, pp. 28-86; and *talengphai*, pp. 87-178. Concerning Wat Phra Chetuphon, see Prince Damrong, *prachum charuk wat phra chetuphon* (Bangkok, 1974), pp. 217-332; and penned by the Abbot Prince himself, *khlong dan rüang patisangkhan wat phra chetuphon* (Bangkok, 1929; cremation volume).



Figure 1. Visitor's entrance to the dwelling of the Abbot Prince Paramanuchit Chinorot at Wat Phra Chetuphon ("Wat Po").

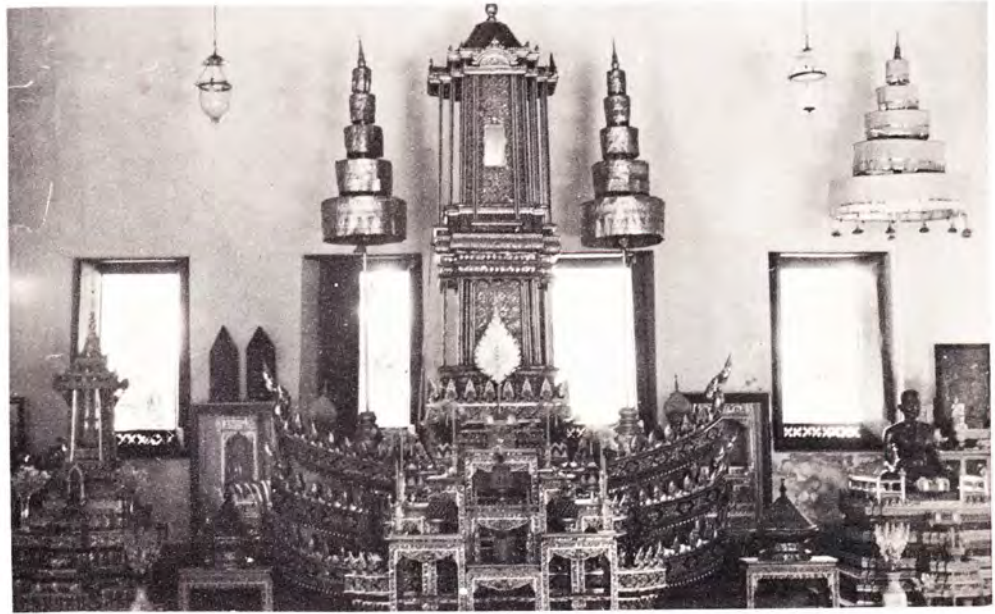


Figure 2. Interior view: The *busabok* supporting the reliquary containing the Abbot Prince's ashes and bones.



Figure 3. The bronze portrait statue of the Abbot Prince.

His residence at Wat Phra Chetuphon remains as a memorial to his life and works. It was constructed by his appreciative royal nephew while the latter was King. At that time the eastern bank of the Chao Phraya river had no intervening structures which could obscure the splendid view of Wat Arun across the water. Therefore, his dwelling must have been a pleasant place, well suited to his poetic temperament. Today it is still a peaceful haven, although it is somewhat hemmed in by other structures. It contains a collection of his literary and scholastic efforts, as well as his possessions and ancient manuscripts. The present structure has been completely renovated, and provides a focus for an annual birthday celebration in his honor every 11 December.

The edifice is divided into two major segments: a large audience hall which comprises the public area, and his private bedroom and study. The orientation is north-south, the study being at the southwest. Murals illustrating the appearance of auspicious animals, such as white elephants and remarkable horses, may be found within this latter chamber³. Intervening partitions and small staircases set the two minor rooms apart from the main hall. It is in this large room that the boat-shaped *busabok* platform supports the small stone reliquary containing his ashes and bones (figure 2). Around the gilded display are mother-of-pearl inlaid stands with some of his personal belongings. This chamber also contains various cabinets and chests with other treasured objects, such as blue-and-white porcelain and gilded ware. Alongside the *busabok* platform is a life-sized bronze portrait of the Abbot himself (figure 3). This is elevated upon a splendidly ornamented base. A replica may be found at the southwest corner of the *phutthawat* section, beside the L-shaped *wihan* to the left of the visitor's entrance.

Not on display to the general public is a carved dais embellished with glass encrustations in the sleeping chamber. Also in this private room is a chest storing his honorary fans of monastic rank. The tip of each one bears carved ivory ornamentations.

In 1851, the new monarch, King Rama IV, appointed the Abbot as the Supreme Patriarch of the Siamese kingdom, and he was given the official title "Somdet Phra Maha Samana Chao Kromphra Paramanuchit Chinorot". Unfortunately, this honor was briefly held, as he died on 9 December 1853, just two years after his nephew for whom he had done so much at Wat Phra Chetuphon. His body lay in state for a full year before cremation⁴.

³ A few illustrations of pictorial remnants were photographed nearly ten years ago by Dr. Vichai Posayachinda, and are now kept in his archives in Bangkok.

⁴ It is a common practice in southeast Asia to await an auspicious time to cremate a special person, either religious or royal. The long interval permits people to pay final tribute to the deceased. This was noted in 1822 by Dr. George Finlayson, *The Mission to Siam and Hué* (London, 1876; revised and published by Sir Stamford Raffles after his death), p. 111. Additional biographical information concerning the Abbot Prince may be found in Prince Sommot Amorphan and Prince Damrong, *rüang tang phra ratchakhana phuyai nai krung ratanakosin* (Bangkok, 1923), pp. 96-102.

Also see Phuttha samakhom, *phra prawat doi sarup khong somdet phra sangkharat haeng krung ratanakosin sip-chet phra-ong* (Bangkok, 1974), No. 7, pp. 21-25. A more extensive biography may be found in Nathawut Sutthisongkhram, *phra prawat lae phra niphon khong somdet phra mahasamanachao kromphra paramanuchit chinorot* (Bangkok, 1962). Fourth-reign references are included in Chao Phraya Thiphakarawong, *The Dynastic Chronicles, Bangkok Era, The Fourth Reign, 1851-1868* (Tokyo, 1965), tr. Chardin Flood, III, pp. 48-50, 85-86.

On the anniversary of the Patriarch's birthday, Wat Phra Chetuphon provides an annual opportunity for people to pay homage to his relics and to his remarkable literary achievements. All dedicate to him the merit which is made at this ceremony. In addition, representatives of the King and Queen preside over this religious and literary occasion. This festival was initiated by the Thai Society of the Faculty of Arts at Chulalongkorn University, in order to commemorate this great author who endowed Siamese literature with immortal compositions, both sacred and secular.