

WHY WERE THE *JĀTAKAS* "HIDDEN AWAY" AT WAT SĪCHUM ?

BETTY GOSLING

When Lucien Fournereau visited Sukhothai in the early 1890s, a source of joy and amazement was the collection of stone engravings depicting scenes from the *Jātakas* that he discovered at Wat Sī Chum. Lodged in a narrow tunnel-like stairwell only a couple of feet wide that had been built into the thick walls of the monastery's *mondop*, or image house, the *Jātaka* plaques, as they remain today, were all but inaccessible. Fournereau described the apprehension with which he crawled into the small opening that appeared to have been knocked haphazardly into the wall just south of the grandiose entryway that led to the shrine proper. He documented his excitement at catching glimpses of the engravings that lined the unlit ceiling of the "boyaux mystérieux." And he reported a sigh of relief when he finally emerged at the end of his arduous intramural journey at the summit of the monument.¹

Why was the dark stairway constructed, and why were the *Jātakas* so obscurely placed? Now, almost a century after Fournereau's exploration, the Sī Chum *mondop* and its *Jātaka* plaques remain something of a mystery. At Pagan, monuments with stairways embedded within exceptionally thick walls are not uncommon, but in the Pagan monuments there is some logical architectural relationship between the stairways and the interiors and exteriors of the monuments that is not evident at Sī Chum. There are several terra cotta collections at Pagan depicting the entire 547 or 550 *Jātakas* (depending on the recension), but they were placed conspicuously on the exteriors of monuments to edify a populace only minimally familiar with the teachings of the Theravada texts.² As in India, the ancient folk tales that had been retold and incorporated into the Buddhist canon as stories of the Buddha's previous lives served to link popular thought with more sophisticated religious tenets. But the inaccessibility of the Sī Chum *Jātakas* belies any such traditional intent.

In 1924 George Coedès suggested that the plaques perhaps had been lodged in the Sī Chum stairwell for safekeeping following some unknown catastrophe.³ The

1. Lucien Fournereau, *Le Siam Ancien*, part 2, *Annales du Musée Guimet* 31 (Paris, 1907), pp. 4-6.
2. Gordon H. Luce, *Old Burma-Early Pagan*, vol. 1, *Artibus Asiae*, Supplementum 25 (Locust Valley, New York), pp. 40, 61, 62, 241, 242, *passim*.
3. George Coedès, *Recueil des inscriptions du Siam*, vol. 1, *Inscriptions de Sukhodaya* (Bangkok, 1924), p. 177.



Jātakas are incomplete—only the first one hundred or so are depicted, and the last of these are executed with fewer details and less precision than the early ones. Some sort of political threat might be suggested as a reason. But the plaques are fitted into the stairwell in such a way that they could not have been added after the completion of the building.⁴ The huge *mondop* does not suggest itself as an emergency measure.

But it is generally agreed, on the other hand, that, although the *mondop* must have been constructed to house the plaques, they had probably been originally intended for another site.⁵ Although each plaque is numbered according to its position in the Pali canon, this ordering is not always followed.⁶ Moreover, the overhead positioning of the plaques makes the numbers, as well as their accompanying inscriptions, illegible under normal circumstances, suggesting that the identifications were no longer attributed their former significance.

Inscriptional and archaeological data provide some clues as to the plaques' original provenance. Coedès suggested that the *Jātakas* were those which Inscription 2 states surrounded a large, tall *ḥhēdī*,⁷ now identified as the Mahāthāt, Sukhothai's most important religious monument, located at the center of the city.⁸ Not only is this the only inscriptional evidence of *Jātaka* engravings at Sukhothai, but the stone engravings are the only extant examples to which the inscriptional passage could apply.

In 1981 I was able to demonstrate that if the Pali text numbering was followed—rather than the sequence of the plaques as placed at Sī Chum—the plaques could be arranged to form a four-foot high panel, rather than the long 17-inch, one-panel wide arrangement one finds in the *mondop*.⁹ I have also recently suggested that prior to the renovations at Wat Mahāthāt around 1330 and 1345, the core of the *ḥhēdī* had been a simple step pyramid of five stages similar to four other step pyramids that can be found at Sukhothai. A feature common to the four pyramids whose bases can still be seen (the base of the Mahāthāt pyramid is now surrounded by galleries) is the four-foot height of the bottom story.¹⁰ Putting inscriptional and archaeological evidence

4. Jean Boisselier, *Thal Painting* (Tokyo, 1976), pp. 75, 168, 169.

5. A.B. Griswold, *Towards a History of Sukhodaya Art* (Bangkok, 1967), pp. 27, 49. M.C. Subhadradis Diskul, *Sukhothai Art* (Bangkok, n.d.), p. 79. It is Boisselier's opinion that the plaques were executed for the Sī Chum location (*Thal Painting*, p. 75).

6. Boisselier, *Thal Painting*, p. 75.

7. Coedès, *Recueil*, p. 177.

8. See Betty Gosling, "Once More, Inscription 2: An Art Historian's View." *JSS* 69. 1–2 (1981): 13–42.

9. *Ibid*, pp. 30, 31.

10. Elizabeth Gosling, "The History of Sukhothai as a Ceremonial Center: A Study of Early Siamese Architecture and Society," University of Michigan Ph.D. dissertation (1983), pp. 211–26.

together, I would suggest that Coedès's theory is correct and that the *Jātakas* might possibly have adorned the bottom story of the Mahāthāt pyramidal base.

Inscription 2 tells us furthermore that when the renovator of the Mahāthāt, the monk Sī Sathā, returned from a lengthy journey to Sri Lanka around 1345 with relics for the Mahāthāt, it was falling into ruin and that it required extensive repairs.¹¹ Apparently, the project which Sī Sathā appears to have begun around 1330 had come to nought in his absence, and it can be hypothesized that the *Jātakas*, like the monument itself, had either been ruined or left uncompleted. If, as Sī Satha states in Inscription 2,¹² he completed the stupa with stucco and brick (around 1345), the stone engravings may well have been omitted from this stage of reconstruction.

But before we continue with this line of thought, it must be mentioned that our theory demands a slight re-dating of the *Jātaka* engravings. Boisselier, basing his conclusions on comparisons of the figures in the engravings with Sukhothai's "high classic" sculpture, usually dated (correctly, I think), to the latter half of the fourteenth century, suggested the *Jātaka* figures as prototypes and dated them accordingly to the Lūthai reign (1349–c. 1370).¹³ Our proposed date of c. 1330, although somewhat earlier than Boisselier's date, does not alter the chronological relation to later sculpture. The use of *stucco* architectural decor, which appears to have become the norm in the 1330s, 1340s, and 1350s,¹⁴ suggests in itself that perhaps the *stone* engravings derive from a somewhat different period.

But even if one accepts these arguments, it is still necessary to explain why, even when renovations of the Mahāthāt resumed around 1345, the plaques were not repaired, completed, and installed, if not on the Mahāthāt itself, on some other monument in the large Mahāthāt compound. The *Jātakas'* removal from the most conspicuous site in the city to a place of obscurity requires some explanation other than a simple change in architectural plans. The inscriptional evidence is not helpful, for the passage concerning the *Jātakas* is mutilated. Mr. A. B. Griswold and Dr. Prasert na Nagara have filled in the lacunae to read that the plaques "were pried loose by foolish men to get gold, and ruined." The translators state, however, that their interpretation is highly conjectural.¹⁵

-
11. Lines 2.18–20. A. B. Griswold and Prasert na Nagara, "Epigraphic and Historical Studies, No. 10 : King Lōdaiya of Sukhodaya and His Contemporaries," *JSS* 60.1 (1972) : 100, 120–1.
 12. Lines 2.20–40. *Ibid.*, pp. 100–102, 120–25.
 13. Boisselier, *Thai Painting*, p. 75.
 14. Gosling, "Sukhothai," pp. 184–85.
 15. Griswold and Prasert, "Studies, 10," p. 125.

It is my opinion that the answer to the Si Chum riddle is reflected, at least in part, in the religious attitudes of some Thai Buddhists in much more recent times. Prince Damrong reported that King Rama III disapproved of depictions of the *Jātakas* because he considered that portrayal of the Buddha in the form of spirits, animals, and persons was not appropriate.¹⁶ Gerini explained that although the *Jātakas* had been incorporated into the Buddhist texts in early times, the modern school of Buddhism, particularly the Siamese Orthodox School, questioned and even denied the canonicity of the stories. This school reasoned that the Buddha himself did not discourse much on himself, and previous lives such as those found in the *Jātakas* are not referred to in other orthodox texts.¹⁷ Over the centuries, with only few exceptions, it has been traditional in Thailand to depict only the last ten of the *Jātakas* (the *Tosachāt*), with emphasis on the last of these, the *Vessantara Jātaka* (the *Mahāchāt*, or Great Life), valued especially for its spiritual and moral values.¹⁸ (The most notable exception: the set of 500 statues, one for each *Jātaka*, which were cast in 1458. Only a few, in ruinous condition, have survived.)¹⁹

It would be unreasonable to project these modern-day attitudes back to the Sukhothai period without some supporting evidence, but although information is scarce, a few analogies can be drawn. As in later times, it appears that by the latter half of the fourteenth century, the *Tosachāt* and the *Mahāchāt* had been singled out as important texts.²⁰ After the 1345 reference to the *Jātaka* plaques around the *čhēdī*, there is no further mention of the 500 *Jātakas* as a complete set.

Furthermore, recent architectural studies have indicated that the installation of relics at Wat Mahāthāt around 1345 marked something of a watershed in the construction of Buddhist monuments at Sukhothai. Between the Rām Khamhæng period, at the end of the thirteenth century, and the mid-fourteenth century, little architectural construction appears to have taken place.²¹ The ruined state of the Mahāthāt in the 1340s appears to reflect the religious climate of the times. But the installation of authentic relics from Sri Lanka seems to have inaugurated a new wave of Buddhist activity, evidenced not only in the fervent Lūthai inscriptions²² but in an inordinate

16. Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, *Monuments of the Buddha in Siam*, second edition (Bangkok, 1973), p. 35.

17. G.E. Gerini, *A Retrospective View and Account of the Origin of the Thet Mahā Ch'at Ceremony*, second edition (Bangkok, 1976), p. 53.

18. Elizabeth Lyons, *The Tosachāt in Thai Painting* (Bangkok, 1963), p. 5.

19. Boisselier, *Thai Sculpture* (New York, 1975), p. 176.

20. Inscription 102.1.35. Griswold and Prasert "Studies, 7," *JSS* 59.1 (1971): 166, 169. Inscription 3.1.37. Griswold and Prasert, "Studies, 11," *JSS* 61.1 (1973): 88, 99.

21. Gosling, "Sukhothai," pp. 177-85.

22. Griswold and Prasert, "Studies, 11," *JSS* 61.1 (1973): 71-178.

amount of architectural construction, increasing as the century progressed.²³ What is significant for the present discussion is that the period between the execution of the *Jātaka* plaques and their installation in the Si Chum *mondop* spans the 1345 watershed.

Putting these diverse scraps of information together, we would suggest that whereas the *Jātakas* would have served well to bridge popular belief and the higher tenets of Theravada Buddhism in the first half of the fourteenth century, they may no longer have been considered the best means of incorporating the old traditions during the latter half of the century, when Theravada orthodoxy was more securely established. We have written elsewhere of the comparatively provincial state of affairs during the Rām Khamhāeng period.²⁴ The importance of animism as a major component of the state religion is documented in Inscription 1.²⁵ In our opinion, the *Jātaka* plaques, often depicting the Buddha in the guise of an animal or an animistic spirit, bore relevance to the Mahāthāt *Āhēdī* in the early periods of Sukhothai's history that would not apply in the years of strict orthodoxy that were to follow.

We propose that in the second half of the fourteenth century, a less conspicuous site, the tunnelled stairwell in the Wat Si Chum *mondop*, would have been considered a more appropriate location. Without doubt, the colossal seated Buddha image in the central shrine of the Si Chum *mondop* is the monastery's major focus of devotion. At Wat Mahāthāt the frieze depicting 168 almost identical monks in the walking mode that now surrounds the *Āhēdī* recalls, as the *Jātakas* could not, the journey to Sri Lanka and the installation of the Sinhalese relics. The *Jātakas*, on the other hand, were preserved at Si Chum, if not for their explicit statements of Buddhist thought, at least for their sanctity, and perhaps their beauty-attributes for which they are still revered today.

23. Gosling, "Sukhothai," pp. 185-204.

24. Betty Gosling, "Some Thoughts on the Introduction of Theravada Buddhism at Sukhothai," paper presented at the International Congress on Thai Studies, New Delhi, 1981.

25. Inscription 1.3.6-10. Griswold and Prasert, "Studies, 9," *JSS* 59.2 (1971): 200, 214.