

Note on Betty Gosling's Article: Why Were the Jatakas "Hidden Away" at Wat Si Chum? (JSS vol. 72)

by Michael Wright

There is sometimes a tendency for the speculations of early scholars to fossilize like resin into amber fact, and on these supposed facts are later built theories that in themselves may be excellent, but which turn out to be of doubtful validity because the early scholar's speculation is now in doubt.

Such is very much the case with the history of Sukhothai. The early scholars like Prince Damrong and Coedes were pioneers, working with a vast volume of previously unexamined information. Since then more information has come to light and we have had the time to reexamine it all in the light of related disciplines that have recently made great progress. Thus many of the proposals of the savants have become obsolete. It is these proposals that are today being utilized as the foundation for new thought, some of which I would like to subject to examination for soundness.

In the normal course of things I would prefer not to challenge Betty Gosling, as she is a refreshing and competent contributor to the thinking on Sukhothai history. But the basing of ideas upon supposed fact has become so widespread (see Piriya Krairiksh in ICTS 1984 vol. 6 for a case in point) that I cannot resist taking on Betty who seems to provide an ideally clear-cut instance of what I am talking about, in her article in JSS vol. 72.

To begin with she provides an original contribution of her own that later students may use as fact (whether they attribute it to her or not) when she appears to propose (p.18) that the Jatakas at Wat Si Chum may have been hidden away because they were in some way offensive to the new orthodoxy then being popularized at Sukhothai. I contend, however, that though the Sangha might fight like fishwives over minor points of Vinaya (see the Mulasasana of Wat Pa Daeng, JSS vol. 65 part 2 for an example), the Jatakas were never a bone of contention and we have no evidence of even one being suppressed.

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My explanation for the 'hiding' of the Jatakas depends upon the Siamese attitude to sacred objects, be they Buddha images or Jataka slabs. The sacred image is viewed as a sacred living presence. When that image is damaged beyond repair – I would like to say "mortally wounded" – it becomes ambiguous, for while remaining sacred and worthy of respect, it is inauspicious, an embarrassment, a reproach to the owner and not fit for the eyes of the faithful to behold. It should thus be disposed of or hidden away where it will not offend the pious eye, like the ruined Si Samphet image from Ayuthya entombed in the Stupa at Wat Phra Chetuphon in Bangkok.

In addition to this the Jataka slabs that Sri Sraddha found formed an ideal building material for the roof of the tunnel. Indeed I wonder whether the tunnel could have been built without them.

This may seem a minor point, but if it is not publicly challenged today another generation may take it up as the basis of a theory of "Jatakas as a source of dissent in the Sangha".

Betty's misuse (as I perceive it) of earlier speculation occurs on p. 15 where she writes "Coedes suggested that the Jatakas were those which Inscription 2 states surrounded a large, tall Chedi, now identified as the Mahathat, Sukhothai's most important religious monument, located at the centre of the city."

I quite agree that the Jataka slabs are those mentioned in Inscription 2, both because of Betty's reasons and because the Jatakas and the Inscription were both found together at Wat Si Chum.

But has the "large, tall Chedi" of Inscription 2 now been identified as the Mahathat? In JSS vol. 69 parts 1 and 2 Betty presents an interesting case for these Jataka slabs once having been arrayed around the central monument of Wat Mahathat, Sukhothai. The case she makes is quite fascinating, and it may indeed be true, but it appears to be based, at least in part, upon a reading of Inscription 2 (Wat Si Chum) that I cannot accept.

It all started with Prince Damrong proposing that Inscription 2 might have been moved from the Mahathat, his chief reason apparently being that the stone – which had then hardly been read – was full of references to "Phra Mahathat", and Wat Mahathat was considered to be of great importance as

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Sukhothai's central monument, though it is strange that even Inscription 1, found right in front of Wat Mahathat, has not a word to say about that monument.

What we know is that the Jatakas and Inscription 2 were found at Wat Si Chum.

We do not know, though it is possible as several scholars have proposed, that both or either were moved from the Mahathat.

The process of the proposal becoming a "fact" can be observed in "Epigraphic and Historical Studies, No. 10" (JSS 60.1, 1972) by Prasert and Griswold (hereafter referred to as P & G) without whom I would have had no entry into the epigraphy of Sukhothai. These honest and expert epigraphists failed us somewhat in their treatment of Inscription 2 and it is important that the record be put straight lest others be led astray. At this point it should be noted that some time ago Dr. Prasert Na Nakhon expressed doubts similar to my own as to the provenance of the Jatakas and the Inscription (see Saratthakadi Prasert Na Nakhon — Phikhanet Press, Bangkok 2527). But as these arguments of Dr. Prasert have not yet been made available to the English-speaking public, I present my counter-argument as though Dr. Prasert had not yet come forward with his new interpretation of the Inscription.

Here follows my interpretation of Inscription 2.

This stone was found at Wat Si Chum in conjunction with the Jataka slabs to which the inscription seems to refer. This is a fact. Both the inscription and the Jatakas may have been moved there from elsewhere, but this is supposition.

The stone is a huge one, the writing tiny, and badly worn in many parts. Furthermore it does not 'read' like the usual run of inscriptions. P & G treated it as a typical inscription and thus ran into trouble, but long ago I became convinced that it was a verbatim transcription of living speech. The changing rhythms, the brilliance followed by banality, the repetitions, and the use of "here" and "there", all point to speech. In some clearly read passages a sentence begins clearly and precisely only to run off into another subject without grammatical underpinnings. I thus suppose — unlike P & G who

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thought Sri Sraddha was composing a written document incompetently – that he was talking at large, that his words were taken down by scribes verbatim, and that somehow they ended up in the form of an inscription on stone. This is quite unlike the run of inscriptions, and even unlike Inscription 1 which, though it sounds “folksy” to modern ears, bears the marks of a polished literary composition. There are no unfinished sentences in Inscription 1.

If one admits that the stone records the spoken word, one may perceive that it contains two sermons, in one of which (side 1 line 1 to side 2 line 42) the author consistently refers to himself (with variations) as the Lord Sri Sraddha Rajaculamuni Sri Ratanalankadvipa Maha Sami. In the other (side 2 line 42 to the end) he consistently uses the pronoun Ku.

The connection between these two sermons will become apparent later.

Let us first dispose of the second sermon which begins on side 2 line 42. It begins in standard sermonic fashion with where the Buddha was and what he did:

(Side 2 lines 42–45)

“At one spot near the bank of the Mahavalukaganga where the Buddha, our Lord, spread his leathern mat, are enshrined the Hair Relic, the (Neck) Relic and Paribhoga Relic. This great Stupa is called Mahiyangana Maha Caitya. There the Lord performed stupendous miracles. The “throne” of the Stupa had crumbled down on the east to a length of thirteen fathoms, so with great faith I.....

This incident is taken from the Mahavamsa, which says that the Buddha, foreseeing that the Sasana would later bloom in Lanka, flew to where the Mahiyangana was to be built, spread his leathern mat, and performed stupendous miracles, driving out the Yaksas, thus making Lanka a Manusyavisaya, or an abode fit for human habitation.

Thereafter occurs an account, perfectly consistent internally, of how Sri Sraddha found the Mahiyangana in ruins, how he helped to restore it and how the Relics performed miracles in response. P & G would like to place some of this passage in Sukhothai, even supposing that around Sukhothai there were “five village of Sinhalas”. But Sri Sraddha's term ห้าบ้าน is simply a Thai

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translation of the Sinhalese “Pas Nuwara” or “Five Cities” into which the Lankan Highlands were divided at the time. Any attempt to read Sukhothai into this part of the inscription is very hard to sustain.

Now let us turn to Sermon 1, which occupies face 1 and face 2 up to line 42. This is a much more difficult prospect. But it also begins in typical sermonic format with the Lord Tathagatha doing something at Mahiyangana on the bank of the Mahavaluka Ganga (1980 reading). The reader should keep in mind that at Mahiyangana the Lord drove out the Yaksas.

After the typical sermonic introduction the author tells of his ancestors and of the distant past of Sukhothai. He then comes to a punch-line:— When his grandfather, Pha Muang, was preparing to join battle with Khom Sabat Khlon Lamphong (line 26) “He gathered his forces here”. That word “here” is of immense significance, for if Pha Muang were preparing to attack Sukhothai, “here” cannot refer to the Mahathat which was in the centre of the city; it must refer to something outside, for instance the vicinity of Wat Si Chum which is outside the city walls, but within shouting distance.

If Pha Muang gathered his forces outside Sukhothai (as he must have done), and if Sri Sraddha called the spot “here” then he must have been delivering his sermon at a site outside the walls, for instance at Wat Si Chum where the inscription was found. Is this proposal of mine unscientific? Does it do more violence or less to the available evidence than the proposals of those with whom I disagree?

I shall not attempt to say who Khom Sabat Khlon Lamphong was, out of respect for the evidence (or lack of it). Others have decided firmly that he was the legitimate Cambodian viceroy of Sukhothai, despite the fact that Inscription 2 tells us clearly that it was Pha Muang who had received the Sword of Office, not to mention the hand of a daughter, from the King of Angkor.

Sri Sraddha continues with the tale of his feats of derring-do as a youth. These are not out of place in a Buddhist sermon, witness the Mahavamsa, each bloody chapter of which Siamese tradition accepts as a sermon, as it says at the end of each chapter “..... written for the edification and horrification of the faithful”. Then comes his conversion and his works of merit, the treatment of which is as tedious to the reader as it must have been to those listening to Sri Sraddha’s sermon, one hot morning some 600 years ago. One item in his list of

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meritorious deeds deserves particular attention as it shows how far afield Sri Sraddha's activities extended and how he used the term "Mahathat" to refer to almost any relic, or monument that was supposed to contain relics, not necessarily the Mahathat of Sukhothai.

On side 2 lines 18 to 35 Sri Sraddha tells us of how he found a great Phra Mahathat where all the relics gathered (or a place where there were many great Stupas) in utter ruin and desolation, how he cleared the jungle growth from it, added something on top to restore its original height and how he restored "great stone images of the Lord". P & G give the passage close attention, examining the possibility that it might refer to Sukhothai, or Pagan, finally proposing the Maha Thupa at Anuradhapura. But Sri Sraddha tells us that this monument was in "Krisna's city" (Nakhon Phra Kris) and P & G failed to note the significance of Sri Sraddha's statement that he could find no lime to whiten his restored monument. Until quite recent times lime was a vital adjunct to civilisation in South and Southeast Asia, as it was a necessary ingredient for a quid of betel. Thus to say "there was no lime" implies total ruin, remoteness from other civilized places, and a lack of basic civilized amenities. We have no evidence that Sukhothai was ever reduced to such straits in Sri Sraddha's time, nor Pagan, nor Anuradhapura, both of which, though long ruined, maintained their status as sacred cities through the centuries. I therefore proposed Nakhon Pathom which is connected by folktale to Krisna to this day, where the chief Stupa has had something added on top, where great stone images have been found broken, mended, and broken again, and which may well have been deep in the jungle and uninhabited in Sri Sraddha's time. Furthermore the name of the monument (Sri Sraddha says the "Khom" called it "Phra Dham") corresponds well with "Phra Dam" found in Ayuthayan and early 19th. century references to the Phra Pathom Stupa, which only acquired its modern spelling (Pathama) much more recently.

Dr. Prasert Na Nakhon has tentatively accepted this interpretation (oral communicatin), his reasoning being based on a re-reading of Inscription 11, also by Sri Sraddha, that says that on his return from Lanka he crossed from "Tennasserim to Phetchaburi, Ratchaburi, Nakhon ris, Ayothaya" etc. Dr. Prasert notes that "Nakhon ... ris" of Inscription II, lying like Nakhon Pathom between Ratchaburi and Ayuthaya, may be the Nakhon Phra Kris (Krishna's City) of Inscription 2.

But, like Sri Sraddha in his sermon, I have strayed away from the real

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purpose of this discussion. Like Sri Sraddha I must cut short my digressions and return to the matter at hand.

Sri Sraddha's digressions took him far from his purpose, namely the restoration and rededication of the old temple that had been built on his grandfather's Jayabhumi, the auspicious spot where he gathered his forces before battle with Khom Sabat.

Sri Sraddha's time is up; he therefore comes to the point with a swiftness that seems enigmatic to us today, but must have been quite clear to those who were gathered to hear his sermon:—

(side 2 lines 39 to 42) “Around that great tall Caitya were carved the five hundred Jatakas, excellent and exceedingly beautiful. The Truk smashed them to strip them of their gold. When the Somdet Phra Maha Sami (Sri Sraddha) had returned from Lanka he gathered a group of to carry up the bricks from below and restore the old Buddha image, being full of faith, and he had brought back two Glorious Gem Relics from Sihala to enshrine there. There is no telling the whole tale of it.”

If this is speech, as I have proposed, then “that” and “there” should refer to something in the presence of the speaker, rather than to “the aforementioned” as might be the case in writing. Sri Sraddha, preaching at Wat Si Chum, seems to be referring to an earlier monument, then in ruins, on the site where he would build the Mondop. The ruin, he tells us, had once been surrounded by the Jataka slabs, which the Truk (whoever they were) had stripped of their gold. When he had returned from Sihala or Lanka (the tense is quite clear in Thai), he inspired the faithful to restore “the old Buddha image” พระเกี้ยว (for พระเกี้ยว) in the 1980 reading, as opposed to พระเกี้ยว (for พระเกี้ยว), — “the nine holy things” of the earlier reading. We may suppose that this image had existed there since the time of Ram Khamhaeng as it seems to be referred to (Phra Acana) in Inscription 1, and when this image was examined before its modern restoration it was found to contain several smaller images of increasing magnitude, each executed in brick and mortar, one added to the other, witness to several restorations and enlargements.

Finally Sri Sraddha enshrined “there” (in the image or the Mondop?) two remarkably holy relics that he had brought back with him from Lanka. P & G believe that these two relics were portions or replicas of the Hair Relic and the

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Neck Bone Relic from the Mahiyangana in Lanka, and I agree with P & G for if Sri Sraddha had acquired the relics elsewhere he would have told us.

This provides us with the first link between the two sermons, for the second sermon (side 2 line 42 to the end) tells us of the significance of the relics and how they were acquired from Mahiyangana, while the first (side 1 line 1 to side 2 line 42) end up with how the relics were deposited at Wat Si Chum, Sukhothai. It would not surprise me if Sri Sraddha named the temple "Maheyong" (Mahiyangana) like similar replicas of the Mahiyangana Caitya at Nakhon Si Thammarat, Ayuthaya and Chainat, but of this we have no evidence.

However, there is a deeper link between the two sermons, and between the Mahiyangana and Wat Si Chum, namely that as the Buddha had driven out the Yaksas, making Lanka a Manusyavisaya, at the site of the Mahiyangana, so Pha Muang drove Khom Sabat Khlon Lamphong out of Sukhothai, his camp being the site outside the walls of the city, which he would subsequently have dedicated as a temple (like Wats "Prachumphon" – Cambodian "Siri Jum" or "Si Chum" – elsewhere in Siam), and which his pious grandson Sri Sraddha later restored. Thus in his sermon Sri Sraddha draws a parallel:— Pha Muang, like the Buddha, was a liberator. However, the enemy from whom he liberated Sukhothai remains an enigma.

Summary

This presentation of mine is at variance with the ideas of several respected scholars. However, I believe that I have shown the inner consistency of Inscription 2 and its consistency with Lankan and Siamese traditions (in particular Siamese ancestor worship). The Inscription is not a collection of random items; through its many digressions runs a thread that I have attempted to identify. My interpretation is also consistent with the simple fact that the Jataka slabs and Inscription 2 were both discovered in the tunnel at Wat Si Chum. No act of faith or stretch of imagination is required of the reader.

My central point is that Inscription 2 cannot be used as evidence that either the inscription or the Jatakas ever had anything to do with Wat Mahathat, Sukhothai. All the evidence in the inscription is to the contrary; and Wat Mahathat itself should be acknowledged as a mystery. It is mentioned neither in Inscription 1 nor 2, and we know nothing so far about its date or original

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form.

As for those Jataka slabs, each inscribed with a description in very primitive Siamese, I would dearly like to believe that they date from Pha Muang's original foundation, and that they show Siamese as it was written before Inscription 1. But, alas, I have no evidence.

Before any more Sukhothai "history" is written, we must define what we know and what we do not know. Sukhothai has become so well "known" that the whole city and period have become a semi-myth, a sort of Camelot, despite the plentiful phy remains that should make Sukhothai more a part of history than of hagiography.

Betty Gosling's articles on Sukhothai remain extremely important, for the Jataka slabs found hidden at Wat Si Chum may indeed have been moved from Wat Mahathat. What we need is solid evidence that this was so. I cannot perceive such evidence in Inscription 2.

P & G's investigations of the epigraphy of Sukhothai are hugely competent and provide perhaps the only entry into this obtruse subject for most westerners – including myself. Only in the case of Inscription 2 have they let us down, due to no fault of their own. If they could find the energy to cooperate yet again in a re-examination of Inscription 2, many people would be yet more indebted to them.

Sources:

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