

A POSSIBLE EARLY THAI ROUTE TO THE SEA*

By what route did the Thai¹-speaking people reach the Gulf of Siam, in early times when the Chao Phraya River valley was inhabited and ruled by other peoples? That there is a mystery here seems hardly to have been noticed.

Thanks to the work of scholars in the fields of archaeology, epigraphy, art history, and linguistics, we now know that before the founding of the Thai city of Ayutthaya in 1351 A.D. the Chao Phraya valley was populated by speakers of a variety of Mon. That the Cambodians were also in the area is shown by the well-known ruins at Lopburi. A Cambodian scholar in Phnom Penh told me many years ago that it is their understanding that there was also a Cambodian town at the place where the Thai city of Ayutthaya was later built. If this is true, one wonders whether the Cambodians constructed no permanent buildings like those at Lopburi. Perhaps they were demolished or recycled in the course of building the Thai city.

Whether the founding of Ayutthaya in 1351 marked the introduction of Thai speech into the area, or was rather the culmination of an earlier more gradual infiltration of Thai speech, we do not know. In any case, in the centuries since then Thai speech has taken over the whole Chao Phraya valley. The few groups of Mon speakers now found at various points along the lower parts of the river are well known to be descendants of more modern Mon immigrants from Burma, having nothing to do with the ancient Mon speakers of the area.

In view of this situation, with Mon-Khmer speakers in control of the Chao Phraya valley in the centuries before the founding of Ayutthaya, one wonders how the Thai-speaking peoples of Northern Thailand communicated with and traveled to the Gulf and the Peninsula. That they did so is certain.

For one thing, the Thai dialects of the southern peninsula are sufficiently different from other varieties of Thai speech to indicate that they have been in place for a long time. But it is hard to imagine that these groups of Thai speakers migrated through the Mon-Khmer speaking Chao Phraya valley to reach their southern location, leaving no traces of their having passed.

And for another thing, the northern cities are known to have had contact with the sea; records speak of visits to and from Ceylon. Of course much of Indian cultural influence reached the Thais second-hand via Cambodia, but not Hinayana Buddhism.

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Quite the reverse. All indications are that by the end of the 13th century Hinayana Buddhism from Thailand was already a democratic, indeed a subversive and revolutionary force in the Khmer empire, and somewhat later was undoubtedly one of the factors leading to the downfall of that empire. The Thais in Thailand may have absorbed some of their Hinayana Buddhism from the Mon-speaking Buddhists whom they encountered in Thailand. But, as already noted, records speak of direct contacts with Ceylon. How did people in these Northern Thailand cities travel to the sea en route to Ceylon?

At this point I must relate a personal experience that has remained vivid in my memory for a long time. Forty years ago, on a trip to Kanburi, I found myself standing on a bit of high ground gazing out in all directions at an interesting topographical situation. I realized that I was standing at the northwest corner of a rectangular plains area. Looking south, the plains were bounded on the west by the wall of mountains running north and south. And looking east, the plains were bounded on the north by a line marking the beginning of the hilly country of the western provinces. Of course the southern boundary of this rectangle was the sea.

During this same visit to Kanburi, a monk showed me a collection in the monastery of objects that farmers and workers had dug up over the years. As is well known, a Roman lamp was once found there, but this collection also included dozens of other metal objects of all sorts.

Kanburi is located on the Meklong River. It struck me that this point was undoubtedly in ancient times the head of navigation; ocean-going boats could come upriver to this point and no farther, and it must have been all the activity connected with loading and unloading, and also perhaps the movement of travelers, that resulted in the dropping of these various objects, many apparently of foreign origin.

Through the years I have been interested in the idea that all of this may answer our question as to how the Thai-speaking peoples of Northern Thailand reached the Gulf and the peninsula. Running northward from Kanburi up the course of the Meklong River and other streams, there may have been in ancient times a corridor that provided a route for migration to the peninsula, and the route by which the Thais reached the sea in order to travel to Ceylon, and also a trade route of importance. Perhaps the inaccessibility of the Chao Phraya River valley farther east, occupied by foreigners, was irrelevant and unimportant.

There is no single north-and-south river in this western region. The course of rivers, especially smaller ones, has sometimes changed in southeast Asia, either naturally or by human intervention. But even if the course of the small rivers in this area was in those times much as it is today, this would have meant only that a good deal of overland travel was necessary. But in view of all their migrations across northern Southeast Asia and southern China, one assumes that the Thai-speaking peoples of early times were good at overland travel; indeed those in the uplands still are.

This area lying to the north of Kanburi, that is, the provinces to the west of the central plain of Thailand, is now a hinterland which has never been of much interest to anybody but the inhabitants. Perhaps this is an injustice. Maybe this area was once of great importance to the Thai-speaking people of Thailand.

There are various other points of possible relevance to this idea of a westerly route to the sea.

Marvin Brown presented arguments many years ago to the effect that the Thai dialects of the southern peninsula are closely related to the dialect of old Sukhothai. The dialect of the central plain, including the present-day national language, is, on the other hand, more closely related to Lao and the dialects of the Northeast. This linguistic connection between Sukhothai and the southern peninsula suggests fairly extensive contacts in early times, and seems likely to be involved with the presumed migrations that resulted in the settling of the peninsula by Thai speakers.

The founder of Ayutthaya was known as the Prince of U Thong. U Thong is a place in our western area. And the early chronicles of Ayutthaya are replete with mention of Suphanburi and its royalty. Suphanburi also figures from time to time in the Sukhothai records. It may be that Ayutthaya at first represented an eastward extension of Thai authority already well established in the west at Suphanburi and probably also other towns. This push to the east continued, culminating in the conquest of the Khmer capital at Angkor in the middle of the 15th century. Why did the Thais not take over and remain in Cambodia? Perhaps they were not numerous enough, and/or perhaps the threat of Cambodian resistance was too great.

The place names Kanburi and Suphanburi are of Sanskrit or Pali origin; in each case, the form could be from either Indic language. (Kanburi is spelled, and sometimes pedantically pronounced, Kanchanaburi.) Both mean 'City of Gold.' And the name U Thong is Thai for 'Cradle of Gold.' Is it too fanciful to speculate that there may be in these names some connection, more than coincidental, with the famous Sanskrit name for some region in this part of the world, Suvarnabhumi 'Land of Gold'? (The prior element in Suphanburi is the same word as the prior element in Sanskrit Suvarnabhumi.) If so, we have another indication that this western hinterland may once have been more important than has been imagined.

Finally, the great Thai literary classic *Khun Chang Khun Phaen*, which I like to call the Thai folk epic, may throw some light on this whole matter. The setting for this story is Suphanburi, in our western region.

The text that we have is modern, dating from the early part of the Bangkok period. This is shown by the language and particularly by the verse form, which is modern. But some, at least, of the content is very old. For example, someone pointed out many years ago that the roundup of wild water buffaloes that occurs early in the story indicates great age, because no wild water buffaloes, to say nothing of a roundup, have been known in historic times.

The home of the three main characters is Suphanburi, and most of the action takes place there. But some of the action takes place at the royal court, which has always been assumed to mean Ayutthaya. Perhaps we should go through the three volumes of this work again, or better yet, the manuscripts in the National Library, to see how much clear evidence there is that the court at Ayutthaya is really intended.

One episode strikes me as being more plausible as a reference to a local chieftain than to the king at Ayutthaya. This is the king's consideration of the case of the heroine, who had caused endless trouble through the years by not being able to make up her mind to stick to one or the other of her two men. The king sentences her to death, in the passage that still makes grown men weep when they read it. This matter, which after all involved no crimes more serious than alienation of affections, abduction, and adultery, and among commoners at that, is hard to imagine as a proper concern of the king and court at Ayutthaya. But one can well imagine a local chieftain, acquainted with the principals, concerning himself with it. Perhaps, as the work became more widely popular, the text was altered.

The National Library edition of this work, which we all use, may not be enough for purposes of studying the questions raised here. The editors made a number of revisions and deletions, as is shown by earlier printings of the work, now hard to find. The National Library has a wonderful collection of manuscripts of this work. I spent some years working through all of these, and can attest that they are well worth detailed study and even full publication. Some were presumably omitted from the published edition because the poetry is so poor, or because there is so much obscenity, or in some cases because the episode could not be fitted into the continuous narrative as presented in the published three volumes. But none of these manuscripts, so far as I can recall from the time when I studied them, gives evidence of earlier composition than the first reigns of the Bangkok period. This is not surprising in the case of a work which was probably always regarded as popular, somewhat vulgar, and certainly not a prestigious literary classic. The various episodes were probably originally sung, or recited orally, and orally transmitted, so that in each generation the language would be updated freely. Thus the manuscripts that survive give us the text of their time, none predating the Bangkok period.

There may still be traditional singers who can produce parts of this narrative; whether their text would turn out to be old would be a question. I encountered one such many years ago at Saraburi, at the time of the annual festival of the Buddha Footprint. He was a beggar sitting beside the road, and was singing part of this story in a rapid patter, very hard to follow. I did not learn where he came from, probably elsewhere, since that is a time when people come from far and wide.

If Suphanburi and U Thong and Kanburi and perhaps other towns in this western region were so important in early times, why are there no local records? This, it seems to me, is not difficult to understand: There was no writing in local dialects

until around the year 1300 A.D. Then all at once, a few years earlier in some places, a few years later in others, there appeared inscriptions in local dialects, not only at Sukhothai but also at many other places in Thailand and Laos. What inscriptions there were in earlier times were in other languages of great religious or governmental importance, such as Sanskrit, Pali, Mon, and Cambodian. I have always believed that this sudden outburst of writing in the local dialects was connected with the democratic influence of Hinayana Buddhism.

So if there are no surviving written records from any of these towns, it may be because there were no great religious or governmental activities to record. These may have been rather bustling towns of commerce and trade and travel, where perhaps there were none learned in the foreign literary languages. Incidentally, Khun Chang, one of the two male protagonists in the folk epic, was a wealthy merchant.

So these are some suggestions that have occurred to me from time to time through the years pointing to a more westerly route which the Thai-speaking peoples may have used to reach the sea, for migration, travel, and trade. Some are perhaps more persuasive than others. Some may seem fanciful or irrelevant.

How can we hope to know more about this matter? For one thing, all the early inscriptions and chronicles ought to be reexamined with this question in mind. And the manuscripts of the folk epic ought to be studied for possible early passages, episodes, and other bits and pieces of evidence.

Perhaps archaeological work in this western area is our best hope. Who knows what evidence may remain, waiting to be dug up, or, as in the case of the collection of artifacts at the monastery in Kanburi, waiting to be noticed?

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ENDNOTE :

1 Most scholars use the spelling Thai for the language and people of Thailand, and the spelling Tai for the entire language family. Because no technical linguistic questions are involved, the spelling Thai is here used throughout. As a matter of fact, the question of which spelling to use is really irrelevant, because at the historical period we are concerned with, long before the sound changes that produced modern pronunciation in the various dialects, this word had as its initial sound neither an aspirated th nor an unaspirated t, but a voiced d.