Where is Rām Khamhāeng’s Stupa?  
A Consideration of Past and Present Topographical Identifications

As historians know, our knowledge of the far-distant past seldom arrives in a sudden burst of glory, but is more often the result of painstaking research involving the work of many scholars. It is not uncommon, of course, for different scholarly efforts to result in contradictory conclusions, and these bring on those heated debates we find in academic journals—and sometimes in intellectual confrontations of a much more personal sort!

But there is another phenomenon: the historical theory that seems so right and so self-evident that the scholarly world espouses it without question. Reiterated unanalytically for decades—or possibly centuries—historical theory may crystallize into established historical “fact.” Sometimes, such a “fact” persists long after new research has cast serious doubts about its validity. And, in some cases, new evidence may even be bent or manipulated so as not to conflict with established opinion.

One example of this crystallization process concerns the identification of the stupa (or Buddhist reliquary monument) documented in the oldest known inscription written in the Thai language. Inscription 1, which describes the thirteenth century Thai city, Sukhothai, under the reign of its best known ruler, Rām Khamhāeng, reports that Rām Khamhāeng built this stupa in Sukhothai’s sister city, Si Satchanalai.

Rām Khamhāeng’s stupa was evidently an important one—the only one, in fact, mentioned in the inscription. Similarly, it is the one stupa attributed to the Rām Khamhāeng period in Sukhothai’s Inscription 2, dating from the middle of the fourteenth century—that is, about one half century after the stupa was built. However, neither Inscription 1 nor Inscription 2 gives much detail about the stupa’s construction, and we are told nothing at all about its appearance.

What we are told is this: (table 1, passage A): that in the year 1285 A. D. Rām Khamhāeng had a relic (Phra That) dug up, that “the relic was buried in the middle of Si Satchanalai, and a chedi (stupa) was built on top. The stupa was finished in six years. A wall of boulders (phā) enclosing the Phra Mahā That was built, and that was finished in three years”.

It should be remembered that the word that can mean either a relic, or a stupa in which a relic is enshrined. Phra is an honorific term. Phra That in this passage

obviously refers to a relic (or possibly relics), whereas *Phra Mahā Thāt*, around which Rām Khamhāeng built the wall, could refer to either the relic or the *stupa*. (*Mahā*, of course means "great"). In Inscription 2 (table 1, passage C), the *stupa* is called *Phra Si Ratana Thāt*,² an elaboration of *Phra Thāt*; *Si*, like *phra* is an honorific term, and *ratana*, meaning "jewel," is yet another term frequently found in the names of Thai *stupas* and relics. We will return to the *Phra Si Ratana Thāt*, noted in table 1, passage B, below.

Inscription 1's statement that it took six years to build Rām Khamhāeng's *stupa*, suggests a structure of considerable size. Other than that, the only information that helps us to identify the *stupa* is topographical, that is, that the *stupa* was built in the middle of Si Satchanalai.

Si Satchanalai is identified today as a walled area about 50 kms. north of Sukhothai. A dozen or so noted writers have identified Rām Khamhāeng’s *stupa* as the monument known today as Chāng Lōm (meaning surrounded by elephants), located at the approximate center of the walled area. (See table 2, cols. 4, 5. In the table, I refer to the walled area as the "hill* area, actually at the foot of the hills). In recent times the hill area and its surroundings have been called "Sawankhalok" --a name that does not appear in the Sukhothai inscriptions.

But let's get back to Rām Khamhāeng's stupa. It has been recognized for some time that the walls surrounding this area date from the fifteenth or sixteenth century,² that is, some two or three centuries after Rām Khamhāeng is said to have built his *stupa*. Thus the position of the walls cannot indicate where the center of Satchanalai might have been in the thirteenth century or where the *stupa* was built. But this has not deterred those writers who still, on the basis of the topographical reference, proclaim the Chāng Lōm/Rām Khamhāeng identification without question.

Another problem concerning the Rām Khamhāeng/Chāng Lōm identification is that in the past several years some art historians have begun to question a thirteenth century date for the Chāng Lōm *stupa* on stylistic grounds. A fifteenth century date for the *stupa*, as well as for most of the other buildings located within the walled area, has been proposed.⁴ But stylistic anomalies have not done much to shake the old Rām Khamhāeng identification. Some writers who admit to the stylistic problems--but who have ignored the topographical uncertainties--have suggested that the Chāng Lōm *stupa* that we see today is a reconstruction that does not adhere to the *stupa*’s original design.⁵ Thus, in one form or another, the Chāng Lōm identification persists.

Here I am not going to discuss stylistic matters, but, instead, the identification of Inscription 1’s “Si Satchanalai”. This topographical datum is, after all, the most explicit information we have about Rām Khamhāeng’s *stupa*.

One other place name mentioned in Inscription 1 is relevant to our discussion. This second name, “Chaliang,” occurs in a passage (table 1, passage B), separate from the one documenting the *stupa* at the center of Satchanalai. But like the Satchanalai
passage, the passage refers to a place, ("Chaliang") at the middle of which a thêt, i.e., a stupa or relic was located. As in Inscription 2, (table 1, passage C), the thêt is called, honorifically, Phra Si Ratana Thêt.6

Inscription 1's "Chaliang" (table 2, col.2) is usually identified today as an area nestled in a bend of the Yom River, southeast of the hill area. The "Phra Si Ratana Mahâ Thêt" is identified as the large prâng, or Khmer-inspired monument situated near the center of the river bend area.

It is also in the river bend that we find the wall generally identified as the one Râm Khamhâeng is reported to have built around the Phra Thêt in table 1, passage A. The wall is unique; constructed of large boulders, it is the only wall anywhere that fits Inscription 1's specification of phâ in the construction.7 I do not see any reason to question this identification; nor do I know of others who have done so. The wall surrounds the prâng identified as the Phra Si Ratana Mahâ Thêt--the Stupa of the Great Relic.

Inscription 1 does not tell us where Râm Khamhâeng dug up his relic. But the most often expressed scholarly explanation is that he removed it from the Phra Si Ratana Mahâ Thêt in the river bend. According to this theory, after-digging up the relic and building a new stupa (Chang Lôm) to hold it, Râm Khamhâeng built his wall around the site where the relics had formerly been.8 The theory is cumbersome, and as its proponents admit, it is a little shocking that Râm Khamhâeng would have robbed a stupa of its relics.9 The interpretation is required, of course, if one accepts the present-day identifications of Inscription 1's "Satchanalai" as Sawankhalok's hill area and "Chaliang" as the river bend.

What I will suggest here is that passages A and B and, therefore, "Satchanalai" and "Chaliang," refer, not to two different sites but to one area--the area at Sawankhalok's river bend. As mentioned above, there is no problem with identifying the wall as Râm Khamhâeng's, and although the Mahâ Thêt that we see today is the product of fifteenth- and eighteenth-century reconstructions, it is commonly thought that its earliest state dates from the Râm Khamhâeng period or earlier.10

True, like the names "Satchanalai" and "Chaliang" in the inscription, Sawankhalok's hill and river bend areas suggest two distinct settlements. They are about two km. apart, and each site is centered on its own cluster of ceremonial buildings. However, the two areas are contiguous, and a dirt road lined with small houses, a few shops, and some ancient temple ruins connects the river bend with the hills. Local inhabitants with whom I have talked have no idea where the dividing line between "Chaliang" and "Satchanalai" might be. A Thai chronicle, the Phong-sawadan Nîpa, which dates from the post-Sukhothai period but recounts the legendary history of Satchanalai, notes a temple, Wat Khôk Singkhârâm, as having been located in the center of Satchanalai.11 Wat Khôk Singkhârâm is a monastery, situated roughly
half way between Sawankhalok's hill area and the river bend. It is my opinion that the center of Satchanalai at an earlier time was located even farther to the east, i.e. at the river bend. The growth of the settlement from east to west, in this elongated pattern is easily explained by the site's proximity to the river, which forms a natural barrier against expansion in a more conventional manner. Moreover, the area is heavily silted, suggesting that flooding may have necessitated a move away from the river bend to a more protected area.

In order to understand the present-day identifications of "Satchanalai" and "Chaliang" as two separate areas, it is helpful to consider how the distinction came about. The distinction appears to have been made first in the twentieth century.

At the end of the nineteenth century there was little consensus about the location of "Satchanalai," and "Chaliang" had not been identified at all. (See table 2, cols.3, 4.) As late as 1901, Aymonier noted that "Satchanalai" was a forgotten city, its whereabouts unknown. Between 1885 and 1895, Schmitt and Fournereau at various times had identified "Satchanalai" with Kamphaeng Phet (well over 100 kms. to the south) and with Sawankhalok--the identification that would eventually take hold. Aymonier, while admitting that either of these identifications was possible, suggested Sukhothai as a third alternative, and, in the end, concluded that identification was impossible.

In the early twentieth century, things became more certain. In 1906, Vajiravudh, King Rama VI visited Sukhothai and Sawankhalok, and in his thēo Mūang Phra Ruang, published in 1907, explained Sawankhalok's ruins--both at the river bend and the hill area--in terms of references to "Si Satchanalai" in the Thai inscriptions and in the chronicles. At about the same time, in 1907 and 1908, the French archaeologist Lajonquiere also visited Sawankhalok and, like King Rama VI, concluded that the extensive ruins could only be the inscriptiveal "Si Satchanalai." Lajonquiere noted that Sawankhalok's inhabitants still referred to the area as "Satchanalai" and that at least one nineteenth century map referred to the area by that name. Understandably, when he published his conclusions in 1909 and 1912, he questioned why the Sawankhalok/Satchanalai identification had not been made much sooner.

But, although in the first decade of the twentieth century the Satchanalai/Sawankhalok identification was well-established, the identity of Inscription 1's "Chaliang" was still unknown. In 1909, the same year that Lajonquiere published his conclusions, Bradley, quoting the most renowned of Thai historians, Prince Damrong, suggested that Chaliang had been located at MƯāng L Após, near Kakhon Sawan, some 200 kms. south of Sawankhalok. Thus, with "Chaliang" not yet in the picture, historians, like Sawankhalok's inhabitants, still considered the hill and river areas one entity. In 1906 King Rama VI suggested the lotus-bud stupa known as Čhēdi Čhet Thāeo, just east of Chāng Lömür, in the hill area, as Râm Khamhāeng's stupa.
Lajonquière, in 1909 thought Rām Khamhāeng's *stupa* was the large octagonal *stupa* just west of the Phra Sī Mahā That, at the river bend.  

As far as I have been able to determine, it was not until the 1920s that "Chaliang" came to be associated with Sawankhalok. The first reference I have found is in a lecture that Reginald Le May presented to the Siam Society in 1924 (published in *JSS* in 1925). Le May, like Bradley, quoted Prince Damrong. According to Le May, Prince Damrong now thought that Inscription 1's "Chaliang" was an old name for Sawankhalok before Satchanalai was founded (not located at Mūang Lūng, as he had previously thought). But as far as I know, Prince Damrong's theory was not published in full until 1944, twenty years after Le May's lecture, (and, sadly, a year after the Prince's death). It was during those previous twenty years that scholars began to chop Sawankhalok (locally called "Satchanalai") into two parts and call one part "Satchanalai," the other "Chaliang".

In Prince Damrong's 1944 book, *Nithān Bōrānkhađi*, he would explain "Chaliang" and "Si Satchanalai" on the basis of a meticulous study of Thai chronicles and inscriptions. Prince Damrong's research disclosed that the chronicles, which (unlike the Sukhothai inscriptions) date from the post-Sukhothai period, all refer to *either* "Satchanalai" *or* to "Chaliang"—never to both. The inclusion of one name or the other in connection with other Thai place names in the chronicles led to the conclusion that both "Chaliang" and "Satchanalai" referred to the same place—Sawankhalok. Furthermore, Prince Damrong concluded that "Si Satchanalai" was not only a newer name than "Chaliang," but also an official, honorific one (*khruāng pradap phra kiat yot*) coined by Rām Khamhāeng.

If the theory is correct, then it would not be surprising for the old popular name, "Chaliang," to continue in use long after the new, official name had been devised. Nor is it improbable that, in different contexts, both names could have been used in the Sukhothai inscriptions to refer to the same place. Who of us has not vacillated at times between "Ceylon" and "Sri Lanka"; "Cambodia" and "Kampuchea"; or "Siam" and "Thailand"! Although "Satchanalai," the official name, was the name most often used in the inscriptions dating from the Sukhothai period, three inscriptions, nos.1, 2, and 38, refer to both "Satchanalai" and "Chaliang."

But in the twenty years between the time Le May first quoted Prince Damrong’s theory (in 1924), and the time that it was explained in full (in 1944), the scholarly bisection of Sawankhalok into "Satchanalai" and "Chaliang" had been performed.

Paradoxically, this turn of events can be traced to Prince Damrong himself. In 1926, just two years after Le May gave his lecture, Prince Damrong published his well-known *Tamnān Phra Phuttha Čhēdi*, one of the most widely-read and widely-quoted works ever written on Thai history. In the *Tamnān*, Prince Damrong attempted
to trace the history of Buddhism in Thailand back to the religion’s founding in India in the sixth century B.C. His concern here was with the broad sweep of history—with India, Sri Lanka, and Burma—not with the minutiae of place names in Sukhothai inscriptions.

Describing the spread of Theravada Buddhism from Sri Lanka to Siam, Prince Damrong noted the similarity between what is considered Sri Lanka’s most important Buddhist monument, the Mahāthupa, and Sawankhalok’s Chāng Lôm stupa. Both are dome-shaped monuments and both are surrounded by statues of elephants. In the 1920s, Sukhothai art was considered to be much older than we now think, and Sawankholok’s hill area was considered contemporary with Rām Khamhāeng. In the context of Indian and Sinhalese architectural history, the Chāng Lôm stupa must have seemed a natural selection for the most important religious monument of the Rām Khamhāeng period. It was also in the Tamnān Phra Phuttha Chēdī that Prince Damrong—again, without reference to the complexities of place names—identified Inscription 1’s Phra Si Ratana Thāt at “Chaliang” with the prāng surrounded by Rām Khamhāeng’s wall at the river bend (passage B).

The first seven chapters, which deal with the history of Buddhism before it was introduced into Siam—and which places the Chāng Lôm identification in the proper historical perspective—have not been translated into English. Nor has the 1944 Nīthan Bōrānkhārīdi, in which Prince Damrong’s explained his old name/new name theory. Beginning in the 1940s, a comparison between Sri Lanka’s Mahāthupa and the Chāng Lôm Stupa has been included in most western-language works on Thai art. The visual analogy between the two monuments has done a lot, I think, to establish—irrationally—the firm Chāng Lôm/Rām Khamhāeng identification.

Today we must challenge the identification. As noted above, recent art historical studies suggest that it was the river bend area, not the hill area, that was contemporary with Rām Khamhāeng. The monument identified by Prince Damrong as Inscription 1’s Phra Si Ratana Thāt, or Temple of the Great Relic, is the logical choice for Rām Khamhāeng’s stupa. Since a thirteenth century date for the early state of the monument is not disputed, the identification resolves stylistic controversies. And no longer is it necessary to believe that Rām Khamhāeng robbed the Phra Mahā Thāt of its relic. The identification reunites Rām Khamhāeng’s relic, wall, and stupa at the same site.

Before I close, Piriya Krairiksh’s recent research (table 2, line 25) should also be mentioned. Dr. Krairiksh, like me, considers the Mahā Thāt in Sawankhalok’s river bend to be Rām Khamhāeng’s stupa. But our opinions about “Chaliang” and “Satchanalai” are surprisingly different.

According to Dr. Krairiksh, Inscription 1 is a fabrication dating from the
post-Sukhothai period: thus, it cannot tell us anything about Rām Khamhāeng’s stupa (or about anything else, for that matter).30 And (although Chaliang is mentioned in two fourteenth century inscriptions—one referring to it as a large city),31 Dr. Krairiksh contends that “Chaliang” did not flourish until late fifteenth century. Thus, he thinks that Rām Khamhāeng’s “Chaliang” can only refer to Sawankhalok’s hill area, which other scholars call “Satchanalai”. And “Satchanalai” for Dr. Krairiksh is the river bend, which other scholars call “Chaliang”. 32

So, in spite of my agreement with Dr. Krairiksh about chronology and Rām Khamhāeng’s stupa, I must end my paper with controversy. Given the disputed authenticity of Inscription 1, the controversy is a major one, its resolution crucial to any real understanding of early Thai history. But the consensus about Rām Khamhāeng’s stupa is heartening. Whether or not the river bend Mahā Thāt identification will ever entirely supplant the old Chāng Lôm theory only time can tell.

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Visiting Scholar, Horace Rackham School of Graduate Studies,
The University of Michigan

TABLE 1
Inscriptional Reference to Rām Khamhāeng’s Stupa

Passage A: Inscription 1, side 4, lines 4-8.

(In 1285) “he caused the Phra Thāt to be dug up so that everyone could see it. The Phra Thāt was worshipped for a month and six days, and was buried in the middle of the city/country of Si Satchanalai. A chedi (stupa), was built on top of it, and the construction took six years. A wall of boulders (pñh) was built around the Phra Mahā Thāt and that was finished in three years”.

Passage B: Inscription 1, side 3, lines 22-23.

“There is an inscription in the city/country of Chaliang, erected by the Phra Si Ratana Thāt”.

Passage C: Inscription 2, side 1, lines 36-37.

“A son of Phā Khun Sī Indradit named Phā Khun Rāmarāja....built Phra Si Ratana Thāt in the middle of Si Satchanalai”.

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### TABLE 2

Identification of "Chaliang," "Satchanalai," and Rām Khamhaeng's Stupa

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>&quot;Chaliang&quot;</th>
<th>&quot;Satchanalai&quot;</th>
<th>RK Stupa</th>
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<td>Schmitt¹</td>
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<td>doesn't know</td>
<td>Kamphaeng Phet,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sawankhalok</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Fournereau²</td>
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<td>Kamphaeng Phet</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>not sure, maybe</td>
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<td>Aymonier³</td>
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<td>Vajiravudh⁴</td>
<td>1907</td>
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<td>Bradley⁵</td>
<td>1909</td>
<td>Mìiang Lōng* (nr. N. Sawan)</td>
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<td>Lajonquière⁶</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>river bend &amp; hill</td>
<td>octagonal stupa (river bend)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Coedès⁷</td>
<td>1920</td>
<td>Sawankhalok</td>
<td>river bend &amp; hill</td>
<td>octagonal stupa (river bend)</td>
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<td>river bend &amp; hill</td>
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<td>Coedès⁹</td>
<td>1924-1926</td>
<td>river bend*</td>
<td>hill*</td>
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<td>Wood¹⁰</td>
<td>1926</td>
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<td>hill*</td>
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<td>Damrong¹¹</td>
<td>1926</td>
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<td>Claey's¹²</td>
<td>1931</td>
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<td>hill</td>
<td>Châng Lôm</td>
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<tr>
<td>le May¹³</td>
<td>1938</td>
<td>river bend</td>
<td>hill</td>
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<td>1975</td>
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<td>hill</td>
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<td>Chand¹⁹</td>
<td>1976</td>
<td>Sawankhalok</td>
<td>hill and surroundings</td>
<td>Châng Lôm</td>
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<td>hill</td>
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<td>1979</td>
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<td>Châng Lôm</td>
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<tr>
<td>Van Beek, Tettoni²⁴</td>
<td>1985</td>
<td>river bend</td>
<td>hill</td>
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<td>Woodward²⁵</td>
<td>1985</td>
<td>hill</td>
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<td>Mahathat (river bend)</td>
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<td>Krairiksh²⁶</td>
<td>1985-1986</td>
<td>river bend &amp; hill</td>
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<td>(old name)</td>
<td>(new name)</td>
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</table>

* Prince Damrong quote.

** Perhaps in an earlier form.
ENDNOTES:

1. Griswold and Prasert, EHS 9, pp.201, 217.
2. Griswold and Prasert, EHS 10, pp.93, 112.
3. Griswold, Towards, p.57; Srisakra, "Tribura," pp.22-24. The remains of older, earthen walls can still be seen west of the hill area. (Subhadradis, Sukhothai Art, p.147.)
7. Griswold, Towards, p.11.
12. Aymonier, Le Cambodge, pp.69, 100.
13. Quoted in Aymonier, Le Cambodge, pp.69, 100.
22. Damrong, Nithan Borankhadi, pp.354-7. I am grateful to Bonnie Brereton for calling my attention to this work.
25. Damrong, Tamnan, p.120.
27. For instance, see Coedès, "Première capitales," p.261; Griswold, Towards, p.10; Stratton and Scott, Sukhothai Art, p.39.
28. See note 10 above.
31. Inscription 2 and Inscription 38. See note 23 above.

Notes to Table 2

1. Quoted in Fournereau, Le Siam Ancien, pp.157, 239 and in Aymonier, Le Cambodge, p.100, n.1.
3. Le Cambodge, pp.69, 100.
23. *Art of Sukhothai*, pp.12, 36.

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