

A Pious Fable

Reconsidering the Inscription I Controversy: A 'Demonic' View

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"What is truth?" said jesting Pilate, and would not stay for an answer.

—Sir Francis Bacon

Several years ago a number of eminent scholars, Siamese and foreign, caused a furore by proposing that Inscription 1 (traditionally thought to have been composed by King Ram Khamhaeng of Sukhothai in the late 13th century) was in fact an extremely erudite product of the 19th. The response, by eminent conservative scholars, both Siamese and foreign, was prompt. They insisted that the earlier attribution and date be maintained (Chamberlain 1991).

Professor William J. Gedney (U. of Michigan, retired) brought the controversy into sharp focus by naming the conservatives "Angels" and the rebels "Devils" (Chamberlain 1991, 203).

The present writer has always been a Devil but counts among his teachers and friends some of the Archangels. He has therefore hesitated to come out too strongly, out of respect for their feelings and their erudition. His hesitancy was augmented by an awareness of the fact that neither faction has come up with irrefutable evidence, for if either had done so then the controversy would be at an end. But it is not; both factions have retired, glowering, to their tents.

The problem seems to be that there is little or no common ground within which Angels and Devils can communicate; each occupies an ideological world of its own. Furthermore, the controversy seems to have got off to a bad start, with the Devils *seeming* to imply that King Rama IV, as putative author of Inscription 1, had created fiction, and the Angels leaping gleefully onto this supposed slight to blacken the Devils' reputation. The Angels could do this because everyone knows *what* a "fable" is, but no one seems to have asked *when*. In other words, we have neglected to discuss the radical differences between modern and pre-modern scholarship.

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At the time of their composition, the Old and New Testaments were works of remarkable erudition; from the point of view of modern scholarship, they are both obvious fables, cobbled together from any number of doubtful sources. No modern scholar, however, supposes that the editors and redactors were dishonest; they were admirable scholars of *their time*.

The same principle applies to King Rama IV and Inscription 1. The Devils may be excused for calling the Inscription a fable, because, from the point of view of modern scholarship, it *is*—as just about everything is wrong with it as a work of the 13th century, whereas, it fits nicely into the 19th century, on point after point. But none of this casts any shadow on Rama IV, who was a brilliant, *pre-modern* scholar.

King Rama IV and his contemporaries did not inhabit our modern intellectual world of black and white; they lived in a colourful intellectual universe in which oracles, spirits, numerology, astrology, prodigies and miracles were the science of the day. They also must have had available to them a body of oral literature now lost to us, and they would have had a much less critical attitude towards it than we now have.

If one wants to understand the intellectual atmosphere in the time of Rama III and IV, one might study the writings of the Prince Patriarch, Somdej Krom Phraya Pavares, for instance *Aphinihan kan prachak* (อภินิหารการประจักษ์) with its miracles and portents, and his “translation” of Inscription 4 in which he tell us what he thinks the inscription *should* say (Krom Silpakorn 1983, 225). For instance, he tells us that the Mahāsāmi Saṃgharāja and a certain golden Buddha image came from “Chanthakhet” (ฉันทระเขต) in Lanka, though this toponym does not occur on the stone, nor does it exist in Lanka. “Chanthakhet” probably stands for “Hangurangket”, summer-retreat of the Kandyan kings (1594–1815) with a famous monastery and library. This must have been known to Siamese monks visiting Lanka when Kandy was the capital, and as the Sinhalese language consistently confuses “c” and “h” the Siamese would have “corrected” Hangurangket (meaningless to Thai speakers) to Candrakhet (meaningful). As a result the Prince Patriarch included this piece of misinformation in his “translation,” but he was not being dishonest; he was reporting what he believed to be true.

The distinction between fact and fiction is a relatively modern phenomenon. Until quite recently the story of Adam and Eve, and the Vessantara Jātaka, were both taken by intelligent people as actually having happened. The romance has long been a popular literary form in East and West, particularly if written in antique style. Victorian tales of chivalry, however, were never mistaken for

medieval works because 19th century Britain had a modern publishing industry that printed date and name of author. Fakes, too, were produced there, but they were soon recognized as such, because in Britain modern critical scholarship was already well established.

This was not the case in 19th-century Siam, where a scholar of the Third Reign produced the delightful “Nang Nophamat” (นางนพมาศ) about customs at the Court of Sukhothai in convincingly quaint language. The anonymous author’s intent was probably to amuse his/her contemporaries, not to deceive. When the author’s identity and date had been forgotten, however, the book came to be revered as a genuine work of Sukhothai and is taught in school as such to this day, though a modern critical scholar established its real period some years ago (Aeosiwong, no date).

In pre-modern times, later laws were sometimes ascribed to earlier sages (Rāmādhipati) or earlier texts (the Dharmaśāstra, ‘the Pāli’) not dishonestly, but because wise laws were thought to derive from ancient wisdom. This, of course, is not allowed today because our attitudes to fact and fiction have changed.

The first half of the 19th century was, for Siam, a great period of scholarly investigation and literary production, and the Prince–Priest Mongkut had about him a brilliant cadre of intellectuals. Brilliant though they may have been, they were men of their time and cannot be judged by modern scholarly criteria. Thus, even though we may judge Inscription 1 to be a fable by modern standards, no blame can fall upon its authors.

In their haste to discredit the Devils, the Angels fell into a number of errors. They painted the Devils as condemning King Mongkut for forgery. This was simply not so, for reasons outlined above.

The Angels themselves then proceeded to denigrate King Mongkut’s intellect by suggesting that “he could not have known,” whereas, the Devils so admired the breadth and depth of his learning that they claimed that “he must have known.”

A third error was a minor one, but with major consequences: the Angels supposed that the Devils had imagined Mongkut working alone. Prof. Gedney even has him chipping away at the Inscription in his Kutī, hoping that no one would realise what he was doing. This grotesque picture served to hide how Inscription 1 might have been produced.

We have no way of knowing precisely how Inscription 1 was made, but we do know that if Mongkut (Prince or King) were responsible, he need not have worked alone, nor need he have been furtive. Monk and king, he had a staff of scholars at his disposal, men of ranks and men of letters, to do his research for him, a very busy man.

On his return from the North, inspired by his discovery and acquisition of Inscription 4 and the stone "throne." Mongkut would have set his entourage and associates the task of discovering all they could about Sukhothai. Research may have begun with the literature available in Bangkok's libraries. The search would then have been extended up-country, using agents with the scholarship and authority to investigate what was known in places like Ayutthaya, Kamphaeng Phet and Sukhothai. In view of these observations, the Angels' claim that the Prince-Priest Mongkut "could not have learnt much about Sukhothai because he spent only a couple of days there," does not stand up. He was not working alone, but had the personnel with the authority to gather information for him.

I began by remarking that Angels and Devils had little common ground within which to communicate; each group occupies an ideological world of its own. However, one may detect at least one area of common ground, namely the "strangeness" of Inscription 1.

Though this area of strangeness has been largely pre-empted by Devils, Angels, too, (notably David K. Wyatt) admit that Inscription 1 is strange within the corpus of Sukhothai inscriptions, strange within the corpus of Southeast Asian epigraph, strange in comparison with the mass of Indic orthography, strange for its time and strange for its place. Angels all implicitly accept this strangeness when they emphasize the uniqueness and originality of Inscription 1.

In this paper the author intends to examine this area of strangeness, accepted by Angels and Devils alike, and to suggest that Inscription I may be *much* stranger than has been thought.

Inscription I as Seance

In 1833 the Prince-Priest Mongkut experienced an epiphany at Sukhothai. There, he was introduced to a site consisting of a stone "throne" and an inscription (No. 4), held in awe by the locals, who warned him not to go near. But he did go near, spoke softly to the spirit and sat on the stone without being struck down. He then invited the spirit down to Bangkok where it might "observe the precepts and listen to sermons." The villagers had honoured the spirit there with an annual boxing match (i.e., a festival).

This shrine may have been unique in that it seemed to have a written history (Inscription 4, which was in fact displaced from Wat Pa Mamuang), but if it was in any way typical of spirit shrines, it must have embodied some local oral

history, and it certainly had an annual festival (the boxing match) at which the spirit probably spoke through its medium.

It might, therefore, be proposed that, perhaps, some parts (certainly not all) of Inscription 1 were derived from a seance. Alternatively, it might be proposed that the Inscription was composed in such a way as to make it sound like the report of a seance, i.e., an oracle.

Inscription 1 begins by speaking to us in an eerie voice as though Ram Khamhaeng is addressing us in person (Side 1 lines 1–18). It sounds as though the spirit has taken possession of his medium and announces his presence, boasting of his prowess, perhaps using a traditional formula. “My father’s name was Sri Indraditya....”

In line 18 a second, much milder voice takes over, referring to Ram Khamhaeng in the third person: “During the reign of King Ram Khamhaeng, this Sukhothai was good.” Though it is common in Thai speech to refer to oneself in the third person, such a practice is modest and self-effacing, quite out of keeping with the bombast of the first eighteen lines. This second “voice” thus sounds like another spirit. In Thai spiritualism it is common for a great spirit to have a spirit “secretary” or “minister” to speak on his behalf (great spirits having more important things to do than give interviews).

If Inscription 1 were read as a seance, it might make the “jumpiness” of the Inscription easier to understand. Both Angels and Devils have noted how the Inscription jumps from subject to subject, giving a few lines to this and more lines to that, unlike most inscriptions that have a clear purpose and proceed in fair order (for instance King Lidaya’s inscriptions and Inscription 9 Wat Pa Daeng; Inscription 2 Wat Si Chum is a very complex exception). Thus, it is almost impossible to recognize a context in Inscription 1; it contains too many unconnected contexts (as noted by the Angelic Dr. Woodward). If this were the record of a seance, containing the spirit’s oracular pronouncements but omitting the questions put to it, then the Inscription might be more transparent:

Q. [omitted] What was Sukhothai like in King Ram Khamhaeng’s time?

A. During the reign of King Ram Khamhaeng, this Sukhothai was good. There were fish in the waters, rice in the fields.

Q. [omitted] What was the King’s trade policy?

A. The King imposed no taxes on inter-city [international?] trade. Trade in cattle, horses, elephants and gold and silver was free.

Q. [omitted] What about the law of inheritance?

A. All the inheritable property of freemen went to their sons.

Though the oral literature of a spirit shrine and the partial transcription of a seance might help us to appreciate Inscription 1 better, it cannot tell the whole story of this very complex document, which certainly contains many other erudite contributions to both its content and its form.

Sentence Structure in Inscription I

In sharp contrast to the Inscription's oracular "voice" that would lead one to expect complex, confused and imperfect utterances, the sentence structure of Inscription 1 is surprisingly clear and simple. Indeed, much of Inscription 1 consists of simple sentences, unlike the other inscriptions and Thai writings in general, some modeled on the complex constructions of an inflected language like Pali, and others constructed on Thai principles that give precedence to poetics over grammar.

The simple sentence is not really characteristic of Thai, which delights in circumlocution; it was not favoured by the literati, and was not even taught in traditional "grammar" books (Chindamani, จินตามณี) that leap from Letters to Poetics without mention of the sentence. Even today, a Thai writer who composes formal sentences, making sure that each has an expressed subject, is likely to be accused of "writing like a Farang." The prolixity of other inscriptions of Sukhothai is perfectly in keeping with the genius of the language, their time and their place, in contrast to the stately progression of subjects, verbs and objects through much of Inscription 1. And do not forget King Mongkut had learned (and had reached the high level of proficiency in) Latin, English and French—a unique achievement which may well have influenced his choice of style. Inscription 1 is exceedingly strange for medieval Southeast Asia. It seems much more like an intelligent Siamese reaction to 19th-century missionary criticism of the oblique language in which official Thai pronouncements were once made (and still are).

Here is another instance of the strangeness of Inscription 1, more strange for the 13th century, and less strange for the 19th when foreign critics were about, who expected sentences to have subjects. I am unable to explain how a Thai spirit oracle came to be reported in the language of the Penny Catechism, unless it had been rewritten by a skilled 19th-century editor.

The Throne in The Palmyra Grove

Side 3 lines 10–19 tell of the origin of the stone throne that was found at the spirit shrine. In 1278 or 1292 (the text is ambiguous), King Ram Khamhaeng had a grove of palmyra palms planted. Fourteen years later (when the palms would have gained some height) he set up the stone throne in their midst and conducted affairs of state there except on the Buddhist days of observance, when monks sat upon the throne to chant from scripture. The throne was called “Manang-sila-bat” (มนั่งศิลาบาตร).

Angels and Devils seem to have come together about the Stone Throne in the Palmyra Grove, supposing that (if Inscription 1 has a point) this is the point of the Inscription, i.e. the Inscription was written to account for the throne.

Here we have a case of the fact–fiction contrast that does not seem to have been carefully thought out. The Throne in the Palmyra Grove suggests an idyllic picture, until one considers its practicality. Where did King Ram Khamhaeng hold court in the rainy season? The Inscription does not say.

All the literary background for the grove and the stone, contributed by Angels and Devils alike, is from fables (Jātaka, etc.). We know that South and Southeast Asian kings conducted affairs of state in the audience halls of their palaces. No known king of flesh and blood was ever recorded as having ruled his kingdom from a stone throne in a grove.

The whole passage involving the Stone Throne seems to be a fantasy based on earlier fantastical literature. Its literary antecedents were all mythical; the miraculous stone known as the Manosilatala could even fly. (Krairiksh in Chamberlain 1991, 106–7). We are not dealing here with history, but with whimsy: a fairy king, on a fairy throne, in a fairy dell.

Thus, this passage might have been derived from an oracular fantasy, or from a local myth. But in view of the scrupulous honesty of Church and Court at the time of Kings Rama III and IV, it was more probably intended as a clue, deliberately planted by its conscientious authors to indicate to later generations how Inscription 1 should be read: as an instructive fable about an ideal Buddhist kingdom. Except where it contains input from other inscriptions, it is no more historical than Nang Nophamat or the Jātakas.

The authors of Inscription 1 may have hoped that some readers, particularly Westerners, would not cotton on. If so, they were vastly more successful than they had intended. But this is our fault, not theirs.

The Mystery of The Other Three Inscriptions

On Side 3 lines 22–25, three other inscriptions are mentioned:

One inscription is at Muang Chaliang, set up together with the Sri Ratana That. One inscription is in the cave called Phra Ram Cave on the bank of the Samphay River. One inscription is in the Ratanathan Cave.

These inscriptions have never been found. Or have they? The geography sounds fabulous. Are we in a Buddhist fairyland again? We might be, or the conscientious authors of the Inscription may have intended to record their chief inscripitional sources.

It has been proposed by the Devils that the authors of Inscription 1 had some knowledge of other inscriptions of Sukhothai, in particular No. 2 Wat Si Chum; No. 3 Nakhon Chum; No. 4 Wat Pa Mamuang (in Khmer); and No. 5 Wat Pa Mamuang (in Thai).

We know that No. 4 was available to the Bangkok intelligentsia in the second quarter of the 19th century, which leaves us with three inscriptions unaccounted for. Each of them has something strange about it.

Inscription 2 was first recorded as having been found in 1887, hidden in what might be called a “cave,” namely the tunnel at Wat Si Chum. Who hid it there, and why?

Inscription 3 came to the notice of the authorities in 1921, apparently *in situ* at Kamphaeng Phet. However, its existence must have been known earlier because H.R.H. Prince Damrong had been asking about it “for a long time” before he came across it in 1921 (Krom Silpakorn 1983, 26).

Inscription 5 (Wat Pa Mamuang, the Thai version of Inscription 4 in Khmer) turned up in 1905 at Nakhon Luang, just to the northeast of Ayutthaya!

These inscriptions had obviously attracted attention prior to their officially recorded discovery. As pre-modern Siamese were probably no less curious than other peoples, it is reasonable to suppose that where these inscriptions were legible, they would have been read by local men of letters (Buddhist monks), correctly or not. The Bangkok intelligentsia would have had no trouble in acquiring copies of what the local antiquarians had learnt from the inscriptions.

I would propose that on Side 3 lines 22–25 the conscientious authors of Inscription 1 intended to record their inscripitional sources, but they could not quote sources as we do today: author, title, publisher, date. Instead they used the poetic language and oracular format (*laai thaeng*, ลายแทง) of their day. I regret to admit that I have not found the key to it.

All this is, of course, supposition, but it is supposition within the real world and does not call upon the reader to believe in fairyland.

As a work of the 13th century, Inscription 1 is strange to the point of being embarrassing; as a product of the 19th century it is a conscientious masterpiece.

Conclusion

Convinced Devil though I am, I sympathize with the Angels and their love of Inscription 1, on which so much labour has been spent and in which so much faith has been placed. I sympathize less with the Angels' defense of King Rama IV, who needs no defense, least of all from intellectuals, Thai or foreign. The Angelic pretence that the Devils were attacking the scholarship of H.M. King Rama IV smacks of psychological warfare.

Devils may have been hasty in some instances, undiplomatic in some, and quite wrong in others, but the Devils' case for Inscription 1 being a work of the 19th rather than the 13th century is so massive as to be highly convincing, if not conclusive. Both Angels and Devils agree that, as a product of the 13th century, Inscription 1 is "strange." Angels prefer to say "unique"; Devils tend to say "incredible." It is not as though only the script were strange, or the writing system, or the vocabulary, or the sentence structure, or the art history, or the geography, or the mythology, or the economics, or the religion, or the politics. Item after item is out of place in 13th century Southeast Asia; item after item matches King Rama IV's modernistic Buddhist idealism of the mid-19th century, together with his economic and language reforms.

Perhaps some of the best support for the Devils' position is provided by the Angels themselves in *The Ram Khamhaeng Controversy*. Almost without exception, the Angels reject out of hand the Devils' sane proposal that if the Inscription really dates from medieval Sukhothai, then it should fit fairly comfortably with what is known about Sukhothai from archaeology and from *other* documents of slightly later date, but that it should not quote them. Instead the Angels paint a picture of Sukhothai largely derived (consciously or not) from Inscription 1 itself, then say, "Voila! A perfect fit!"

For the Angelic scholar, Siamese or foreign, Inscription 1 is the foundation of the Thai script and writing system, Thai Buddhism, Thai nationalism, Thai militarism or Thai democracy (take your pick), and all that is rational, modern and desirable in Thai society. The Inscription supported King Rama V's efforts to equate Siam with "other civilized nations," and Luang Wichit Wathakarn's efforts to promote the Thais' unique role as Master Race among the degenerate

Viets, Khmers, Laos, Burmese, etc., all of whom had fallen to European colonialism.

Demonic scholars, in contrast, live in the present. For them the problems that beset Kings Rama IV, V and VI have long been solved. Devils thus see no need to use the mythology of Inscription 1 to "prove" Siam "civilized," nor do they see in the Inscription support for the disreputable racial theories of Luang Wichit.

But I am going round in circles. *The Ram Khamhaeng Controversy* is not really about Inscription 1 at all. It is essentially a confrontation between conservatives (Angels) who wish to continue interpreting Thai society, past and present, in terms of nationalistic mythology, and a new generation of liberals (Devils) who are reinterpreting Thai society, past and present, in a modern, critical, non-mythological spirit.

The Angels continue to live comfortably within their mythology and be guided by its luminosity. The Devils live, for better or for worse, in a colder, harder, more scientific environment outside the mythology, which they perceive not as a guiding light, but as an object of scrutiny.

It now occurs to me why, as earlier remarked, there is so little common ground for dialogue between the Devils and the Angels: how can there be a dialogue between modern critical scholars on the one hand, and, on the other, learned gentlemen who read a *Midsummer Night's Dream* as history and insist that it was written by Oberon?

Whether we are talking of Inscription 1 or of more immediate social and political conflicts, it is of vital importance that Angels and Devils keep open their avenues of communication. Neither party should pronounce anathema against the other, or we shall get nowhere. Devils need Angels with their deep traditional knowledge, and Angels need Devils to challenge their certainties. Both parties need communication, not excommunication.

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