INSCRIPTIONS AND ART HISTORY: THE CASE OF SUKHOTHAI'S INSCRIPTION II

Betty Gosling

I think there comes a time in the life of every historian of ancient art when she or he desperately wishes for a knowledge of the languages of the period under consideration commensurate with his understanding of artistic and archaeological remains. As is well known, we as art historians are ever so confident of our ability to reconstruct the distant past through the examination, analysis, and comparison of art forms by means of which process broad, sweeping, evolutionary patterns of artistic development can be hypothesized. Without the written word, however—that is, without resort to inscriptive material—our work not only lacks the substance and texture of which true history is made, but specific dates on which to anchor our developmental trends cannot be ascertained with any accuracy. At certain times, when our research has not yielded the answers we have been seeking, it is easy to fantasize: “If we only knew the language all our problems would be solved!” Like sneaking a look at the answers at the end of a puzzle book, a look at the written record should provide the solutions our finite minds have been unable to conjecture from less directly communicated evidence.

As I am sure most linguists are aware, matters are not always so readily resolved. A case in point is Sukhothai’s Inscription II, a pivotal document for the reconstruction of early Thai history. Because several passages relate in some detail the building or reconstruction of what have been recognized as important Buddhist monasteries, this inscription is of special interest to the historian of Thai art. Dating from the mid-fourteenth century,1 Inscription II is the only extant written document from Sukhothai in the half-century or so following King Rām Kamhāeng’s famous inscription of 1292. As

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such it provides information about an otherwise undocumented era that in good conscience cannot be ignored. However, interpretations of various passages in the text have posed serious problems for the historian and have precluded the evidence from being put to its fullest use.

One particularly troublesome matter for the historian of art is that, unlike some areas of the world where inscriptions are engraved directly upon architectural structures in order to preserve for posterity the particulars of the monuments’ foundings, it has been customary in Thailand to inscribe texts on stelai in the vicinity of, but separate from, the buildings commemorated. Once these readily portable stones have been moved to other locales—and this has happened frequently without proper documentation of the original sites—a basic concern for the art historian becomes the identification of the structure about which the inscription supplies information.

Inscription II provides an extreme example of the controversy that can arise from attempted identifications. Discovered in 1887 at Wat Stī Chum,2 an imposing Buddhist temple just northwest of Sukhothai’s city walls, the inscription describes in some detail the reconstruction of a large, tall stupa ("Phra ėhēt sūng yai") situated, it is explicitly stated, at the center of the city.3 Without regard to the particulars of the text, one would assume that the passage refers to the refurbishing of Wat Stī Chum. However, the location of Stī Chum outside the city walls, and the fact that the Stī Chum complex centers upon a large, tall mondop rather than a stupa, eliminates the possibility of the inscription referring to the site where it was found. George Coedès, whose French translation of Inscription II appeared in 1924,4 hypothesized that the text refers to the stupa of Wat Mahāthāt.5 Sukhothai’s largest and most important temple complex, situated almost exactly at the city center. This identification was, I believe, generally accepted until 1967 when A. B. Griswold, shortly before the publication of Prasert ṇa Nagara and his English translation, claimed that the stupa in question was not the Mahāthāt, nor was it located anywhere in Thailand.6 It was, he contended, actually the Mahāthūpa at Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka,7 where Inscription II tells us the Sukhodayan monk, Stī Sathā, made an extended pilgrimage shortly before the inscription’s execution.8 Later a Sinhalese identification was proposed by Mom Chao Chand Chirayu Rajani in 1976,9 and by Michael Vickery in 1978,10 although neither specifically linked the inscription with the Mahāthūpa. I have

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stated elsewhere my reasons for supporting Coedès’s identification over those of Griswold, Prasert, Chand, and Vickery. Here, in this study, only one aspect of the problem will be discussed. A peculiarity of Thai word usage holds the key to the solution.

One of the more explicit bits of information that Inscription II gives us about the large, tall stupa in the middle of the city is its height, both before and after its reconstruction. As we all know, what words—let alone art—cannot prove, numbers most certainly can! The stupa whose vertical dimensions fit those detailed in the inscription is obviously the monument we are looking for.

In measuring stupas, however, a problem that immediately presents itself is the length of the wā, the unit of measure in which the inscriptive height is reported. Over the centuries there have existed in Asia, as in other areas of the world, varieties of different linear measurement systems, and taking into consideration the lesser variations that can occur among individual units within any one system, the probability of finding a measure to correlate inscriptive and archaeological evidence, if one sets one’s mind to it, is far from remote. Thus the correlation might demonstrate nothing more than the persistence of twentieth-century scholars in tracking down minutiae of something less than earth-shaking consequence. With the consideration, however, that the possibility of finding no correlating measure for the Sukhothai Mahāthāt and the information in Inscription II would cast considerable doubt on that identification, the investigation was undertaken. Happily, the results proved more gratifying than I had anticipated.

The wā (or fathom) as we know it today is a Thai linear measure of about six feet. There is also evidence of its length in ancient times: Griswold compared the length of the innermost of Sukhothai’s three ramparts with the dimensions given in Inscription I and determined that the length of the wā in the thirteenth century was about seventy-three inches, that is, essentially the measure we use today.

But, when we apply this measure to the Čhēdī described in Inscription II, projecting 95 or 102 of the units as the inscription dictates, the result is a structure of about six hundred feet, that is, six times or so as high as the Mahāthāt and about twice the height of any monument in Sri Lanka. Unless we are willing to believe that the figures are a great exaggeration—an alternative I would not want to consider until all other possibilities are dismissed—we are left to assume one of two things: that there was once a mammoth Čhēdī in

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Thailand or Sri Lanka unlike anything known from historical or archaeological sources; or, more probably, that Inscription II’s wā refers to a linear measure that differs from the wā used in Thailand today. Coedès, in his Mahāthāt identification, suggested that the unit referred to was actually the sōk, or cubit, a Thai measure of about eighteen inches. However, according to more recently published plans of the Mahāthāt, use of the sōk results in a structure still about one and one-half times the height of the present monument.

Griswold, for his Mahāthūpa identification, resorts to more complex reasoning. The unit of measure he suggests is the “architect’s cubit,” which according to Paranavitana was about thirty-one inches in the eighteenth century, and was perhaps used in the third century B.C. to measure the Mahāthūpa. To make this unit of measure fit the facts, Griswold suggests that the Mahāthūpa (originally 120 cubits high, as documented in the Mahāvamsa), had by the fourteenth century fallen to a height of 95 cubits, and after the restoration might well have measured the 102 “wā” documented in Inscription II—although he acknowledges that this height does not correspond with the Mahāthūpa’s height either now or in ancient times.

As well as I can make out from the Fine Arts Department plans of the monument, the height of the Mahāthāt today is about ninety-two feet. Taking the inscriptive height as ninety-five wā, (the seven-foot pinnacle added during the fourteenth-century reconstruction is no longer extant), it is necessary to hypothesize a linear measure of about 12.43 inches to make the epigraphic evidence fit. From a cursory examination of measurements taken of Sukhothai wihān, bot, and chēdent, it is easy to find multiples of 9, 18, 36, and 72 inches, conforming to the system of the 18-inch sōk (cubit) and the 72-inch wā (fathom) in use today and noted by Griswold in the Sukhothai ramparts. There is also inscriptive evidence for a chēdent at Sukhothai’s Wat Sa Si whose vertical and horizontal measurements conform to the inscriptive specifications by means of this standard set of measures. Eleanor Morón has noted that a cubit of slightly over 17 inches was utilized in the plan of Angkor Wat.

So how is one to justify the approximate one-foot measure required for the proposed Wat Mahāthāt–Phra Mahāthāt Luang identification? Two possibilities present themselves. One is the pāt or pāda (“foot”), whose length I have not been able to determine,