

CHAPTER 5

SUKHOTHAI RELIGIOUS ARCHITECTURE AND ITS RELEVANCE TO THE AUTHENTICITY OF INSCRIPTION ONE

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Recent arguments for and against Inscription One's authenticity have been based largely on evidence deriving from linguistic theory.¹ In this paper I would like to address nonlinguistic arguments expressed by Piriya Krairiksh and seconded by Michael Vickery in attempts to back up their claims that Inscription One was not written in the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century, as its text implies, but dates instead from the post-Sukhothai period. In particular, I will address Dr. Piriya's (and Dr. Vickery's) conclusion that Inscription One's contents are unauthentic and useless for the study of Sukhothai history.² In my opinion, this conclusion, as well as the arguments on which it is based, is without merit.*

Dr. Piriya has written a great deal about Inscription One in several publications. However, as he himself notes, his con-

*The present study deals only with the question of Inscription One's **authenticity**: not its **genuineness** or possible forgery. A document may be labeled "genuine" if it is the original document it is purported to be—that is, not a forgery. "Authenticity" refers to the veracity of the document. An un-genuine—or forged—document may be authentic if it accurately reports information in the original. Of course, a good forgery preserves not only the contents of the original, but also the appearance. Dr. Piriya and Dr. Vickery contend that Inscription One is both unauthentic and un-genuine. My concern is with authenticity only.

clusion that Inscription One was written in the nineteenth century by Thailand's King Mongkut, Rama IV, is based on four fundamental arguments.³ (Although Dr. Vickery does not agree with Dr. Piriya that it was King Mongkut who wrote Inscription One, he apparently subscribes to these underlying tenets.)⁴ Some serious scholars of Thai history have found Dr. Piriya's arguments so unconvincing that they have felt little need to confront them directly. But when a scholar as well-known and highly esteemed as Dr. Piriya writes about a subject on which he is considered a world authority, his ideas must be taken seriously.

The first three of Dr. Piriya's contentions can be dismissed on methodological grounds. I will have more to say about his fourth argument, concerning Sukhothai's art and architecture, in the pages that follow.

Argument No. 1: Words and word meanings in Inscription One are not found in other Sukhothai inscriptions. Thus, they must date from the post-Sukhothai period.⁵

Dr. Piriya's argument is untenable. A quick check through Ishii's *Glossarial Index*⁶ indicates that most Sukhothai inscriptions have numerous words and definitions not found in other Sukhothai inscriptions: Inscription One has about 150 unique words; Inscription Two, over 300 unique words; Inscription Three, about 100 unique words; Inscription Forty-five, about 130 unique words; and so on. (The number of unique words is related in part to the length of the inscription.) The corpus of extant Sukhothai inscriptions simply is not large enough to determine which words and definitions were commonly used in the Sukhothai period and which were not. Moreover, Sukhothai culture, both linguistically and ethnically, was far from homogeneous. Vocabulary was drawn from a variety of sources, not all of which have been identified; the written language was still in its formative stages. Variations in vocabulary, spelling, and writing must be expected, and do not have to indicate different centuries of origin. It is particularly disturbing when Dr. Piriya and Dr. Vickery assert that such and such a word is untypical or highly unusual for the thirteenth century – a century for which

Inscription One is the only document in the Thai/Tai languages extant.

Argument No. 2: Many words and phrases in Inscription One are found in late eighteenth and nineteenth-century works, thus indicating a nineteenth century date for Inscription One's execution.⁷

Nonsense. All Sukhothai inscriptions have words and phrases still in use today. No one has claimed that the Thai language of the Sukhothai period was entirely different from modern Thai. Moreover, most of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century works that Dr. Piriya has selected for comparison were either copied from, compiled from, or based upon sources written centuries before, some possibly as early as the fourteenth century.⁸ A larger than average correlation between words and phrases in these eighteenth- and nineteenth-century works and the Sukhothai inscriptions should not come as a surprise. Furthermore, Dr. Piriya's repeated claim that this or that word or phrase appeared for the first time at such and such a date implies that he has read everything that has ever been written in the huge body of Thai/Tai languages and dialects. Of course that is impossible.

Argument No. 3: The author of Inscription One "lifted" passages from fourteenth-century Sukhothai inscriptions.⁹

Dr. Piriya gives us no reasons to reject the more rational conclusion that fourteenth-century Sukhothai inscriptions lifted passages from Inscription One.¹⁰

Argument No. 4: The author of Inscription One was a casual visitor with little interest in Sukhothai architecture. Thus, he provided only a vague description of religious sites and neglected to "specify the name of any buildings at Sukhothai. The style of the remaining Buddha images mentioned in Inscription One cannot be as early as the late thirteenth century." Moreover, the architecture mentioned in the inscription is not substantiated by "archaeological and art historical evidence."¹¹

Here, Dr. Piriya has fallen into the familiar trap of assum-

ing that Inscription One's description of the city of Sukhothai refers to the multitude of religious structures whose ruins can be seen today (and which were partially visible in 1833, when King Mongkut visited the city).¹² I will have more to say about this commonly held fallacy below. Here I will simply note my own conclusion: that Inscription One's description of Sukhothai is not, as Dr. Piriya contends, a careless, unobservant survey made by King Mongkut – who, as a matter of fact, took a serious interest in Buddhist architecture; sponsored the construction and repair of religious buildings in various parts of Thailand; saw to it that the construction of Thai *bōts*, or ordination halls, conformed to the Buddhist precepts; had a model of Angkor Wat constructed for his palace grounds; and who, in his own words, visited Sukhothai and other parts of the north country specifically to visit the "*čhēdi*" sites.¹³ More likely (I will argue), Inscription One's description is a reasonably accurate depiction of Sukhothai as it existed at the end of the thirteenth century—that is, some one hundred years before the city took on the appearance suggested by its nineteenth- and twentieth-century ruins.

I would like to emphasize at this point that my interpretation in no way undermines—but, rather, supports—Dr. Piriya's "new" (1986) chronology of Thai art,¹⁴ which generally concurs with a chronology of Thai sculpture outlined by Dr. Hiram Woodward in 1975,¹⁵ and my own (1983) chronology of Sukhothai architecture,¹⁶ which is based partially on information in Inscription One and which I will discuss below. My arguments with Dr. Piriya are about his interpretation of Inscription One—not about the art historical conclusions he has based on other sources.

But let me start at the beginning.

Back in 1977 when my study of Sukhothai architecture was in its early stages, suggestions that Inscription One was a forgery and possibly unauthentic were as yet only vaguely formulated. Just a year earlier Prince Chand Chirayu Rajani¹⁷ had suggested a fourteenth (rather than thirteenth) century date of