

## CHAPTER 16

# AN EPILOGUE TO THE RAM KHAMHAENG INSCRIPTION

Piriya Krairiksh

This writer has already proposed in the article "The Date of the Ram Khamhaeng Inscription" (in this volume) that King Mongkut might have composed the Inscription between 1851, when he ascended the throne, and 1855, when he informed Sir John Bowring about its existence. Thus there remains one question: the motives for doing it. Some answers to this question would have to be found in King Mongkut's own writings.

As borne out by Western writers, King Mongkut liked to put up inscriptions. When he was a young man he had English language inscriptions inscribed over doorways, for according to an account published in 1837,

"On one side of his punkah is written, or rather printed, 'The House of Pleasure,' with his name, 'T.C. Momfanoi;' and on every door he has written something."<sup>1</sup>

After he became king, he continued to put up inscriptions in English over his private apartments, as Sir John Bowring noted:

"Inscribed on the apartments to which his Majesty had conducted me, were the words, "Royal Pleasure" in English, and in Sanscrit characters with the same meaning."<sup>2</sup>

In 1827, while he was the abbot of Wat Samoe Rai, Prince Mongkut had two stone inscriptions set up at the Phra Phutthabat, Sara Buri Province, one in Thai, written in Thai script, and another in Pāli, written in Khmer script.<sup>3</sup> During his abbotship

of Wat Bovoranives Viharn from 1836 to 1851, he had three undated stone inscriptions in Thai put up in his residence, the Phra Tamnak Panya, one attesting to his celibacy<sup>4</sup> and the other two forbidding women to enter his residence.<sup>5</sup> After having become king in 1851, he had another stone inscription set up in the same building, commanding that it should be kept free of women.<sup>6</sup> Thus, when he began the Ram Khamhaeng Inscription, he already had experience in composing stone inscriptions. But the Ram Khamhaeng Inscription was to be a challenge worthy of himself. His aim must have been to produce an inscription so convincingly realistic that it could be mistaken for genuine.

Upon his ascent to the throne the king might have conceived the inscription as a votive offering to the gods in gratitude for their divine favour. For it was at Sukhothai in 1833 that the gods first revealed his destiny through the discovery of the stone slab. On account of his accumulation of virtues, *pārāmī*, no harm befell him as he sat upon the stone slab, which was so highly feared by the local people that no one dared to go near it. Thus, in the words of his confidant, the Prince Patriarch Krom Phraya Pavares,

"This was miraculous. It seemed that the gods in that city wanted to tell His Royal Highness that eventually he would be a great king."<sup>7</sup>

The above remark could only have echoed King Mongkut's own feeling, for on a later occasion, when in 1857 he miraculously escaped serious injury from a carriage accident, he wrote to his ambassador in London the following lines:

"I say that the gods who still favour me with divine protection, have come to my aid..."<sup>8</sup>

Further on in the same letter he wrote,

"The accident has caused me no serious bodily harm but I think that it has been the wish of the gods to reveal to me the innermost thoughts and feelings of various people..."<sup>9</sup>

King Mongkut probably thought that the miraculous event at Sukhothai was worthy of commemoration because it shows that the gods, or the "Superagency of the universe" as he sometimes called it,<sup>10</sup> had manifested to him that he would be king. For in 1833 he had lost hope of attaining the throne. In a letter to his eldest son Krom mu'n Mahesuar Siva Vilas dated 1866, year of the rat, he attributed his becoming king to the divine intervention of the gods.<sup>11</sup> According to him, even though formerly his parents were of high rank, fortune had deserted him, leaving him, as it were, buried in clay and sand. Even his servants did not think that he would ever be anybody. But his elevation was probably due to the gods, who helped to inspire the senior officials to discover him and consecrate him king. It might be pointed out that the year 1866 was not the year of the rat, but that of the tiger, a discrepancy of two years. Thus, ironically, the two-year discrepancy appears not only in the Ram Khamhaeng Inscription (Line 4.4), but also in King Mongkut's own letter to his son. King Mongkut appears to have had some problems in reconciling the two-year difference, as is demonstrated by his telling Sir John Bowring that King Ram Khamhaeng introduced the Siamese alphabet in 1284,<sup>12</sup> and then writing to him that it was first invented in 1282.<sup>13</sup>

The king must have realized, just as Pavares had pointed out, that his own life and achievements were similar to those of Phra Bat Kamraten At Śrī Suriyavaṃsarāma Mahādharmarājādhirāja (Li Thai), whose inscription in the Khmer language (Inscription No. IV) he brought back to Bangkok from Sukhothai together with the stone slab. King Mongkut must have felt some spiritual affinities with King Li Thai for, like himself, that king had studied the *Tiṭṭaka*, had been a monk, and was interested in astronomy to the extent that he could correctly calculate the calendar. Furthermore, King Li Thai was also the author of three other inscriptions: two in Thai, with which King Mongkut must have been familiar, namely Inscriptions No. III and No. V, and one in Pālī, No. VII. King Li Thai's examples must have inspired King Mongkut to try his hand at producing a Sukhothai Inscription of his own. He probably had it in mind from the beginning that his inscription in the Sukhothai

idiom would have to be written in the earliest Thai script ever devised.

Since his inscription was meant to represent the earliest Thai script, it would have to be earlier than those of King Li Thai. The inscription of Phra Mahāthera Śrīśraddhārajaculamuṇi (Inscription No. II) gave him the genealogy of Sukhothai rulers and the idea for the name Ram Khamhaeng. He thus coined the name Ram Khamhaeng from that of King Li Thai's grandfather, Phraya Rāmarāja, and Śrīśraddhā's father, Phraya Khamhaeng Phra Ram. The name Rāmarāja probably struck him as being close to his own heart. For even though there was nothing remarkable in Rāmarāja's reign beside the building of a Mahathat at Si Satchanalai, King Mongkut found a congenial spirit in the epithet "the sage who knew the dharma."<sup>14</sup> Ram Khamhaeng was his own alter ego to whom King Mongkut could transfer his own wishes and aspirations so that King Ram Khamhaeng could accomplish them for him.

The first three lines of the Ram Khamhaeng inscription seem to have been based on the life of King Mongkut. Firstly, after he gave his mother, whose proper name was Boonrot, the posthumous name of Śrī Suriyendrā (Suriya + Indrā), which might have been inspired by that of Rāmarāja's father, Śrī Indrāditya (Indrā + Āditya), for both Suriya and Āditya are the names of the sun god. Allusion to the sun is repeated in the name of Ram Khamhaeng's mother, Nang Soeng, which means "sunrise." Secondly, King Mongkut, like King Ram Khamhaeng, had three brothers, born of the same mother, and just like Ram Khamhaeng, his eldest brother died when he was still a child.<sup>15</sup> Thirdly, his other brother also became king, since King Mongkut raised his younger brother to the rank of the second king. This veiled autobiographical aspect of the inscription is borne out by the coincidence in the date of crucial events in the life of Prince Mongkut with those of King Ram Khamhaeng so that the same date when read in the Christian era refers to an event in Prince Mongkut's life but when changed into the Buddhist era applies to that of King Ram Khamhaeng, which is discussed in the article, "The Date of the Ram Khamhaeng Inscription."