

EVIDENCE OF THE THAI NOI ALPHABET FOUND IN INSCRIPTIONS

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This research is a diachronic study of the writing system of the Northeastern Thai dialect. It is based on the analysis of twenty two rubbings of inscriptions. The question of the origin of the Thai Noi alphabet is considered in the light of epigraphic evidence. The phonetic interpretation of some proto-Tai sounds on the basis of historical spelling is suggested. The waxing and waning of vowel length in the Northeastern Thai dialect is observed.

1. Introduction

The earliest known Thai script was invented by King Ramkhamhaeng of Sukhothai Kingdom in 1283 A.D. The Sukhothai script of King Ramkhamhaeng was used till 1357 A.D. In 1357, in the reign of King Li Thai, the grandson of King Ramkhamhaeng, a new script called "King Li Thai Script" came to be used. From my observations it is evident that the shapes of letters of King Li Thai are based on the Sukhothai ones, although some of them are modified. It is stated in Thai history that Ayudhaya city replaced Sukhothai city as the capital of Thailand in 1378. During the early periods of the Ayudhaya kingdom King Li Thai script had been used, though certain changes were introduced through the process of time. In 1680, during the reign of King Narai, the script called "King Narai Script" was brought into use. King Narai script has been developed and preserved as our national script up to now.

The Thai Noi script was used in the Northeastern part of Thailand. The earliest Thai Noi writing was engraved on the Phrathat Sribunruang inscription dated 1510 A.D. Thai Noi was used widely in the Northeast till the Primary School Act was introduced in 1871 A.D. It was stated in this act

that only Standard Thai writing could be used in writing Thai.

2. The Origin of Thai Noi Script

The question of the ultimate source of the Thai Noi script has been debated for many years. According to the work of various scholars, such as Thawat Punnothok and others, the Thai Noi script was developed from King Li Thai script. In this view, King Li Thai, during his reign, made Sukhothai a centre of Buddhism, so that through the spread of Buddhism, King Li Thai script was widely used in Laos and the Northeastern part of Thailand. Later on, this developed into the Thai Noi script. After careful consideration of the shapes of letters in King Li Thai and Thai Noi scripts, I have also reached the conclusion that the source of the Thai Noi script is King Li Thai script.

My observations on the shapes of letters are based on the rubbings of the inscriptions. Of the Thai Noi script, I analyzed twenty two rubbings of inscriptions dated from 1510 - 1840 A.D. From these observations, it is clear that there is great epigraphic similarity among them.

I attempt to show here the similarity of the shapes of letters in King Li Thai and the Thai Noi scripts, by reproducing them side by side. The phonetic value of each symbol of the scripts is that used in the present Thai pronunciation.

1. Consonant Symbols

k	kh	ŋ	tə	təh	d
ก	ข	ง	จ	ช	ด
ก	ข	ง	จ	ช	ด

King Li Thai Script 1357 A.D.

The Thai Noi Script 1510 A.D.

t	th		n	b	p
ต		ท	น	บ	ป
ด		ด	น	บ	ป

King Li Thai Script 1357 A.D.

The Thai Noi Script 1510 A.D.

King Li Thai Script 1357 A.D.

j	r	l	w	s	h
u	ɿ	ɔ	ɜ	u	u
ɜ	ɿ	ɔ	ɜ	ɜ	ɜ

The Thai Noi Script 1510 A.D.

i	i:	e:	ɛ:	a	a:	u:
ɜ	ɜ	ɜ	u	-ɜ	-ɜ	u
ɜ	ɜ	ɜ	ɜ	-ɜ	-ɜ	u

2. Vocalic Symbols

King Li Thai Script 1357 A.D.

j	r	l	w	s	h
u	ɿ	ɔ	ɜ	u	u
ɜ	ɿ	ɔ	ɜ	ɜ	ɜ

The Thai Noi Script 1510 A.D.

i	i:	e:	ɛ:	a	a:	u:
ɜ	ɜ	ɜ	u	-ɜ	-ɜ	u
ɜ	ɜ	ɜ	ɜ	-ɜ	-ɜ	u