

THE ANCIENT SETTLEMENTS OF SUKHOTHAI

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In general the study of the ancient history of Thailand (that is, events from the thirteenth century A.D. onward) relies mainly on epigraphical, iconographical, and architectural sources, with a limited reference to local chronicles and myths. These resources, although admittedly inadequate in many respects, correspond very well with the myth of the Thai race migrating to Thailand from southern China. As a result, Thai history is commonly viewed as starting with the establishment of the first capital of Sukhothai by the Phra Ruang family sometime during the thirteenth century A.D. Sukhothai became an independent Thai state, shrugging off the Khmer yoke; shortly, in the reign of King Ram Kamhaeng, it extended its hegemony as far south as the Malay Peninsula. However, such a reconstruction of Thai history contradicts the fact that at the time there already existed several independent states, namely, Nakhon Sri Thammarat, Ayutthaya, Suparnabhum, and Lan Na, some of which outlived Sukhothai.

Resolution of this contradiction requires not only an investigation of the nature of the Thai state and its interstate relationships, but also a thorough study of its geopolitical position and physical structure, which may enable one to understand its political structure. This article, focussing on the study of ancient settlements, is an attempt to bring to light the composition of the state of Sukhothai (that is, its cities and towns) and to see how these settlements interacted to keep the state alive or to cause its decline. Various ancient sites were mapped, surveyed, and studied to aid in understanding their dates and physical structures. In addition, documentary sources such as inscriptions, chronicles, and local myths were consulted to help place these ancient settlements into a historical perspective.

Fieldwork Study

By consulting Sukhothai inscriptions I was able to designate the location of the state of Sukhothai in the lower basins of the rivers Ping, Yom, and Nan, that is, on the north of the Chao Phraya delta in the modern provinces of Nakhon Sawan, Pitchit, Kampaeng Phet, Pitsanulok, Sukhothai, Tak, Uttaradit, and Phetchabun. Although it is drained by three big rivers and their tributaries, this region is not fertile owing to the poor quality of its soils and the fluctuation of the rainy season. Sometimes rain comes so heavily that it causes inundation, which damages paddy crops and other agricultural products. By ground survey, with the help of aerial photographs, I have been able to identify the sites of thirty-eight moated settlements in the Sukhothai region. These sites have either irregular or regular shapes. They vary in size and structure from 350 meters in diameter (sites with a few religious monuments and traces of ponds and irrigation dykes) to over 1,500 meters in diameter (settlements with triple walls, large numbers of religious monuments, and networks of roads, irrigation channels, and ponds both large and small).

Archaeological monuments, art objects, and inscription stones found at these sites indicate that urban settlements in this region developed sometime in the thirteenth century A.D. Unlike the settlements of the Chao Phraya delta and the northeast, which date back to the seventh century A.D., differences in the forms of the Sukhothai ruins cannot be used as a criterion to indicate which sites antedate the others. However, it appears that the oldest settlements are often surrounded with triple earthen walls, in contrast to those with a single brick or laterite wall that are likely to have appeared sometime during the late fifteenth century. With the exception of the city of Sukhothai, which is regularly oriented, the irregular, triple-walled sites resemble many ancient settlements in the Chiangmai and Chiangrai valleys in the north. As for the peculiarity of the city of Sukhothai, its geometrical plan was no doubt heavily influenced by the Khmer-type settlements of the northeast.

Religious monuments and irrigation structures found in the settlements seem to indicate to a certain extent the hierarchy of their sociopolitical status and this can be used to establish three grades of settlements. The first type includes small-sized settlements, with or

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without traces of religious monuments; the second type is larger, and is dotted with ruins of big religious monuments, ponds, irrigation bunds, and causeways; the third type is larger still, and is well defined by moats and walls and an infrastructure network of irrigation dykes, large and small ponds, and roads to connect the site with other communities. Above all, this the third kind of settlement is associated with prominent religious monuments, within and without the enclosed area. Based on evidence in the stone inscriptions and local chronicles, I identify the first kind of Sukhothai settlement with the *muang*, or town, and the third kind with the *nakhon*, or city. Due to the limits of space and time here, I will confine myself to delineating the structure of the *nakhon*, or city.

Structurally, the sociopolitical status of the Sukhothai cities is marked first of all by two prominent types of religious monuments. The first type was built inside the city and will be called here the *nagara-wasi wat*, or city monastery. Such monasteries are characterized by a complex of religious monuments and buildings such as the stupas and *vihara* surrounded by walls and moats. Like the Khmer cities in the northeast, which are marked by the existence of either Hindu or Mahayana Buddhist *prasat* (towers) in the middle of the city, the most prominent and sacred stupa (*phra mahadhatu*, or the Relics of the Buddha) is found in the middle of the complex. Here was the center of the universe and the foci of sacredness, where the royal rituals were performed, and for long-lasting cities this stupa became an important, regional, pilgrimage site. The importance of the stupa of *phra mahadhatu*, which served to mark the social status of the city, is often emphasized not only in the Sukhothai inscriptions but in the poems and chronicles of Lan Na and Ayutthaya in the fifteenth century. However, the importance of the *nagara-wasi wat* was not centered on the *wat* alone but also extended to other *wat* built by the kings or rulers of the later periods. Probably the long existence of the city is attested to by the series of these *nagara-wasi wat*.

The second type of prominent religious monument that served to mark the sociocultural significance of the city are large *wat* located outside the city wall. These are usually of two types: (1) *aranya-wasi wat*, or monasteries of the forest-dwelling monks, the abode of the learned or high-ranking monks; and (2) the *wat* of the sacred object, notably the *wat* that enshrined the Buddha's Footprint, which is as a rule located on top of a small hill near the city. Like the *nagara-wasi wat*, the numbers of these *wat* vary according to the status and

longevity of the city. In addition, large and important sites are often studded with ruins of lesser *wat* three to five kilometers from the city. These are the *kam-wasi wat*, or village monasteries, and each serves to mark the center of a village community.

Apart from the *wat* and sacred sites already mentioned, the Sukhothai cities seem to possess unequal infrastructures in terms of irrigation works and communication systems. The extent of these systems seems to depend on the location of a particular city and its environment. Upland cities located far from the main river and other water resources are likely to be equipped with a sophisticated network of causeways, irrigation channels, and ponds, while those situated near a waterway are not so equipped. The ancient city of Sukhothai can be cited as a case in point. It is located on the border of an upland that stretches from a mountain range in the southwest to the Yom River about twelve kilometers to the east. Although there exist in this area some small rivers and streams, they seem to have been used as runoff channels rather than serving to detain or spread water to needed areas. Because of this, the city of Sukhothai is characterized by a large-scale irrigation network that makes its city plan unique and extraordinary compared with those of contemporary cities elsewhere. Often this causes some misunderstanding among historians who, after a superficial examination of the city plan, put forward the idea that Sukhothai was a hydraulic city. From my close observation of the city of Sukhothai, I would argue that its intricate irrigation network was not built for agriculture but mainly for trapping and storing water for consumption throughout the year. This, in my view, explains why Sukhothai is dotted with large numbers of big and small ponds.

The irrigation works for paddy cultivation are limited to a few areas along the Mae Lam Pan River to the north and east of the city. One area, which I will call the *na-luang*, or the royal paddy field, is characterized by a large rectangular enclosure fenced by earthen bunds and equipped with *fai* (weir) and *muang* (irrigation channels) from the Mae Lam Pan River. The presence of such a structure is by no means an indication of large-scale paddy cultivation, but was used merely to provide surplus food for the inhabitants and ensure their survival in times of drought.

Other interesting earthworks found among the settlements of Sukhothai are remains of ancient causeways. Formerly only the Phra Ruang Road, which links the cities of Kampaeng Phet, Sukhothai, and