

CHAPTER 8

THE RAM KHAMHAENG INSCRIPTION: LACUNAE AND RECONSTRUCTIONS

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The Sequential Model

It is generally accepted that the first modern scholarly reading of the Ram Khamhaeng inscription was made by C.B. Bradley in 1909.¹ Bradley himself began his lengthy study of the inscription with some scathing comments on earlier attempts to understand the inscription. The transcript made by the 1855 Commission (of which only the first fourteen lines had been published, in 1857)² he calls “an indifferent pen-sketch.” Apparently he had not seen the whole transcript, a copy of which had been presented to the French envoy in 1856.³ What Bastian had published in 1865 as a “translation” Bradley quite rightly dismissed as being only “a first sketch, in which the writer [Bastian] reports such impressions of the drift and import of the writing as he was able to get from Siamese sources.”

During the last two decades of the nineteenth century Father Schmitt had dominated the field of Ram Khamhaeng studies by publishing both a copy of the text and a translation.⁴ The plates of the text published by Père Schmitt are dismissed by Bradley in the following manner:

The text is neither a facsimile nor a tracing, nor a rendering of it by any method of accurate reproduction. What the author supposed to be found of the stone, and what he supplied from conjecture, are both set down alike in coarse black letters apparently drawn with a brush.

Words still plainly to be read on the stone reappear strangely, or even absurdly, transformed.⁵

Schmitt's most recent translation, as published in the papers of the Mission Pavié was, according to Bradley, even worse than the earlier attempts in that it had "everywhere been retouched, and that too, it would seem, without reference to the original, but to some inaccurate transcript."⁶

Bradley's dismissive comments on all nineteenth - century attempts to publish the text of the inscription have apparently had a profound influence upon later scholars, for these efforts have not, to our knowledge, been examined in detail since.

After Bradley came further revisions by G. Coedès,⁷ followed by relatively minor revisions published by the Department of Fine Arts,⁸ Griswold and Prasert na Nagara⁹ and a committee of Chulalongkorn University.¹⁰

Griswold and Prasert have given an outline of the different stages of the decipherment, and their article is magnificently illustrated with reproductions of Bowring's specimen, the 1855 transcript and Schmitt's plates. They also made a comparison of translations by juxtaposing four sample paragraphs, one from each face, as they were rendered on subsequent occasions during the nineteenth and early twentieth century. These samples demonstrate a rapid advance in understanding the view that the readings of the Ramkhamhaeng inscription can be regarded as a series of gradual improvements, and that the more recently published versions are invariably the more authoritative. As a result of this model of continually-ameliorated versions, the earliest readings have been vested with an aura of dilettantism and are seen as quaint attempts purely of antiquarian interest.

The Nineteenth Century Transcripts

The 1855 transcript which Bradley had summarily dismissed as "an indifferent pen - sketch," was more judiciously appraised by Griswold and Prasert na Nagara. Although admittedly it contained several dozen false readings — mostly mistakes re-

sulting from making the wrong choice between two letters that look much alike in Ramkhamhaeng's script, Griswold and Prasert point out that it must be seen as a pioneering work and that therefore we ought to feel less inclined to blame the first transcribers for their mistakes and should be more ready to praise them for accomplishing as much as they did. Griswold and Prasert do not venture to guess the extent of that accomplishment, and express reservation in noting that it is "uncertain how much progress they [the transcribers] had made in understanding the text."¹¹ However, a careful reading of the 1855 transcript reveals that the accomplishment may have been greater than has hitherto been suspected.

As an example of what a remarkable document the 1855 Committee produced it may be noted that its members actually read on Face 2 of the inscription between lines 18 and 19 a word that had been inserted in much smaller letters: the word *klong*, "drum" had apparently inadvertently been left out during the original incision. The 1855 Committee reproduced the word as *kong* and spelled it with a *mai tho* tone-marker, to make the word "noisy", and transcribed it as an integral part of the text of line 18, between *kham* and *duai*, to make an intelligible sentence. The inserted word did not occur on Schmitt's Plate of Face 2, and in 1909 it also escaped Bradley's notice. Later scholars, having noted that something was subscribed, argued as to whether it ought to be read *kloy*, "together" or *klong*, "drum," and the latter view seems to have won most supporters. Throughout the twentieth century debate on the meaning of the subscribed word it seems to have escaped notice that in 1855 the word was noticed, read, and placed in the appropriate text location. Moreover, it was read with the final consonant which is now accepted by most modern scholars. This may be regarded as strong proof that the mid-nineteenth century effort was the result of careful observation combined with a good level of understanding.

Some of what modern epigraphers would dismiss as "mistakes in reading" may actually represent deliberate spelling changes. Thus in the 1855 transcript the archaic spelling of the

word *to*, “to engage [in a duel],” was changed from the single consonant *to - patak* to nineteenth century spelling by using the *to-taw* consonant and adding both vowel and tone marker. Similarly *ton tan*, “the sugar palm,” is changed to *ton tal*, and *araiyik* to *aranyik*, no doubt in order to assist contemporary readers’ understanding of the text. What in the twentieth century are scornfully dismissed as inaccuracies may upon closer inspection reveal that members of the mid-nineteenth century Committee had such a good understanding of the meaning that they felt sufficiently confident to transcribe it in a more readable form.

Schmitt’s plates must be regarded as a separate, independent nineteenth century transcript of the inscription, and they are obviously an artist’s effort to render an eminently legible text, closely following the style and shape of the original. While it is superior in spelling and spacing of letters, in some instances it is inferior to the 1855 transcript. For example, on Face 2, line 24, Schmitt’s Plate shows a word *faek*, which Bradley rightly pointed out to be a mistake. It ought to have been read as *taek*, “to burst.” The proper reading *taek* was not, strictly speaking, established for the first time by Bradley; it can already be found in the 1855 transcript.

These examples serve to draw notice to the fact that the nineteenth century transcripts are valuable documents and that they deserve to be compared with more recent transcripts.

The Study of Lacunae

The most striking difference between the nineteenth century attempts and those of Bradley and his successors is in the manner in which textual lacunae are handled. In the 1855 transcript the text is presented without any gaps, and all sentences are presented as following each other without a single interruption. Schmitt’s plates show only three places where damage on the stone has made part of the text illegible. Everywhere else it presents a full text as if the stone were undam-