

CHAPTER 9

PILTDOWN SKULL — INSTALLMENT 2 REMARKS OFFERED TO THE RAM KHAMHAENG PANEL

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Introduction

It was with great pleasure that I received Betty Gosling's invitation to participate in the Ram Khamhaeng (RK) panel at the Asian Studies Conference, but unfortunately my newly assumed teaching duties since July 1988 prevent me from travelling to the U.S. at this time, and, together with the move out of Australia which began in February 1988, have prevented me from completing what I had projected for my second RK installment, and for which I would have found this conference an appropriate venue for its presentation.

In spite of these impediments, I fear it would be seen, and indeed I would feel it, as a *cop-out* if I declined to provide any contribution to the ongoing discussion, since it appears that my Canberra paper has taken the lid off long accumulated pressures and is responsible for there being an RK panel at this conference. There has now occurred a psychological breakthrough, corresponding to that which, according to an adviser of the present Thai Prime Minister, has occurred in another area in which I have been involved as a historian, the conflict in contemporary Cambodia.

I regret that I have not had time to prepare a well - organized scholarly paper, and indeed what follows may appear as stream - of - consciousness ruminations, because in the haste with

which they were set down that is indeed what they are. Still, I feel it is better to offer them in this unorganized form rather than to avoid the occasion entirely.

I must first state again clearly, perhaps more clearly, what it is that I am trying to do, and certain things that I am not attempting. Obviously my Canberra title, "...Piltdown skull...?", though ending in a question mark, implied that I considered the RK inscription to be a Piltdown skull, indeed a "...fake..." as Anthony Diller has quoted from my paper.¹

Indeed I do consider RK a fake, and have thought so since I first began trying to read the Sukhothai inscriptions some years ago, when a graduate student at Yale. In fact I believe that if all other evidence about Sukhothai had been discovered and studied in the sequence which has prevailed, but inscription No. 1 only dug out of obscurity now, rather than in the 1830s, it would be dismissed out of hand by all historians and archaeologists as an interesting hoax perpetrated by some of the people who are skillfully 'restoring' old Sangkhalok ceramic ware.

In spite of drawing this conclusion early on, I did not try to pursue it in print, nor even for many years to try to study Sukhothai inscriptions, in the realization that the conservative nature of the Southeast Asian historical community would not permit an objective hearing. I threw out a few hints in "Guide Through Some Recent Sukhothai Historiography," having discovered that two respectable old Thai scholars whose patriotic nationalism was beyond reproach also had their doubts about RK, and then, following meetings with several Thai historians whose underground doubts about RK had long flourished, I decided that the proper time to bring anti - RK out of the closet had arrived. Indeed closet suspicion of RK within Thai circles may always have been much stronger than any of us realized, for now Sujit Wongdes has revealed that one of the old masters of Thai language and literature, Saeng Manviton, kept telling his students that RK had been composed by King Mongkut, but they all thought he was only joking.²

When I say that RK is a fake, I *do* mean that I think it was

not written when its text alleges, but at a significantly later date. I am not, however, trying to prove that it was written by King Mongkut, or by any other individual, or at any particular time. Thus counter arguments which aver that "...etymology shows the RK inscription cannot have been written in the Ratanakosin period," are irrelevant to my argument.³

We must also realize that until there is some foolproof scientific test to apply to the stone itself to determine the date of incision of the inscription, it will be impossible to prove absolutely that RK is, or is not, a genuine 13th century period piece, that all arguments are inferential, and that the question revolves around the relative logical solidity of the arguments as read by scholars seeking the truth. There will always be some room for disagreement. Moreover, even if fakery cannot in the end be demonstrated, or even if the better arguments prove to be on the side of authenticity, there are so many anomalies in the inscription, and even more in the linguistic work surrounding it, that the discussion will have served to advance historical knowledge.

Since I consider that the placing of all vowel signs on line is a crucial indicator of fakery, that such drastic changes of a traditional system can only result from strong external cultural influences,^{3a} not from a great mind foreseeing advantages several centuries hence, I consider that RK cannot have been written before the 17th century, probably not before the reign of King Narai, when there was strong interest in Europe on the part of Thai elites. Unless, as I said in "Guide," it can be shown that there was some other Indic source for such an arrangement. To the extent I have been able to investigate such a possibility, which has been limited, the only possibility would still seem to place such influence no earlier than the 15th century.

What I wish to demonstrate, however, is that the crucial fakery of RK, regardless of when it was composed, lies in its inaccurate information about 13th century Sukhothai, and that it must be rejected as a source for Sukhothai, or Thai history. Since I am mainly interested in the status of RK as a historical source, and not in proving that it was embarrassingly faked by some later cultural hero, perhaps purists could cut a deal with

me. I will lay off 'fakery' if they will announce that RK has no bearing on, and no validity, for any question of Sukhothai history. Since contemporary sources generally contain something of value for reconstructing the history of their period, 'unhistorical fake' generally implies later compositions by authors ignorant of the true historical situation; but even those who insist on the veracity of RK's claim to composition in 1292, might still face problems regarding the veracity of its contents.

For example, did King Ram Khamhaeng invent Thai script as alleged? If this is what is claimed, but if there is good evidence that such a claim is untrue, the inscription is no less a fake, as historical evidence, than if it were written in the 1830s. Of course I know that there has been a movement, since at least the work of Coedès, to counter this difficulty by concluding that King Ram Khamhaeng only claimed to have invented *this* Thai script, which is unique, in contrast to other previously existing Thai script(s). The present most purist defender of RK authenticity will have none of this. For Dr. Prasert na Nagara, the term 'this (Thai *nī*) does not in RK mean 'this,' but serves rather as a kind of definite article, as is proved by the several occurrences of the phrase '*mōan* *Sukhodai nī*,' when there can have been no other Sukhothai in question.⁴ I agree with Dr. Prasert's reading on this point, and think there can be no way to counter it. What the RK inscription says, and what its author intended, was that King Ram Khamhaeng invented *Thai writing*, not *this* Thai writing in contrast to some other kind of Thai writing. This use of '*nī*' is extremely interesting in itself, and may serve to identify RK textual relationships, as I take up below.

There are several other RK details which seem clearly anachronistic, thus a kind of fakery, even if the text itself may not be redated to a significantly later period. I will not be able to discuss all of them here, but shall give some indication of what I mean.

I have been asked why I wished to evoke such a controversial subject, as though such challenges were outside the bounds of what a historian should do. The answer to this is that a historian's first duty is to check the validity of his sources and