CHAPTER 1

THE RAM KHAMHAENG INSCRIPTION: A PILTDOWN SKULL OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN HISTORY?

Michael Vickery

Nearly ten years ago General Saiyud Kerdphol, then Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces of Thailand and director of the ISOC, said the Thai possessed a "traditional cultural and religious regard for human rights and freedom of the individual inherited from our first king—Ramkamhaeng the Great of the 13th century;" and he must have considered the so-called Ram Khamhaeng inscription as evidence for those qualities, for no other source mentions 'Ram Khamhaeng' at all.[1]

Some 60 years earlier, however, George Coedès, who finally supplied the first really complete translation of the Ram Khamhaeng inscription (RK), and then used it in an original analysis of Sukhothai state and society, said that the social system implied was reminiscent of that of the Mongols. "De même qu'au sommet de l'édifice social des Mongols se trouve la 'famille d'or', dont le chef est le grand Khan, et dont les princes sont les fils du grand Khan, de même Rama K'amhèng se donne dans son inscription le titre de *p'o khun*, 'pére khun', tandis que les princes et hauts dignitaires sont les *luk khun*, 'fils khun'."[2]

If these two views of the Ram Khamhaeng inscription seem to imply a link between Genghis Khan and Thomas Jefferson and give the former some claim to be a forerunner of the latter in an international struggle for democracy, we should not be too astonished, for probably few other historical documents have

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been forced into so many divergent contexts or have had such diverse *a priori* judgements forced onto them.

Similarly, extreme contrasts in opinion have also been expressed about RK's style and script. For A.B. Griswold and Dr. Prasert na Nagara Ram Khamhaeng's "style of composition was sobre, disciplined and orderly, with a well-defined succession of events and a clear topography,"[3] while C.B. Bradley saw it as an example of "primitive speech," with a "marked tendency toward formal and conventional phrasing," which "moreover is generally marked by some isolation or obscurity of meaning...due, as we may imagine both to exigencies of rhyme and to the use of antiquated diction" (Bradley, pp. 19, 41).[4] In even greater contrast, Bradley excoriated the tone-marking system, calling it a "twice, nay thrice, involved scheme...together with the absurdly inflated consonantal alphabet which is part and parcel of it...it might well bear the palm of what Professor Whitney has called 'devices of perverse ingenuity' " (Bradley, p. 14); while Marvin Brown thinks it was a work of genius.[5]

There are two separate issues involved in the question of the authenticity of the Ram Khamhaeng inscription. Is it a genuine work of the 13th century, and if so does it represent the invention of Thai writing? If it could be shown that the Ram Khamhaeng inscription is a later composition, then it was certainly not the first Thai script, but even if its temporal authenticity cannot be assailed, there could conceivably be internal evidence indicating prior Thai writing.

Publicly, or in print, very little doubt has ever been cast on the authenticity of the Ram Khamhaeng inscription in either way. Prince Chand Chirayu Rajani wrote that it must have been composed by King Lidai, but he still accepted that its system of writing had been devised earlier as the invention of Thai writing; and I cast doubt on it by describing some of its anomalies.[6]

Now a serious gauntlet has been thrown down by Art Historian Piriya Krairiksh who has stated flatly that the inscription cannot have been written before the beginning of the 15th century, which if true means that it not only does not

represent an early Thai script, but is a deliberate historical fake (Krairiksh 1986).

There are three ways to investigate the inscription's authenticity–(1) script, (2) vocabulary, (3) content, its description of the city of Sukhothai, its politics, economics, and religious activity. This last was the aspect examined by Piriya Krairiksh, who said that the writer of the inscription had no idea of the architecture of the city in the time attributed to the inscription.

All three of these aspects show a number of inadequately explored anomalies. My purpose here is to set out clearly the nature of these anomalies, and the linguistic and historical evidence bearing on them. In the space available not all of the problems will be resolved, but I hope at least to demonstrate, even if it is impossible to prove the Ram Khamhaeng inscription a hoax, that it may not be considered as a true example of 13th-century Sukhothai Thai and used as such by linguists or historians.

First let us review what is known of the circumstances of the inscription's discovery.

According to Prince Patriarch Vajiraňan, Prince Mongkut brought the stone throne from Sukhothai, and "He also secured a stone pillar inscribed in Khamen letters, and one inscribed in ancient Siamese...of wondrous import, as if presaging that he would be sovereign of Siam, a king of majesty, power, and goodness far-reaching, like the Phra Bat Kamaradeng At,...who was king in Sukhothai, as recorded in that inscribed stone." Bradley added, "the reference in the last sentence is to the other stone. I am at a loss to understand how it is that the Siamese generally seem to value so highly Prince Kamaradeng At and his Khamen inscription" (Bradley, p. 7, n. 2).

The reason, as clearly implied in the quotation from Prince Patriarch Vajiraňan, was that then both inscriptions—nos. 1 and 4—were believed to be of the same date and of the same king, that is Phra Bat Kamaradeng At was believed to be Ram Kamhaeng, although Bradley realized that such was not true.[7]

According to Griswold and Prasert (EHS 9, p. 183). "In 1836 the task of decipherment was turned over to a Commission of scholars under the direction of Prince Rksa, the learned monk who is best known by his later title Kram Brahya Pavareç-variyalankarana [a first cousin of Mongkut][8]... .The first published work to mention this inscription is *The Kingdom and People of Siam,* by Sir John Bowring (London 1857)...."

A slightly different tale of discovery is reproduced in Caru'k samay sukhothai, cited from Prince Pavareçvariyalankarana's notebook.[9] It is worth translating in full, perhaps for the first time.

In the year 1195 [1833] snake year 5th of the decade... [Mongkut] went up to visit the northern *möang* and pay respects to the various chedi sites...on the 6th of the waxing moon he came back down by boat; on the 7th at noon he reached the landing of Thani [i.e.rājadhāni, the new town of Sukhothai]; he walked to *möang* Sukhothai reaching it in late afternoon. He stayed there two days. He walked around, and came upon a stone slab near the edge of a palace mound, set up as a pedestal, broken down and leaning on its side in that place. The local people venerated it as a *san cau.* They had a boxing match to celebrate it every year.... He ordered that it be brought down, and set it up as a throne under a tamarind tree at Vat Samoray, along with a stone pillar inscribed with Khmer letters. [The one] at Vat Phra Çri Ratnasasdaram was brought at the same time as the stone throne".

This sounds very much as though Mongkut's contemporary, and the first translator of the Khmer no. 4, considered that *it* was *the* inscription which Mongkut found, and brought down from Sukhothai, along with the stone throne.

The introduction to no. 1 in *Caru'k*, however, adds that Prince Pavareçvariyalankarana's notebook, not quoted, also refers to "another 'stone pillar' saying it was a stone pillar which had come from Sukhothai, containing information about the first Thai writing arising in that *möang*, and describing the content of side 4 of the Rama Khamhaeng inscription." *(Ibid.).*