

## THE MOVEMENT OF THAI SPEAKERS FROM THE TENTH THROUGH THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY: AN ART HISTORIAN'S VIEW

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In 1964, some years before I came to Ann Arbor, I was teaching at Silpakorn University in Bangkok and became involved in setting up a symposium on the subject, "Who are the ancestors of the Thai?" I remember Bill Gedney from that time. Of course he was much too wise to actually participate in the symposium, but I was heartened that he took an interest, and his interest has given me courage to address today the problems of the movement of Thai speakers. From the wisdom that has restrained him from trying to answer questions that cannot be answered, I have, on the other hand, learned nothing.

I would like to be able to say that the 1964 symposium gave rise to all sorts of interdisciplinary cooperation and that our knowledge has increased manyfold in the past sixteen years. Alas, that is not the case. We know somewhat more--in certain areas there have been advances--but there has been no comprehensive effort to pull together information from various disciplines. In this paper I would like to make some general observations about the movement of Thai speakers and about the difficulties of obtaining and interpreting data; then I will discuss paths of movement--perhaps of groups of people, but not necessarily; and finally I will turn to the matter I understand least and know least about, namely, linguistic evidence.

The Thai art historian Piriya Krairiksh has proposed in recent years that we use the word "Mon" rather than "Dvāravatī" to describe the culture of the sixth through the tenth centuries. In Thailand itself Dr. Piriya's suggestion has received almost no support. There are plenty of academic criticisms that can be made, but beyond these there seem to be nationalistic sentiments and simple emotional responses: to say "Mon," not "Dvāravatī," is to say that Dvāravatī is not Thai and is therefore somehow foreign. To me the evidence is clear: the Mon-language inscriptions found at certain Dvāravatī sites mean

that Mon was the vernacular language. If only our vocabulary made it easier to distinguish between culture, race, and language! Dvāravatī is indeed the cultural ancestor of modern Thailand, and Dvāravatī people are physically the forefathers and foremothers of the modern Thai. Unfortunately, language seems to many of us to lie at the heart of both culture and race. If only we were able to realize that particular sounds are arbitrary, petty matters quite separable from race and culture. We can understand, therefore, but must regret, that the word “Mon” makes Dvāravatī culture and Dvāravatī people seem alien.

We cannot build a theory, however, on the notion of Thai words floating over and landing on a Mon Dvāravatī, leaving race untainted and allowing culture to grow in its mysterious ways. People have to move. Yet we have no solid evidence to show how or why they moved. As far as Dvāravatī is concerned, there is no particular sign of rupture until about the middle of the tenth century. King Rājendravarman of Cambodia, who came to the throne in 944, was said in an inscription of 946 to have been “victorious in combat against the powerful and wicked Rāmaṇya”—evidently the people of Monland. It does seem that Cambodia expanded at this point in time, but we know nothing about the local conditions that allowed, for instance, a Khmer-style temple (Müang Khaek) to be built near Müang Semâ, a Dvāravatī-type town in Khorat province, or the construction of the Khmer-influenced brick towers of Prāṅ Khaek in Lopburi. A number of Dvāravatī towns may have been abandoned in the tenth century, and it is around this time that we must suspect movements of Thai speakers.

But who were they? Groups of people, whole villages, following charismatic leaders into areas underpopulated or decimated by disease? Refugees? Resettled prisoners of war? We don't know. There is even little support from legend, so far as I know, for what seems to me to be a reasonable hypothesis, one that makes other matters explicable: that in the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth centuries, Thai chieftans saw Khmers as their patrons, allowed themselves to be set up as loyal rulers of towns on the fringes of the expanding empire, and adopted, within limits, aspects of Cambodian culture.

The evidence of art history cannot tell us much about the reasons for movement, though the accumulated evidence does indeed make me favor this last hypothesis. Can art, on the other hand, tell us anything about paths of movement? Let us first ask what kinds of

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evidence we would like to have and are likely to have. Historical legends do offer some clues. It may be that unknown manuscripts will come to light and add to our fund of written sources, but I do not foresee anything of great magnitude being discovered. The same holds for inscriptions; they will continue to be found--especially interesting is the publication in recent years of Mon-language inscriptions found in the area of Vientiane--but no single inscription is going to solve all our problems. Perhaps the solution is to be found in archaeological evidence. In a broad sense this is true, yet there are severe limits to what archaeology can tell us. No total picture will emerge until we know more about when towns were settled, invaded, or abandoned, or when intrusive elements appeared. At the same time I doubt whether the archaeological evidence will ever tell us all we would like to know about ethnic identity. Burial practices, village location, house orientation, or the presence of a certain kind of irrigation work could, I suppose, turn out to distinguish Mon from Thai settlements, but that will have to be demonstrated. There are other matters in which it would be unwise to place hope. Pots were surely traded, but if they were not, Thais and Mons must have exchanged shapes and techniques. If burial was practiced, the physical characteristics of the skeletons will not tell us anything conclusive (though some might think they may). Archaeological recovery of settlement patterns within a village is at best a remote hope.

The evidence of art is also archaeological. Works of art cannot help us at all if we do not know where they were found or cannot compare them to something with a known findspot. But architectural remains have not moved, and portable art objects are more easily visible in museums and are better published than potsherds because they have a more varied appeal. Similarities between two works of art from two different places, of course, need not indicate anything at all about the movement of groups of people. There are numerous ways art styles can spread. A religious leader might move from one place to another, or be moved by a ruler, and impose what he thinks is a proper style. A craftsman might travel, or be invited by a ruler, or be captured and moved. A craftsman might travel and study in some strange place and then return home. In a time of political expansion, a local ruler might find it in his interest to build a temple in cosmopolitan style. City-states might form long-range alliances; a queen might have been born far away, and her good works introduce the art style of her birthplace. All these possibilities mean that when

art styles spread, someone must move, but not necessarily groups of people.

Having now suggested some of the dangers of using art-historical evidence, let me proceed as if these dangers did not exist. I want first to discuss migration from east to west, or from northeast to southwest, and secondly cultural influence more or less in the opposite direction, from peninsular Thailand into central Thailand. I will have to omit evidence regarding all sorts of other movement, and I will not be able to review the various interpretations that can be made of the evidence upon which my own suggestions rest.

As for east-west or northeast-southwest movement, there is first the matter of boundary stones in northeast Thailand and Thaton, Burma; then the links between Phimâi, Wat Mahâthât in Lopburi, and Ayutthaya; and, third, ties between the Vientiane and Sukhothai regions. Piriya Krairiksh, in an important article published in 1974, pointed out the stylistic similarities between boundary stones found at Fâ Daet in Kalasin province and those at the Kalyāṇī-Sīmā in Thaton. At neither place are the stones firmly dated, but there are good reasons for putting the Fâ Daet steles late in the Dvāravatī period--no earlier than the ninth century and possibly as late as the eleventh--and the Thaton boundary stones in the eleventh. The people of Fâ Daet left Mon-language inscriptions, and the people of Thaton have of course remained Mon. References in chronicles to a "Krom" invasion--at least partly confirmed by inscriptions--could mean that Cambodia attacked Thaton in the eleventh century. If there were disruptions that involved Khmers and Mons at this time, however, and if Mons did move from northeastern Thailand to Thaton--a movement which, there is evidence to suggest, would also have touched Lamphûn--it seems reasonable to suppose that Thai speakers were somehow also involved.

The Tantric Buddhist temple of Phimâi in Khorat province dates from around A.D. 1100. It was built, in my opinion, by a powerful local ruler who wanted simultaneously to proclaim his own importance and freedom of action, on one hand, and his loyalty to the then-weak Khmer monarch on the other. The main temple at Wat Mahâthât in Lopburi copies Phimâi in a number of ways. We have no exact date for it; it was probably built in the thirteenth century, in a period of political independence following the death of the last great Khmer monarch, Jayavarman VII, but there is a possibility that it was started in an earlier period of independence in the second half of the