

CHAPTER 10

RAM KHAMHAENG'S INSCRIPTION: THE SEARCH FOR CONTEXT

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One reason why the date of the inscription of Ram Khamhaeng has become a debatable issue is that scholars concerned with cultural history have never sufficiently given the document a context – a sense of the period in which it was produced so strong that the inscription could no more be lifted into another era than could the Magna Carta or the American Declaration of Independence. This paper deals with three aspects of cultural context, in an effort to show how the inscription is very much a document of its time. There is first the matter of sacred Buddhist geography and of the relationship of this geography to architectural traditions, to the language of the inscription, and most importantly, to Ram Khamhaeng's throne and his name for it, the *Manaiṣilāpātra*. Secondly, there is the matter of the sort of Buddha image that was being made in the Ram Khamhaeng period. And thirdly there is a cultural aspect that is merely Tai, there to be illustrated by a discussion of the word *Klāng*, "in the middle of." This word appears to reflect pre-Sukhothai traditions.

These matters will not be discussed in such a way as to prove the authenticity of the inscription. This authenticity is taken for granted. Nevertheless the paper includes evidence for genuineness that may be added to arguments found elsewhere in his volume.

The purpose of the inscription of Ram Khamhaeng was the foundation of a stone platform or throne, the *Manaiṣilāpātra* as

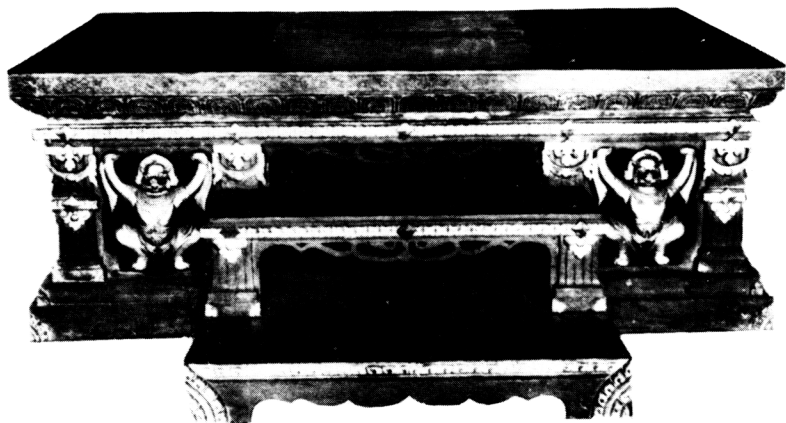


Fig. 1. The Manasīlāpātra. Royal Palace, Bangkok. (Photo after a Fine Arts Department publication.)

the text names it. The throne survives and is now in Bangkok (fig.1). In 1923, George Coedès proposed that the compound Manasīlāpātrā was derived from the name Manosilā, a site in the sacred geography of the Himalayas.¹ This sacred geography has never been sufficiently explored. It provides clues to the content of Sukhothai Buddhism in the time of Ram Khamhaeng as well as to the style of the inscription.

The mythical site Manosilā may be obscure, but it stands beside the lake – Anavatapta in Sanskrit, Anotatta in Pali – that is perhaps the best known spot in the sacred Himalayas of the Buddhists. This lake is the source for the rivers of India. In the time of Jayavarman VII of Cambodia, about a century before Ram Khamhaeng, the lake was recreated at the pond-and-temple site of Neak Pean in the city of Angkor.² Allusion to Himalayan geography was an element shared by the Buddhism of Jayavarman VII and of Ram Khamhaeng.

Manosilā, literally “mind stone,” means red arsenic or vermilion. In the Pali scriptures Manosilā-tala, the Manosilā

surface, platform, or flatland, is the name of the spot where the Paccekabuddhas (the “lonely” non-teaching Buddhas) stop after they have finished brushing their teeth in Lake Anotatta.³ Manosilātala is also a place where lions roar the doctrine, and by extension it is a platform used for preaching. The name Manosilātala appears most frequently in the Jātakas, and translations of passages can be found in the appendix below.

The change from the name Manosilātala to the Manansilāpātra of Ram Khamhaeng’s inscription can only be hesitantly accounted for. Replacing *tala* (“platform”) as the final element is *pātra*, “vessel” or “begging bowl,” in its Sanskrit spelling. Perhaps the primary distinction between *pātra* and *tala* is simply one of scale. *Manañ* replaces *mana*. This is another form of the same word meaning “mind,” with an ending used in the nominative case in Pali but not in compounds. It is as if the deviser of the name wanted to separate the compound *manasilā* into its two parts and to signify to those knowing the rudiments of Pali grammar *mana* in its primary sense as “mind.” The stone platform, therefore, can be construed both as “stone vessel of the mind” and as “the place Manosilā in vessel form.” Was this name Manansilāpātra the work of someone who had a slapdash way with Indic words? That could be argued, but I would guess not.

According to the inscription, this “stone slab” (ขดาร์หิน) had two functions. On regular holy days monks (or a monk) sat on it to preach the Dharma, and on other days the king sat on it so that “officials, lords and princes” (which may or may not be an accurate rendering of ผู้ทวยลูกเจ้าลูกขุน) could, in the Griswold and Prasert translation, “discuss affairs of state with him.”⁴ Literally, what they did was to “hold the village, hold the city together” (ถือบ้านถือเมืองกัน)—an idiomatic expression the exact nuances of which may be irrecoverable. The throne, in other words, was a symbol of both sacred and secular authority. In the Jātaka, the Manosilātala is a place for authoritative speech, for the discourse of the roaring lion, but it is also merely a place to visit – by Paccekabuddhas, by the Buddha-to-be, and others. The throne, it may be surmised, was given its name in part to

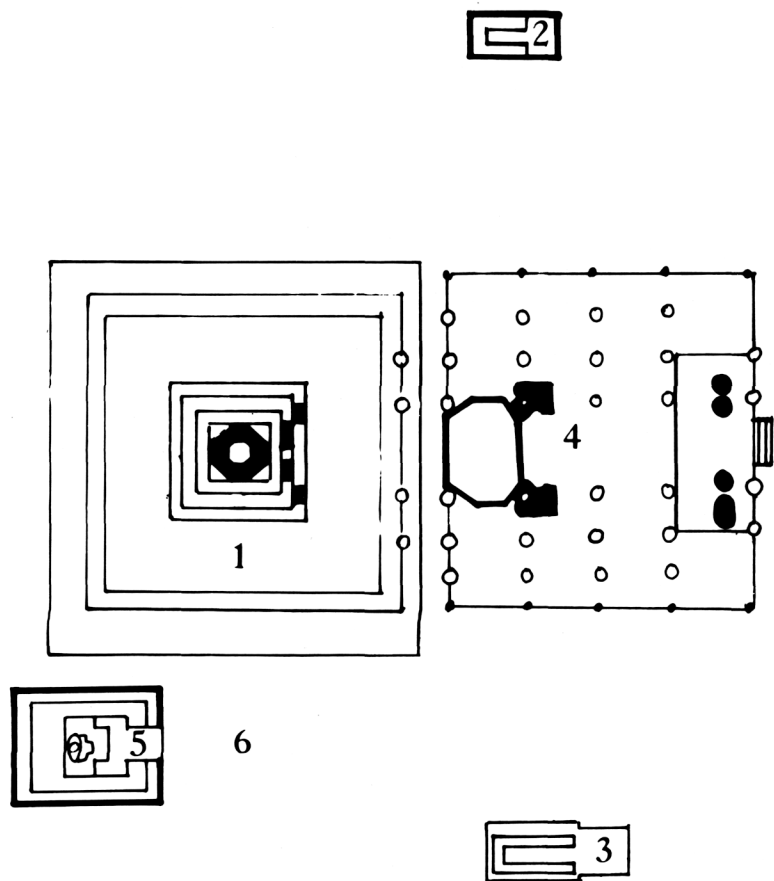


Fig. 2 Sukhothai, Mahâthât, in the time of Ram Khamhaeng. Conjectural plan, based on the researches of Betty Gosling. 1. Pyramid (later transformed into a lotus-bud tower). 2, 3. Laterite shrines, probably *Sālā Brah Māsa* and Buddha *sālā* 4. *Wihân*. 5. Eighteen-cubit Buddha image. 6. Site of *wihân*.