CHAPTER 11

CONTEXTUAL ARGUMENTS FOR THE AUTHENTICITY OF THE RAM KHAMHAENG INSCRIPTION

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For more than a century, those concerned with the history of Thailand have used the first Sukhothai inscription as their most important primary source for the earliest history of the Tai in the Chaophraya River basin, dating it, following the inscription, to the very end of the thirteenth century. It has become one of those hoary chestnuts, to be pulled out of the fire at the drop of a hat (to coin several phrases) to fit any occasion, though like the Bible in the West it is more often referred to than read. It might quietly slip from memory or from public attention had several iconoclasts within the past several years not questioned its authenticity by suggesting that it is a "Piltdown Skull," a forgery from the nineteenth century. Were these claims true, historians of Thailand would have to go back to square one (wherever that is), and re-think and re-work thirteenth-century Sukhothai history.

I do not think such claims are sustainable. Several scholars today will present a variety of arguments that, it seems to me, support the authenticity of the inscription. The most telling of these, in my view, are those from the discipline of linguistics. For what they are worth, please allow me to present another perspective, from an historian viewing the inscription as a text; that is, as a coherent structure of words and logic. I want to present the view that Sukhothai Inscription Number 1 has a logic that is medieval, not modern; and that it speaks with a voice that is medieval, not nineteenth century.

Let us begin with the structure of the inscription as a whole and examine what Alton Becker once called the "text-building strategy" of its author or authors. You should have to hand the full text of the inscription as translated by A.B. Griswold and Prasert na Nagara slightly revised, to which I have added paragraph numbers that I will refer to in the course of the remarks that follow. (The paragraphing of the inscription is that added by Griswold and Prasert.) And to simplify matters let us assume, following the judgments of most who have studied the stone, that all or part of Face 4 of the inscription consists of one or more postscripts, added to the main portion of the inscription some time after the first three faces were engraved on the stone. I will confine my remarks to the first three faces.

The point to which the logic of the inscription leads is paragraph 11. This paragraph describes the ritual occasion for which the inscription was engraved – rather like a cornerstone-laying ceremony in the West. On this occasion in a year equivalent to A.D. 1292, the inscription says, the king had a slab of stone carved as a throne on which he daily sat to deliberate the business of the kingdom, except on the four holy days of each month when a Buddhist monk preached from the same throne. To mark this occasion, the stone says the king had four inscriptions engraved, only one of which – Sukhothai Inscription 1 – has survived.

The point of the inscription thus is reached only in the last half of the third face of the inscription: it took the author 80 finely-chiseled lines of text to get there. The first question we must ask is, 'In what context did the inscription's author choose to set the ritual occasion of the inauguration of his throne?'

Consider the logic through which the text of the inscription builds up to the climax of the inauguration of the throne.

The first three paragraphs of the inscription present the case for the legitimacy of the king based on conditions prior to his accession to the throne. Paragraph 1 presents the evidence for legitimacy through birth or descent: Ram Khamhaeng was the son of [King] Sri Indraditya. Paragraph 2 presents the

evidence that he be named "Rama the Brave." Paragraph 3 provides a case for legitimacy by personal virtue, not in this case Buddhist virtue but rather the virtue of what in the Chinese context would be called filial piety: Ram Khamhaeng served his father, his mother, and his elder brother. And that virtue, of course, was rewarded: "When my elder brother died, I got the whole kingdom for myself." But it is more than his service to his elder brother that was so rewarded: Ram Khamhaeng also became king because of his descent and his kingly valor.

There follow two paragraphs – really, long sections – that deal with defining the kind of polity that Ram Khamhaeng created, or at least presided over. Paragraph 4, the longest single section of the inscription (26 lines), deals with the king's policies, portraying him as a wise, just, and benevolent ruler. The section concludes by saying, in effect, that the people praise the king, and that the king nourishes and protects them by providing clear drinking water and fortifying the city. The mutuality of the relationship between ruler and ruled is noteworthy here, and we will need to return to this point.

Paragraph 5 describes the religious life of Sukhothai, focusing particularly upon the annual *kathin* ceremony, when robes and other monastic requisites are given to the Buddhist monks at the end of the "lenten" season. This section touches both upon piety – "all have faith in the religion of the Buddha, and all observe the precepts during the rainy season" — and upon the civic expression of that faith; that is, it includes both merit-making and merry-making.

Next, there are five short paragraphs (nos. 6 - 10) describing the five quarters of the city – the interior and the west, east, north, and south – and concluding with that most curious reference to Phra Khapung, "The divine sprite of that mountain is more powerful than any other sprite in this kingdom."

Now, there is a curious sort of parallelism between the "tour of the city" section and the "policy" section, in that both end up with expressions of mutuality. Note that, just as the "policy" section (Paragraph 4) ends with the people praising the

king by planting and the king (in return?) providing them clear water to drink and strong city walls, the "tour of the city" section concludes with the king's responsibility to ensure the survival and prosperity of the city by the propitiation of Phra Khapung, that is, by animistic ritual.

What does this logic add up to as we approach the final paragraph of our text? Consider what has to be accounted for in the final paragraph. A throne is being established; a throne that is not just an institution but also a physical object; a "slab of stone" as Griswold and Prasert somewhat inelegantly translate *thæn sila*. This throne is to become (quite literally) the seat of government, as well a physical and symbolic focus for the Buddhist life of the kingdom. The preceding ten paragraphs have attempted to demonstrate that the king undertaking this act is a legitimate ruler, that his kingdom is a credible polity, and that the Buddhism – i.e., the moral quality – of this kingdom is sincere and well-developed.

Taken to this relatively abstract level, the logic of the inscription is not particularly striking, though it is for the most part coherent and it is well adapted to the purposes of the inscriptions's author. Viewed on this level, however, there is nothing particularly thirteenth century about it.

If we take this approach one step further, however, and look at the individual sections or "paragraphs" of the inscription, quite the opposite conclusion comes to mind, for nearly every paragraph of the inscription has a distinctively early quality to it.

The "legitimacy by descent" paragraph at the opening of the inscription names the king's father but goes no further back in time; and it also mentions his mother and the death of his eldest brother as a child. And of course the choice of language is quite startling: the text uses the vulgar first person singular *ku* for (presumably) the king speaking for himself.

The "legitimacy by valor" paragraph describes in most vigorous, active prose an elephant-duel scene that, in my view, reads like an account by a participant. Note, for instance, how