

## CHAPTER 6

# THE DATE OF THE RAM KHAMHAENG INSCRIPTION

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In the book *Charuk Pho Khun Ram Khamhaeng: kan wikhroe choeng prawatsatsilpa* (The Inscription of King Ram Khamhaeng: An Art Historical Analysis), this writer has shown that the Ram Khamhaeng Inscription cannot have been written in the late 13th century.<sup>1</sup> He bases his conclusion on four discrepancies. First, some of the words in the inscription have different meanings from those used in other Sukhothai inscriptions. Also some of its contents do not conform to the usage and what is known of the culture of Sukhothai. Second, the art and architecture mentioned in it are not supported by archaeological and art historical evidence. Third, the author of the inscription freely lifted phrases and sentences verbatim from inscriptions of King Mahadharmaraja of the Sisatchanalai-Sukhothai kingdom. Fourth, many words and some of the contents of the Ram Khamhaeng Inscription are found in late 18th and early 19th century literature. Hence this writer has proposed that the date of the Ram Khamhaeng Inscription should be between 1833 and 1855.<sup>2</sup> In this paper, the same writer would like to be more specific with the dating of the Ram Khamhaeng Inscription, once a mid-19th century date is accepted, for clues to the dating of the Ram Khamhaeng Inscription can be found in *Roeng aphinihan kan prachak* written by the Prince Patriarch Somdet Phra Maha Samana Chao Krom Phraya Pavares Variyalongkorn as a memorial to King Mongkut in 1868.<sup>3</sup>

Prince Pavares, who was born in 1809, entered the monkhood at Wat Mahathat in 1829.<sup>4</sup> He became one of the earliest members of the Dhammayattika Nikaya, the sect founded in

1826 by Phra Vajiranana Thera, the name taken by Prince Mongkut when he was a monk. After Phra Vajiranana assumed the abbotship of Wat Bovoranives Vihara in 1837, Prince Pavares followed him there and became one of the ten senior monks who took charge of the monastery. When Phra Vajiranana left the monkhood in 1851 to be consecrated king, Prince Pavares became the abbot of Wat Bovoranives, a position he held till his death in 1892.

*Roeng aphinihan kan prachak*, which might be translated as "An Account of Miraculous Manifestations," records the miraculous happenings that took place between Prince Mongkut's ordination in 1824 and his death in 1868. These miraculous manifestations were signs that Prince Mongkut possessed the *parami*, the perfection of virtues befitting a future king and a Buddha-to-be. A brief summary of "An Account of Miraculous Manifestations" is as follows:

- 1824 While residing at Wat Mahathat, Phra Vajiranana Thera (Prince Mongkut) was disillusioned with the state of the Buddhist monkhood, so he made a vow that if within three to seven days he had not found someone who could guide him in the true teaching of the Buddha he would leave the Order. As if by a miracle, after a few days a Mon monk came to see him and taught him the true path which became the foundation of the Dhammayattika Nikaya.
- 1830 Phra Vajiranana Thera went to stay at Wat Samoe Rai. In that same year he had the stone markers (*sima*) of the consecrated convocation hall (*uposathagara*) of Wat Samoe Rai dug up for him to see. He found that they were not of the correct size and so had new ones put in their places, after which he had the monks at Wat Samoe Rai reordained within the re-consecrated *sima* boundary.
- 1830-1 He had an image of the Buddha cast in bronze and named it Phra Samphuttha Phanni.
- 1831 He made a pilgrimage to the Phra Pathom Chedi.

There he prayed that if there were relics of the Buddha interred therein, the god who protected them might spare him two relics. After more than a month two relics the size of a lettuce seed appeared miraculously inside an image of the Buddha which he had consecrated at Wat Mahathat. He then had these relics enshrined in the Samphuttha Phanni image.

1833

*He made a pilgrimage to the north. While spending the night on the river bank in front of Wat Mahathat at Chainat, a loud noise was heard like an elephant's bellow. On asking the local people, he was told that there was no elephant there. It appeared that a large crocodile had come up to witness his *parami* and had saluted him with a loud voice.*

At Sawankhalok he stayed at Wat Mahathat four days. On the afternoon of the second day he went to bathe at the Kaeng Luang rapids but felt dizzy and went to sleep. Even though there were no fish at the rapids because it was stony and shallow, schools of fish miraculously appeared. The local people and those in the royal party caught fish to eat and had their fill.

Then he went to Sukhothai, where a miracle that is crucial to the dating of the Ram Khamhaeng Inscription occurred. It is translated in full as follows:

"Arrived at the Thani Landing at noon on the seventh day of the waxing moon. Walked to Muang Sukhothai and reached it in the evening. Stayed there two days. The Prince went sightseeing and found a stone slab at the side of a knoll of a prasat. Someone had set it up as a seat but it had collapsed and had fallen on its side. The townspeople venerated this place as the abode of spirits. They held boxing matches each year in its honor. People could not walk past it disrespectfully, for they would become ill. It was forbidden for anyone to go near it. The Prince saw it and walked straight to the stone slab. The other members

of the party, whose mouths were working with fright, informed His Royal Highness that this place was spiritually potent. The Prince stood still, saying, 'Don't do it, don't do it.' He then seated himself on the stone slab. He said, 'Why should you stay in the middle of the jungle? Come with me to Bangkok so that you can listen to sermons and keep the precepts.' All was quiet and well. Before he left, the Prince commanded that the stone slab be carefully moved. It was set up as a seat beneath a tamarind tree at Wat Samoe Rai together with the stone pillar with an inscription in the Khmer alphabet that is in Wat Phra Sri Ratana Sasadaram and was brought back at the same time as the stone slab.

"If we think about it, this was miraculous. It seems that the gods in that city wanted to tell His Royal Highness that eventually he would be a great king, famous for his royal position and renowned for his good deeds, as was Phra Bat Kamraten At Sri Suriyavamsarama Mahadharmarajadhiraja, who was the sovereign at Muang Si Satchanalai, as is stated in the inscription on the stone pillar, because when the Prince went to stay at that city, he said that on arriving there he felt at home, as if he had been there before. During the night he dreamt that many townspeople, both commoners and dignitaries, came to see him and invited him to prolong his stay there. If we think about it, the gods might have willed the Prince to bring back the stone pillar. Since they could not speak to him verbally, they willed in a roundabout way that he bring it back so that he could learn from it. The story on the stone pillar has many similarities to the events of the present reign. This is only conjectural."<sup>5</sup>

1837

Phra Vajiranana Thera took up residence at Wat Bovornives Vihara. Those who came to welcome him and watch the royal procession saw that there were two

suns that afternoon, "...the cause of which was that that person would be king, following the reign of King Phra Nang Klao."<sup>6</sup> In that year he reconsecrated the *sima* boundary of the *uposathagara* at Wat Bovoranives.

- 1838 He had the Jinasri image moved to the east wing of the *uposathagara* of Wat Bovoranives.
- 1847 He had the *sima* boundary of the *uposathagara* of Wat Bovoranives enlarged. While a chapter of monks was performing the consecration ceremony, rain fell which measured 350 centimetres.
- 1851 Phra Vajiranana left the monkhood to become King Mongkut, having been the abbot of Wat Bovoranives Vihara 14 years and 86 days.
- 1868 King Mongkut passed away. More miracles occurred.

Then follows Prince Pavares' translation of the Khmer language inscription that Phra Vajiranana Thera brought back with him together with the stone slab from Sukhothai. Finally, Pavares mentions the stone slab, saying that it is described on a stone pillar which came from Sukhothai. This is followed by a summary of the contents of the third and fourth sides of the Ram Khamhaeng Inscription. At the end of the book he tells the reader how to convert the different dating systems; for example, the Buddhist Era (Buddhasakaraja) is 621 years more than the Mahasakaraja. He ends his "Account" with a poem, to the effect that the conversion of one era to another is a mystery to the common people. Thai people consider tricks in calculation important. Subtle is the ruse that the old-timer used to feign a person from the distant past.<sup>7</sup>

Following his life of King Mongkut as told in *Roeng aphinihan kan prachak*, Pavares published his translation of the Khmer-language inscription of King Mahadharmaraja of Si Satchanalai-Sukhothai, now known as Inscription IV. According to Pavares' translation, in 1342 King Mahadharmaraja was the heir apparent in Si Satchanalai. Having heard that his

father was ill, he came with his army to take Sukhothai from his enemies and was consecrated king. He thought only of teaching and helping others and to become a Buddha, so that his fame spread to every country. He had studied the Tipitaka and was learned in all of the sciences, especially astronomy, in which he could correctly calculate the calendar. After having reigned for 22 years, in 1361 he invited the Maha Sami Sangaraja from Sri Lanka to spend the rainy season retreat at Wat Pa Mamuang. After the retreat was over, he gave alms and consecrated a bronze image of the Buddha in the middle of Muang Sukhothai to the east of the base of the Phra Mahathat. Then he became ordained a novice and the earth shook in every direction. When he was ordained a monk there was another earthquake and a naga living to the east of Muang Sukhothai reared up its hood above the peoples' heads. Music was heard by everyone and all who were present witnessed the miracles as manifestations of his *parami*. His subjects asked him to leave the monkhood to rule over them and to teach them the *dharma*.

This translation of the Khmer-language inscription of King Mahadharmaraja was inserted as an appendix to Pavares' life of King Mongkut so that the reader could verify for himself the similarities between the story of the stone pillar and the events of the present reign. The parallels would appear to be as follows:

King Mahadharmaraja and Prince Mongkut were both rightful heirs to the throne but were prevented by circumstances from claiming their kingship after the death of their fathers. Both had studied all that there was to know of the Buddhist *Tipitaka* and were highly proficient in astronomical science and could make the corrections of the calendar. They both had images of the Buddha cast in bronze. They were influenced by learned foreign monks who were instrumental in helping them to establish new Buddhist sects. Both had been ordained as monks but were called to leave the monkhood in order to become kings. Both became virtuous monarchs who sought to make their subjects good Buddhists. Above all, miraculous happenings attested to their being in possession of the *parami*, the perfection of virtues befitting a Buddha-to-be.

According to Prince Pavares, the reason that Mahadharmaraja had the stone pillar inscribed was to record such miraculous happenings as manifestations of his *parami*. Pavares wrote that on the occasion of Mahadharmaraja's ordination the following occurred:

"Since it was a winter month, there was no rain. But on account of the power of (Mahadharmaraja's) taking up the precepts together with his making the vows, the earth shook. Although it was in the dry season, rain fell from the air. Miracles manifested themselves on his accumulation of the *parami*. Thus they were described in detail on the stone slab in order to glorify him in the future."<sup>8</sup>

Later on he wrote,

"(Mahadharmaraja) ordered a canal dug and a road built from Sukhothai to Si Satchanalai, linking small towns with large ones on that route. It was an act of merit in commemoration of his late father. He set up road blocks with guards to prevent people from fleeing across the border and to prevent the route from being deserted and dangerous. His subjects who came and went to trade could do so with ease. All was accomplished because of the king's *parami*. On one occasion these miraculous happenings were recorded and inscribed on a stone pillar so that future generations could read about it clearly for themselves."<sup>9</sup>

Just as the Khmer language inscription of Mahadharmaraja was a record of the manifestations of his *parami*, so Pavares' *Roeng aphinihan kan prachak* was meant to be a record of those of King Mongkut. Among the miraculous manifestations of King Mongkut's *parami* was the incident at Sukhothai when the future king sat on the stone slab that was considered to be spiritually potent without having any harm befall him. This stone slab introduces the reader of *Roeng aphinihan kan prachak* to Pavares' summary of the Ram Khamhaeng Inscription which follows his translation of the Khmer language inscription of Mahadhar-

maraja. This is the first time that Pavares mentions the Ram Khamhaeng Inscription. It should be noted that Pavares kept it separate from his "Account" of the life of King Mongkut and did not say when and by whom the Ram Khamhaeng Inscription was brought to Bangkok. Nevertheless, he must have felt that it was relevant to the life of King Mongkut because he appended it to his "Account." Pavares' summary of the Ram Khamhaeng Inscription was the first occasion that the inscription was transliterated into modern Thai. His summary generally follows the literal meaning of the text, but occasionally he deviates from it and the passage becomes unintelligible. It can be translated as follows:

"The stone slab that is described in the above passage is mentioned on a stone pillar which came from Muang Sukhothai telling of the first decree for devising the Thai alphabet. At that time that city was not independent, but was a vassal state. The governor was Khun Ram Khamhaeng. He was the one who devised the Thai alphabet. Thus it is recorded on this stone pillar that in Mahasakaraja 1214 saka, the year of the dragon, Pho Khun Ram Khamhaeng, governor of Muang Si Satchanalai-Sukhothai, commanded the planting of some sugar-palm trees. After 14 years had passed, he ordered craftsmen to carve the stone slab and set it up in the midst of these sugar-palm trees. On the day of the new moon, the eighth day of the waxing moon in May, the day of the full moon, all eight of them [sic],<sup>10</sup> an assembly of monks and senior monks go to sit on the stone slab to preach the *dharma* to the congregation, all of whom keep the precepts. If it is not a day for preaching the *dharma*, Pho Khun Ram Khamhaeng, governor of Muang Si Satchanalai-Sukhothai, goes to sit on the stone slab and permits the royal sons and sons of the nobility to pledge allegiance to him."<sup>11</sup>

The above passage of the Ram Khamhaeng Inscription parallels the intellectual, political and religious activities in the life of the future King Mongkut. Central to the inscription is the

function of the stone slab which the Prince Mongkut had in mind to use as a seat from which he would deliver sermons. Although he did not say it overtly, he probably had thought of using it as a throne whenever he became king.

As has been noted, after the prince returned to Bangkok he set the stone slab up as a seat beneath a tamarind tree at Wat Samoe Roi. However, Pavares does not say whether the future King Mongkut took the stone slab with him to Wat Bovoranives when he was appointed abbot of that monastery in 1837, or whether he had senior monks preach the *dharma* to the congregations while seated on it on *uposatha* days. But it is possible to infer that he did, because it was his original intention to do so, judging from Pavares' "Account" quoted above.

According to Pavares, Prince Mongkut was the abbot at Wat Bovoranives for 14 years and 86 days, or 5,196 days and 22 hours, before he was invited to become king. The 14 years that Prince Mongkut served as the abbot of Wat Bovoranives while awaiting his call to the throne has its parallel in the above-quoted passage of the Ram Khamhaeng Inscription as well:

"In Mahasakaraja 1214 saka, the year of the dragon, Pho Khun Ram Khamhaeng, governor of Muang Si Satchanalai-Sukhothai, commanded the planting of these sugar-palm trees. After 14 years had passed, he ordered craftsmen to carve the stone slab and set it up in the midst of these sugar-palm trees."<sup>12</sup>

After his 14 years of preaching the *dharma* at Wat Bovoranives, King Mongkut ascended the throne, and just like Pho Khun Ram Khamhaeng, in Pavares' summary of the inscription quoted above,

"...permits the royal sons and sons of the nobility to pledge allegiance to him."<sup>13</sup>

Although the Ram Khamhaeng Inscription does not specify which system of dating is used, Pavares assumed that it was the Mahasakaraja. Moreover, it is not by coincidence that Mahasakaraja 1214 is equal to Buddhasakaraja 1835, if we add 621

to 1214, as Pavares told us to do. If the Christian era is substituted for the Buddhist era B.E. 1835, we arrive at A.D. 1835, two years before Prince Mongkut assumed the abbotship of Wat Bovoranives Vihara. Adding 14 years to it, the date becomes B.E. 1849 for Ram Khamhaeng's setting up of the stone throne, or A.D. 1849, two years before Prince Mongkut came to the throne. The two years' difference between A.D. 1849, given in the Ram Khamhaeng Inscription, and the actual date of King Mongkut's ascension to the throne, which is A.D. 1851, might be corrected by the clue given by the ambiguity of the next date mentioned in the inscription:

"In sakaraja 1207, the year of the boar, he commanded that the relic be dug up for all to see. After having venerated the relic for one month and six days, he buried it in the middle of Si Satchanalai."<sup>14</sup>

Mahasakaraja 1207 was not the year of the boar, but that of the cock. So if sakaraja 1207 was meant, it had to be the year of the cock. But it was probable that the year of the boar was intended, for in his translation of the above passage Pavares flatly states "In sakaraja 1209, the year of the boar." This ambivalent dating suggests that the author of the inscription might have purposely wished to give an allowable margin of two years for the correct interpretation, because, with the exception of Pavares' conversion specifying that the Buddhasakaraja is 621 years more than the Mahasakaraja, the Buddhasakaraja is generally accepted to be 623 years more than the Mahasakaraja.<sup>15</sup> Hence if we add 623 to 1214 and 623 to 1228, we arrive at 1837 and 1851 respectively. Therefore, if the date A.D. 1849 is corrected to A.D. 1851, it becomes the actual date of King Mongkut's ascension to the throne, which also happened to be the year of the boar.

Pavares continues his summary of the Ram Khamhaeng Inscription:

"In sakaraja 1209, the year of the boar, he commanded that the relic be dug up for all to see. After having venerated the relic for one month and six days, he buried

it in the middle of Si Satchanalai."<sup>16</sup>

Depending on the interpretation, sakaraja 1209 can be either B.E. 1830 or A.D. 1830. The year A.D. 1830 was an important one in the life of Prince Mongkut, for in that year he had the monks at Wat Samoe Rai properly reordained into the Dhammayuttika Nikaya because he had reconsecrated the convocation hall (*uposathagara*) of Wat Samoe Rai by putting up new boundary stones (*sima*). Pavares tells about it as follows:

"After some time had passed the Prince commented on the *sima*, remarking that today the *sima* are not properly put up, are not long lasting and are not consecrated by the power of the Order (*sanga*). This is because the laymen do not know anything about the *sima*. They follow the custom of the teacher (*acariya*) which they have seen. These are the reasons why the Prince objected to it. Thus he commanded that the stone markers at Wat Samoe Rai be dug up for him to see. He saw that they were tiny, not suitable to be markers. His heart was saddened at this aberration from the *sima* practice, so he made a search for a chapter of monks who had been ordained in the ancient method. It is said that the ancient *sima* boundary was consecrated by a chapter of 18 worthy ones (*arahant*), so he had 18 monks who had been ordained in the old way come to preside over the reordination within the *sima* boundary in front of Wat Samoe Rai."<sup>17</sup>

Pavares's summary of the Ram Khamhaeng Inscription continues:

"After having venerated the relic for one month and six days, he buried it in the middle of Si Satchanalai. He erected a *cetiya* above it. It was completed in six years. Then he built a stone wall on three sides of the Great Relic *Cetiya* (Mahathat)."<sup>18</sup>

The date of the completion of the *cetiya* as given in the inscription is sakaraja 1213 (1207+6), which is either B.E. 1834 or A.D. 1834. When corrected by adding 2 to it, it becomes A.D.

1836. The *cetiya* at Wat Bovoranives Vihara had its foundation laid in 1831 and may have been partially completed in 1836. In that year Phra Vajiranana Thera had the fourth wing of the original convocation hall (*uposathagara*) of Wat Bovoranives Vihara, which was in the form of a Greek cross, pulled down to make room for the terrace of the *cetiya*. At the same time he had the *sima* boundary of the *uposathagara* enlarged to include all three wings of the convocation hall.<sup>19</sup>

The last date given in the Ram Khamhaeng Inscription is the date of the invention of the Thai alphabet. Pavares translates the passage as follows:

"Formerly the Thai alphabet did not exist. In sakaraja 1205, the year of the goat, Pho Khun Ram Khamhaeng set his mind to it and devised these Thai letters...So these letters exist because that Lord set his mind to them."<sup>20</sup>

The date of the invention of the Thai alphabet corresponds to B.E. 1826, which can be interpreted as A.D. 1826. In that year Prince Mongkut, who was residing at Wat Mahathat, became extremely disillusioned by the lack of learning and the unruly behavior of his fellow monks, so he made a vow that if within three to seven days he had not found some true disciples of the Buddha to instruct him, he would leave the monkhood. As if by a miracle, after a few days a monk of the Mon sect, well versed in the teaching and the discipline of the Buddha, came to convince him of the religion. He thus formulated the rules of conduct for his own Dhammayuttika Nikaya after those of his mentor. In the year 1826 he seriously began to study the *dhmma* until there was nothing more in which his teacher could instruct him. He then began to teach his fellow monks. Prince Mongkut's interest in the transliteration of the Pali language into the Thai script may have arisen around this time. It is possible also that he might have begun to experiment with devising an alphabet for the writing of Pali that later evolved into the so-called "Ariyaka" system of writing.

The purpose of this paper is not to point out the many

similarities between events in the life of King Mongkut and of Ram Khamhaeng, but to narrow the possibility for the date of the Ram Khamhaeng Inscription. Since the inscription attests to a period of 14 years between the planting of the sugar-palm trees in B.E. 1837 (corrected date) and the carving of the stone slab in B.E. 1851 (corrected date), that can be seen as paralleling King Mongkut's 14 years' tenure as abbot of Wat Bovorani-ves, from A.D. 1837 to his ascension to the throne in A.D. 1851. It can thus be concluded that the Ram Khamhaeng Inscription probably was carved soon after 1851 and certainly before 1855, when King Mongkut wrote to John Bowring about it.

## Conclusion

From careful reading of Prince Pavares' "An Account of Miraculous Manifestations," it can be seen that the author wished to pay homage to his mentor, King Mongkut, whose *parami* and accomplishments rivalled those of King Mahadhar-maraja of Sukhothai. His introduction of the Ram Khamhaeng Inscription was to draw an analogy between coincidences in the life of King Mongkut and that of King Ram Khamhaeng. However, such a similarity as the 14 years of Prince Mongkut's abbotship at Wat Bovoranives and the 14 years between when Ram Khamhaeng had the sugar-palm trees planted and the carving of the stone slab to be used as a throne is too contrived to be coincidental. This observation is further supported by the fact that the years 1837 and 1851 when read as Christian era happen to coincide with the crucial events in the life of King Mongkut. Furthermore, Pavares' advice on how to convert different eras is a key with which to unlock the mystery of the Ram Khamhaeng Inscription. Pavares' admiration for King Mongkut was so great that he could not refrain from giving the game away, for the last sentence of his memorial reads,

“ไทยถือว่าสำคัญ	กลเลข
แยบยนต์คนเก่าแก่ง	กล่าวอ้างคนไกล” <sup>21</sup>

"Thai people consider tricks in calculation important. Subtle is the ruse that the old-timer used to feign a person from the distant past."

## Notes

- 1 Piriya Krairiksh, *Charuk Pho Khun Ram Khamhaeng: kan wikhroe choeng prawatsatsilpa/The Inscription of King Ram Khamhaeng: An Art Historical Analysis* (Bangkok: Amarin Press, 1989).
- 2 *Ibid.*, pp. 225-230.
- 3 Somdet Phra Maha Samana Chao Krom Phraya Pavares, "*Roeng aphinihan kan prachak*," *Vajiranana Lem 6*, 16 (Kanyayon, Ratanakosin sok 116), 3543-3577.
- 4 Somdet Phra Maha Samana Chao Krom Phraya Vajiranana Varorasa, *Tamnan Wat Bovoranives Vihara* (Bangkok: Rong Phim Sophonphiphatthanakon, B.E. 2465), pp. 32-33.
- 5 Pavares, *Vajiranana Lem 6*, pp. 3551-3553.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 3553.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 3577.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 3571.
- 9 *Ibid.*, pp. 3573-3574.
- 10 The correct translation is as follows: "the eighth day of the waxing moon, the day of the full moon, and the eighth day of the waning moon"
- 11 Pavares, *Vajiranana Lem 6*, pp. 3574-3575.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 3575.
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 "*Banthuk ken sop sakaraja*," *Phrachum Phongswadan phak thi 5* (Bangkok, 2506), pp. 191-192,196.
- 16 Pavares, *Vajiranana Lem 6*, p. 3575.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 3546.

18 *Ibid.*, pp. 3575-3576.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 3554.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 3576.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 3577.

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