

Barend Jan Terwiel

# The Ram Khamhaeng Inscription

## The fake that did not come true



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## Introductory

If, twenty years ago, a commission of specialists in Thai history were to decide which primary document was the most important and influential for Thai history, there can be little doubt but that the Ram Khamhaeng Inscription would have been first choice. Not only was this inscription, dated 1292 A.D., the oldest dated document in the Thai writing system, but also its lavish information had determined the historiography of what since the beginning of the twentieth century was called “the Sukhothai Period”. A special stamp was issued in 1983 at the occasion of commemorating 700 years of Thai writing.



Stamp commemorating the 700 years of Thai writing

In March of that same year the Thai crown princess summoned representatives from all fourteen countries where courses in the Thai language were offered and presented them with plaster replicas of the inscription. The German ambassador Dr. Hans Christian Lankes accepted three copies, which were duly sent to Hamburg, Munich and Heidelberg.

## 1 The Discovery

The story of how the Ram Khamhaeng Inscription was discovered has often been told. It happened in the first half of the nineteenth century through the activities of Prince Mongkut. This prince had been ordained in 1824 at the age of twenty as a Buddhist monk, fifteen days before his father died and his half-brother was chosen to be the successor. While he had followed normal tradition in

joining the Buddhist Sangha<sup>1</sup> it was expected that he would leave the order after one Lenten Season and return to wife and children, but remarkably Prince Mongkut decided to remain a monk for a large part of his life. The reason was not, as it was whispered in gossipy circles, that he wanted to protect himself against his half-brother the King. The relationship between those two was quite cordial. All evidence points to the fact that Mongkut remained in the Buddhist order because he liked the life as a monk.



Sisatchanalai, Wat Khao Phanom Phloeng

During the first ten years as a monk he resided mainly in Wat Samorai, a medium-size monastery (presently called Wat Rachathiwat) which was at that time situated on the outskirts of Bangkok. Mongkut was a bright and inquisitive monk, keen to learn about the wider world. While Mongkut's younger brother Chuthamani eagerly sought the acquaintance of those reaching Bangkok in sailing vessels and in the first steamships, Mongkut concentrated upon long discussions with European missionaries, such as the Catholic priest Jean-Baptiste Pallegoix (who later became bishop) who was one of the few Europeans who could speak the Thai language.

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1 The Sangha (literally: "assembly") comprises all ordained members of the Buddhist church.

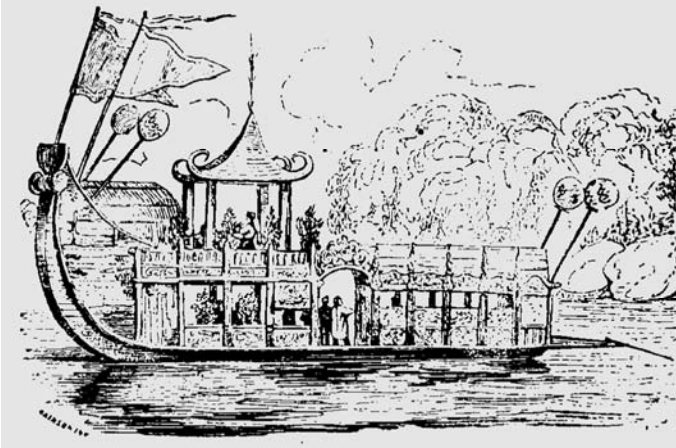
Late 1833, when Mongkut was 29 years of age he went on a pilgrimage to the far north of Siam. It was – and still is – customary that enterprising Buddhist monks used the annual period outside the rainy season, when the rules of the Sangha are somewhat more relaxed, to make voyages that last more than a day. They cannot do so during the rainy season when monks are allowed to travel only on condition they return to their own monastery before the sun rises. This particular journey that began late 1833 was a pilgrimage that took Mongkut, among other places, all the way north to the ancient towns of Sisatchanalai and Sukhothai. It was in the latter town that he found in the centre of the ruins of the past two remarkable heavy stone objects: a gray slab of stone with designs in bas-relief at the edges which reputedly had been the throne of the ruler of Sukhothai and a large black stone inscribed with a curious ancient type of script.



Throne found by Prince Mongkut

Mongkut decided to have both objects removed so that they could be installed in his monastery in Bangkok, the slab of stone to be used as preaching seat, and the inscription to be studied at leisure in order to discover what was written on it.





Contemporary drawing of a large pleasure boat

Unbeknown to most historians there exists an eye-witness account of the return journey of Prince Mongkut. Pallegoix who had also set out on a voyage to the north, in order to propagate the Christian faith, had begun his travel probably on January 15, 1834.<sup>2</sup>

Late January, while the crew of his boat was slowly paddling against the current of the Ping River at a location well over 300 kilometres north of Bangkok, the solitude of the river was suddenly interrupted when he and his rowers

[...] heard confused shouting and a terrible noise. Soon afterwards they saw a multitude of large rowing boats, adorned with peacock feathers, occupied with soldiers, dressed in red and armed with pikes and halberds, that were coming down the river with the speed of lightning. We understood immediately that this was the Prince-Monk (presently the king of Siam) who returned from his voyage to the Laos people, where he had been to press gold-leaf on the Sacred Fang-tree, that is to say an enormous sappan tree or campeche, one that is much

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2 This is the date in the first account by Pallegoix of this journey (Pallegoix 1835, 109). In his *Description* published 1854 he makes it January 10 of that year.

venerated because of its age. Quickly my rowers knelt down and I withdrew in the hut of my rowing boat while His Highness passed, who did not have the time to recognise me.<sup>3</sup>



The Ram Khamhaeng stele in the National Museum, Bangkok

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3 “Nous faisons donc route en silence dans cette affreuse solitude, lorsque nous entendimes tout à coup des cris confus et un vacarme épouvantable;

Pallegoix's account establishes that Prince Mongkut's pilgrimage of 1833-1834, during which he took the inscription to Bangkok, was a major undertaking, he apparently travelled not anonymously but surrounded by the pomp and the paraphernalia of his princely rank. It also shows that he took sufficient men along to lift, move and transport the heavy objects.

## 2 The Deciphering

After the inscription had arrived in the Siamese capital, the throne and inscription were set up in Wat Samurai. The first evidence of the long process of deciphering dates from 1836, the year during which Mongkut was appointed abbot of the large and famous monastery named Wat Bowonniwet. Mongkut took the inscription to this monastery in the centre of Bangkok.

One of his first actions there was the appointment of a committee to study the unusual signs on the stone inscription. Luckily there was much material to study, for the inscription consists of no less than 124 lines of text.

It must have been clear from even a casual examination that the archaic signs looked like an early form of Thai writing, and that apparently these were somehow related to old Khmer. There can also be little doubt that many consonants were relatively easy to determine. After that it must soon have been clear that most of the vowels were placed in a very odd position. All hitherto known Thai documents, including early inscriptions, had in common with the Indian scripts

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bientôt nous aperçûmes une multitude de grandes barques ornées de pavillons, de panaches et queues de paon, garnies de soldats en habits rouges, armées de piques et hallebardes, descendant la rivière avec la rapidité de l'éclair. Nous comprimes de suite que c'était le prince talapoin (aujourd'hui roi de Siam) qui revenait de son voyage au Lao, où il était allé revêtir de feuilles d'or le *phra fāng*, c'est-à-dire un arbre énorme de sapan ou campêche très vénéré par son antiquité. Vite les rameurs de s'agenouiller et moi de me blottir dans la hutte de ma barque pendant le passage de Son Altesse, qui n'eut pas le temps de me reconnaître." (Pallegoix 1854, vol. 1, 92.)

## Appendix 3:

### The Ram Khamhaeng Inscription, Translation

#### Text 1

My father's name was Si'Inthrathit, my mother was called Lady Sueang, my elder brother was called Ban Mueang There were five of us born from the same womb, three boys and two girls. My eldest brother died at a young age. When I was grown to the age of nineteen, Lord Sam Chon, the ruler of Mueang Chot came to attack Mueang Tak. My father went to fight Lord Sam Chon on the left. Lord Sam Chon drove forward on the right. Khun Sam Chon attacked in force, and my father's men fled in confusion. I did not flee. I mounted my elephant, opened [a way through] the soldiers and pushed him in front of my father. I fought an elephant duel with Lord Sam Chon. I fought Lord Sam Chon's elephant, who was called Mas Mueang, and beat him. Lord Sam Chon fled. Then my father named me Phra Ram Khamhaeng because I fought Sam Chon's elephant.

During the time of my father I served my father and my mother. When I caught any game or fish I brought them to my father. When I picked any sour or sweet fruits that were delicious and good to eat, I brought them to my father. When I went hunting either by lasso or by [driving] elephants into a corral, I brought them to my father. When I raided a village or town and captured elephants, young men or women of rank, silver or gold, I took and gave them to my father. When my father died, my elder brother lived and I served him like I had served my father. After my elder brother died I obtained the whole kingdom for myself.

#### Text 2

In the time of King Ram Khamhaeng this land of Sukhothai is thriving. In the water there is fish and in the fields there is rice. The lord of the realm does not levy toll on his subjects for travelling on the

roads they lead their cattle to trade or ride their horses to sell. Who wants to trade in elephants can do so, who wants to trade in horses can do so, who wants to trade in gold or silver can do so. When free men or a person of rank dies, his property, his elephants, wives, children, granary, rice, slaves and plantations of areca and betel is entirely left to his son. When commoners or persons of rank differ and disagree, the case will be examined as to its truth and will be settled in a just manner for them. He does not connive with thieves or favour concealers [of stolen goods]. Seeing someone's rice, he does not covet it, seeing somebody's wealth he does not get angry. If anyone riding an elephant comes to see him to put his country under his protection he helps him, treats him generously, and takes care of him. Those who have no elephants, no horses, no young men or women, no silver or gold, will be given some and be helped until they can establish an estate. When he captures enemy warriors, he does not kill them or beat them. In the opening of the gate over there he has hung a bell. If anybody in the country has a grievance which sickens his belly and gripes his heart which he wants his ruler and lord to know, it's easy, he goes and strikes the bell which the king has hung there.

King Ram Khamhaeng, the ruler of the kingdom hears the call, he comes and questions the person, examines the case and decides it justly for him, so the people of Sukhothai praise him. They plant areca groves and betel groves all over the country. Coconut plantations are manifold in this country, and jackfruit plantations are manifold in this country. Mango plantations are manifold in this country. Tamarind plantations are manifold in this country. Anyone who plants them gets them for himself. Inside this town of Sukhothai there is a marvellous clear pond of water and as good to drink as the Khong river in the dry season. Around this town of Sukhothai there is a triple wall measuring three thousand fathoms.

### Text 3

The people in this town of Sukhothai like to observe the precepts and to bestow alms. Lord Ram Khamhaeng the ruler of this town

of Sukhothai, the noblemen, noble women, the young men and women of rank, and all the nobility without exception, both male and female all have faith in the Buddhist religion, all observe the precepts during the rainy season. At the close of the rainy season they celebrate the *kathina* ceremonies, which last a month. The *kathina* ceremony is celebrated with heaps of cowries, heaps of areca nuts, heaps of flowers, there are cushions and pillows. The gifts they present to accompany *kathina* are worth two million each year. Everyone goes to the forest monastery over there for the recitation of the *kathina* (formula). When they are ready to return to the town they walk together, forming a line all the way from the forest monastery to the parade ground. Whoever wants to make merry, does so; whoever wants to laugh, does so; whoever wants to sing, does so. As this town of Sukhothai has four very big gates, and as the people always crowd together to come in and watch the lord lighting candles and setting off fireworks, the town of Sukhothai is filled to the bursting point.

#### Text 4

In the middle of this town of Sukhothai there is a temple with golden statues of the Buddha, there is a statue eighteen cubits in height, there are large statues of the Buddha and medium size statues of the Buddha there are large temples and medium-size temples. There are Buddhist monks of more than five years serving, of ten years serving and among the latter those of a special degree of knowledge. West of this town of Sukhothai is the forest monastery, built by Lord Ram Khamhaeng for the venerable chief of the Buddhist order, knowing the whole of the Tipitaka more knowledgeable than any other monk in this domain, coming from the town of Si- Thammarat. In this forest monastery there is a rectangular gathering hall, large and beautiful, and an eighteen-cubit statue of the Buddha in standing position. East of this town of Sukhothai there is a temple with monks, there is a large lake, there are groves of areca and betel, upland and lowland rice fields, there are homesteads, large and small villages, groves of mango and tama-

rind that are a pleasure to look at North of this town of Sukhothai there is the market place, there is the statue of the Teacher, there are the towers, groves of coconuts and jackfruit, upland and low-land rice farms, homesteads, large and small villages. South of this town of Sukhothai there are monk's cells, temples and Buddhist monks, there is the dam, there are groves of coconuts and jackfruit, groves of mango and tamarind, there are mountain streams and there is the Sacred Kaphung, the divine spirit of the mountain who is more powerful than any other spirit in this realm. Whatever lord may rule this Sukhothai, if he properly pays respect with the right offerings, this town will endure, this town will prosper. If he does not properly pay respect with the right offerings, the spirit of the mountain will no longer protect it, and the realm will be lost.

### Text 5

In 1214 saka, a year of the dragon [1292 A.D.], the Lord Ram Khamhaeng, chief of the state of Sisachanalai and Sukhothai, who had planted these sugar-palm trees fourteen years before, commanded his craftsmen to carve a slab of stone and place it in the midst of these sugar-palm trees. On the day of the new moon, the eighth day of the waxing moon, the day of the full moon, and the eighth day of the waning moon [one of] the monks, *theras* or *ma-hatheras* goes up and sits on the stone slab to preach the *dhamma* to the throng of lay-people who observe the precepts. When it is not a day for preaching the *dhamma*, Lord Ram Khamhaeng, chief of the state of Sisachanalai and Sukhothai, goes up, sits on the stone slab, and lets the officials, lords and nobles discuss affairs of state with him. On the day of the new moon and the day of the full moon, when the white elephant named Ruchasi has been decked out with howdah and tassled head cloth and with customary gold on both tusks, Lord Ram Khamhaeng mounts him, rides away to the forest monastery to pay homage to the leader of the Buddhist order, and then returns. There is an inscription in the town of Chaliang, erected beside the [monument] Sirattanathat; there is an inscription in the cave called Phraram Cave, which is located on

the bank of the river Somphai; and there is an inscription in the Ratanathan cave. In this sugar-palm grove there are two pavilions, one named San Phramat, one named Phutthasan. This slab of stone is Manangsilabat. It is installed here for everyone to see.

## Epilogue

To the son of Lord Si'Inthrathit, to Lord Ram Khamhaeng, who was the lord of the country of Sisachanalai and Sukhothai, all the Ma, the Kao, the Lao, the Tai of the lands under the vault of heaven and the Tai along the U and the Khong came to show respect.

In 1207 saka, a year of the boar [1285 A.D.] he caused holy relics to be dug up so that everyone could see them. They were worshiped for a month and six days, then they were buried in the middle of Sisachanalai, and a *cetiya* [a pyramidal structure] was built on top of them which was finished in six years. A wall of rock enclosing the Great Relic Monument was built which was finished in three years.

Formerly these Tai letters did not exist. In 1205 saka, a year of the goat [1283 A.D.] Lord Ram Khamhaeng set his mind and his heart on devising these Tai letters. So these Tai letters exist because that lord devised them.

Lord Ram Khamhaeng was master and overlord over all the Tai. He was the teacher who taught all the Tai to understand merit and the *dhamma* rightly. Among men who live in the lands of the Tai, in knowledge and wisdom, in bravery and courage, in strength and energy, there was no one to equal him. He was able to subdue a throng of enemies who possessed large states and many elephants. The places whose submission he received on the east include Hot, Saluang, Songkhwae [=Phitsanulok] Lumbachai, Sakha, the bank of the [River] Khong, and Vientiane which is the furthest place. To the south Khonthi, Phrabang, Phraek, Suphannaphum, Ratchaburi, Phetchaburi, Sithammarat at the sea coast which is the furthest. To



the west the town of Chot, [one name illegible] and Hongsawadi, where the seashore is. To the north the town of Phrae, the town of Man, [one name illegible], Phlua, and beyond the River Khong the town Java [=Luang Prabang], which is the furthest place. He protected and reared all these people from all these places and all took pleasure in the *dhamma*.

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In 1833 Prince Mongkut found a remarkable inscription, reputedly written in the year 1292. When the text was finally deciphered it revealed the existence of an ideal state, ruled from the town of Sukhothai by a wise and devout king, named Ram Khamhaeng. This inscription has long been regarded as Thailand's most important historical document.

It came therefore as a shock when in the late 1980s two renowned scholars announced that they had proof that the inscription was a recent fabrication. From that moment on the authenticity of the inscription was fiercely debated, and up to the present there are some who consider the matter to be unresolved.

Terwiel, who has taken part in the debate from the outset, presents some novel ideas and interpretations as a contribution to the closure of the debate.

At the end of this booklet the inscription is presented line by line, transcribed and with a fresh translation.

Barend Jan Terwiel was born in 1941 in the Netherlands. He gained his PhD degree at the Australian National University (ANU) with a study of Religion in Rural Central Thailand. From 1992 until his retirement in 2007 he was Professor of Thai and Lao Languages and Literatures at Hamburg University. He wrote extensively on the Ethnography of Tai peoples as well as on the history of the Thai.

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