

INSCRIPTIONS AND ART HISTORY: THE CASE OF SUKHOTHAI'S INSCRIPTION II

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I think there comes a time in the life of every historian of ancient art when she or he desperately wishes for a knowledge of the languages of the period under consideration commensurate with his understanding of artistic and archaeological remains. As is well known, we as art historians are ever so confident of our ability to reconstruct the distant past through the examination, analysis, and comparison of art forms by means of which process broad, sweeping, evolutionary patterns of artistic development can be hypothesized. Without the written word, however--that is, without resort to inscriptional material--our work not only lacks the substance and texture of which true history is made, but specific dates on which to anchor our developmental trends cannot be ascertained with any accuracy. At certain times, when our research has not yielded the answers we have been seeking, it is easy to fantasize: "If we only knew the language all our problems would be solved!" Like sneaking a look at the answers at the end of a puzzle book, a look at the written record should provide the solutions our finite minds have been unable to conjecture from less directly communicated evidence.

As I am sure most linguists are aware, matters are not always so readily resolved. A case in point is Sukhothai's Inscription II, a pivotal document for the reconstruction of early Thai history. Because several passages relate in some detail the building or reconstruction of what have been recognized as important Buddhist monasteries, this inscription is of special interest to the historian of Thai art. Dating from the mid-fourteenth century,¹ Inscription II is the only extant written document from Sukhothai in the half-century or so following King Rām Kamhāeng's famous inscription of 1292. As

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such it provides information about an otherwise undocumented era that in good conscience cannot be ignored. However, interpretations of various passages in the text have posed serious problems for the historian and have precluded the evidence from being put to its fullest use.

One particularly troublesome matter for the historian of art is that, unlike some areas of the world where inscriptions are engraved directly upon architectural structures in order to preserve for posterity the particulars of the monuments' foundings, it has been customary in Thailand to inscribe texts on stelai in the vicinity of, but separate from, the buildings commemorated. Once these readily portable stones have been moved to other locales--and this has happened frequently without proper documentation of the original sites--a basic concern for the art historian becomes the identification of the structure about which the inscription supplies information.

Inscription II provides an extreme example of the controversy that can arise from attempted identifications. Discovered in 1887 at Wat ST Chum,² an imposing Buddhist temple just northwest of Sukhothai's city walls, the inscription describes in some detail the reconstruction of a large, tall stupa ("*Phra čhēdT sūng yai*") situated, it is explicitly stated, at the center of the city.³ Without regard to the particulars of the text, one would assume that the passage refers to the refurbishing of Wat ST Chum. However, the location of ST Chum outside the city walls, and the fact that the ST Chum complex centers upon a large, tall mondop rather than a stupa, eliminates the possibility of the inscription referring to the site where it was found. George Coedès, whose French translation of Inscription II appeared in 1924,⁴ hypothesized that the text refers to the stupa of Wat Mahāthāt,⁵ Sukhothai's largest and most important temple complex, situated almost exactly at the city center. This identification was, I believe, generally accepted until 1967 when A. B. Griswold, shortly before the publication of Prasert ṇa Nagara and his English translation, claimed that the stupa in question was not the Mahāthāt, nor was it located anywhere in Thailand.⁶ It was, he contended, actually the Mahāthūpa at Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka,⁷ where Inscription II tells us the Sukhodayan monk, ST Sathā, made an extended pilgrimage shortly before the inscription's execution.⁸ Later a Sinhalese identification was proposed by Mom Chao Chand Chirayu Rajani in 1976,⁹ and by Michael Vickery in 1978,¹⁰ although neither specifically linked the inscription with the Mahāthūpa. I have

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stated elsewhere my reasons for supporting Coedès's identification over those of Griswold, Prasert, Chand, and Vickery.¹¹ Here, in this study, only one aspect of the problem will be discussed. A peculiarity of Thai word usage holds the key to the solution.

One of the more explicit bits of information that Inscription II gives us about the large, tall stupa in the middle of the city is its height, both before and after its reconstruction.¹² As we all know, what words--let alone art--cannot prove, numbers most certainly can! The stupa whose vertical dimensions fit those detailed in the inscription is obviously the monument we are looking for.

In measuring stupas, however, a problem that immediately presents itself is the length of the *wā*, the unit of measure in which the inscriptional height is reported. Over the centuries there have existed in Asia, as in other areas of the world, varieties of different linear measurement systems, and taking into consideration the lesser variations that can occur among individual units within any one system, the probability of finding a measure to correlate inscriptional and archaeological evidence, if one sets one's mind to it, is far from remote. Thus the correlation might demonstrate nothing more than the persistence of twentieth-century scholars in tracking down minutiae of something less than earth-shaking consequence. With the consideration, however, that the possibility of finding *no* correlating measure for the Sukhothai Mahāthāt and the information in Inscription II would cast considerable doubt on that identification, the investigation was undertaken. Happily, the results proved more gratifying than I had anticipated.

The *wā* (or fathom) as we know it today is a Thai linear measure of about six feet.¹³ There is also evidence of its length in ancient times: Griswold compared the length of the innermost of Sukhothai's three ramparts with the dimensions given in Inscription I and determined that the length of the *wā* in the thirteenth century was about seventy-three inches,¹⁴ that is, essentially the measure we use today.

But, when we apply this measure to the *čhēdT* described in Inscription II, projecting 95 or 102 of the units as the inscription dictates, the result is a structure of about six hundred feet, that is, six times or so as high as the Mahāthāt and about twice the height of any monument in Sri Lanka.¹⁵ Unless we are willing to believe that the figures are a great exaggeration--an alternative I would not want to consider until all other possibilities are dismissed--we are left to assume one of two things: that there was once a mammoth *čhēdT* in

Thailand or Sri Lanka unlike anything known from historical or archaeological sources; or, more probably, that Inscription II's *wā* refers to a linear measure that differs from the *wā* used in Thailand today. Coedès, in his Mahāthāt identification, suggested that the unit referred to was actually the *sōk*, or cubit, a Thai measure of about eighteen inches.¹⁶ However, according to more recently published plans of the Mahāthāt, use of the *sōk* results in a structure still about one and one-half times the height of the present monument.

Griswold, for his Mahāthūpa identification, resorts to more complex reasoning. The unit of measure he suggests is the "architect's cubit," which according to Paranavitana was about thirty-one inches in the eighteenth century, and was perhaps used in the third century B.C. to measure the Mahāthūpa. To make this unit of measure fit the facts, Griswold suggests that the Mahāthūpa (originally 120 cubits high, as documented in the *Mahāvamsa*), had by the fourteenth century fallen to a height of 95 cubits, and after the restoration might well have measured the 102 "*wā*" documented in Inscription II—although he acknowledges that this height does not correspond with the Mahāthūpa's height either now or in ancient times.¹⁷

As well as I can make out from the Fine Arts Department plans of the monument, the height of the Mahāthāt today is about ninety-two feet.¹⁸ Taking the inscriptional height as ninety-five *wā*, (the seven-foot pinnacle added during the fourteenth-century reconstruction is no longer extant), it is necessary to hypothesize a linear measure of about 12.43 inches to make the epigraphic evidence fit. From a cursory examination of measurements taken of Sukhothai *wihān*, *bot*, and *chēdī*, it is easy to find multiples of 9, 18, 36, and 72 inches, conforming to the system of the 18-inch *sōk* (cubit) and the 72-inch *wā* (fathom) in use today and noted by Griswold in the Sukhothai ramparts. There is also inscriptional evidence for a *chēdī* at Sukhothai's Wat Sa Sī whose vertical and horizontal measurements conform to the inscriptional specifications by means of this standard set of measures.¹⁹ Eleanor Morón has noted that a cubit of slightly over 17 inches was utilized in the plan of Angkor Wat.²⁰

So how is one to justify the approximate one-foot measure required for the proposed Wat Mahāthāt-Phra Mahāthāt Luang identification? Two possibilities present themselves. One is the *pāt* or *pāda* ("foot"), whose length I have not been able to determine,

mentioned in a fifteenth-century Mon inscription from Burma.²¹ The second is the *wadhu vidhatti*, or “span” (a span equals half a cubit), part of a system of measures described by H. Parker and others as having been used from very early times in the construction of Buddhist monuments in Sri Lanka.²² In the more common systems of measure in use today, the 18-inch cubit is traditionally based on the length of the forearm, resulting in a span of 9 inches. In the Sinhalese system, however, the cubit (or *wadhu ryana*) is computed as twenty-four “fingers” or “joints” of about 1 inch, resulting in a span (the *wadhu vidhatti*) of about 12 inches. I have been informed by U Bokay, curator and conservator of the Archaeological Department, Pagan, Burma, that a cubit of four-times-six “fingers” is prescribed in a Pali text, the *Liḷāvatī*,²³ although I am not sure whether a span is mentioned as well. Parker, on the other hand, has reported that in the Pollonaruva, Sri Lanka, bricks of about 12 inches replaced the standard cubit bricks of the Anuradhapura period,²⁴ perhaps indicating the span’s more common use at that time. The span, in this case known as the *sugata vidhatti*, is cited in the Pali text, *Pātimokkha*, or *Rules of a Bhikkhu*, to specify the measurements for robes and housing.²⁵ This span has been calculated by modern Thai Buddhists at 13.3 inches.²⁶

An interesting source of confirmation for the length of the ancient cubit (and consequently the span) can be found in the heights of the *Phra Atthārat*, or eighteen-cubit Buddha images, in Thailand and Sri Lanka. According to chapter 20 of the *Buddhavamsa Attakathā*, the living Buddha was not the size of ordinary men, but eighteen cubits tall, and numerous, colossal, standing Buddhas in Burma, Sri Lanka, and Thailand portray him as such. According to U Bokay, any large Buddha image in Burma, no matter what its actual height so long as it is well above human size, is considered to be representative of the eighteen cubits.²⁷ In Sri Lanka and Thailand, on the other hand, measurements have in some cases proved to be more exact. In the Lankātilaka temple at Pollonaruva, there is a colossal image, described in the *Cūḷavamsa* as the size of the living Buddha,²⁸ which measures forty-one feet,²⁹ resulting in a cubit length (that is, one-eighteenth the total height) of 27 inches. Thus, its corresponding span length of 13.5 inches closely matches the 13.3-inch span suggested for the *Pātimokkha sugata vidhatti*. It is exciting that an almost identical height has been reported for the eighteen-cubit Buddha image mentioned in Rām Kamhāeng’s inscription and located at Sukhothai’s Wat Saphān Hin.³⁰

At Sukhothai's Wat Mahāthāt there are two eighteen-cubit Buddha images incorporating a cubit length (one-eighteenth the total height) of about 24.8 inches,³¹ the corresponding span length of 12.4 inches matching almost exactly the 12.43 unit we have suggested for the Mahāthāt *čhēdT*. Taking into consideration the possible sources of error--the small scale of the Fine Arts Department plan from which I took my measurements; a possible change in the height of the present-day *čhēdT* with its new spire; possible minor inaccuracies in my measurements of the Buddha images; whether the images should be measured to the top of the *ushnTsa* or the *ketu* (the latter was used here)--it seems almost certain that the surprisingly close correlation of the above figures should not be taken literally. And, while it is not surprising that the monk, ST Sathā, whose ardent efforts to adhere to the Buddhist principles are well documented in Inscription II,³² should have used a system of measures in conformity with Buddhist practice, the inscriptional use of *wā* to refer to the *wadhu vidhatti*, and perhaps to the *sugata vidhatti*, is not explained. However, it is my opinion that the (roughly) 12-inch span of the Mahāthāt Buddha images and the (roughly) 92-foot height of the present-day Mahāthāt *čhēdT* indicate that the same span was used to provide the 95-*wā* height recorded in Inscription II. It is possible, then, to use the inscriptional evidence in conjunction with other considerations to support the identification of Inscription II's large tall *čhēdT* with the stupa of the Sukhothai Mahāthāt.

If the path by which this conclusion has been reached appears something less than straightforward, it also can be suggested that such unavoidable circumlocution--while undeniably bothersome if only a final solution is sought--sometimes yields rewards of its own. Happily, art history and epigraphy, despite the difficulties inherent in the correlation of diversely expressed data, can be successfully combined for the deliverance of both sought-after and unanticipated answers.

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Notes

1. A. B. Griswold and Prasert na Nagara, "Addendum to Epigraphic and Historical Studies, No. 10," *Journal of the Siam Society* 61, no. 1 (1973): 179, 180.
2. George Coedès, *Recueil des Inscriptions du Siam: Première Partie: Inscriptions de Sukhodaya* (Bangkok: Bangkok Times Press, 1924), 177.
3. A. B. Griswold and Prasert na Nagara, "Epigraphic and Historical Studies, No. 10: King Lōdaiya of Sukhodaya and his Contemporaries," *Journal of the Siam Society* 60, no. 1 (1972): 122.
4. Coedès, *Recueil*, 62–75.
5. *Ibid.*, 51.
6. A. B. Griswold, *Towards a History of Sukhodaya Art* (Bangkok: Fine Arts Department, 1967), 61.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Griswold and Prasert, "Epigraphic and Historical Studies, No. 10," 125 and *passim*.
9. Mom Chao Chand Chirayu Rajani, *Guide Through the Inscriptions of Sukhothai*, Southeast Asian Studies Working Papers, no. 9 (Honolulu: University of Hawaii at Honolulu, Center for Asian and Pacific Studies, 1976), 22.
10. Michael Vickery, "A Guide Through Some Recent Sukhothai Historiography," *Journal of the Siam Society* 66, no. 2 (1978): 211, 212.
11. Betty Gosling, "Once More Inscription II: An Art Historian's View," *Journal of the Siam Society* 69, nos. 1, 2 (1981): 13–42.
12. Griswold and Prasert, "Epigraphic and Historical Studies, No. 10," 121.
13. Mary R. Haas, *Thai-English Student's Dictionary* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1964), 502. According to George McFarland, *Thai-English Dictionary* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1944), 767, the *wā* equals two meters.
14. Griswold, *Towards a History*, 8. According to Griswold, 1.86

meters. In the present study, all measurements are given in feet and inches, which, unlike the modern metric system, are relatable to measures used in ancient times.

15. The tallest structure in Sri Lanka is the Jetavana Dagoba, which measures 232 feet in its present ruinous condition. See S. Paranavitana, *Sinhalayo* (Colombo: Lake House Publishers, 1967), 20.
16. Coedès, *Recueil*, 69.
17. Griswold and Prasert, "Epigraphic and Historical Studies, No. 10," 121.
18. Sinlapakon, *Rāṅgān kān samruat lae khut tāeng būrana bōrānawattthu satthān mūang kao Sukhothai* (Bangkok: Sinlapakon, 1969).
19. A. B. Griswold and Prasert ṇa Nagara, "EHS No. 11, Part II: The Epigraphy of Mahādharmaṛājā I of Sukhodaya," *Journal of the Siam Society* 61, no. 2 (1973): 128.
20. Eleanor Morón, "Configurations of Time and Space at Angkor Wat," *Studies in Indo-Asian Art and Culture* 5 (1977): 217–67.
21. H. L. Shorto, *A Dictionary of the Mon Inscriptions from the Sixth to the Sixteenth Centuries*, London Oriental Series, vol. 24 (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 223.
22. H. Parker, *Ancient Ceylon* (London: Luzac and Co., 1909), 338–40.
23. Personal communication, 1980.
24. Parker, *Ancient Ceylon*, 346.
25. *The Pātimokkha, 227 Fundamental Rules of a Bhikku*, translated by Ven. Nanamoli Thera (Bangkok: Social Science Association Press of Thailand, 1966), 22–24, 68–70.
26. *Ibid.*, 114.
27. U. Bokay, personal communication, 1980.
28. *Cūḷavaṃsa*, translated by Wilhelm Geiger (London: The Pali Text Society, 1973), sec. 78, p. 54.
29. H. C. P. Bell, *Archaeological Survey of Ceylon* (Colombo: Ceylon Government Press, 1910–11), 36.

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30. M. C. Subhadradis Diskul, *Sukhothai Art* (Bangkok: Cultural Committee of the Thailand National Commission for UNESCO, [1979]), 87.
31. Measured, February 1980. Calculated by means of multiplying the distance between viewer and base of image by tangent of angle between viewer and top of image.
32. Griswold and Prasert, "Epigraphic and Historical Studies, No. 10," 113ff.

