

THE ANCIENT SETTLEMENTS OF SUKHOTHAI

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In general the study of the ancient history of Thailand (that is, events from the thirteenth century A.D. onward) relies mainly on epigraphical, iconographical, and architectural sources, with a limited reference to local chronicles and myths. These resources, although admittedly inadequate in many respects, correspond very well with the myth of the Thai race migrating to Thailand from southern China. As a result, Thai history is commonly viewed as starting with the establishment of the first capital of Sukhothai by the Phra Ruang family sometime during the thirteenth century A.D. Sukhothai became an independent Thai state, shrugging off the Khmer yoke; shortly, in the reign of King Ram Kamhaeng, it extended its hegemony as far south as the Malay Peninsula. However, such a reconstruction of Thai history contradicts the fact that at the time there already existed several independent states, namely, Nakhon Sri Thammarat, Ayutthaya, Suparnabhum, and Lan Na, some of which outlived Sukhothai.

Resolution of this contradiction requires not only an investigation of the nature of the Thai state and its interstate relationships, but also a thorough study of its geopolitical position and physical structure, which may enable one to understand its political structure. This article, focussing on the study of ancient settlements, is an attempt to bring to light the composition of the state of Sukhothai (that is, its cities and towns) and to see how these settlements interacted to keep the state alive or to cause its decline. Various ancient sites were mapped, surveyed, and studied to aid in understanding their dates and physical structures. In addition, documentary sources such as inscriptions, chronicles, and local myths were consulted to help place these ancient settlements into a historical perspective.

Fieldwork Study

By consulting Sukhothai inscriptions I was able to designate the location of the state of Sukhothai in the lower basins of the rivers Ping, Yom, and Nan, that is, on the north of the Chao Phraya delta in the modern provinces of Nakhon Sawan, Pitchit, Kampaeng Phet, Pitsanulok, Sukhothai, Tak, Uttaradit, and Phetchabun. Although it is drained by three big rivers and their tributaries, this region is not fertile owing to the poor quality of its soils and the fluctuation of the rainy season. Sometimes rain comes so heavily that it causes inundation, which damages paddy crops and other agricultural products. By ground survey, with the help of aerial photographs, I have been able to identify the sites of thirty-eight moated settlements in the Sukhothai region. These sites have either irregular or regular shapes. They vary in size and structure from 350 meters in diameter (sites with a few religious monuments and traces of ponds and irrigation dykes) to over 1,500 meters in diameter (settlements with triple walls, large numbers of religious monuments, and networks of roads, irrigation channels, and ponds both large and small).

Archaeological monuments, art objects, and inscription stones found at these sites indicate that urban settlements in this region developed sometime in the thirteenth century A.D. Unlike the settlements of the Chao Phraya delta and the northeast, which date back to the seventh century A.D., differences in the forms of the Sukhothai ruins cannot be used as a criterion to indicate which sites antedate the others. However, it appears that the oldest settlements are often surrounded with triple earthen walls, in contrast to those with a single brick or laterite wall that are likely to have appeared sometime during the late fifteenth century. With the exception of the city of Sukhothai, which is regularly oriented, the irregular, triple-walled sites resemble many ancient settlements in the Chiangmai and Chiangrai valleys in the north. As for the peculiarity of the city of Sukhothai, its geometrical plan was no doubt heavily influenced by the Khmer-type settlements of the northeast.

Religious monuments and irrigation structures found in the settlements seem to indicate to a certain extent the hierarchy of their sociopolitical status and this can be used to establish three grades of settlements. The first type includes small-sized settlements, with or

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without traces of religious monuments; the second type is larger, and is dotted with ruins of big religious monuments, ponds, irrigation bunds, and causeways; the third type is larger still, and is well defined by moats and walls and an infrastructure network of irrigation dykes, large and small ponds, and roads to connect the site with other communities. Above all, this the third kind of settlement is associated with prominent religious monuments, within and without the enclosed area. Based on evidence in the stone inscriptions and local chronicles, I identify the first kind of Sukhothai settlement with the *muang*, or town, and the third kind with the *nakhon*, or city. Due to the limits of space and time here, I will confine myself to delineating the structure of the *nakhon*, or city.

Structurally, the sociopolitical status of the Sukhothai cities is marked first of all by two prominent types of religious monuments. The first type was built inside the city and will be called here the *nagara-wasi wat*, or city monastery. Such monasteries are characterized by a complex of religious monuments and buildings such as the stupas and *vihara* surrounded by walls and moats. Like the Khmer cities in the northeast, which are marked by the existence of either Hindu or Mahayana Buddhist *prasat* (towers) in the middle of the city, the most prominent and sacred stupa (*phra mahadhatu*, or the Relics of the Buddha) is found in the middle of the complex. Here was the center of the universe and the foci of sacredness, where the royal rituals were performed, and for long-lasting cities this stupa became an important, regional, pilgrimage site. The importance of the stupa of *phra mahadhatu*, which served to mark the social status of the city, is often emphasized not only in the Sukhothai inscriptions but in the poems and chronicles of Lan Na and Ayutthaya in the fifteenth century. However, the importance of the *nagara-wasi wat* was not centered on the *wat* alone but also extended to other *wat* built by the kings or rulers of the later periods. Probably the long existence of the city is attested to by the series of these *nagara-wasi wat*.

The second type of prominent religious monument that served to mark the sociocultural significance of the city are large *wat* located outside the city wall. These are usually of two types: (1) *aranya-wasi wat*, or monasteries of the forest-dwelling monks, the abode of the learned or high-ranking monks; and (2) the *wat* of the sacred object, notably the *wat* that enshrined the Buddha's Footprint, which is as a rule located on top of a small hill near the city. Like the *nagara-wasi wat*, the numbers of these *wat* vary according to the status and

longevity of the city. In addition, large and important sites are often studded with ruins of lesser *wat* three to five kilometers from the city. These are the *kam-wasi wat*, or village monasteries, and each serves to mark the center of a village community.

Apart from the *wat* and sacred sites already mentioned, the Sukhothai cities seem to possess unequal infrastructures in terms of irrigation works and communication systems. The extent of these systems seems to depend on the location of a particular city and its environment. Upland cities located far from the main river and other water resources are likely to be equipped with a sophisticated network of causeways, irrigation channels, and ponds, while those situated near a waterway are not so equipped. The ancient city of Sukhothai can be cited as a case in point. It is located on the border of an upland that stretches from a mountain range in the southwest to the Yom River about twelve kilometers to the east. Although there exist in this area some small rivers and streams, they seem to have been used as runoff channels rather than serving to detain or spread water to needed areas. Because of this, the city of Sukhothai is characterized by a large-scale irrigation network that makes its city plan unique and extraordinary compared with those of contemporary cities elsewhere. Often this causes some misunderstanding among historians who, after a superficial examination of the city plan, put forward the idea that Sukhothai was a hydraulic city. From my close observation of the city of Sukhothai, I would argue that its intricate irrigation network was not built for agriculture but mainly for trapping and storing water for consumption throughout the year. This, in my view, explains why Sukhothai is dotted with large numbers of big and small ponds.

The irrigation works for paddy cultivation are limited to a few areas along the Mae Lam Pan River to the north and east of the city. One area, which I will call the *na-luang*, or the royal paddy field, is characterized by a large rectangular enclosure fenced by earthen bunds and equipped with *fai* (weir) and *muang* (irrigation channels) from the Mae Lam Pan River. The presence of such a structure is by no means an indication of large-scale paddy cultivation, but was used merely to provide surplus food for the inhabitants and ensure their survival in times of drought.

Other interesting earthworks found among the settlements of Sukhothai are remains of ancient causeways. Formerly only the Phra Ruang Road, which links the cities of Kampaeng Phet, Sukhothai, and

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Sri Satchanalai, was widely known. During the course of my survey many more causeways have been discovered. They did not function only as a communication system, as do the roads and highways of the present day, but they also served as irrigation channels, draining or *spreading water from one place to another*. Such a function is illustrated clearly in an inscription found at Kampaeng Phet, which mentions a restoration of the *thor-pu-phraya Ruang* (the irrigation dyke and channel) that sent water from Kampaeng Phet to the paddy fields in the town of Bang Phan. Again, such irrigation works were meant to support the subsistence production of the towns and villages located in dry areas.

Historical Cities

After studying all the fieldwork data and documentary evidence, I have developed a tentative proposition concerning the emergence and decline of the state of Sukhothai, as follows.

Early in the late twelfth century A.D. the lower basins of the rivers Ping, Yom, and Nan were underpopulated due to poor soil and climate. But, as these areas were located on the trade route between the Me Khong and the Salween river basins, and between the old states of Haripunjaya in the north and Lavo in the central plain, two towns about fifty kilometers apart developed sometime during the thirteenth century on the west bank of the Yom River. These were Chalieng and Sukhothai. Evidence from their archeological monuments and objects leads me to believe that these towns were culturally and probably politically linked with the states of Lavo in the Chao Phraya delta and Angkor in Cambodia. According to inscriptions and myths, additional people, particularly from the Me Khong basin, migrated to this region, where they seem to have erected their villages and towns along the trade route. Finally, with some encouragement from the Khmer of Angkor, the small state of Sukhothai was formed under the leadership of the Phra Ruang family. According to the Sukhothai Inscription No. 2, four settlements (*nakhon*) were established along the rivers Yom and Nan. The first two towns, Sukhothai and Chalieng (later known as Sri Satchanalai), were rebuilt and elevated to the status of city. The other two, Sra Luang and Song Kwae, were located on the bank of the Nan River. The inscription mentions that the stupas of *phra-mahadhatu* were built in the cities. The state was united and consolidated in the reign

of King Ram Kamhaeng, of the Phra Ruang family, during the late thirteenth century. This king, through his personal prowess, not only brought under his control the stubborn rulers of the cities and towns within his own state, but also extended his political power to other states nearby. At the same time he established friendships with such powerful states as Nakhon Sri Thammarat, Ayutthaya, Lan Na, and Angkor. Shortly after the death of Ram Kamhaeng, the state of Sukhothai began to decline. Thereafter, semi-independent cities and towns were ruled by descendants of the Phra Ruang family who competed for power.

In the middle of the fourteenth century Sukhothai was united again under King Mahadhammaraja Lithai, who built more cities and towns along the Ping River in the provinces of Kampaeng Phet and Nakhon Sawan. The inscriptions mention that the king had the stupa of *phra-mahadhatu* built in the city of Nakhon Chum and the Buddha's Footprint erected on the mountain close to the towns of Muang Bang Phan and Muang Phra Bang. It was Lithai who initiated the custom of establishing the Buddha's Footprint as a sacred place outside the walls in addition to the stupa of *phra-mahadhatu* in the city. As a result the Buddha's Footprint became another status symbol of important towns and cities. At Sukhothai, the king had the Buddha's Footprint built on Khao Phra Bat Yai, a small hill to the southwest of the city, and he brought people from various conquered areas to worship there. In time more cities were established and reestablished all over the state and these were studded with the stupa of *phra-mahadhatu* in the form of a lotus pagoda.

Later in the reign of King Lithai, an attempt to extend his political power over some countries in the east failed. He was blocked by King Ramathibodi I (King U Thong) of Ayutthaya who sent his army to capture the city of Song Kwae. Thus humiliated, Lithai had to beg for the return of the city. It is likely that by this time King Lithai was forced to remain in Song Kwae. Sukhothai was ruled by his sister, who later became a consort of Pha Ngua, U Thong's brother-in-law and general. This man, who was later crowned King Baromrajathiraj I of Ayutthaya, initiated a policy to divide Sukhothai into two halves. He abandoned King Lithai's city of Nakhon Chum and to replace it established Cha Kangrao, which was later called Kampaeng Phet, on the opposite bank of the Ping River. He had his stepson, Yanadit, probably the son of King Lithai's sister by her former husband, appointed as the ruler of Cha Kangrao. Cha Kangrao became a rival of Sukhothai and the two cities were often in conflict or at war.

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Sukhothai often invaded and captured Cha Kangrao, which provoked Baromraja (Baromrajathiraj I) to lead his army to Sukhothai to free his vassal city. The war between Baromraja and Sukhothai was well recorded in the Chronicle of Ayutthaya.

According to its inscriptions, Sukhothai rose to power again under King Mahadharmaraja III who had great monasteries like Wat Asokaram and Wat Sri Pichitraram built as landmarks in the city. But the resurgence seems to have been a short one, for after 1412 the state of Sukhothai came again under the sway of the ruler of Kampaeng Phet, the nephew of King Baromrajathiraj I of Ayutthaya. The state was broken into principalities and the king of Sukhothai moved to Song Kwae, while Kampaeng Phet became the dominant city of the region. With the ascension of Baromrajathiraj's nephew, Nakrindhraraja, to the throne of Ayutthaya, the whole Sukhothai country was brought under the rule of Ayutthaya. At the death of King Mahadharmaraja IV, who was regarded as the last king of Sukhothai at Song Kwae, Nakrindhraraja appointed his third son, Chao Sam Phraya, as ruler of Song Kwae. It is likely that during this period Nakrindhraraja had pottery kilns set up at Sukhothai and Sri Satchanalai (by this time known as Sawankalok) for large-scale export production. This king was, according to many myths and folktales, the Phra Ruang who went to China and brought the Chinese potters to Thailand.

I would say that by the end of the fifteenth century A.D. the city of Sukhothai was no longer the principal city, having been replaced by Kampaeng Phet on the Ping and Song Kwae on the Nan River. It remained for a little while a religious town and industrial site serving Ayutthaya, then faded away sometime in the sixteenth century. The settlement destined to survive as the principal city of the region was Song Kwae, which was later rebuilt and enlarged by King Trailok, Nakrindhraraja's grandson, and came to occupy both banks of the Nan River. But by this time it was known by a new name, Pitsanulok.

