

CHAPTER 8

THE RAM KHAMHAENG INSCRIPTION: LACUNAE AND RECONSTRUCTIONS

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The Sequential Model

It is generally accepted that the first modern scholarly reading of the Ram Khamhaeng inscription was made by C.B. Bradley in 1909.¹ Bradley himself began his lengthy study of the inscription with some scathing comments on earlier attempts to understand the inscription. The transcript made by the 1855 Commission (of which only the first fourteen lines had been published, in 1857)² he calls “an indifferent pen-sketch.” Apparently he had not seen the whole transcript, a copy of which had been presented to the French envoy in 1856.³ What Bastian had published in 1865 as a “translation” Bradley quite rightly dismissed as being only “a first sketch, in which the writer [Bastian] reports such impressions of the drift and import of the writing as he was able to get from Siamese sources.”

During the last two decades of the nineteenth century Father Schmitt had dominated the field of Ram Khamhaeng studies by publishing both a copy of the text and a translation.⁴ The plates of the text published by Père Schmitt are dismissed by Bradley in the following manner:

The text is neither a facsimile nor a tracing, nor a rendering of it by any method of accurate reproduction. What the author supposed to be found of the stone, and what he supplied from conjecture, are both set down alike in coarse black letters apparently drawn with a brush.

Words still plainly to be read on the stone reappear strangely, or even absurdly, transformed.⁵

Schmitt's most recent translation, as published in the papers of the Mission Pavie was, according to Bradley, even worse than the earlier attempts in that it had "everywhere been retouched, and that too, it would seem, without reference to the original, but to some inaccurate transcript."⁶

Bradley's dismissive comments on all nineteenth - century attempts to publish the text of the inscription have apparently had a profound influence upon later scholars, for these efforts have not, to our knowledge, been examined in detail since.

After Bradley came further revisions by G. Coedès,⁷ followed by relatively minor revisions published by the Department of Fine Arts,⁸ Griswold and Prasert na Nagara⁹ and a committee of Chulalongkorn University.¹⁰

Griswold and Prasert have given an outline of the different stages of the decipherment, and their article is magnificently illustrated with reproductions of Bowring's specimen, the 1855 transcript and Schmitt's plates. They also made a comparison of translations by juxtaposing four sample paragraphs, one from each face, as they were rendered on subsequent occasions during the nineteenth and early twentieth century. These samples demonstrate a rapid advance in understanding the view that the readings of the Ramkhamhaeng inscription can be regarded as a series of gradual improvements, and that the more recently published versions are invariably the more authoritative. As a result of this model of continually-ameliorated versions, the earliest readings have been vested with an aura of dilettantism and are seen as quaint attempts purely of antiquarian interest.

The Nineteenth Century Transcripts

The 1855 transcript which Bradley had summarily dismissed as "an indifferent pen - sketch," was more judiciously appraised by Griswold and Prasert na Nagara. Although admittedly it contained several dozen false readings — mostly mistakes re-

sulting from making the wrong choice between two letters that look much alike in Ramkhamhaeng's script, Griswold and Prasert point out that it must be seen as a pioneering work and that therefore we ought to feel less inclined to blame the first transcribers for their mistakes and should be more ready to praise them for accomplishing as much as they did. Griswold and Prasert do not venture to guess the extent of that accomplishment, and express reservation in noting that it is "uncertain how much progress they [the transcribers] had made in understanding the text."¹¹ However, a careful reading of the 1855 transcript reveals that the accomplishment may have been greater than has hitherto been suspected.

As an example of what a remarkable document the 1855 Committee produced it may be noted that its members actually read on Face 2 of the inscription between lines 18 and 19 a word that had been inserted in much smaller letters: the word *klong*, "drum" had apparently inadvertently been left out during the original incision. The 1855 Committee reproduced the word as *kong* and spelled it with a *mai tho* tone-marker, to make the word "noisy", and transcribed it as an integral part of the text of line 18, between *kham* and *duai*, to make an intelligible sentence. The inserted word did not occur on Schmitt's Plate of Face 2, and in 1909 it also escaped Bradley's notice. Later scholars, having noted that something was subscribed, argued as to whether it ought to be read *kloy*, "together" or *klong*, "drum," and the latter view seems to have won most supporters. Throughout the twentieth century debate on the meaning of the subscribed word it seems to have escaped notice that in 1855 the word was noticed, read, and placed in the appropriate text location. Moreover, it was read with the final consonant which is now accepted by most modern scholars. This may be regarded as strong proof that the mid-nineteenth century effort was the result of careful observation combined with a good level of understanding.

Some of what modern epigraphers would dismiss as "mistakes in reading" may actually represent deliberate spelling changes. Thus in the 1855 transcript the archaic spelling of the

word *to*, “to engage [in a duel],” was changed from the single consonant *to - patak* to nineteenth century spelling by using the *to-taw* consonant and adding both vowel and tone marker. Similarly *ton tan*, “the sugar palm,” is changed to *ton tal*, and *araiyik* to *aranyik*, no doubt in order to assist contemporary readers’ understanding of the text. What in the twentieth century are scornfully dismissed as inaccuracies may upon closer inspection reveal that members of the mid-nineteenth century Committee had such a good understanding of the meaning that they felt sufficiently confident to transcribe it in a more readable form.

Schmitt’s plates must be regarded as a separate, independent nineteenth century transcript of the inscription, and they are obviously an artist’s effort to render an eminently legible text, closely following the style and shape of the original. While it is superior in spelling and spacing of letters, in some instances it is inferior to the 1855 transcript. For example, on Face 2, line 24, Schmitt’s Plate shows a word *faek*, which Bradley rightly pointed out to be a mistake. It ought to have been read as *taek*, “to burst.” The proper reading *taek* was not, strictly speaking, established for the first time by Bradley; it can already be found in the 1855 transcript.

These examples serve to draw notice to the fact that the nineteenth century transcripts are valuable documents and that they deserve to be compared with more recent transcripts.

The Study of Lacunae

The most striking difference between the nineteenth century attempts and those of Bradley and his successors is in the manner in which textual lacunae are handled. In the 1855 transcript the text is presented without any gaps, and all sentences are presented as following each other without a single interruption. Schmitt’s plates show only three places where damage on the stone has made part of the text illegible. Everywhere else it presents a full text as if the stone were undam-

aged. In contrast, Bradley's transcript indicates ninety-nine instances where the text was illegible and where it was conjecturally reconstructed or had to be left blank.

This remarkable difference reflects the changing goals of the transcribers. The 1855 Committee was primarily interested in establishing the meaning of the sentences, and illegible sections were regarded as obstacles to their goal that had to be eliminated by reconstructing the text. The artists who made the replica that formed the basis for Schmitt's plates were somewhat more restrained in that they worked from a rubbing, which discouraged the adoption of a modernised spelling and, where text had to be reconstructed, forced them to fit these in specific gaps. Bradley, on the other hand, was intent on presenting himself as the harbinger of a fresh scholarly approach. His audience was supplied with an extensive report on difficulties encountered and solutions proffered. Bradley's persistent indication of which letters were no longer legible may be seen as part of the new scientific approach in Thai history, so clearly reflected in the works of Prince Damrong.

When it is understood why nineteenth century transcripts tended to minimise the indication of lacunae, the manner in which such gaps in the text were filled is not without interest. In the first place, nineteenth century reconstructions may provide a means for judging the level of understanding and in some cases the degree of inventiveness on the part of those who constituted or rewrote the text.

A second reason for studying the different solutions presented over time is the consideration that there is a possibility that the number of lacunae increased between 1855 and 1909; certain parts of the stone may have been easier to read during King Mongkut's reign than in the twentieth century. This possibility is indicated by Bradley himself when he reported on the state of preservation of the stone:

The stone has suffered somewhat from exposure, and much more from outrageous mishandling — the latter incurred, so far as one can judge, chiefly during its

transportation from the north. It has apparently been dragged along bodily over rock or grit, or prised about with crowbars, so that most parts of its surface are disfigured by long lines or sweeps of scratches. Besides this there are some channels and small areas that have been excavated by drip of water. The edge at points has suffered a smooth abrasion, no doubt caused by its use as whetstone for sharpening knives. There is abundant evidence also of such things as recent dripping of oil and melted candle wax upon the stone, and of the application of various inks and other pigments to the surface, presumably in attempts to secure reproductions of the inscription.¹²

Bradley mentions in his article that the inscription was far too much exposed to the weather, to accidents and to rough handling by unscrupulous persons. Members of the public passed almost within arm's length without the slightest barrier interposed. He also notes that anybody who had watched the *handling of recent archaeological finds would simply stand aghast.*

Bradley's comments on the relatively exposed position and the dangerous manner of handling unique documents raises the question whether some of the damage may not have been caused after the arrival of the inscription in the Thai capital. It is known that the inscription was moved at least twice before Bradley had the chance to examine it, and there were thus several moments when it was in serious danger of being further damaged. It was therefore in a better condition, so that certain letters which were not visible to Bradley and succeeding scholars, may have been readable at the time of the first transcript.

Therefore a secondary goal of this study of how lacunae were filled is to find cases where the 1855 transcript may be regarded as improvements upon twentieth century readings. Such cases could be interpreted as evidence indicating the better condition of the inscription at the time it was first transcribed.

Bradley was the first to record a large number of lacunae and to note every instance where the text had to be established conjecturally.¹³ The 1909 transliteration will therefore be taken

as the basis for comparison with earlier transcripts. First a list was made of all places where Bradley could not read the stone. Each item on this list was compared with the nineteenth century transcripts, and in some instances with more recently published versions of the four faces of the pillar. Often there is *complete accord among all who read the text, but occasionally* some interesting discrepancies can be noted.

The illegible segments are discussed sequentially, beginning with Face 1, line 1, and ending with the last line of Face 4. In accordance with modern readings, but unlike Schmitt's and Bradley's transcripts, each face is numbered anew.

Face 1

The first lacuna occurs at the beginning of line 7 and falls at the end of a sentence. In 1909 the reconstruction of the concluding part of this sentence caused difficulties. Bradley reported: "a trace of a part of its [the letter's] right hand stroke still remains. Whatever it was, it cannot be a part of the following word." He objected to Schmitt's assumption that it might have been the character "ng", for "this made a word of no intelligible sense."¹⁴ Bradley also rejected the repetition sign that had been assumed in another transcription. Unable to solve this problem, Bradley left the space blank but then — rather inconsistently — proceeded as if the sentence ended on line 6, with the word *chae* which he took to mean "cowering." This unsatisfactory situation of having noted that once there had been something following *chae*, but translating as if there were not, remained until the 1954 *Prachum Silacharu'k* reading, where the missing letter was assumed to have been "n" and the concluding word of the sentence was taken to have been *chaen*, "quickly." This new reading has since been accepted in all authoritative publications.

What appears to have escaped notice is that the 1855 reading, as published in Bowring's excerpt and clearly visible in the document held in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, already

shows the reading *chaen*. This indicates that Bradley does not seem to have taken the trouble to read the “specimen,” and also proves that the 1855 transcript is well worth consulting. The occurrence of *chaen* in 1855 may be seen as support for the idea that between 1855 and 1909 the legibility of this part of the stone had deteriorated.

The lacuna at the beginning of line 8 was read by Bradley as *chang*, “elephant,” as part of the expression *to chang* meaning “to fight an elephant duel,” and all modern scholars have followed suit. Both nineteenth century transcripts already give the word *chang*.

The lacuna at the beginning of line 18, where according to Bradley and his successors there ought to be a letter “k” with a *nikhahit* sign¹⁵ above to form the word *klom*, was misread by Schmitt as “ph,” part of a word *phonlamu’ang*. Going back to the 1855 transcript, however, reveals that the first letter was then read as “k,” fully in accordance with the modern reading. Since the 1855 transcript does not have the *nikhahit* sign, and the meaning of the passage must therefore have been unclear, it may be concluded that in the mid - nineteenth century the first letter of line 18 was still legible, but that it had been obliterated by 1909.

At the beginning of line 19 Bradley reconstructs the verb *mi*, part of what became the most famous and undoubtedly the most often quoted sentence of the whole inscription: *nai nam mi pla, nai na mi khaw*. This agrees with Schmitt’s plate of Face 1, but in 1855 the Committee’s transcribed: *nai nam **thang** pla, nai na mi khaw*. This explains Bastian’s translation: “The waters are **full of** fish, in the field grows rice.”¹⁶ There can be little doubt that the reconstruction with the word *mi* makes for a grammatically more satisfactory couplet of phrases, and since this use of the word *thang* seems to be quite irregular when compared with all other places where it occurs in Sukhothai inscriptions, it is most unlikely that the word *thang* was the original. The 1855 transcribers seem to have come upon the word *thang* by pure guesswork and this may be taken as evidence that in 1855 this part of the stone already was illegible.

At the beginning of line 20 Bradley's reconstructed vowel sign accords with the earlier transcripts, and his reading of the final word of that line as *kh[r]ai* is in accordance with Schmitt's plate of Face 1. In lines 20 and 21 the words *khrai chak* occur no less than three times, and in 1855 the Committee — probably accidentally — dropped five words of the text by jumping from one *khrai chak* to the next, so that it is impossible to determine whether or not the final letter of line 20 had been recognised as being the letter "r."

Bradley's next nine reconstructions of Face 1, which are at present all accepted as standard readings, were all clearly identified by the 1855 Committee. In 1855 the eighth letter of line 31 was taken to be an "l," to form the word "*lu'ak*," to choose, which made for a rather garbled sentence. It was only when Bradley thought to add a small side stroke to change the "l" into an "s," that the expression *kha su'k kha su'a* was perceived, thus solving problems of understanding. The remaining two lacunae, the first letter of line 34 and the fifth letter of the last line, were convincingly identified in 1855 as "kh" and "n" respectively.

Face 2

Bradley's reconstitutions in the first five lines are obvious and straightforward in the textual context. They agree fully with the 1855 transcript, but it is hard to decide whether this is because the stone was then easier to read, or because Bradley used the same process of reasoning.

The first word of the sixth line, however, caused Bradley much trouble, and he left it as a gap in transliteration. In a footnote he notes that in all his earlier attempts to read it, the word appeared hopelessly lost in the corrosion of the surface of the stone, however, a careful "rub" revealed traces which were completely lost to the eye and resulted in the word *klang*. Bradley's discovery was already anticipated in the 1855 Committee reading, and also can be found in Schmitt's copy. The word *klang* is not a particularly obvious choice in the sentence, and the fact that it was used in earlier readings may therefore be

taken as evidence that half a century prior to Bradley's attempts this part of the inscription still was legible.

The lacuna at the beginning of line 7 has not been filled by Bradley or his successors. Both nineteenth century transcripts had filled this spot with the word *sai*, "clear, transparent," which Bradley rejected because it did not fit the context. It is possible that in 1855 the members of the Committee simply guessed that the word was *sai*, prompted by the fact that the same word had occurred earlier in the sentence. However, the fact that the text immediately above had been legible in 1855 but had caused great trouble to Bradley, suggests the possibility that a word vaguely like *sai* had still been visible in 1855. The obvious candidate would be the auxiliary verb *dai*, "be able to," which would form an appropriate end to the final clause of line 6.

The beginning of line 8 also caused Bradley much trouble. He explains that fragmentary traces at the beginning of the line suggest the letters *pur* with a faint line which might be part of a letter "ai," making the word following *dai*. The 1855 transcript has *pu...dai*, with what looks like a *wisanchani* sign¹⁷ in the place of the letter "r." Schmitt's mistranslation of "trois faubourgs" should not obscure the fact that the copy of his transcript gives all letters in the manner modern scholars have reconstructed. The translation of *tripur* as "wall" was not understood until it was found in the inscription of Wat Chiang Man. For the present purposes it suffices to note that in the nineteenth century the upper left side of Face 2, where in places the letters could hardly be guessed from the context, was read with remarkable accuracy.

Bradley's reconstructions in the following six lines consist simply of replacing single letters to make up for damage apparently once caused by dripping water. In all these cases the reconstructed text agrees with that of 1855.

However, at the beginning of line 16 the transcript of 1855 shows the letter "ng," the ending of the word *ong*. In the Schmitt plate this was changed to *oi*, "to bestow," a reading also adopted by Bradley and his successors. This discrepancy among the two

nineteenth century transcripts indicates that this part of the stone was already damaged in 1855.

Bradley's reconstructions in the following ten lines agree with the earlier transcripts, with two minor exceptions. In line 21 there is a small, but subtle, difference. While there is agreement as to the meaning of the reconstituted word "doorway," the nineteenth century transcripts spell it differently from Bradley and his successors. What Bradley considered to have been *pak patu* (emphasis added) was presented in the earlier versions as *pak tu*.¹⁸ It is difficult to choose between the two spellings. In favour of the nineteenth century transcripts, *pak tu* may be seen as the now obsolete form of "doorway" which was contracted to form the word *patu*, (and later "Cambodianised" to *pratu*),¹⁹ and that therefore *pak patu* is strictly speaking a pleonasm. In favour of Bradley's reconstruction, however, is the fact that on Face 1 the compound is written out, quite legibly, in full.²⁰

The second exception is to be found in line 22, where Bradley recognised the expression *phaw thie[n]*, "to light candles." This is in agreement with Schmitt's Plate 2, but in the 1855 transcript the "n" of *thien* is omitted.

In 1855 a clause, consisting of the final word of line 26 and the first four of line 27, simply was left out. It can hardly be a coincidence that in the middle of this omitted clause there is serious damage to the stone. The problem of producing a readable text without an awkward lacuna was in this case apparently solved by excision of the whole clause.

Bradley's reconstructions in line 28 are relatively easily seen in the context and they agree with the reading of 1855. However, Bradley reconstructed the first lacuna of line 29 as the word *phra*, a honorary prefix for the following word *thera*, while in the nineteenth century transcripts it was given as *kae*, to be read together with the preceding word *oi* as the expression "to bestow on." Bradley's suggestion was firmly rejected by Coedès in 1918 in favour of *kae*,²¹ and all subsequent readings have followed Coedès. It appears to have been overlooked that the superior reading can already be found in the 1855 transcript.

All twelve of Bradley's remaining reconstructions are synonymous with the transcript of 1855. One of these, *ngam nak* (line 32), was later rejected by Coedès and is now generally accepted as *ngam kae kam*.²²

Face 3

Bradley indicates a lacuna at the beginning of line 1, and was unable to supply a tentative reading. It so happens that the last letters of face 2 together with the first legible letter of face 3 constitute the word *klaeng*, which makes for a perfectly acceptable sentence, and the nineteenth century transcribers have therefore assumed that the gap at the beginning of the first line of face 3 needs not to be filled.²³

Bradley was unable to read the first characters of line 2. He rejected Schmitt's transcript which supplied the letters "s" and "a" making a word *pa[sa]n*, on the grounds that its meaning of "welded," "united," did not make sense, coming immediately after the word *talat*, or "market". However, in the 1954 edition of the text in *Prachum Silacharu'k* the reading *talat pasan* was adopted because it was realised that *pasan* must have been derived from *bazar*, Persian for "market." *Talat pasan* is now generally accepted as a proper, albeit reconstructed, reading of this part of the inscription. What seems to have escaped notice is that both nineteenth century transcripts already provided this spelling, even though its real meaning was not satisfactorily understood until a century later. It is plausible to assume that in 1855 this part of the stone must have been more legible than at any time during the twentieth century.

Bradley's two reconstructed characters in line 18 and the beginning of line 20 agree with the 1855 transcript. Further on in line 20 the stone has some heavy damage, extending over part of line 21, indicated in Schmitt as lacunae. Bradley did not succeed in guessing the first part of the missing text, but he assumed the word *nai*, "in," to have been the lost word of line 21. In the 1855 transcript of line 21 the letters "nga," just before the hiatus, were taken to be the beginning of the word

ngam, "beautiful," and the words *thang sai* added, to form, together with the first following legible word *khwa*, the expression "both on the left and on the right." This reconstruction indicates a good attempt to make a meaningful sentence, but it is obviously false in that it uses seven letters where there is space for no more than three or four characters. Twentieth century scholars have taken *nga* to be a word by itself standing for "ivory," and the following lacuna is generally assumed to have been the word *sai*, "left."²⁴ The gap in line 21, which Bradley filled with *nai*, was reconstructed in 1855 with the word *thi*, "at." In the context it is impossible to choose between *thi* and *nai* and other words may be considered here. Most modern transcripts leave the space open.²⁵

Bradley was unable to guess the first characters of line 22. In the nineteenth-century transcripts the text was given with the verb *aw*, "to take."²⁶ Modern scholars have assumed the character "w" to complete line 21's "lae" as *laew*, and the letters "kha" as the beginning of *khaw*, which results in a more convincing, but not necessarily accurate reconstruction.

Bradley's filling of missing text in lines 23 to the beginning of line 26 agrees with the 1855 transcript, but the name of the second pavilion in line 26 could not be read by Bradley, who recognised only the first character, a "b." The nineteenth century transcripts gave not only the letter "b," but also an "a" and "l," to make the word *bal*, "protector." Post - Bradley readings agree that what was actually on the inscription was a repeat of the word for "pavilion," *sala*. Considering the small difference in writing between *bo - baimai* and *so - ru'si*, the nineteenth century readers therefore seem to have come up with a somewhat better transcript than Bradley's.

In the final line of face 3 Bradley indicates two lacunae, the first one reconstructed as *ching*, corresponding to the modern *chu'ng*, "then; consequently." In the 1855 transcript *ching* is also given, but with the addition of the tonal marker *mai ek*, which all modern scholars accept as the best reconstruction. In Schmitt's plate the *mai ek* is missing. Bradley's final reconstruction of face 3 is the assumed word *dai*, which does not appear

in the nineteenth century. All modern readings agree with the 1855 transcript in this respect, again indicating that the lower part of face 3 was more legible in 1855 than it appeared to Bradley in 1909.

Face 4

Bradley's first five reconstructions in lines 1, 2 and 3 agree with the 1855 transcript. In the middle of line 3, however, the text is missing in the middle of an enumeration of various Tai peoples. After the words *tai la fa*, "under the vault of heaven," Bradley simply indicates that he could not identify a single letter till the words *thai chaw u*. Later scholars have identified the first letter in this gap, namely a *do - chada*, and this has been taken as indicating the word *to*, "joining." The nineteenth century transcripts also give the *do - chada*, but take it to be the beginning of the word *ton*, and add the word *thang* before continuing the still legible text. The pre-Bradley transcripts offer an acceptable sentence, and it is possible that the stone was here damaged after the transcript was made. However, the space after the *do - chada* seems a little cramped for the five characters needed to make *ton thang*, so that it can be argued that this is another case of spirited guesswork.

Bradley's reconstructions of lines 4, 5, 6 and 10 all agree with the 1855 transcript, but in line 11 Bradley left a lacuna that in 1855 was filled with the words *sai sai pho*, and in Schmitt's plates rendered as *sai wai pho*. All modern readings agree with Schmitt's version.

In lines 12, 15 and 16 the letters indicated in Bradley's text as conjectural all occur in the 1855 transcript, even though the beginning of line 15 was somewhat misread. In line 21 all texts agree that the word *buri*, "town," ought to be inserted so as to form the name of the town of Phetchaburi. What has escaped notice, however, is that the nineteenth century transcript gives *puri*. This rather archaic spelling is all the more surprising because immediately preceding it is the word *Rachaburi*, which in all readings, including that of 1855, is given with a *bo - baimai*.

The reconstruction of five characters in line 22 agrees with the 1855 transcript, but in line 23 Bradley and his successors have not ventured a guess as to what text may originally have been there. In 1855 the Committee made no such guess either, but, as in line 27 of face 2, the sentence was contracted as if the break did not exist.

Bradley reconstructed the lacuna of line 24 as *tin*. In 1855 this gap had been filled in with the words *thit hua*, which makes for a meaningful sentence, but uses too many letters to comfortably fit in the vacant space. In Schmitt's plate Bradley's version, *tin*, already occurred and this has become the standard reading. Line 25 also is damaged, the name of one town being completely obliterated. The 1855 transcript simply omits the gap. In line 26 the nineteenth-century texts reconstructed the words *pen daen*, which make sense, but take up a little too much room. Bradley and those who came after him construed them as *pen thi*. The final lacuna, in line 27, was rendered by Bradley as *an*, in conflict with the two earlier transcripts, which gave the word *nan*, with a *mai tho* sign on the first "n." Modern scholars have changed Bradley's reading to *nan*, but for some unknown reason have placed the tone - marker upon the second "n." In this final instance the 1855 reading seems preferable.

Lacunae and the Question of Authenticity

The study of lacunae can be used to furnish arguments in the debate on the inscription's authenticity. This debate, which is currently raging in Thai historical circles, is far ranging. A multitude of "weaknesses" have been perceived by a relatively small, but quite vociferous group of scholars, such as Piriya Krairiksh and Michael Vickery, and most of these have been countered quite effectively by Prasert na Nagara in his 1988 address to the annual general meeting of the Thai Historical Society. Professor Prasert gave a plausible explanation for the aspects that had puzzled Dr Piriya, and, basing himself largely upon Anthony Diller's examination of Vickery's linguistic evidence, offered the view that in this instance Vickery's methods

did not withstand scrutiny.²⁷ In June 1988 a special volume of *Sinlapawathanatham* was devoted to the question of authenticity, in which persons who had earlier published their opinions, such as Prasert na Nagara and Michael Wright, were given an opportunity to elaborate on earlier remarks, but also various other scholars entered the debate. Among the latter were the noted historian Nidhi Aeusrivongse, who in three articles examined some points that Vickery raised, and the epigrapher - historian Dhawaj Poonotoke, who enumerated the evidence in favour of authenticity.²⁸

The intensity of the debate indicates an ideological "hidden" component among some of the protagonists of the idea that Ram Khamhaeng's inscription could be a fake. It would be a real "coup" for an iconoclast if such a revered nationalistic symbol as the first Thai inscription could be shown to be a late copy or a deliberate fake. Usually the debate centers upon the question whether the inscription was made one or two hundred years after the events described in the inscription, but there is one rather daring variant hypothesis, one which has been mentioned in a few lectures, but which reached the printed page only in the late 1980s. This variant is that the inscription might have been deliberately concocted in imitation old characters some time during the nineteenth century. To protagonists of the latter hypothesis some of the results of this study of lacunae could, when taken out of context, be construed as providing collaborating proof. The fact that there are several instances where the nineteenth century transcribers wrote a more accurate text than Bradley, and that they could occasionally read words which have since been obliterated, could be construed as evidence of the nineteenth century faking process: after having incised the quasi-old words the newly incised stone might have been deliberately rolled about, chafed and mishandled, so as to create the impression of authenticity much in the same manner that modern Thai factories create Sukhothai - style Buddha images which are rapidly corroded and sold in antique shops.

Such an interpretation may, however, not be attached to the findings of this research on lacunae. The reasons why the

condition of the stone is likely to have deteriorated have been indicated, and while the Committee of 1855 seems to have been able to read and understand the general gist of the text, we have also discovered various instances where its members misunderstood the text, or were not yet familiar with a particular archaic expression.

Conclusion

There can be no doubt that the stone was already badly damaged in 1855 when the first transcript was made, and the members of the Committee resorted to a variety of strategies to create an uninterrupted text. Often a missing letter could be inferred by reading and understanding the surrounding text. In cases where whole words were missing sometimes parts of sentences were simply added with little consideration for the actual size of the lacuna, and in other instances a clause with a large lacuna was simply dropped.

The great majority of Bradley's reconstructed letters can already be found in the 1855 transcript. This may be seen as the result of a combination of two factors. In the first place the original level of understanding must have been much higher than has hitherto been realised: in our opinion the 1855 text has been underestimated, partly because of the prevailing "sequential model" which tends to regard nineteenth century observations as rather singular and clumsy first attempts.²⁹ The second factor behind the remarkable number of good readings is the stone's relatively better state of preservation when it was first examined in the nineteenth century.

It will not be possible to determine in many cases whether a good nineteenth century reading of one of Bradley's lacunae is due to a good understanding of the context, to better legibility, or to both. The idea that parts of the stone were more legible at that time helps explain the instances where Bradley's reconstruction turned out to be inferior to the nineteenth century transcripts.

Bradley, in his enthusiasm for his own revised reading, seems to have dismissed the earlier attempts somewhat too lightly. The 1855 transcript and its immediate successor, which formed the basis of Schmitt's plates, are much more than fanciful "first tries," they are quite remarkable, hitherto undervalued sources for the study of the Ramkhamhaeng inscription.

It has been established in this paper that adherents of the principle of unilinear gradual improvement ("sequentialists") may have been unable to recognise nineteenth century accomplishments. A final example of the insidious power of the "sequentialist model" is the way present-day scholars have accepted the latest understanding of the purpose of the inscription. Schmitt assumed that the text had been inscribed to be read by the people as a guide to principles of law. Bradley dismissed that view and considered that it was a eulogy, to commemorate the most noteworthy achievements of Ram Khamhaeng's reign. Coedès understood that the "real" purpose was to celebrate the inauguration of the stone throne, next to which the inscription was found. However, by agreeing with Coedès on what formal occasion the inscription was set up, earlier evaluations of the content as a whole are not necessarily superseded.

The inscription is obviously much more than a note to remind people of the moment when the throne was set up. Schmitt was undoubtedly right in noting a legal dimension in the text, and Bradley was also right when he recognised a summing up of the great moments of that reign. We ought to resist the off-hand dismissal of early scholarly accomplishments and admit the possibility that earlier scholars perceived at least some facets of a complex truth. The Ram Khamhaeng inscription's purpose is not satisfactorily explained by agreeing that it was set up to commemorate the setting up of a throne. Various layers of meaning may be discerned. One of these, which seems to have escaped notice thus far, is a didactic one. The description of elephant duels and internecine warfare prior to Ramkhamhaeng's accession, followed by a series of unusual steps to secure an enduring peace, which in turn is followed by scenes of a blossoming of cultural and religious life, may be interpreted as a politi-

cal guideline for the future. Cooperate, curb the ruler's greed, adjudicate, and cultural life will thrive — a message that may still inspire seven hundred years after it was written.

Notes

- 1 C.B. Bradley, "The Oldest Known Writing in Siamese, the Inscription of Phra Ram Khamhaeng of Sukhothai, 1293 A.D.," *Journal of the Siam Society*, Vol 6, pt 1, 1909, pp. 1 – 64.
- 2 "Specimen of ancient Siamese Inscription — about A.D. 1284," in Sir John Bowring, *The Kingdom and People of Siam*, Vol 1, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1969 (reprint of the 1857 edition), opp. p. 278.
- 3 The mid - nineteenth century document was published as Figure 5 in A.B. Griswold and Prasert na Nagara, "The Inscription of King Rama Gamhen of Sukhodaya (1292 A.D.), Epigraphic and Historical Studies No. 9," *Journal of the Siam Society*, Vol 59, pt 2, July 1971, pp. 179 – 228.
- 4 Father Schmitt first published plates of a copy of the inscription in "Les deux inscriptions de la pagode de Pra - Kéo à Bangkok," *Excursions et Reconnaissances*, No. 18, February 1884, pp. 429 – 38. this was reprinted as *Deux anciennes inscriptions siamoises transcrites et traduites par M. Schmitt, missionnaire à Siam*, Saigon: Imprimerie Coloniale, 1885. Slightly revised versions were published in L. Fournereau (ed.), *Le Siam ancien, archéologie, épigraphie, géographie*, Annales du Musée Guimet, Vol 27, Paris: E. Leroux, 1895, pp. 216 – 41; and finally in *Mission Pavie; Indo - Chine 1879 - 1895, Études Diverses, II, Recherches sur l'histoire du Cambodge, du Laos et du Siam*, Paris: E. Leroux, 1898, pp. 175 – 201. The latter version has been used in the research for this paper.
- 5 Bradley, "The Oldest Known Writing," p. 3.
- 6 Griswold and Prasert have given some thought as to what source Schmitt may have used and they have come to the

conclusion that he worked from a painted replica, on which all but the three largest lacunae had been conjecturally restored. Griswold and Prasert na Nagara, "The Inscription of King Rama Gamheñ," footnote 13.

- 7 G. Coedès, "Notes critiques sur l'inscription de Rama Khamheng," *Journal of the Siam Society*, Vol 12, pt 1, 1918, pp. 1 – 27; and *Recueil des inscriptions du Siam*, Part 1, Inscriptions de Sukhodaya, Bangkok, 1924, pp. 37 – 48, reprinted in G. Coedès and Prince Wan Waithayakon, *L'inscription du roi Rama Gamhen de Sukhodaya (1292 a.D.)*; *Stone Inscriptions of Sukhothai*, Bangkok: The Siam Society, 1965.
- 8 Khana Kammakan Phitcharana lae Chatphim Ekasan Pravatissat Samnakngan Rathamontri, *Prachum Silacharu'k, Phak Thi 1*, Bangkok: Krom Sinpakon, Charuek samai Sukhothai, Bangkok: B.E. 2526 (1983), pp. 4 – 20.
- 9 Griswold and Prasert na Nagara, "The Inscription of King Rama Gamheñ," pp. 179 – 228.
- 10 Chulalongkorn University, *The Inscription of King Ramkhamhaeng the Great, published on the 700th anniversary of the Thai alphabet*, Bangkok, 1983. The most recent published rubbing, transcript and annotated translation into modern Thai, prepared by officers from the National Library and the Department of Fine Arts, can be found in Suchit Wongthes (ed.), *Charu'k Phokhunramkhamhaeng; Khrai Taeng kan nae?*; "Khong Ching" rue "Khong Plom," Bangkok: Sinlapa-wathanatham, Special Volume, June B.E. 2531 (1988), pp. 11 – 39. The most distinct and legible published twentieth century rubbing of faces 2, 1 and 4 [in that order] was found in *The Souvenir of the Siamese Kingdom Exhibition at Lumbini Park*, B.E. 2468, Bangkok: The Siam Free Press, B.E. 2470 (1928), pp. 9 – 12.
- 11 Griswold and Prasert na Nagara, "The Inscription of King Rama Gamheñ," p. 185.

- 12 "The Oldest Known Writing," p. 8.
- 13 In Bradley's own words: "All letters or words that cannot be fairly made out on the stone, and that are therefore supplied conjecturally, are placed within brackets."
- 14 Actually the resulting sound *chaeng* corresponds with well-known words in the Thai language, the difficulty being that in the context they do not appear to make sense.
- 15 Colloquially known as *sara am*.
- 16 A. Bastian, "On some Siamese Inscriptions," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, Vol 34, No 1, 1865, p. 32 (emphasis added).
- 17 Colloquially known as *sara a*, apparently the upper and lower part of the letter "r."
- 18 In his transcription in European characters Schmitt, probably influenced by the fact that the word for "door" in modern central Thai is *pratu*, added a middle syllable *pa*. This does not accord with his Plate of Side 2.
- 19 Dr A.V.N. Diller of the Australian National University has found the words *pak tu* to mean "opening" in southern Thai (personal communication, 25 July, 1988).
- 20 On Face 1 *patu* is spelt *sara u*, *po'*, *to'*, but in his reconstructed version of Face 2 Bradley reversed the vowel and first consonant. Strangely enough, all twentieth-century transcripts seem to have slavishly followed Bradley in this.
- 21 Coedès, "Notes critiques," p. 10.
- 22 In early Sukhothai inscriptions it is quite easy to misread *sara ae* as a *no' nu*, and vice versa. Thus it is possible that the difficult reading of Face 1, lines 5 and 6 may one day be resolved by reading "n" instead of "ae," which would eliminate the unsatisfactory *cha - chae[n]* and substitute *chon ch[op]* or some such expression.

- 23 Modern readings suggest *klae[ngtae]ng*.
- 24 The reading *tho'ng nga sai khwa* is the best that has thus far been suggested, but it is not wholly satisfactory. Possibly a future scholar will be able to improve upon it.
- 25 In *Charu'k samai Sukhothai* the word *thoeng*, "to reach" is suggested.
- 26 Bastian's informants read the resulting expression as applying to the words immediately following: "He has brought forth the engravings." In Schmitt's translation it refers to the preceding clause: "Puis s'en revient."
- 27 Prasert na Nagara, "Lakthan Khomun Mai thang Prawatisat Thai dan Charu'k," *Kanprachum Yai Saman Pracham Pi Ph.S. 2531*, 30 – 31 January 1988, pp. 50 – 58.
- 28 Nidhi Aeusrivongse, "Khwamchagon khong rop 700 Pi," "Chakraek khong Michael Vickery," and "Lao ru'ang Charu'k Phokhunramkhamhaeng khong Michael Vickery," in Suchit Wongthes (ed.) *Charu'k...*, pp. 52 – 61, 62 – 67, and 68 – 85; and Dhawaj Poonotole, "Silacharu'k Phokhunramkhamhaeng: Thammai Maichai Silacharu'k Tatsin?," *ibid.*, pp: 130 – 141.
- 29 Another reason why the first transcript has not received scholarly attention may have been the effect of Bastian's clumsy published attempt to translate the inscription. Bastian did not know sufficient Thai to read any Siamese text with confidence, and his informant apparently did not know sufficient English to tell the difference between "to flee" and "to fly."

