

## CHAPTER 11

# CONTEXTUAL ARGUMENTS FOR THE AUTHENTICITY OF THE RAM KHAMHAENG INSCRIPTION

David K. Wyatt

For more than a century, those concerned with the history of Thailand have used the first Sukhothai inscription as their most important primary source for the earliest history of the Tai in the Chaophraya River basin, dating it, following the inscription, to the very end of the thirteenth century. It has become one of those hoary chestnuts, to be pulled out of the fire at the drop of a hat (to coin several phrases) to fit any occasion, though like the Bible in the West it is more often referred to than read. It might quietly slip from memory or from public attention had several iconoclasts within the past several years not questioned its authenticity by suggesting that it is a “Piltdown Skull,” a forgery from the nineteenth century. Were these claims true, historians of Thailand would have to go back to square one (wherever that is), and re-think and re-work thirteenth-century Sukhothai history.

I do not think such claims are sustainable. Several scholars today will present a variety of arguments that, it seems to me, support the authenticity of the inscription. The most telling of these, in my view, are those from the discipline of linguistics. For what they are worth, please allow me to present another perspective, from an historian viewing the inscription as a text; that is, as a coherent structure of words and logic. I want to present the view that Sukhothai Inscription Number 1 has a logic that is medieval, not modern; and that it speaks with a voice that is medieval, not nineteenth century.

Let us begin with the structure of the inscription as a whole and examine what Alton Becker once called the “text-building strategy” of its author or authors. You should have to hand the full text of the inscription as translated by A.B. Griswold and Prasert na Nagara slightly revised, to which I have added paragraph numbers that I will refer to in the course of the remarks that follow. (The paragraphing of the inscription is that added by Griswold and Prasert.) And to simplify matters let us assume, following the judgments of most who have studied the stone, that all or part of Face 4 of the inscription consists of one or more postscripts, added to the main portion of the inscription some time after the first three faces were engraved on the stone. I will confine my remarks to the first three faces.

The point to which the logic of the inscription leads is paragraph 11. This paragraph describes the ritual occasion for which the inscription was engraved – rather like a cornerstone-laying ceremony in the West. On this occasion in a year equivalent to A.D. 1292, the inscription says, the king had a slab of stone carved as a throne on which he daily sat to deliberate the business of the kingdom, except on the four holy days of each month when a Buddhist monk preached from the same throne. To mark this occasion, the stone says the king had four inscriptions engraved, only one of which – Sukhothai Inscription 1 – has survived.

The point of the inscription thus is reached only in the last half of the third face of the inscription: it took the author 80 finely-chiseled lines of text to get there. The first question we must ask is, ‘In what context did the inscription’s author choose to set the ritual occasion of the inauguration of his throne?’

Consider the logic through which the text of the inscription builds up to the climax of the inauguration of the throne.

The first three paragraphs of the inscription present the case for the legitimacy of the king based on conditions prior to his accession to the throne. Paragraph 1 presents the evidence for legitimacy through birth or descent: Ram Khamhaeng was the son of [King] Sri Indraditya. Paragraph 2 presents the

evidence that he be named “Rama the Brave.” Paragraph 3 provides a case for legitimacy by personal virtue, not in this case Buddhist virtue but rather the virtue of what in the Chinese context would be called filial piety: Ram Khamhaeng served his father, his mother, and his elder brother. And that virtue, of course, was rewarded: “When my elder brother died, I got the whole kingdom for myself.” But it is more than his service to his elder brother that was so rewarded: Ram Khamhaeng also became king because of his descent and his kingly valor.

There follow two paragraphs – really, long sections – that deal with defining the kind of polity that Ram Khamhaeng created, or at least presided over. Paragraph 4, the longest single section of the inscription (26 lines), deals with the king’s policies, portraying him as a wise, just, and benevolent ruler. The section concludes by saying, in effect, that the people praise the king, and that the king nourishes and protects them by providing clear drinking water and fortifying the city. The mutuality of the relationship between ruler and ruled is noteworthy here, and we will need to return to this point.

Paragraph 5 describes the religious life of Sukhothai, focusing particularly upon the annual *kathin* ceremony, when robes and other monastic requisites are given to the Buddhist monks at the end of the “lenten” season. This section touches both upon piety – “all have faith in the religion of the Buddha, and all observe the precepts during the rainy season” — and upon the civic expression of that faith; that is, it includes both merit-making and merry-making.

Next, there are five short paragraphs (nos. 6 - 10) describing the five quarters of the city – the interior and the west, east, north, and south – and concluding with that most curious reference to Phra Khapung, “The divine sprite of that mountain is more powerful than any other sprite in this kingdom.”

Now, there is a curious sort of parallelism between the “tour of the city” section and the “policy” section, in that both end up with expressions of mutuality. Note that, just as the “policy” section (Paragraph 4) ends with the people praising the

king by planting and the king (in return?) providing them clear water to drink and strong city walls, the “tour of the city” section concludes with the king’s responsibility to ensure the survival and prosperity of the city by the propitiation of Phra Khapung, that is, by animistic ritual.

What does this logic add up to as we approach the final paragraph of our text? Consider what has to be accounted for in the final paragraph. A throne is being established; a throne that is not just an institution but also a physical object; a “slab of stone” as Griswold and Prasert somewhat inelegantly translate *thæn sila*. This throne is to become (quite literally) the seat of government, as well a physical and symbolic focus for the Buddhist life of the kingdom. The preceding ten paragraphs have attempted to demonstrate that the king undertaking this act is a legitimate ruler, that his kingdom is a credible polity, and that the Buddhism – i.e., the moral quality – of this kingdom is sincere and well-developed.

Taken to this relatively abstract level, the logic of the inscription is not particularly striking, though it is for the most part coherent and it is well adapted to the purposes of the inscriptions’s author. Viewed on this level, however, there is nothing particularly thirteenth century about it.

If we take this approach one step further, however, and look at the individual sections or “paragraphs” of the inscription, quite the opposite conclusion comes to mind, for nearly every paragraph of the inscription has a distinctively early quality to it.

The “legitimacy by descent” paragraph at the opening of the inscription names the king’s father but goes no further back in time; and it also mentions his mother and the death of his eldest brother as a child. And of course the choice of language is quite startling: the text uses the vulgar first person singular *ku* for (presumably) the king speaking for himself.

The “legitimacy by valor” paragraph describes in most vigorous, active prose an elephant-duel scene that, in my view, reads like an account by a participant. Note, for instance, how

for a warrior on elephant back the immediate object of attack is the other man's elephant, not the man himself.

The "legitimacy by filial piety" paragraph would have been extremely difficult to invent in the nineteenth century, for the actions of the young prince in serving his father were hardly modern activities – hunting and gathering, capturing elephants, and raiding towns and villages.

The logic of the long "legitimacy by policy" paragraph is very complex. First, note that many of the state policies are expressed in terms of what they are not; presumably an implicit contrast with the policies of Angkorian Cambodia is being drawn. To cite one example, "The lord of the realm does not levy toll on his subjects for travelling the roads." (The word used for "toll" is *cangkop*, a Khmer word.) Second, after the passage about hanging a bell nearby which commoners can ring to gain an instant hearing for their grievances, note how the logic runs: "so the people...praise him. They plant areca groves and betel groves...coconut groves and jackfruit groves...mango groves and tamarind groves." The inscription does not say that people planted rice, though we know that they did. Instead, they planted tree crops that take years to mature, thereby signifying their long-term commitment to this Sukhothai.

There is a logic in the "religious life" paragraph that still escapes me. The first part of the paragraph is straightforward enough. But note the last few sentences: the people "repeatedly pay homage together, accompanied by the music of instruments and singing. Whoever wants to make merry, does so; whoever wants to laugh, does so; whoever wants to sing, does so." In addition to the interesting parallelism with the trading section of the "policy" paragraph, there seems here to be a contrast implicitly drawn between Buddhism in Sukhothai and religious life elsewhere. The line of this logic leads us not to some conclusion having to do with collective piety so much as it leads to an impression of the collective: "...the city is filled to the bursting point" for festivals.

The "tour of the city" paragraphs are also not without

interest for this purpose. Note that two scenes are described as being beautiful: a *vihara* west of the city, and the bucolic farms, orchards, and villages east of the city. The reference to Phra Khapung is of course quite unusual: there are only two other references to this spirit in the epigraphy, and both those references are to one spirit among many, while the reference of Inscription 1 is to a singular, immediately locatable deity. I find it difficult to believe that a nineteenth century (or earlier) forger might have given Phra Khapung the place it/he has in this inscription.

Finally, the concluding and climactic paragraph has a very curious logic to it, which is interesting mainly for the puzzles with which it leaves us. Why is the first sentence of this paragraph the first occasion in this text when Ram Khamhæng is identified as the ruler of a *dual* kingdom of Sukhothai and Sri Sajjanalai? Why is reference made to his having planted sugar-palm trees fourteen years earlier? Why the references to the pomp with which the king, mounted on the richly caparisoned elephant Rucasri, goes off to the Araññika twice a month? Why the reference to three other inscriptions (and why were two of the three “planted” in caves)? Why an inscription in Phitsanulok (Chaliang) and none in Sajjanalai? One might have expected tighter logic from a forger.

To a considerable extent, the logic of the inscription defines the voice of its author; but its voice also is defined by the language employed on the stone. The language can be (and will be) better described by linguists, and I will only mention here the curious first - person beginning of the text, the short, choppy sentences, the archaic vocabulary, and the simplicity of the text.

It would be easier to assess the authenticity of Sukhothai Inscription 1 if we had other contemporary sources against which to measure it. In effect, however, we have used this inscription to define our view of late thirteenth century Sukhothai, so we cannot now reverse the process and measure the stone against the picture that we have created using the stone! At a minimum, I find nothing in the logic, the voice, or the “text” of the text that would support the view that it is not authentic.

## INSCRIPTION ONE OF SUKHOTHAI\*

1. [I/ 1-3] My father was named Sri Indraditya, my mother was named Lady Sūang, my elder brother was named Ban Müang. There were five of us born from the same womb: three boys and two girls. My eldest brother died when he was still a child.

2. [I/3 - 10] When I was nineteen years old, Lord Sam Chon, the ruler of Müang Chot, came to attack Müang Tak. My father went to fight Lord Sam Chon on the left; Lord Sam Chon drove forward on the right. Lord Sam Chon attacked in force; my father's men fled in confusion. I did not flee. I mounted my elephant, opened [a way through] the soldiers, and pushed him ahead in front of my father. I fought an elephant duel with Lord Sam Chon. I fought Lord Sam Chon's elephant, Mas Müang by name, and beat him. Lord Sam Chon fled. Then my father named me Phra Ram Khamhæng because I fought Sam Chon's elephant.

3. [I/10-18] In my father's lifetime I served my father and I served my mother. When I caught any game or fish I brought them to my father. When I picked any acid or sweet fruits that were delicious and good to eat, I brought them to my father. When I went hunting elephants, either by lasso or by [driving them into] a corral, I brought them to my father. When I raided a town or village and captured elephants, young men or women of rank, silver or gold, I turned them over to my father. When my father died, my elder brother was still alive, and I served him steadfastly as I had served my father. When my elder brother died, I got the whole kingdom for myself.

4. [I/18-35; II/1-8] In the time of King Ram Khamhæng this land of Sukhothai is thriving. There is fish in the water and rice in the fields. The lord of the realm does not levy toll on his subjects for traveling the roads; they lead their cattle to trade or ride their horses to sell; whoever wants to trade in elephants,

does so; whoever wants to trade in horses, does so; whoever wants to trade in silver or gold, does so. When any commoner or man of rank dies, his estate — his elephants, wives, children, granaries, rice, retainers, and groves of areca and betel — is left in its entirety to his son. When commoners or men of rank differ and disagree, [the King] examines the case to get at the truth and then settles it justly for them. He does not connive with thieves or favor concealers [of stolen goods]. When he sees someone's rice he does not covet it; when he sees someone's wealth he does not get angry. If anyone riding an elephant comes to see him to put his own country under his protection, he helps him, treats him generously, and takes care of him; if [someone comes to him] with no elephants, no horses, no young men or women of rank, no silver or gold, he gives him some, and helps him until he can establish a state [of his own]. When he captures enemy warriors, he does not kill them or beat them. He has hung a bell in the opening of the gate over there: if any commoner in the land has a grievance which sickens his belly and gripes his heart, and which he wants to make known to his ruler and lord, it is easy: he goes and strikes the bell which the King has hung there; King Ram Khamhæng, the ruler of the kingdom, hears the call; he goes and questions the man, examines the case, and decides it justly for him. So the people of this müang of Sukhothai praise him. They plant areca groves and betel groves all over this müang; coconut groves and jackfruit groves are planted in abundance in this müang, mango groves and tamarind groves are planted in abundance in this müang. Anyone who plants them gets them for himself and keeps them. Inside this city there is a marvelous pond of water which is as clear and as good to drink as the water of the [Me] Khong in the dry season. The triple rampart surrounding this city of Sukhothai measures three thousand four hundred fathoms.

5. [II/8-23] The people of this city of Sukhothai like to observe the precepts and bestow alms. King Ram Khamhæng, the ruler of this city of Sukhothai, as well as the princes and princesses, the young men and women of rank, and all the nobles, without exception, both male and female, all have



faith in the religion of the Buddha, and all observe the precepts during the rainy season. At the close of the rainy season they celebrate the *kathin* ceremonies, which last a month, with heaps of cowries, with heaps of areca nuts, with heaps of flowers, with cushions and pillows: the gifts they present [to the monks] as accessories to the *kathin* [amount to] two million each year. Everyone goes to the Araññika over there for the recitation of the *kathin*. When they are ready to return to the city they walk together, forming a line all the way from the Araññika to the parade-ground. They repeatedly pay homage together, accompanied by the music of instruments and singing. Whoever wants to make merry, does so; whoever wants to laugh, does so; whoever wants to sing, does so. As this Sukhothai has four very big gates, and as the people always crowd together to come in and watch the King lighting candles and setting off fire-works, the city is filled to the bursting point.

6. [II/23-27] Inside this city of Sukhothai, there are viharas, there are golden statues of the Buddha, there are statues eighteen cubits in height; there are big statues of the Buddha and medium-sized ones; there are big viharas and medium-sized ones; there are monks, Nissayamuttas, Theras, and Mahatheras.

7. [II/27 - 33] West of this city of Sukhothai is the Araññika, built by King Ram Khamhæng as a gift to the Mahathera Sangharaja, the sage who has studied the scriptures from beginning to end, who is wiser than any other monk in the kingdom, and who has come here from Müang Sri Dhammaraja. Inside the Araññika there is a large rectangular vihara, tall and exceedingly beautiful, and an eighteen-cubit statue of the Buddha standing up.

8. [II/33-35] East of this city of Sukhothai there are viharas and ponds, there is the large lake, there are groves of areca and betel, upland and lowland farms, homesteads, large and small villages, groves of mango and tamarind. [They] are as beautiful to look at as if they were made for that purpose.

9. [III/1-3] North of this city of Sukhothai there is the bazaar, there is the Acan statue, there are the *prasadas*, there are groves of coconut and jackfruit, upland and lowland farms, homesteads, large and small villages.

10. [III/3-10] South of this city of Sukhothai there are kuti with viharas and resident monks, there is the dam, there are groves of coconut and jackfruit, groves of mango and tamarind, there are mountain streams, and there is Phra Khaphung. The divine sprite of that mountain is more powerful than any other sprite in this kingdom. Whatever lord may rule this kingdom of Sukhothai, if he makes obeisance to him properly, with the right offerings, this kingdom will endure, this kingdom will thrive; but if obeisance is not made properly or the offerings are not right, the sprite of the hill will no longer protect it and the kingdom will be lost.

11. [III/10-27] In 1214 saka, a Year of the Dragon [A.D. 1292], King Ram Khamhæng, lord of this kingdom of Sri Sajjanalai 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, theas, or mahatheras goes up and sits on the stone slab to preach the Dharma to the throng of laypeople who observe the precepts. When it is not a day for preaching the Dharma, King Ram Khamhæng, lord of the kingdom of Sri Sajjanalai and Sukhothai, goes up, sits on the stone slab, and lets the officials, lords, and princes 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 Rucasri has been decked out with howdah and tasseled head cloth, and always with gold on both tusks, King Ram Khamhæng mounts him, rides away to the Araññika to pay homage to the Sangharaja, and then returns. There is an inscription in the city of Chaliang, erected beside the Sri Ratanadhatu; there is an inscription in the cave called Phra Ram's Cave, which is located on the bank of the River Samphai; and there is an inscription in the Ra-

tanadhara Cave. In this Sugar-palm Grove there are two pavilions, one named Sala Phra Masa, one named Buddhasala. This slab of stone is named Manangasilabat. It is installed here for everyone to see.

12. [IV/1-4] All the Ma, the Kao, the Lao, the Tai of the land under the vault of heaven and the Tai who live along the U and Khong come and do obeisance to King Sri Indraditya's son King Ram Khamhæng, who is lord of the kingdom of Sri Sajjanalai and Sukhothai.

13. [IV/4-8] In 1207 saka, a Year of the Boar [A.D. 1285], he caused the holy relics to be dug up so that everyone could see them. They were worshipped for a month and six days, then they were buried in the middle of Sri Sajjanalai, and a cetiya was built on top of them which was finished in six years. A wall of rock enclosing the Phra Dhatu was built which was finished in three years.

14. [IV/8-11] Formerly these Tai letters did not exist. In 1205 saka, a Year of the Goat [A.D. 1283], King Ram Khamhæng set his mind and his heart on devising these Tai letters. So these Tai letters exist because that lord devised them.

15. [IV/11-27] King Ram Khamhæng was sovereign over all the Tai. He was the teacher who taught all the Tai to understand merit and the Dharma rightly. Among men who live in the lands of the Tai, there is no one to equal him in knowledge and wisdom, in bravery and courage, in strength and energy. He was able to subdue a throne of enemies who possessed broad kingdoms and many elephants. The places whose submission he received on the east include Sra Luang, Song Khwæ, Lum Pa Cai, Sakha the banks of the Khong, and Viang Can-Viang Kham, which is the furthest place. On the south, [they include] Khanthi, Phra Bang, Phræk, Suphannaphum, Ratchaburi, Phetchaburi, Sri Dharmaraja, and the seacoast, which is the farthest place. On the west, [they include] Müang Chot, Müang ...n, and Hamsavati, the seas being their limit. On the north, they include Müang Phlæ, Müang Man, Müang N[an], Müang Phlua,

and, beyond the banks of the Khong, Müang Sava [Luang Phrabang], which is the farthest place. All the people who live in these lands have been reared by him in accordance with the Dharma, every one of them.

---

*\*From translation by A.B. Griswold and Prasert na Nagara in the Journal of the Siam Society, 1970.*

### **III. ADDITIONAL PAPERS**

