

Wat Mahādhātu
Interior of the Maṇḍapa.

HISTORY OF WAT MAHĀDHĀTU

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The monastery which is now called Wat Mahādhātu⁽¹⁾ or the Monastery of the Great Relic was founded at the beginning of the first reign by Mahāsurasimhanāda, the Siamese second king. The founder was the younger brother of the first king and had shared his fortunes since the days of Ayuthia. In good time they had rallied to the cause of Phya Tāk and had distinguished themselves against both internal and external foes, so that royal favours had been showered upon them. It was the understanding between these two brothers which enabled the troubled situation at the end of the reign of Phya Tāk to be solved so easily. Thus it was that when the new king came to the throne in 1782, he invited his brother to share the highest rank with him, as second king. It was a purely honorary title which could not but fail to satisfy the ambition of the younger prince: he never ceased to aspire to the succession and at one time was even in open rebellion against his brother.

The second king caused a luxurious palace to be built for himself on the left bank of the Menam and, in accordance with the tradition, in front⁽²⁾ of the palace which the first king was then having built, and upstream from it. Between the two palaces and facing the river was an ancient monastery called Wat Sālāk or "the Sculptured Monastery", behind which stretched a vague expanse of land later to be made the site for the cremation of royalty. To judge from the remains of the older buildings which lie in the north-west portion of the modern monastery, it was already

1. My chief source is a monograph by H. R. H. Prince Damrong Raxanuphab published in B. E. 2461 under the title เมือง ประเวศ วัดมหาธาตุ.

2. The palace of the second king, at Ayuthia, stood in front of the first king's palace; thence the name by which it was commonly called: หน้า (Vāng Nà), or the *Front palace*.

of some importance before the foundation of Bangkok. But the outlay of the monastery was much disturbed by the planning of the new capital. The city wall split the monastery into two parts and at the same time cut it off from the river, so that the principal buildings now stood in a rather eccentric position. The second king determined to rebuild the whole monastery and make of it an edifice worthy of the site on which stood also the two royal palaces. The work of reconstruction was begun in 1783 and proceeded side-by-side with the construction of the second king's own palace. The new monastery faced away from the river. The religious buildings were erected on a piece of land lying on the edge of the site for royal cremations, which had been granted in exchange for that taken up by the building of the city wall. The monks' quarters were laid at the back on the old site of Wat Sālāk. This original plan has never been altered nor has that of the three great religious edifices in the monastery: Maṇḍapa, Bôt and Vihāra.

The Maṇḍapa is, by virtue of its position in front of the two other edifices, to be considered the most important. In the annals of the kingdom it is related that the second king planned to build in his palace grounds a pavilion set in a miniature lake, like that in the royal palace at Ayuthia. The requisite material had been collected and work begun, when two criminals who had made their way into the palace grounds were surprised by the guard and in the ensuing chase one of the prince's followers was killed on the very site intended for the new pavilion. The second king, who had only by a lucky chance escaped the conspiracy, now reflected how the second kings of Ayuthia had in their palace grounds no pavilion such as he was proposing to build. He saw in the event which had just occurred a warning that his plan was inopportune and accordingly gave it up. He decided instead to use the material at his disposal in building a Maṇḍapa in the grounds of the new Wat Sālāk. For this structure a Maṇḍapa in Wat Çri Sarvajña,⁽¹⁾ the royal chapel at

1. Written by the Siamese ศิริสมเฝ้าบุญ, (*Si Sira:phēt*). Sarvajña, "the Omniscient", is a name of the Buddha.

Ayuthia, was apparently taken as a model. It had a pointed, cone-shaped roof and contained a gilded *chedi* similar to the one in the Maṇḍapa of Wat Cūri Sarvajña. In view of the fact that this latter Maṇḍapa was designed to hold the ashes of the kings of Ayuthia and members of the royal family, one may presume that it was the intention of the second king that the Maṇḍapa of the new Wat Sālāk and its *chedi* should serve a similar purpose.

Behind the Maṇḍapa, the Bôt and the Vihāra were raised side-by-side. These two structures are nowadays of different dimensions, the Bôt being rather larger than the Vihāra, and as their axes are at a like distance from the Maṇḍapa, there is a slight lack of symmetry in relation to the Maṇḍapa. This lack of symmetry was probably caused by further alterations to which I shall refer later.

A *prang* and a pair of *chedi* were set up north of the Vihāra and south of the Bôt. In addition, two more *prang*, which have now disappeared, were placed behind the Vihāra. The whole group of buildings was surrounded by a covered cloister containing a row of Buddhas in a sitting position.

The belfry and the library were built facing one another outside the cloister and behind the Bôt. During the third reign, both these buildings were moved and placed in their present positions; the belfry is now slightly to the north of its original site, while the library is within the *kuṭi* at the corner of the Saṅgharāja's residence.

The *Kambārien*, or hall of preaching, was set in the position which it occupies to-day. The monks' quarters were all built of wood except three buildings for the abbot's use.

A wall of brick ran around the whole monastery, containing seven doors, of which the most important was that which opened on to the site of royal cremations and bore a roof in the form of a *prang*.

On the completion of the work of reconstruction, the second king bestowed upon the monastery, which was now so completely changed, the name of Wat Nibbānārāma, the monastery of Nirvāpa. It was a name unknown in the nomenclature of Ayuthia and of

Sākhōthāi and was probably chosen in reference to the Maṇḍapa, which was plainly in the eyes of its founder the most important point in the monastery. ⁽¹⁾

Some few years after its completion, the Monastery of Nirvāṇa was the scene of an event memorable in the history of Buddhism in Siam—the meeting of the “Ninth Council”. When Ayuthia was captured by the Burmese in 1767, the manuscripts stored in the monastic libraries disappeared during the fire and pillage which took place. When the country was at peace again, it was one of the first tasks of Phya Tak to form a new collection of the canonical texts. He therefore caused a search to be made in the provinces and even in Cambodia for the best copies of the Tripiṭaka in existence and these were assembled in the capital. Phya Tak was driven from the throne before anything had been done with this material, but his successor hastened to follow up the scheme. From the very beginning of his reign, King Phra: Phūttha: Jōt Fa had copies made of the documents which had been collected and distributed them to the royal monasteries. These copies were very imperfect, being full of omissions and errors which made the teaching of the Law a difficult matter. The king and the second king therefore summoned in the hall of the palace an assembly of a hundred high dignitaries of the Saṅgha and doctors of theology. When all had agreed that a revision of the existing manuscripts was imperative, the assembly was asked to appoint a *saṅgāyanā* or “Council” to “recite” the sacred texts—that is, to restore them in their original form. The hundred religious men proceeded immediately to Wat Bang Va Jaī (now called Wat Ra:khāng on the right bank of the river), the residence of the Saṅgharāja, and there chose 218 monks and 32 royal “pandits” to constitute that important council

1. In a pamphlet written after the demise of the second king, and published by King Chulalongkorn in appendix to the พระราชวิจารณ์, the word นีพาน, *nibbāna*, is used as referring to the death of the second king. Then, the name given to the monastery may be an indication of the wish of its founder to have his ashes kept in the Maṇḍapa.

which is considered by the Siamese to be the ninth assembled since the death of the Buddha.

Wat Nibbānārāma was chosen as the meeting-place of the Council, by reason of its position between the palaces of the first and the second kings, under whose equal patronage the work was to be carried on. The monastery was at this time renamed Wat Phra: Āri Sarvajña, doubtless because of the similarity of its Maṇḍapa to that of the famous chapel at Ayuthia.

On the 12th November 1788, in the middle of the last month of the rainy season, the two kings proceeded in state to the Bôt of Wat Āri Sarvajña, where the 250 members of the Council were assembled. Phra: Vimala Dhamma, the abbot of Wat Phô, one of the leaders in the Council and later the author of a history of the nine councils in Pali, read a "supplication" to the gods who had heard the actual words of the Buddha. It was a prayer that the gods would assist the members of the Council in recalling the sacred texts and protect them against the evil powers which would try to confuse their thoughts. The assembly then divided itself into four groups and each group was allotted a portion of the Sacred Scriptures. The first, which had as its president the Saṅgharāja, Sī, was given the task of revising the Suttantapiṭaka and held its meetings in the Bôt. The second group, with Phra: Vanaratana, Sūkh, the abbot of Wat Āri Sarvajña, as its president, dealt with the Vinayapiṭaka and met in the Vihāra. The third, which met in the Maṇḍapa with Phra: Vimala Dhamma as president, was charged with the production of the true text of the Saddāvisesana. The fourth and last group occupied the hall of prayer and was concerned with the Paramatthapiṭaka: its president was Phra: Buddhācārya, Pāo, the abbot of Wat Indārāma, who was later joined by Phra: Dhamma Trailoka, Xūn, of Wat Hamsa. The latter had been Saṅgharāja under Phya Tāk and was still under the shadow of the punishment inflicted on him, but by the intervention of his successor he was able to obtain the royal pardon so that he might take part in the work of the Council.

Throughout the period when the Council was sitting, the king and the second king went every day, morning and evening, to the

monastery. In the morning, they distributed food to the monks in the Council, who gathered together in the long gallery to receive the daily offering. In the evening, at the time of prayer, the two kings came again to present candles and liquid refreshment. The royal princes and the officials of the three palaces ⁽¹⁾ were also charged with the careful maintenance of the Council.

The revision of the Tripiṭaka lasted for five months. The revised collection was made up of 288 manuscripts in not less than 3,568 bundles of palm-leaf. The king had made a copy of this "Council Edition" or "Edition of the Old Masters" as it is more usually called nowadays, which was six times corrected by the original. It consisted of 354 texts, forming 3,686 bundles of palm-leaf. The edges of the leaves in each bundle, as well as the surface of the outer leaves, were covered with gold, so that each bundle looked like a bar of gold. This was the "Grand Gilt Edition", each volume of which was wrapped in gold brocade and bound together with many coloured silks.

The king distributed gifts among the members of the Council, yellow robes to the monks and garments to the laity. Then, in accordance with the ritual of religious offering, he sprinkled on the hands of the Buddha consecrated water from a golden ewer, while vowing that he would see the benefit of his good work extended throughout the world. When this ceremony was finished, the Tripiṭaka manuscripts were carried in royal litters in procession to Wat Phra:Kĕo, where they narrowly escaped destruction in the fire which broke out on the very day they were deposited.

The Saṅgharāja Śi died in 1794. The king chose as his successor the abbot of Wat Crī Sarvajña, Śūkh (Sukha), who bore the title of Phra: Vanaratana and had been president of that group of the Ninth Council in charge of the revision of the Vinaya. At the time of his nomination he was about sixty years of age and was to be head of the Church for a further twenty-three years. The

1. There was at that time a third king, whose palace was on the right bank of the river. He was a nephew of the first and the second kings.

king in nominating the new Saṅgharāja had decided that he should remain at Wat Cṛi Sarvajña, which was better placed to be the residence of the patriarch than Wat Rākhaṅg. From now on Wat Cṛi Sarvajña held the first position among the royal monasteries.

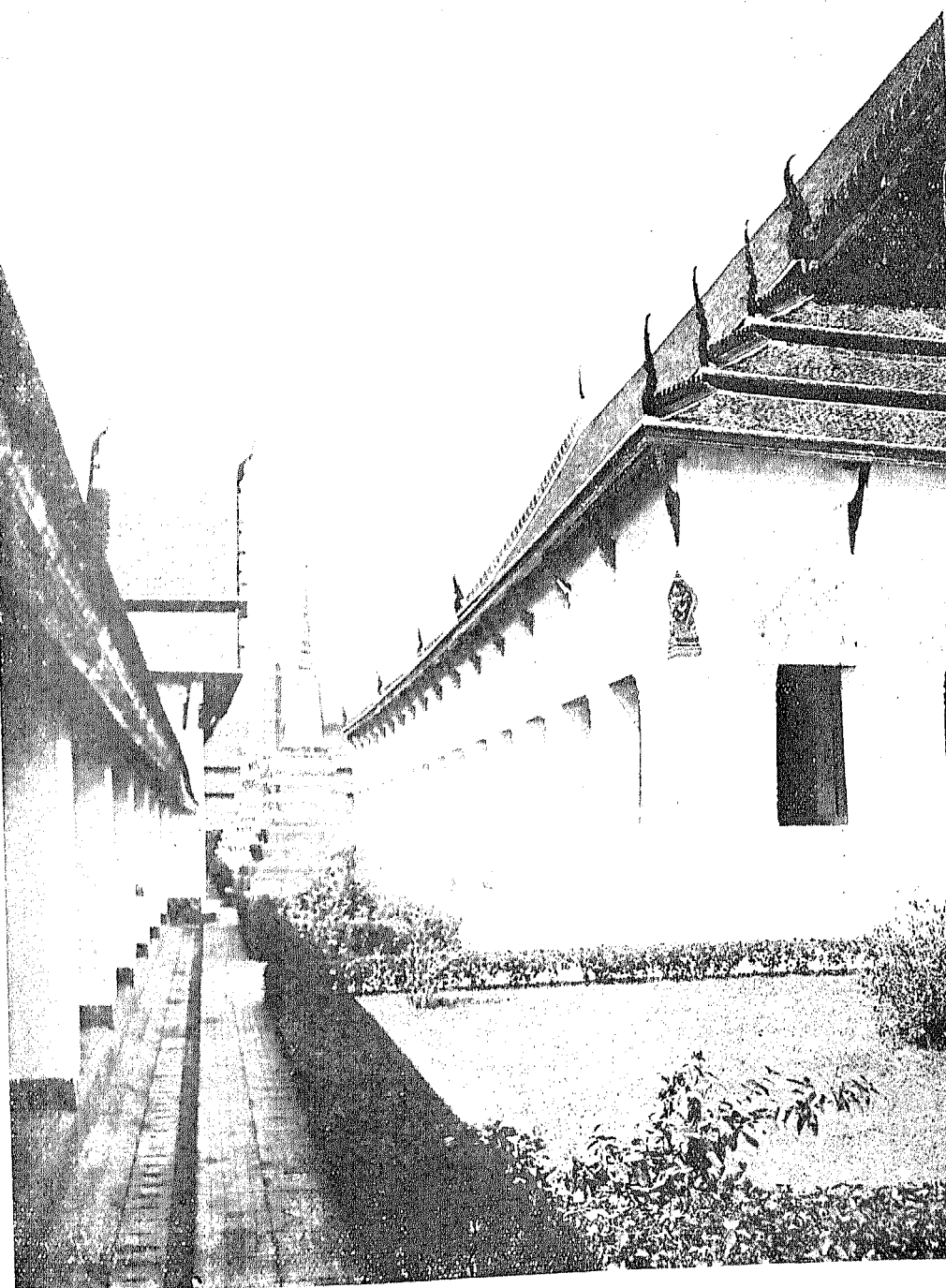
The following year the second king made a decision to retreat for a short time under the yellow robe, in fulfilment of a vow made during illness. Before taking leave of the king, according to the custom, he obtained pardon for 32 condemned prisoners in the gaols, with the purpose that they should enter the priesthood with him and so increase the merit of his action. He was ordained in the Bôt of Wat Cṛi Sarvajña on 1st July, 1795, before an assembly of 44 monks, into which he was introduced by the patriarch, his *upajjhāya*. He relinquished the yellow robe within a week.

A few years later the second king was to see the monastery which he had just founded almost completely destroyed. On the night of the 2nd April, 1802, some monks and novices were amusing themselves by letting off fireworks in the courtyard of the Wat. A rocket fell on the roof of the Maṇḍapa, where some pigeons had been building their nests, and set fire to it. The fire spread quickly to the two adjacent structures, the Bôt and the Vihāra. The first and second kings hurried to the scene of the calamity and assisted their followers in the work of checking the outbreak. The gallery alone was saved, the Maṇḍapa, the Bôt and the Vihāra being entirely destroyed. The second king sought out the culprit and decreed that he be unfrocked and executed the following day. The Saṅgharāja was successful, however, in obtaining pardon for him.

The second king proceeded without delay to the work of reconstruction. In order to prevent a repetition of the disaster which had just occurred, the Maṇḍapa now assumed its present form, that of a simple building square in layout, with a door on each side, and covered in by an ordinary roof. Inside is a second chamber almost completely open on all four sides, in the centre of which stands a Maṇḍapa 20 metres in height. It is constructed of four pillars of masonry covered with small pieces of glass, and stands on a stone base overlaid with marble slabs; its roof is shaped like a pyramid with decorated edges. Inside the Maṇḍapa is a gilded

chedi like that which originally stood there. In the cloister between the inner chamber of the Maṇḍapa and the outer wall are placed statues of the Buddha of various sizes, some seated and others in a standing position. These statues, as well as those placed in the gallery and the Vihāra, may have been selected from those which the first king had collected when Wat Phô was built.

It is probable that before the fire, the Bôt and the Vihāra were of the same size and placed at an equal distance from the axis of the Maṇḍapa. The sacred area, as marked out by the *sīmā*, must have been slightly larger than that covered by the Bôt and the vacant space most probably formed a gallery running round the building, such as may be seen in many Siamese monasteries. The Vihāra was reconstructed exactly as before, but the walls of the Bôt were extended to the very limit of the sacred area. The size of the Bôt was thus increased by the whole width of the original gallery, but the result was a displeasing lack of symmetry in the arrangement of the three edifices. Besides, as the structure of the new Bôt covered the whole of the consecrated site, the *sīmā* had to be encased in the actual wall of the Bôt. They are represented in stucco in bas-relief, four outside at the corners of the building and four inside in the centre of each wall: in the former Garuda is represented alone, in the latter ridden by Indra. This method of placing the *sīmā* is very unusual in Siam; in Bangkok it is to be found in only one other place, Wat Janasagrāma, which is likewise the work of Mahāsurasimhanāda, the second king. The Bôt was constructed almost in the way it appears to-day. It is a large building twenty metres wide by fifty long, with many windows framed in stucco relief and four side-doors. A kind of second enclosure is formed inside by two rows of large masonry pillars, and in this enclosure is a big statue of the Buddha in the attitude known as that of the victory over Māra (Māravijaya), made of bricks and mortar, with a covering of plaster, and gilded. This statue is surrounded by statues of eight disciples kneeling with joined hands. The ceiling is painted red with gilt stars, while the shutters of the doors and windows bear the usual guardian figures. There were originally paintings on the walls and on the pillars, but these were not restored during the



Wat Mahādhātu
South-eastern corner of the Bôt showing
the *sīmā* built in the wall.

recent renovations, and nowadays the interior is plainly white-washed. Besides the usual furniture found in religious buildings in Siam, there is on either side of the altar a painted wooden elephant and a painted wooden horse, which are said to have been used by the second king as a depository for his offerings to the monks when they made their morning visit to the palace.

The second king was not allowed the pleasure of seeing his work fully restored. For several years past he had been suffering from a cancer, and during 1803 the disease became acute, so that he felt his time was near. Not long before his death he had himself carried round the palace in a litter, so that he might see for the last time the buildings which he was about to leave. It is said that during this round, he cried out: "It is I, with the help of my own men, who have made these buildings: if ever they should fall into the hands of those who are not my children, may the demons and the gods deprive the possessors of all good fortune." The second king also had himself carried to Wat *Çri Sarvajña* to make a last offering to the Buddha. When he had arrived before the great statue in the *Bôt*, he asked for his sword that he might present it as a gift to the Buddha, but when it had been brought to him, he instantly turned it against himself. His eldest son, who was with him, tore the sword from his hands, whereupon the prince in a fury threw himself on the ground and cursed those who had thus prevented him from making of himself a sacrifice to the Buddha. In this violent passion, he had to be borne back to the palace. Later he again uttered curses on those who should deprive his children of their inheritance by taking possession of the palaces and other property which he was leaving. Thus when he died on the 3rd November, 1803, the feelings of his party were much excited. His two sons even went so far as to form a plot with several high officials against the life of the king. They were denounced and put to death with their fellow conspirators. The king even thought of refusing to their father the funeral ceremony due to his rank. The crown of the second king fell to one of the sons of the first king. But the curses uttered by the dead prince were still feared. The new second king did not take up residence in the

palace built by his predecessor, nor for a long time did anyone dare to touch the monasteries which his predecessor had founded. It was thought better to let them fall into ruin than to allow some appropriation which would enrage the spirit of the founder.

Two months after the death of the second king, the monastery underwent a third change of name. As a pretext for this further change, the king pointed out that the examination for the doctorate of theology was being held for the first time in Wat Çrī Sarvajña. But one may be justified in supposing that by this action the king meant to show that he refused to allow to the Maṇḍapa that significance of which its founder had thought. Besides this, it was possible that there might be some confusion between the name of Wat Çrī Sarvajña and that of the new royal chapel, Wat Phra : Kṛo, which was called by many by the name of the former royal chapel at Ayuthia. The monastery was now named Wat Çrī Ratanamahādhātu, the Monastery of the Great Relic, the name which it still bears at the present time. All the ancient capitals had had a monastery with this name and it was a name all the more suited to Wat Çrī Sarvajña in that the Wat Mahādhātu at Ayuthia had been the residence of the patriarchs.

The first king died on the 7th September, 1809. The second king, who had been appointed several years before, now came to the throne and chose one of his brothers, Prince Senānurakṣa, to be second king. In the following year this prince was sent out against the Burmese who had seized Xūmphon and Thālang. During the campaign he had a serious attack of malaria and he vowed that, if he recovered, he would take the yellow robe. Accordingly, when victory was complete, he returned to Bangkok and entered the monastery of the Great Relic, where he remained for a week in the yellow robe.

On the 22nd May 1816, the Saṅgharāja, Sūkh, abbot of Wat Mahādhātu, died. The king chose as his successor the abbot of Wat Rājapurāṇa, Mi, who bore the title of Sōmdēt Phra : Vanaratana. He was taken in procession to Wat Mahādhātu in March, 1817, after the cremation of his predecessor. The new Saṅgharāja, who was

born on 15th July, 1750, had been made a doctor either at the end of the Ayuthia period or at the very beginning of the Bangkok period. Shortly after his nomination there was a great scandal in the Church. Three high dignitaries, amongst whom was the Phra: Buddhaghosācārya of Wat Mahādhātu, were charged with violating their vows of chastity in a particularly flagrant manner, inasmuch as they were well known to have several children. They were brought up before a special court composed of a brother and a son of the king, were found guilty, unfrocked and imprisoned. The king was alarmed as to conditions in the Buddhist community and called upon the new Saṅgharāja to write, in collaboration with the abbot of Wat Sa:kēt, Āt, a work which should recall the monks to the observance of their vows. This work was the *Ovādānusāsani* which was ordered to be studied in all monasteries. During his short period of office as Saṅgharāja, the new abbot revived the great festival of Visākha, the anniversary at one and the same time of the birth of Buddha, of his illumination beneath the Bhodhi tree and of his entry into Nirvāṇa. That important ceremony had long ceased to be observed, in fact even before the fall of Ayuthia. The new Saṅgharāja had it re-established in the list of royal ceremonies and arranged the details of its celebration. It was held for the first time in 1817 and has continued since that time to be held every year in the middle of the sixth month (May).

The new patriarch had already taken an important part in the work of the church previous to his nomination. In 1814 he had been given the task of selecting the members of the religious mission which the king planned to send to Ceylon to investigate the state of the faith in the Mother-Island, which had but recently passed into English hands, and to renew the traditional relations which had been interrupted since the fall of Ayuthia. The mission was composed of four monks from Wat Mahādhātu and four from Wat Rājapurāṇa and it set out from Bangkok at the end of 1814, after receiving from the king gifts destined for the principal shrines in Ceylon and for the high dignitaries of the Cinghalese Church. After being shipwrecked and having to wait almost a year at Nākhon Si Thāmmārāt (Ligor),

the mission finally embarked in a boat carrying elephants to a port on the coast of Bengal somewhere north of Madras.

When they arrived in India, the eight Siamese monks set out on foot with a native guide and carrying with them the royal gifts, and after 76 days on the road they reached the port at which they were to take boat to Ceylon. They reached Anurādhapura at last in July, 1816. They were very well received both by the monks and the people of Ceylon and also by the English officials, who were trying to win the confidence of their new subjects. The mission remained for some time in Kandy in that same monastery whither had come the Siamese therā Upāli sixty years before to reform, at the request of the king of Ceylon, the Cinghalese Church and to found that Siamese sect which is still at the present time the most important in the Island. The mission visited the principal centres of pilgrimage, in particular the foot-print of the Buddha on the top of Adam's Peak and the shrine of the Buddha's tooth, where the English government allowed the doors to be opened so that the mission might pay its devotions to the famous relic.

After spending a year in the Island, the mission set sail from Colombo carrying with it, among other presents from the religious community of Ceylon, six cuttings from the Bodhi tree of Anurādhapura, which is known to be itself an offshoot of the Mahābodhi of Buddhagayā. The mission arrived in July, 1818. Three of the six cuttings of the Bodhi tree were allotted to monasteries within the capital. Wat Mahādhātu, as the residence of the Saṅgharāja, received one, which was set in the north-east corner of the monastery, where it has now grown into a fine tree.

In the meantime the Monastery of the Great Relic had given shelter to a young monk who was afterwards to take a notable part in the history of the Buddhist faith in Siam, before becoming one of the greatest kings of Siam in recent times. In 1817, the eldest son of the first queen was fourteen years of age. By his birth he was the first in rank of the king's sons and the king had just conferred on him with elaborate ceremony the title of Prince Mongkut. Towards the close of the Ayuthia period, Siam had adopted the

custom that all younger members of noble families who were intended for positions of public service, and in particular the members of the royal family, should serve in the priesthood for two periods, the first as a novice at the age of fourteen years, and the second as a monk at the age of twenty-one. As soon as circumstances allowed, this custom was adopted in Bangkok and it has continued to be observed down to the present day. The young prince was accordingly escorted in procession on the 24th May, 1817, to the royal chapel and ordained *samānera* (novice). After the ceremony he took up his residence in the Monastery of the Great Relic, in a private pavilion set on the spot where the Bodhi tree brought from Ceylon was soon afterwards to be planted. The prince remained for seven months in the monastery, learning the elements of the Pali language and making himself acquainted with religious practices. During this period he followed the usual custom by preaching before the king and members of the royal family a chapter of the Mahājāti, or story of Vessantara, the last incarnation of the future Buddha.

On 11th September, 1819, the Saṅgharāja, Mi, died at the age of seventy. His ashes, together with those of his predecessor, the Saṅgharāja, Sūkh, were afterwards deposited in the two *prang* within the cloister, which stand on either side of the Maṇḍapa and were apparently erected at this time. The king appointed as head of the Monastery of the Great Relic the abbot of Wat Sa:kēt, Sōmdēt Phra:Vanaratana, Āt (he who had collaborated with the late Saṅgharāja in the compilation of the *Ovādānvasāsanī*); he was at this time 62 years of age. The transfer was but a preliminary to his nomination to the supreme dignity. While awaiting consecration, the new abbot took up residence in the monastery in February, 1820. His consecration was delayed by an epidemic of cholera which broke out three months later, and was one of the worst epidemics recorded in the annals of Siam. Corpses which there was no time to burn were heaped up in the monastery "like stacks of timber" or else left to float about in the river and the canals. The people fled in a panic from the capital: the monks deserted the monasteries and the whole machinery of government was at a standstill. The king even released the royal guard from their duties

at the palace. There were great ceremonies of propitiation: the Emerald Buddha and the precious relics kept in the monasteries were taken out in procession through the streets and on the canals of the city, attended by high dignitaries of the Church who scattered consecrated sand and water. The king and the members of the royal family maintained a rigorous fast. The slaughter of animals was completely forbidden and the king caused all supplies of fish, bipeds and quadrupeds offered for sale to be bought up in order that they might be liberated. All criminals, except the Burmese prisoners of war, were released from prison. The scourge abated at last after taking 30,000 victims within a few months. The consecration of the new Saṅgharāja was about to take place when, in October, he was charged with having shown a doubtful affection for one of his young disciples. There were good grounds for the charge, but not sufficient to entail his expulsion from the Buddhist community. The Saṅgharāja to be was relegated to the bottom of the hierarchy and made an exile from all the royal monasteries. He ended his days in obscurity in one of the minor monasteries of the capital.

The king now chose to fill the vacant office of Saṅgharāja an old man of 88 years, the abbot of Wat Rājāsiddha, Sūkh (Sukha), who bore the title of Sōmđēt Phra:Ñāṇasaṃvara and was famous for his piety. He was born at Ayuthia on the 14th January, 1734. Before the fall of the old capital, his ascetic habits had already earned for him a great reputation of holiness. He lived in a monastery far removed from the city and had reached such a stage of abstraction from worldly things that the wild animals of the jungle trusted him, and even the jungle-fowl, which are considered to be the most timid of wild creatures in Siam, would allow him to approach them, just as though they were ordinary farmyard birds. For this reason, he was known throughout the country as "the abbot of the jungle-fowl." After the foundation of Bangkok, the king had called upon him to become head of Wat Rājāsiddha, on the right bank of the river, and conferred on him the title of Phra:Ñāṇasaṃvarathera, leader of the group of the *araññavāsī*, "forest monks", who lived in seclusion and preferred the life of an ascetic to the



Statue of Sômdēt Phra:Ñāṇasaṃvara (Sūkh)
in Wat Mahādhātu,



study of the sacred writings. Under this title, he was the preceptor, either as *upajjhāya* or as *kammavācācārya*, of practically all the members of the royal family at the time of their entry into the priesthood, and in particular of the three next kings of Siam. He was raised to the rank of *Sōmdēt* in the second reign, and at the official functions he came by virtue of his age and of his seniority before the Saṅgharāja himself. After the death of the two patriarchs Sūkh and Mi and the degradation of Sōmdēt Phra:Vanaratana Āt, Sōmdēt Phra:Nāṇasamvara was the only eminent dignitary of the Saṅgha remaining. The king, who wished to bestow upon him some token of his respect, urged him to accept the supreme office in spite of his age and the fact that the head of the Church should not be chosen from among those monks who were specially devoted to meditation. The holy man was borne to the Monastery of the Great Relic with due ceremony on the 4th November, 1820, and a month later he was consecrated Saṅgharāja. The king had built for him two pavilions which are still standing, between which was a smaller building containing a room for prayers: this has now disappeared.

The career of the new Saṅgharāja was very short, for he died on the 4th September, 1822, at the age of ninety. His body was placed in a great gilded urn, an honour reserved for the king and princes of high rank, and was cremated during the following May, on the site for royal cremations. In 1844, King Phra:Nāng Klāo had cast a statue of the famous patriarch who had been his preceptor. This statue was at first set up in Wat Phra:Kēo, but in 1852 it was taken to the Vihāra of the Monastery of the Great Relic, where it still remains, forgotten amidst the book-cases stored in that "annex" of the National Library. The statue stands on a gilded wooden pedestal carved with the figures of jungle-fowl, an allusion to the name which the recluse of Ayuthia retained to the day of his death. There is another statue of this same patriarch at Wat Rājasiddha, where it is believed that his ashes are deposited; even at the present day, the king does not fail to pay his devotions to this statue, when he goes there to present to the monks the annual gifts of clothing.

The next Saṅgharāja was the abbot of Wat Sa:kēt, Dōn, who had received the title of Sōmdēt Phra: Vanaratana some years previously. His consecration took place in February, 1823, after which he took up residence in the Monastery of the Great Relic. He was at that time sixty-one years old and was destined to be head of the Buddhist community for twenty years.

In 1824, Prince Mongkut, who was considered by every one as the heir apparent, reached the age at which he was to serve his second term in the yellow robe. Since his departure from the Monastery of the Great Relic, he had commenced apprenticeship in the political life while still continuing his studies. He had been entrusted with several minor missions and had been appointed chief officer of the pages. His father, the reigning king, a famous poet, was more occupied in amusing his people than in trying to govern them: from the very beginning of his reign, he had been accustomed to entrust the government to members of his family. In these circumstances, it was inevitable that there should be a more or less open rivalry among the royal princes. ⁽¹⁾ At first, the most influential of them was Prince Vidakṣa, younger brother of the first queen, who was officially in charge of the Ministry of the Household and the Ministry of Interior; in the early years of the reign, he conducted in fact the whole business of government. His nephew, the young Prince Mongkut, was under his recognized protection, and while the old prince was alive, no one thought of doubting that Prince Mongkut would be the next to occupy the throne. But the influence of Prince Vidakṣa was counterbalanced by that of the king's eldest son, Prince Cestā (the "Prince Krom Kiat" of English contemporary writers) who was the offspring of an ordinary concubine. He had been entrusted with the Treasury, a department of importance by itself, whose jurisdiction moreover extended over Foreign Affairs. This

1. See: J. Crawford, *Journal of an Embassy*, London 1828, p. 105; G. Finlayson, *The Mission to Siam and Hué...*, London, 1826, pp. 203-204; H. R. H. Prince Damrong Raxanuphab, พระราชพงษาวดาร กรุงรัตนโกสินทร์ รัชกาลที่ ๓, p. 353.

clever prince was able, thanks to the king's complete lack of interest in political matters, gradually to increase his power and gather around himself an influential party. It was unfortunate for Prince Mongkut that his guardian, Prince Vidakṣa, died in 1822, when the prince was as yet too young to have personal influence sufficient to lead a party of his own. The authority of Prince Cestā, then thirty-four years of age and with ten years experience of government affairs behind him, became the deciding factor in the affairs of the kingdom. Nevertheless it might be that this influence was only temporary, and Prince Mongkut had reason to hope that in time his legitimate title would attract followers. Whatever were the prince's thoughts, it is clear that in re-entering the priesthood he was but following the usual tradition. He had married a few years before, and in May of that year, 1824, he had just had a second son. He intended to leave his young household and his public life for a few months only. Who could have predicted that his service as a monk was to last for twenty-seven years?

The prince's ordination was appointed for the 7th July. A few days before that date, two of the three white elephants which had been captured during the reign, died at the same time. This double calamity was one of the worst of omens and the king was profoundly alarmed. The ordination of the prince could not be postponed but the festivities, which had been arranged, were abandoned and the customary ceremony was much simplified. Immediately after his induction into the priesthood at the royal chapel, the prince went to reside for some days in the Monastery of the Great Relic with the Saṅgharāja who had been his preceptor. He went next to Wat Sāmórai (now called Wat Rājādhivāsa), situated at some distance from the city, whose inmates belonged to the sect of *araññavāsī*. In choosing this retreat, the prince was conforming to a tradition dating back to the time of Ayuthia. It seemed of little use for a prince to study the sacred writings, when he was to be in the priesthood but a short time. It was a better plan to have him trained in spiritual exercises which could be taught rapidly and were, moreover, supposed to endow the disciple with valuable gifts and to make him successful in his undertakings,

particularly in war. Thus it had happened that since the time of Ayuthia, the kings had preferred to send the heirs-presumptive to a monastery where "meditation" was given a place of special prominence. The first king of Bangkok had himself spent a short time in Wat Sāmórai and it was there that he sent his son, later to be King Phra:Phūttha:Lot Là. It was natural that Prince Mongkut should go there in his turn.

Ten days after the arrival of the prince at the monastery, on the 21st of July, his father the king died, following a sudden illness. He had not even time to make known his final wishes as to the succession to the throne. Prince Cestā, with the assistance of one of his meles, Prince Çakti, the Minister of War, had himself made king without any opposition. It was even said⁽¹⁾ that Prince Mongkut was consulted, and that he consented to relinquish the crown in favour of his brother. His lack of experience and the weakness of the resources on which his few followers could draw, would in any case have made any resistance on his part but a foolhardy action. He was wise enough to accept the position as it was, and he remained in the priesthood after he had served the usual period, having determined to live secluded from that political life, in which he might be led to play some hazardous part. His character as a *bhikkhu*, while it implied that he gave up all worldly ambition, placed him also above all temporal power, and he could claim after all, while still secluding himself voluntarily from the world, that no one had overpowered him.

The prince did in fact take his new form of life very seriously, for he was no commonplace individual and a state of idle melancholy would not satisfy him. As chance had set him in a community of monks vowed to a life of contemplation, he turned resolutely to the study of that important and highly esteemed part of monastic discipline. Besides Wat Sāmórai, Wat Rājasiddha was also a centre for the practice of ascetism. The prince divided his time between these two monasteries and was instructed in their system. He soon became conversant with the various exercises whose purpose

1. *The Burney papers*, Bangkok 1910, I, p. 50.

is to assist in the concentration of thought, the understanding of the inner significance of things and the deep knowledge of the path to salvation. But this training did not satisfy his mind. He wished to know the reasons which underlaid these practices and how they were related to the teaching of the Buddha. To these questionings, his instructors could give him no answer; they knew nothing of written texts and could quote as their authorities only their own masters. A year of this unsatisfying kind of teaching left the prince but little more enlightened as to his faith than he had been before his ordination. He decided to turn to the study of the sacred writings and to make an entirely fresh start on his religious instruction. He left Wat Sāmórai and returned to his residence in the Monastery of the Great Relic. He had not been there for long, when he had to undergo much more disquieting spiritual experiences.

There were among the inmates of the Monastery of the Great Relic some notable Pali scholars. For three years, Prince Mongkut devoted himself exclusively to the study of the sacred language, and he acquired a profound knowledge of the Scriptures. The king, who was delighted to have an opportunity of showing favour to the prince, summoned in the royal palace an extraordinary session of the high dignitaries who composed the examining body for the doctorate of theology and caused the prince to undergo the usual examination in the royal presence. It was soon evident that the candidate was possessed of a knowledge much greater than that required for the first examination. The king ordered that questions appertaining to a more advanced stage of the examination should be put to him; to these the prince replied with ease. This gave rise to jealous feelings among the king's entourage, and Phra:Devamoli, Xím, a member of the examining body, was asked to make a protest against such a relaxation of the usual rules. Prince Mongkut outspokenly declared that only at the express wish of the king, had he submitted himself to examination and he was not in search of empty glory. He demanded that the matter should go no further, and only the first degree of the doctorate was conferred upon him. He was the first member of the royal family to be a doctor. Shortly afterwards, at the conclusion of a sermon which he delivered at the palace, the king bestowed

on him a streaked fan, which was the insignia carried by high officials of the Saṅgha. From now onwards he acted as a member of the examining body.

Such a sudden elevation did not fail to arouse the jealousy of his colleagues, and in particular that of Phra:Devamoli, Xim, although the latter had just received the title of Phra:Buddhaghosā-cārya. One day when they were about to examine a candidate, a disagreement arose as to the translation of the Pali word *āsanne*. The prince strongly maintained his own opinion, with some justification, whereupon his colleague broke out, exclaiming: "Were it not for the gratitude I owe to His Majesty, I should get foot sore in coming to such meetings". In consequence of this incident, the hot tempered abbot was reprimanded by the king and forbidden to appear at official functions. The direction of the organisation of examinations was given to Prince Mongkut, and was retained by him until the death of the king. Under his guidance, religious teaching underwent a revival and attained to a standard much higher than that in any previous reign.

It was not to be long before his knowledge of the Scriptures would arouse in the prince scruples of conscience. While still young, he had been a witness of the scandals which caused the discredit of the higher ranks of the priesthood. Four years spent among the monks had unfortunately only widened his earlier experience. But in addition to immorality due to individual weaknesses, in what a number of ways were the ordinary rules of the monastic life daily disregarded, while either through indifference or ignorance none took upon themselves to pass censure. Little attention was paid to the few rites prescribed by the Buddha to the assembly of his disciples. The meetings in the communities were no more held periodically but depended on the will of the abbots. The rules laid down in the formulary were a dead letter. Prince Mongkut, after a study of the texts, began to doubt even the correctness of the ordination ceremony as performed in Siam. Thus the Siamese church had failed to preserve the sacred tradition which alone made it worthy of the same veneration as the Buddha and the Law. The faith had no longer a single representative nor anyone with authority to expound it: its foundations were

undermined and the very roots of the tree to which the faithful came for refuge were rotting away . . . Under these conditions it was an open deceit to wear the yellow robe: it would be better to discard the robe and to consider the teaching of the Buddha as a mere doctrine in philosophy.

One afternoon, when the prince had retired to the Bôt to rest, he suddenly determined to seek assistance from the deities which protect the faith of the Buddha in the eight regions of the universe. When he had lighted candles and strewn flowers before the great gilded statue of the Buddha, he pronounced this vow: "When I dedicated my life to the service of the Lord, I took the yellow robe by reason of my convictions and my faith, with no thought of reward, honour, or praise. If anywhere in this world there still remain any spiritual descendants of the ten-powered Sugata, may it be given to me to meet them within three or seven days from now, or at least to know of their existence. Should this not be granted to me, I shall have to infer that the spiritual family of the Lord has become extinct, and I shall leave the yellow robe in order to follow as a layman the five or the eight commandments as may seem fit."

Three or four days after he had made this vow, the prince came to know that at the head of Wat Pavaramaṅgala there was a dignitary of Mon origin, named Phra:Sumedhācārya, who had been ordained at Pegu and was held to be very well versed in questions of doctrine and of discipline. The prince hastened to pay him a visit. The conversations which followed inspired in him a great admiration for the Mon community, which seemed to observe the commandments of the Buddha much more strictly than the Siamese communities. He realised that it was possible to be ordained in a way above all criticism and to live in conformity with the rules of the Vinaya. Having thus regained confidence, he gave up the idea of leaving the priesthood, but he resolved without delay to follow the rules of the Mon community, as they had been expounded to him by the abbot of Wat Pavaramaṅgala, remaining free, however, to modify them if he should see fit to do so. It is probable that he had himself reordained in conformity with the ritual of the Mons. But

as it would not have been comfortable for him to live after his own rules in the midst of a community which was both numerous and conspicuous, he decided to return to Wat Sāmórai. There he could lead his own life without scandal, thanks to the distance of the Wat from the city and the considerable freedom allowed to the inmates. During this second residence at Wat Sāmórai, Prince Mongkut worked out the details of the reform which was to result in the formation in the Siamese Church of a new sect, the Dhammayuttika, or sect of those who adhere to the Law. The sect was to have an important influence on the religious life of the country. The prince left Wat Mahādhātu in 1829, but he retained his residence there and paid brief visits to it until his appointment to be head of Wat Pavaranivega, seven years later. His activities were from now on centred elsewhere and were no longer connected with the history of the Monastery of the Great Relic.

The Saṅgharāja, Dōn, died on 23rd September, 1842, at the age of eighty-one years. In May of the following year, the king named as his successor the abbot of Wat Rājapurama, Nakh (Nāga), aged seventy-eight years, who was Sōmdēt Phra:Yamaratana. Unlike his predecessor, the patriarch did not take up his abode at Wat Mahādhātu. The curse delivered by its founder against any person not of his own family who might dare to touch the buildings which he had constructed, had caused the monastery to be left uncared for since 1803. The pious king Phra:Nāng Klāo, who had been occupied since the beginning of his reign in the restoration and the decoration of the monasteries in the capital, had never included this monastery in his plans. It was in vain that the abbot and chief monks had repeatedly pointed out to the king the disagreeable effect of this dilapidated monastery, situated close to the royal palace, and had urged him to make it a worthy counterpart to Wat Phó which had been entirely rebuilt and embellished. He had always refused to incur the terrible maledictions of the former second king. The abandoned monastery threatened to become a ruin. The roofs of the religious edifices collapsed, while the *kuti*, were barely habitable. The buildings were in such a ruinous state that the

king had discontinued the annual *kathina* gifts. The new patriarch insisted once again that the monastery which was his official residence, should be restored to its original condition. The king was then nearly sixty years old, an age which is considered pretty ripe among the Siamese, and he replied that now that his life had almost reached its end, the power of the curse which he would incur, seemed less fearful to him and the work of restoration should shortly be put in hand. The Saṅgharāja, Nakh, remained for the present as abbot of Wat Rājapurāṇa, while the duties of abbot of Wat Mahādhātu were performed by Phra:Ñānatrāiloka, Phūk, who had been the assistant of the previous Saṅgharāja. The work of restoring the Monastery of the Great Relic was started as promised, but before it was completed, the Saṅgharāja, Nakh, died in 1849. His successor, Prince Paramānujita, who was nominated two years later, was abbot of Wat Phō and he remained as head of that important monastery. Wat Mahādhātu, which had been the traditional residence of the patriarch for half-a-century, now ceased to be so.

The restoration of Wat Mahādhātu was begun in 1844 or 1845. Complete reconstruction was necessary, and in several instances quite new work was put in. The principal edifices were reconstructed according to the original plan, the Bôt being slightly higher than before. The only noteworthy change was made in the Vihāra: it was given a porch in front and at the back, thus attaining the same length as the Bôt: but as it had not been widened, there remained the same dissymetry between it and the Maṇḍapa. In order that the structure might be lengthened, the pair of *prang* behind the Vihāra had to be moved to a northerly site behind the gallery. The library and the belfry were also moved, as mentioned above. The gallery does not seem to have been altered at all, though the towers above the doors date from this period. The most important alterations were in that part of the monastery where the monks lived. A new residence was built for the patriarch; it included a large building for his private use, a rest-pavilion symmetrical to the library, and seven *kuṭṭi* for the patriarch's followers, the whole being surrounded by a wall. The monks' quarters were all built of brick. They were divided into thirteen groups, some of which con-

tained a large pavilion to serve as a library, a hall for prayer and a refectory. There were additional rows of *kuṭṭī* ranged along the monastery walls. The new plan intended to provide ample accommodation for one thousand monks and novices. Thirty *sālā* were also constructed, mainly round the walls of the gallery and on either side of the principal entrance of the Monastery, on the site which is now occupied by the National Library.

The work of restoration was practically completed, when by a strange stroke of fate, King Phra: Nāṅ Klāo died on 2nd April, 1851. Prince Mongkut, who was abbot of Wat Pavaraniveṇa, was called upon to ascend the throne, in circumstances which will be related elsewhere. The work of restoration was finished by the new king. During his reign, he had only built a small Vihāra beside the Bodhi tree brought from Ceylon, on the very spot where he had lived during his first term in the priesthood. The building is nowadays known as *Vihāra bodhilaṅkā* or the Vihāra of the Bodhi tree of Ceylon.

When King Mongkut thus came into power, his former colleague Phra: Buddhaghosācārya, Xīm, then abbot of Wat Moli-lokya, became alarmed lest the new monarch should now take his revenge for the affronts which he had received, and was preparing to flee to his birthplace, Phētchābūri. The king, however, had appreciated the experience of his adversary, and after raising him to the rank of *Sōmāṅgā*, appointed him to be head of the Monastery of the Great Relic. Such a generous pardon inspired the prelate to compose a poem in Pali in praise of the royal clemency, and this so gratified the king that it was thenceforth included in the customary prayers intoned at official ceremonies. The new abbot died seven years later, at the age of seventy-four years. His successors were for some time dignitaries of a much lower rank, and the monastery gradually decreased in importance, while the majority of the *kuṭṭī* were not inhabited. Wat Phō became the centre of religious life, and later Wat Pavaraniveṇa, the residences of the patriarchs.

At the beginning of King Chulalongkorn's reign, however, Wat Mahādhātu was an object of the royal favour. Since its founda-

tion, the monastery had been the place at which were burnt the sanies collected from the urns in which the bodies of kings and princes of high rank were placed during the sometimes lengthy period before cremation. From 1877 onward, the Wat became the site for the actual cremation of royalty, in place of Wat Pavaraniveça which proved to be not sufficiently spacious for the ceremonies on such occasions.

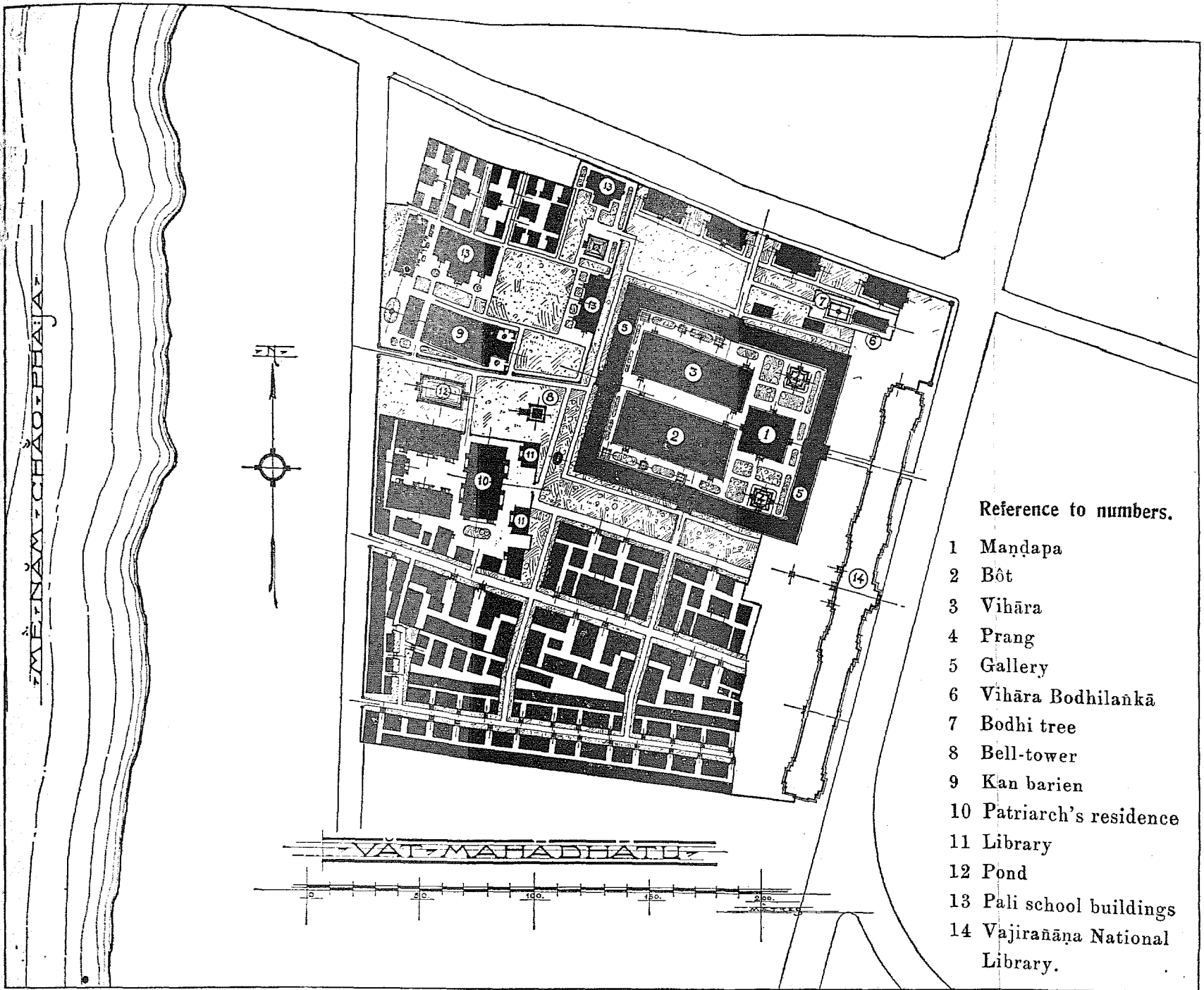
It was not until 1889 that the Monastery of the Great Relic recovered some importance. The king appointed as head of the monastery a famous Pali scholar from Wat Aruṇa, the Phra:Devamoli, Dīṭ, then aged fifty-two years. He was to give very active assistance in preparing the first printed edition of the Siamese Tripiṭaka and to receive in 1900 the title of Sōṃdēt Phra:Vanaratana. In the same year, 1889, the king had found a home in the *sālā* belonging to the Wat for the religious school which had been housed within the precincts of the Royal palace since the beginning of the Bangkok period, following a tradition dating back to the first kings of Ayuthia and even to the Sūkhōthāi period. Instruction was given to the monks by six lay professors chosen from among the royal "pandits" and paid from the royal purse. In May, 1893, at the time of tension between the French and the Siamese, the school had to make way temporarily for an organisation hurriedly formed by ladies of the Siamese aristocracy to care for the wounded. This organisation was at first called the Society of the Red Uṇṇāloma and was the beginning of the powerful Red Cross organisation found in Siam to day. The school was moved into the Bôt.

The heir to the throne, Prince Mahāvajirūphisa, died in the following year. The king decided to use a portion of the large funds set aside for the funeral expenses in the construction of a permanent building where the urn might be placed during the preliminary ceremonies. It was to be erected on the edge of the site for royal cremations, along the eastern boundary of Wat Mahādhātu. Once the cremation was finished, this building could be used to house the school of Pali, but it could also be used for similar cremations in the future, and expenses would thus be considerably reduced. In carrying out this plan, the Red Cross organisation was moved out, and all

the eastern portion of the outer wall of the monastery was demolished, as were also the various *sālā* and *kaṭṭi* which had been built in the space between that portion of the wall and the cloister. When the site had been prepared, the king laid the first stone with due solemnity in September, 1896. The work proceeded but slowly, and when the cremation of the heir to the throne took place in 1900, even when King Chulalongkorn himself died in 1910, the building was not yet ready for use. Eventually, on the completion of the building, King Rāma VI installed there in 1916 the Vajirānāna National Library, which had been founded in 1881 by King Chulalongkorn and other children of King Mongkut, but up to that time had had no abode of its own.

At the beginning of 1897, the king handed over to the abbot of Wat Mahādhātu a sum of Tes. 80,000 from the estate of Prince Mahāvajirūphisa, for the complete restoration of the monastery. To commemorate this generous gift, the pediments of the Vihāra were decorated with ornaments in stucco representing the crown of the heirs to the throne. In 1898, the Pandits' school, which was the embryo of the Chulalongkorn University, was moved to Wat Sudarçana. The abbot of Wat Mahādhātu then founded a school of Pali for the instruction of the inmates of the monastery, for which the teachers were drawn from the ranks of the monks themselves. The school was housed in the buildings, constructed during the third reign to be the residence of the Saṅgharāja; for this purpose, these buildings underwent some alterations. Since 1912, the school has been under Phra:Dhammatrailokācārya, Heng, who was appointed abbot of the monastery on the death of Sōmdēt Phra:Vamaratana, Dīṭ, on 14th August, 1923, and has received in 1929, the title of Phra:Vimaladhamma. Under the direction of this learned prelate, the school of Pali has steadily prospered, and it is now considered one of the most important centres of religious teaching in Siam.

The Monastery of the Great Relic belongs to the old unreformed sect, the Mahānikāya, but since 1914, the inmates have clothed themselves after the style of the monks of the Dhammayāttika order. This was doubtless a movement towards the union of the two sects,



Reference to numbers.

- 1 Maṇḍapa
- 2 Bôt
- 3 Vihāra
- 4 Prang
- 5 Gallery
- 6 Vihāra Bodhilankā
- 7 Bodhi tree
- 8 Bell-tower
- 9 Kan barien
- 10 Patriarch's residence
- 11 Library
- 12 Pond
- 13 Pali school buildings
- 14 Vajirañāna National Library.

which have ceased for a long time past to be rivals. In discipline and in learning, Wat Mahādhātu has nothing to desire from the best monasteries of the reformed sect.

