Ten Jātakas at Wat Ban Khong, Ratchaburi

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Abstract—In this article, we describe two sets of wood panel paintings kept at Wat Ban Khong in Ratchaburi province. Dating from the Sixth Reign, the paintings are latter-day representatives of an older genre that formerly was popular in central Siam. They stand at the cusp of tradition and modernity, of the provincial and the urban. A polychrome set depicts the first nine of the Ten Jātakas, while a gilt lacquer set is devoted to the tenth and last, Vessantara or the Great Birth. Our aim is to bring these paintings to the attention and appreciation of the interested public. Space does not permit us to go into social and art-historical details or to compare conception and technique to the Jātaka paintings of the region or the capital. We hope that this presentation of visual culture will lead specialists to give more attention to the local paintings of the period.

Wat Ban Khong is a temple in Photharam district, Ratchaburi province (วัดบ้านฆ้อง อ.โพธาราม จ.ราชบุรี). The Mae Klong River runs through the district and along its banks are temples and remains that bear witness to centuries of cultural activity. Several Mon communities, who came as refugees from war and strife across the mountains in what is today Myanmar (formerly Burma), were established from the late Ayutthaya period onwards. In Ratchaburi, there are a number of Lao communities that date to the 19th century, a period of intermittent warfare as the Siamese state, recovering from the disastrous destruction of Ayutthaya, extended its sphere of power and trade. Ban Khong was settled by a group brought from Vientiane after Chao Anu's unsuccessful struggle with Bangkok in the 1820s.

Wat Ban Khong does not stand out in terms of monuments or architectural antiquities, but is remarkable in that it has no less than three sets of wood panel paintings. These are displayed in a renovated teaching hall (ศาลาการเปรียญ *sala kan parian*). A stone Buddha image in the hall belongs to the Ayutthaya period, and may point to the existence of an earlier temple, before the arrival of the Lao migrants. Generally speaking, local history is poorly served by mainstream or official historiography and there are few surveys or overviews to consult for the background of the area.

Wood panel paintings were a major contribution to 19th and 20th century visual art. They are testaments to how the Ten Jātakas and Vessantara Jātaka were received at the time in the rural communities of central Siam. They occupy a space between the age of Bangkok's grand murals and the rise of commercial lithographic printing that disseminated visual culture in newly standardized forms. These were, in turn, imitated and disseminated throughout the kingdom in new generations of 20th century wall

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paintings.[1] The wood panel paintings are precious records of how classical Theravāda narratives were interpreted by Siamese artists and countryside/market town communities. These formed networks of "textual communities" that received, conserved, transformed, and transmitted a vibrant story literature.

The wood panel paintings were mainly kept inside, where they were not exposed to the elements; as a result, the extant sets have the advantage of being complete and reasonably well preserved. The panels were painted for about half a century across central and other regions of Siam and the different sets enable us to trace the social passage of visual aesthetics from the late classical to the early modern. The paintings bear witness to the creativity and dynamics of market town and rural communities—local imaginaires in contrast to, competition with, and imitation of those favoured by the urban elites. The paintings are little known and deserve to be integrated into the narrative of Thai art and painting.[2] Their social and artistic value needs to be recognized and at the same time the paintings and their environments need to be carefully preserved and not subjected to the wear and tear of excessive visits.

One set of the wood panels at Wat Ban Khong is done in polychrome while the other two are done in gilt lacquer. Nearly all wood panel paintings known to us are painted in polychrome, that is, in natural powders (สีฝุ่น *si fun*) made from plants and minerals. The two lacquer sets at Wat Ban Khong are rare, if not unique. It goes without saying that lacquer arts were well developed in Siam and neighbouring countries. A famous structural masterpiece is the lacquer pavilion now in the grounds of the Suan Pakkad Palace Museum, Bangkok.[3] Masterworks in lacquer include the large standing screens in the Phutthaisawan Chapel of the Front Palace, now in the grounds of the National Museum, Bangkok, and the numerous scripture cabinets in the National Library and various museum and temple collections. Many of these are devoted to the subject of this essay, the Jātakas. Gilt lacquer work is after all ubiquitous, from lacquered Buddha images to ritual utensils and delicate ornaments.

The Wat Ban Khong paintings are undated, but belong stylistically to the Sixth or early Seventh Reigns. The first of the gilt lacquer panels seems to bear a date: inscribed on a gable is พ ๖๘ *pho* 68; when read as Buddhist Era 2468, this is equivalent to 1925, the last year of the Sixth Reign. This date is consonant with the style. The paintings are the work of teams of artists. The names of two are given en passant in two of the inscriptions, but the artists are otherwise unknown.[4] We do not know whether they were local residents or itinerant artists, and we hope that further research might discover more about them. Whoever they were, the artists were steeped in the time-honoured narrative conventions of Thai painting and had mastered the art of reading and representing the Thai narrative vocabulary. Royal and divine figures are graceful and glittering, clad in rich textiles, ornate jewellery and elaborate, towering crowns. The gestures of

[1] See Bonnie Pacala Brereton, "On the "7-Elevenization" of Buddhist Murals in Thailand".

[2] For a sampling of Thai wood panel paintings of the Tapussa–Bhallika episode, see Skilling, "Tapussa and Bhallika in Thai Painting."

[3] See recently Young, "Lacquer Pavilion".

[4] See Ten Jātakas, Panels 11 and 12, illustrating the same story, Brahma Nārada.

dance mirror the emotional tone, the *rasa*, of the scenes. The figure of the Brahman is immediately recognizable from his costume and style: he wears a white costume and keeps his hair tied up in a bun at the back, a style adopted by Thai Brahmans up to the present day.

The cities boast ornate pavilions and palatial buildings with arching roofs; they are sweet cities of dreaming spires and soaring multistoried towers, some in hybrid European or Chinese styles. Palaces are secure behind high crenellated walls and parapets, well appointed with clock towers and well guarded by stiff soldiers in uniforms of the early decades of the 20th century. The architecture harks back to the 19th century urbanism that flourished from the Third Reign. Narrative scenes are partitioned by zigzagging walls; the surrounding landscape is one of lush forests receding towards distant mountains. The human life of village and town is not neglected, and viewers are diverted with miniature erotic scenes glimpsed through open windows.

The artists delight in nature's exuberant beauty and they artfully capture the delicacy of flowers and trees, the solidity of rocks and boulders and the majestic sweep of cliffs and mountains. Curly clouds delineate divine spaces in the heavens. The *Vessantara* gives great scope for artists to test their skills on the natural environment, including wild and domestic animals, the former being carefully depicted in the thickets and boughs of the jungle and the latter in the human environs. The setting of the built landscape is carefully coded, from simple traditional village houses to grandiose pretensions of the urban rendered in perspective. In all of these, the artists draw on received traditions that they would have learned from their teachers, from temple murals and illustrated books, and from their own experience of the conurbations that burgeoned from the latter half of the 19th to the first decades of the 20th century. Another traditional skill is the collapsing of time and distance, as for example in the scene in which a Brahman receives a chariot in the forest and immediately arrives home with it in Kaliṅga (Panel 2). This is also a feature of Pāli narrative itself.

How did monks, artists, and communities, what today we call "the public", know the Jātakas, especially the Great Ten? This is a perpetually pending question and this is not the place to try to solve it. In premodern Siam, and well into the 20th century, the educated person was not well-*read* but well-*versed* (Sanskrit: *bahuśruta*; Pali: *bahussuta*; Thai: พหูสูต *phahusut*), one who has heard or learned much. The great paintings brim with narrative detail. But how were they transmitted? There are Pāli manuscripts, but few mastered the language sufficiently to read the ornate South Asian classics. Buddhist narrative circulated orally, through public sermons, which were a major vehicle for the transmission of knowledge: the *Vessantara*, for example, was widely broadcast through the medium of long vernacular sermons, usually in rhythmic and sonorous verse. There is plenty of manuscript evidence for this, as well as the story of Phra Malai—Mālaya Thera—the thaumaturge, who visits heavens and hells and returns to earth with a message from the future Buddha Metteyya that endorses the merit and power of listening to the *Vessantara Jātaka*. Another source may be "recitation poems" (กลอนสวด *klon suat*), lively verse tellings of Jātaka and other narratives. By the early 20th century, Jātakas and other literary texts circulated in small printed books issued serially by presses like that at Wat Ko (โรงพิมพ์ วัดเกาะ). We do not know what textual or oral traditions were

followed by the artists of Wat Ban Khong. For the convenience of international readers, who do not know Thai, we refer to the Pali Text Society edition and the recent English translation by Appleton and Shaw.

Wood panel paintings at Wat Ban Khong

Polychrome:
Ten jātakas on 13 panels (average size 250 x 50 cm)
Gilt lacquer:
Vessantara Jātaka: 13 chapters on 8 panels (average size 250 x 40 cm)
Life of the Buddha: 23 panels

In this article, we present the two sets of Jātaka paintings (we leave the Buddha's life story for another occasion). There is much more to these long and complex stories than we can explain in this brief communication: we have tried to limit ourselves to what is shown in the paintings, fleshing out the accounts with details from the stories themselves in hope of making our summaries coherent. We have had to leave out the dreams, prodigies and earthquakes, the heroic and treacherous deeds, the psychological nuances and the many delightful details that enliven the stories. These cannot be summarized, and we hope readers will go on to read the whole stories.[5] The poetry is irreplaceable, but it is just this that is translated into the visual poetry of the paintings.

The Ten Jātakas

The Pāli Jātaka collection is a section of the Tripiṭaka or "Pāli canon". It preserves 547 individual poems, each spoken in relation to a single past life of Gotama Buddha. The poems are arranged in ascending numerical order, from "chapters" with one single verse up to the closing chapter, the *Great Chapter* (*Mahānipāta*), which contains the ten longest Jātakas. This final chapter is grand and great indeed—grand in size (596 pages in Romanized Pāli, 639 pages in English translation), grand in its poetry and prose, grand in philosophy, romance and colourful action. In Thai, the group of Ten Jātakas is commonly called the "Ten lives" or "Ten Births".[6] The first set of panels presented here depicts the first nine of this series of ten. Why does the set depict only nine stories? This is because the tenth and last of the group—the story of *Vessantara*, known as the *Great Birth* or *Great Life* (มหาชาติ *Mahājāti*)—has a special status and is often transmitted autonomously or independently. At Wat Ban Khong, it is depicted separately by different artists in a different medium, that is to say, in gilt lacquer. We do not know the reasons for the choice. In large-scale mural paintings, the Ten Jātakas are frequently depicted by grand tableaux, one Jātaka per bay, equal in size. Sometimes, however, additional bays are consecrated to *Vessantara* alone; in such cases, the *Great Birth* is painted in further narrative detail. There are many variants and combinations;

[5] The translations of the *Ten Great Birth Stories* by Appleton and Shaw are delightfully readable.

[6] *Thotsachat*, ทศชาติ, in Indic spelling *Daśajāti*: also called ทศชาติชาดก *thotsachat chadok*.

the variety may depend on available space—the size of the structure and the number of bays—or on the preferences of abbots or sponsors and lay members of the temple community. Foundational documents of any sort that might explain such choices are very rare.

The *Great Chapter* (*Mahānipāta*) is one of Buddhism's most formidable literary monuments and one of India's great Prakrit (that is, non-Sanskrit) verse and story collections. It has been maintained and transmitted for more than 2,000 years by the Theravaṃsa monastic lineage, and the *Ten Lives* are frequently depicted as a set in mural and manuscript painting. According to the text, Sākyamuni Buddha relates the stories on different occasions at different sites, like the Jetavana in Sāvatthī, Vulture Peak at Rājagaha, and so on. The stories themselves belong to Sākyamuni's deep biography as a Bodhisatta over countless past lives, and they took place ages ago in various familiar places, most of them seen as precursors of the great north Indian cities of the Buddha's own time. Divine figures intervene in various ways in the course of the events, most commonly Sakka or Indra, Lord of the Gods. Goddesses feature prominently in the plots of two stories of the *Great Ten*.[7] Each Jātaka is associated with one of the ten perfections of the Pāli tradition, but the perfections are not built into the stories, and the several exegetical traditions disagree as to which perfection the individual stories feature.[8]

Table 1: Locations and divine interventions

Jātaka	*Location of past events*	*Divine figures*
1. Temīya	Vārānasī	—
2. Mahājanaka	Mithilā	goddess Maṇimekhalā
3. Suvaṇṇasāma	Vārānasī	goddess Bahusodarī
4. Nemī	Mithilā	Indra (= Sakka)
5. Mahosatha	Mithilā	Sakka
6. Bhūridatta	Nāga realm/ Vārānasī	—
7. Candakumāra	Pupphavatī = Vārānasī	Sakka
8. Brahma Nārada	Mithilā	Bodhisatta as Brahma Nārada
9. Vidhūra	Nāga realm/Kuru	—
10. Vessantara	Jetuttara in Sivi	Sakka, Vessukamma[9]

[7] In addition to these two goddesses, an unnamed goddess, who inhabits the royal parasol, advises Temīya on how to avoid kingship (Appleton and Shaw, I, p. 59); a similar parasol goddess features in Mahosatha and in the story of Vidhūra, an unnamed female "guardian deity", who had been his mother three births ago, uses her power to guide King Dhanañjaya in the dice match. Appleton and Shaw (Vol. I, Introduction, p. 19) note how the course of these stories is completely turned around through the interventions of these benign goddesses. The concept of the "goddess of the parasol", or "white sunshade", reminds one of the Sītātapatrā of Dhāraṇī literature.

[8] For this, see Appleton and Shaw, *Ten Great Birth Stories*, Vol. I, pp. 4–7, with the useful Table 2.

[9] Variously spelt: Vessakamma, Vissakamma, Sanskrit Viṣṇukarma. See note on Vissakamma at Appleton and Shaw, *Ten Great Birth Stories*, Vol. 1, p. 208.

Panel 1. Temīya

The story of Temīya is distributed over three panels. Temīya is a parable about the moral agony of a young and sensible boy or, more broadly, about the moral consequences of deeds. The story reads from left to right. The Bodhisatta is the son of the king of Varanasi; the first scene shows the young Bodhisatta seated on his father's lap in a

Ten Jātakas Panel 1: Temīya

Ten Jātakas Panel 2: Temīya

royal pavilion before the city walls. Accused miscreants are brought before the king, who judges the cases, sentencing some of them to mutilation or death. The sensitive boy observes all this and experiences a moral crisis: he realizes that when he grows up and becomes king, he will have to follow suit—that is, he will have to make moral decisions that entail harming or killing other people. This will lead him to hell: in fact, he remembers how he spent his previous birth but one in hell for 80,000 years as karmic

retribution for the deeds he committed as king in the very same city—on the very same throne, so to speak. Determined to avoid having to succeed to the throne, the young prince makes a momentous and dramatic decision: from this moment on he will not speak or react to sounds or other stimuli, but will pretend to be totally deaf and dumb so that king and court will deem him incapable of ruling. His father is decidedly unhappy

with this situation—he wants an heir and a successor, not a passive "golden statue", and he suspects that the boy is malingering. He has the prince tested in various ways to make him respond and speak, trying to bring him back to the everyday world. This happens over several years as the boy grows and is tested in a dozen ways, which the painting condenses to a handful.

The day Temīya was born, 500 boys were born in the city and the king appointed

them to be the prince's retinue, and they are seen in several of the scenes. Watching with the queen from behind a curtain, the king sends a troupe of beautiful dancers to seduce the young prince and then sends—in the order of the painting, which is different from that of the Pāli text—a fierce elephant, venomous serpents and a man brandishing a sword to test him. But all to no avail: the prince doesn't bat an eyelid, but sits calmly in meditation. In one other test, hidden conch blowers sound their conches at the same instant in a terrific blast—but again, the prince does not react. One day his mother begs the king to appoint their son as king; at first, the king refuses, but in the end he relents, and allows him to rule for seven days. Here the prince is shown mounted in state on a

Ten Jātakas Panel 3: Temīya

white elephant, but just as the fearsome tests did not in the least affect him, so he does not allow this elevation to power and glory to entice him.

There is an inscription in a lozenge to the right, but it is not fully legible.

Panel 2. Temīya

The king orders a charioteer named Sunanda to carry Temīya away, and take him out of the city and execute him. To the left, his mother, the queen, looks on from a portico and weeps. In the centre, the chariot is readied and, to the right, the prince is driven away.

There is an inscription but it is effaced.

Panel 3. Temīya

In the upper left corner, the chariot arrives at the charnel ground. Sunanda sets the horses free to graze and gets down to his morbid task of digging a grave for the prince. The young prince sees that the time has come to take control of his fate. To show his prowess and authority, he stands up; with a single hand, he raises the royal chariot over his head and spins it like a toy. In hundreds of paintings in Siam and beyond, this single emblematic picture alone is sufficient to signify the *Temīya Jātaka*. The charioteer is dumbfounded; he kneels down and the prince announces that he is not dumb or deaf, but fully functional. The conclusion is shown synoptically in the last frame. The king

and his retinue leave the city and come to see the Bodhisatta, who sits in a pavilion and teaches them the Dhamma.

When neighbouring kings learn that the city of Varanasi has no king or protector, they march to seize it. They go in search of the former king: but when they approach his hermitage the Bodhisatta rises into the sky and teaches them the Dhamma.

An inscription in a lozenge below the pavilion states that "the story of Temīya is finished, just this".[10]

[10] Stories end with statements like this, and several other inscriptions imitate this format. In Indian manuscript practice, titles are given not at the beginning but at the end. Thai practice was to copy the concluding colophon statement in full and place it as a title on the outside of the first leaf. The title folio seems to announce that the work is finished before it has started, but this is just a convention. The panel painters appear to follow a similar methodology: the statement does not mean the story is finished, but "this is the story called such and such".

Panel 4. Mahājanaka

A single panel is devoted to *Mahājanaka*. In this story, the Bodhisatta is a prince who loses his kingdom and grows up in exile. Determined to regain his rightful throne, he goes to sea in a merchant ship in hope of getting the funds to raise an army. But the ship sinks in a fierce storm. The narrative, to be read from right to left, starts here with the shipwreck. The sun rising from the sea indicates that it is daybreak, as the inscription

Ten Jātakas Panel 4: Mahājanaka

Ten Jātakas Panel 5: Suvaṇṇasāma

mentions. The Bodhisatta is the sole survivor and he swims across the deep ocean (a metaphor for saṃsāra) for seven days, hoping to reach land. Passing through the skies, the beautiful goddess Maṇīmekhalā sees the shipwreck below and sees that a man of merit is displaying extraordinary determination as he swims to safety. She sweeps down, gathers the prince in her arms, and flies to land where she sets him down on a large flat rock to rest and recover his senses. She then flies off and has no further role in the story.

Unbeknownst to the prince, Maṇimekhalā has put him down in his own kingdom, Mithilā, where the king, and usurper, has just died without heir. Custom has it that in such an exigency, an empty royal chariot is sent out, without a charioteer, followed closely by a team of observers. The horse is allowed to follow its nose, to wander at will until it discovers the future king. When the chariot comes up to the sleeping prince, it halts. The royal chaplain inspects the sleeper's feet and sees that they bear lucky

marks—this must indeed be the man of destiny, our rightful king! The prince wakes up to learn that he is soon to be king, and he is taken in the chariot into the city of Mithilā where he is crowned.

An inscription on the sail states that "the junk breaks up in the middle of the ocean". Another on the disk of the rising sun states "the sun is just rising".

Panel 5. Suvaṇṇasāma

The story of golden Sāma is presented on a single panel that reads from right to left. Young Sāma lives with his blind parents in the forest and devotes himself to their care. They are ascetics (ฤๅษี *reusi* = Sanskrit: *ṛṣi*) and wear the regulation rishi's costume of the Thai imagination, leopard skin clothes and a tall cap. At the right, Sāma gathers fruits to feed his parents, his baskets on the ground. But this is not a normal day and the youth is in grave danger: just as Sāma, surrounded by trusting deer, goes down to the river to fetch water for his parents, Piliyakkha, King of Varanasi, arrives on the scene, out on a royal hunt. The king draws his bow and looses an arrow at Sāma who falls to the ground. A goddess named Bahusodarī (also spelt Bahusundarī), who had been the Bodhisatta's mother seven lives before, observes the events from Mt. Gandhamādana. She sends her thoughts to the king, who rues his deed, asks the Bodhisatta—wounded and ostensibly

dying—where he lives, and promises to go there and take care of his parents. He then leaves the Bodhisatta for dead. The narrative resumes to the left. Bearing a pot of water, the king goes to the hermitage to find Sāma's parents. He leads the blind couple by hand back to their son's body; they weep over him and the king laments. His parents invoke the power of Sāma's virtues and their own merit and Sāma revives.

An inscription in a lozenge about mid-panel, somewhat effaced, reads "The story (*vatthu*) of Suvarṛṇasāma".

Ten Jātakas Panel 6: Nemirāja

Ten Jātakas Panel 7: Nemirāja

Panel 6. Nemirāja

The story is set in the great walled city of Mithilā. On the left, King Nemi gives charity: he has a servitor sit atop the palace wall and scatter gems to the eager crowd below. They scramble to get a share: one woman holds up a basket; two men, whose Chinese ethnicity is signalled by their long braided queues, hold up Chinese-style straw hats; and a Thai holds up his European top hat.

At centre stage, King Nemi sits in his palace. A damaged inscription between the two stairways identifies the city as Mithilā. To the left, Nemi performs his royal duties for his subjects, who gather before him. To the right, Indra, marked by his green halo and a label on the wall beside him that reads "Phra In", descends and informs Nemi that

he has brought his charioteer, Mātalī, to take the king on a tour of the heavens and hells. Mātalī waits with a chariot drawn by two white steeds in an entrance court at the front of the palace.

An inscription in a lozenge at the foot of a large leafy tree announces that "this panel depicts Phraya Nemirāja". The chariot sets off and comes to a fork where the routes are indicated by writing on the ground: "the route to the heavens" (upper, left) and "the route to the hells" (lower, right).[11] A pair of devas watches from above, their hands cupped in homage.

Panel 7. Nemirāja

The panel reads from right to left. Seated comfortably in Indra's chariot, King Nemi passes through a gruesome landscape in which the tortures of the hells are in full swing. At centre, King Yama sits in judgement in a pavilion. He sits comfortably, bare torsoed, the perfect picture of a high-ranking Thai nobleman; an inscription below the verandah says "The Great Yamapāla". Seated below and before Yama is an attendant, who holds a "book of deeds" that records the actions, good or bad, that individuals have committed

[11] In Buddhist cosmology, there are multiple hells and heavens to match the variety of deeds of Homo sapiens and other species.

throughout their lives. Behind him bare-torsoed men crouch apprehensively, awaiting their sentences.

To the left, a gate leads to Indra's heaven; an inscription on the outer wall identifies this as "the heavens". The green-skinned King of Heaven turns his attention to his left and listens as an attendant reads out from a book of deeds. Behind the attendant kneel a group of men with hands raised respectfully. Behind Indra, two of his queens peep out from their windows. To Indra's right sit the divine maidens, beautiful, composed and sumptuously dressed. An inscription on the wall identifies them as "heavenly maidens". In the background, gods sit in their palatial *vimāna* or divine mansions. The scene depicts the promise held out for those who do good: to dally in a divine abode with beautiful maidens for long ages. Like most of the literature of the age, the Jātaka is distinctly oriented towards the male members of the species.

Ten Jātakas Panel 8: Mahosatha

Panel 8. Mahosatha[12]

Mahosatha is a long and intricate story replete with riddles, intrigue and dramatic military adventures. The Bodhisatta is Mahosatha, the sage advisor of the King of Mithilā; he is a master strategist, who uses his wisdom to guide king and court through the whirlwind course of events. The early part recounts Mahosatha's birth, youth and early career, during which he ingeniously solves a succession of cases and riddles—twenty according to a verse summary (*uddāna*), but there are more to follow—while the latter part recounts his achievements as advisor to the King of Mithilā during a massive and sustained invasion by King Cūḷani Brahmadatta of Pañcāla. This latter section, named after a strategic tunnel designed by Mahosatha, takes up about about ninety of the 149 pages of the story as a whole, and gives the Jātaka its alternate name, "The Great Tunnel".[13] However, Panel 8 passes over the familiar scenes of the mural

[12] We thank Sarah Shaw (who translated the *Mahosathajātaka* in *Ten Great Birth Stories*) and Arthid Sheravanichkul (Chulalongkorn University) for their comments and suggestions in general, and on Panels 8 and 9 in particular.

[13] That is, the whole of the *Mahā-ummaggakhaṇḍa* (Faussböll, *The Jātaka*, VI: 389–466) is devoted to the story, which really runs to the end of the Jātaka (that is, pp. 389–478), taking up eighty-nine pages. The entire

representations. Rather, it depicts a series of events in a spacious and bucolic countryside. These include the Bodhisatta's construction of a splendid hall as a seven-year old and the start of his romance with Amarā. These scenes are not commonly represented in Thai mural painting.

The story reads from right to left. At the far right, at the very edge of the panel, outside the perimeter walls, a cluster of women kneel respectfully with legs folded to the side and hands raised and clasped together, paying homage to an unseen object of veneration. There is no hint of what they might be worshipping and we are at a loss to interpret the mysterious scene. Further on is the rest hall (*sālā*) that Mahosatha conceived, designed and constructed to protect himself and his companions from the weather when they play. His companions are 1,000 boys, who were born to merchant families in Mithilā the day he was born and appointed by the king to be his entourage. The king gave ornaments

to all of them, and in the painting the boys wear necklaces, armlets, and headbands that signify this gift. Inside the walls, Mahosatha sits in bejewelled costume on a throne at the front of an open hall while young boys play inside and outside the hall. On the wall outside is an inscription announcing that this is "the story of Mahosatha".

The middle section depicts several scenes in the open air. In the upper register, a young couple, decked in fine clothes, face each other, the man holding aloft a parasol as the woman extends her hand to give him an unidentified object taken from a bowl that she holds at her waist. When the Bodhisatta first meets his future spouse, Amarā, she is carrying a bowl of rice gruel to take to her father in the fields, and she gives some to Mahosatha. This seems to be the incident illustrated here.[14]

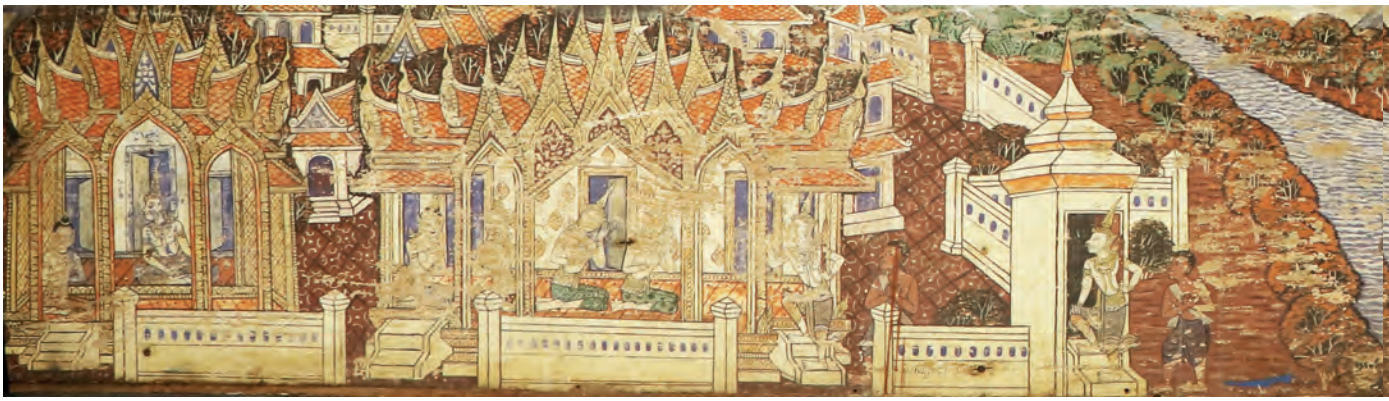
The left-hand portion of the panel is taken up by a prosperous village surrounded by a low white wall with several gateways. This is Mahosatha's birthplace, the East Market Town, and here his father, the merchant, Sirivaḍḍha, lives with his wife. A number of activities are going on, but they are hard to identify. At the left, a man enters through

Jātaka runs from pp. 329–478, that is, it is 149 pages long.

[14] See Cowell, *Jātaka,* VI, pp. 364–367. We thank Sarah Shaw for proposing the identification.

the tallest gate and seems to be received by a woman.[15] He wears a hat, a long-sleeved smock and loose trousers.

To the left of the middle gate stands a man with his hand raised, fingers bunched; to the right stands a woman with her hand held up, palm open. This seems to illustrate the key scene in which Mahosatha meets and communicates with his future wife, Amarā, for the first time: he uses hand gestures to find out whether this beautiful girl, whom he has met along the road, is married or single.[16] He raises his arm and clenches his hand;[17] the girl immediately understands that he is asking whether or not she has a husband, and she responds by raising her hand with palm open to signify that she does not. At far left, the end of the panel, two women are pounding something in a pestle while a third



Ten Jātakas Panel 9: Mahosatha and Bhūridatta

woman stands with her pounder and chats with a man. Normally these would be country women pounding rice: here they might be pounding herbs to make the medicine used to cure Sirivaḍḍha's headache that had lasted for seven years. After his cure, he produces medicine to distribute to others. This might be Sirivaḍḍha's cottage industry, except that the large pestles look rather like the type used for pounding grain, while medicine is usually pounded or rubbed on a grindstone (*nisada* in the Pāli text) or in a much smaller pestle.

In sum, Panel 8 is something of a riddle: many of the details are enigmatic and we are unable to identify them. We hope that future scholars will be inspired to solve them.

Panel 9. Mahosatha and Bhūridatta

A river running though the centre divides Panel 9 into equal portions that depict the second part of Mahosatha (left) and the story of Bhūridatta (right).

The left-hand portion is set in palatial buildings that represent two different locales.

Reading from the left, the first scene is the palace at Videha: a young man sits respectfully with hands raised before a crowned figure. This must be Mahosatha meeting the king.

[15] Two figures wear this costume; we are not certain whether this has any particular significance.

[16] Here the two are not on the road, but in the village: this may be an adaptation of convenience.

[17] The text describes this as a "fist", *muṭṭhi*.

In the next portion, an elegant royal figure bearing a raised sword enters a walled city through a grand gate. He is accompanied by an attendant, who is clad in a wrapped cloth undergarment; bare-chested, he wears a scarf over his right shoulder. His hair is close-cropped and he clasps his hands at his chest. Here the King of Videha and Mahosatha go to see Cūlanī's family. An inscription on the outer wall, to the left of the gate, identifies this as "the story of Phra Mahosot". Next we see the king and his attendant inside the palace. The king mounts the steps of a pavilion with elaborate nested roofs and approaches a group of four figures: first are two ladies, who raise their left hands to their foreheads in lamentation; seated behind them are a male and a female. All wear crowns and ornaments that bespeak a royal status. The scene belongs to the

close of the action-filled story of the tunnel: the city represents the tunnel conceived and constructed by Mahosatha, and the pavilion the opulent room in which, through a variety of ruses, he has installed Cūḷanī's family—the four people seen here are the queen mother, the queen, the prince and the princess. King Videha has regained his throne and goes with Mahosatha into the tunnel to visit them. When they see their opponent come, accompanied by his sage advisor, the ladies realize that their king, Cūḷanī, has lost the battle and they bewail their fate.[18] The long and complex story of the tunnel, and the great struggle between the two kings, is represented by this single scene alone. The painter's technique is to select key narrative moments for representation: these provide the setting for the actions that follow.

The story of Bhūridatta has a long and involved introduction and a large cast made up of an extended nāga family and many others. In the painting, the story starts when the lordly nāga Bhūridatta swims up from his watery realm to practise the moral precepts on earth. He wraps himself around a magnificent termite mound and devotes himself to his spiritual exercises. Nāgas may be safe in their underwater realms, but on land they

[18] We thank Arthid Sheravanichkul for helping to identify this scene, which is also depicted on the polychrome door panel of a scripture cabinet at Wat Sala Khuean, Phetchaburi province (วัดศาลาเขื่อน จ.เพชบุรี) (information and photograph courtesy Sanprasert Panniam, Assistant Professor, Phetchaburi Rajabhat University (email, 22 August 2021). For the relevant Pāli passage, see Appleton and Shaw, T*en Great Birth Stories* I, p. 309.

are exposed to many dangers. One of these is the crafty snake charmer: in this case, a snake charmer and his companion subdue Bhūridatta with a magic spell and carry him off in a basket. The snake charmer travels through the countryside and, as he goes along, he has the captive serpent perform; people flock to see Bhūridatta dance and the snake charmer gets rich. Finally, he takes the serpent to perform for the King of Varanasi. From this point on, the snake charmer's plans unravel and, in the end, Bhūridatta is freed. He returns to his own realm and teaches the Dhamma. This dénouement is not clearly delineated, but the palace buildings at the end right may refer to it.

An inscription in a lozenge in the wilds announces that "the story of Bhūridatta is finished".

Ten Jātakas Panel 10: Prince Canda

Panel 10. Prince Canda

Ekarāja rules in Varanasi, at the time known as Pupphavatī; the Bodhisatta is born as his son, Prince Canda. The prince is viceroy and a wicked Brahman named Khaṇḍahāla is the royal chaplain. The latter persuades the king to carry out a "fourfold sacrifice" of humans and creatures: four princes, four royal ladies including his own queen, four merchants and batches of four animals: elephants, pure-bred horses and bulls. This, he promises, will ensure that the king will be reborn in paradise. The Brahman Khaṇḍahāla is an earlier birth of the Buddha's rival, Devadatta, and all he really wants to do is to kill the Bodhisatta in revenge. To mask his true intentions, Khaṇḍahāla does not single Canda out, but schedules the prince to be slaughtered along with the others. Kaṇḍahāla prepares a sacrifical ground and hastens the sacrifice.

Much of the Jātaka is taken up by evocative pleas made to the king to give up his plan, but, even though he falters a few times, in the end the king has such strong faith in Khaṇḍahāla and has such a strong desire to be reborn in heaven, that nothing and no one can dissuade him. The Brahman goes ahead with the plan and has the intended victims brought to the sacrificial ground. He draws his sword to kill Canda first, but the youth's chief queen, Candā, performs an act of truth and begs non-humans and devas for protection. Sakka hears her plea and descends with a flaming iron hammer. He demolishes the ritual pavilions and reprimands the king. Terrified, the Brahman and the king release the intended victims and call the sacrifice off.

Enraged citizens beat Khaṇḍahāla; they strip the king of his power and banish him to an outcaste village outside the city. They consecrate the prince and crown him king.

The panel, read from left to right, shows the main events that lead to the climax. Court ladies sit in a pavilion in a spacious palace courtyard and discuss or lament the fate of their relatives and loved ones. Further to the right, the ladies beg the king to spare their dear ones. To the right, Prince Canda sits in tranquil meditation on a throne above a sacrifical fire in the ritual ground prepared by the Brahman; to the side, Queen Candā weeps beneath a royal sunshade and invokes the power of truth. Indra descends from his heaven and with his hammer starts to demolish the ritual parasols and structures.

Enraged citizens, together with the animals, attack the wicked Brahman. Outside the city wall is the outcaste village to which the king is banished.

An inscription in a lozenge on the other wall announces that "*Candakumāra* is finished, complete, just so".

Ten Jātakas Panel 10: Prince Canda. Court ladies grieve

Panel 11. Brahma Nārada

Two panels are devoted to the story of Brahma Nārada. Here, in the first panel, a royal figure, with crown and ornaments, holding a sword erect in his right hand, enters a city on a chariot drawn by two horses, accompanied by a small entourage that is guarded by two soldiers bearing muskets. He seems to be headed towards a pavilion where a royal lady sits with entourage. Three of the ladies wear a matching style of court dress. An inscription on a low wall in front of the ladies, in centre foreground, announces that "the story of Phra Phrom Nārot [was painted by] the artisan Phroh".

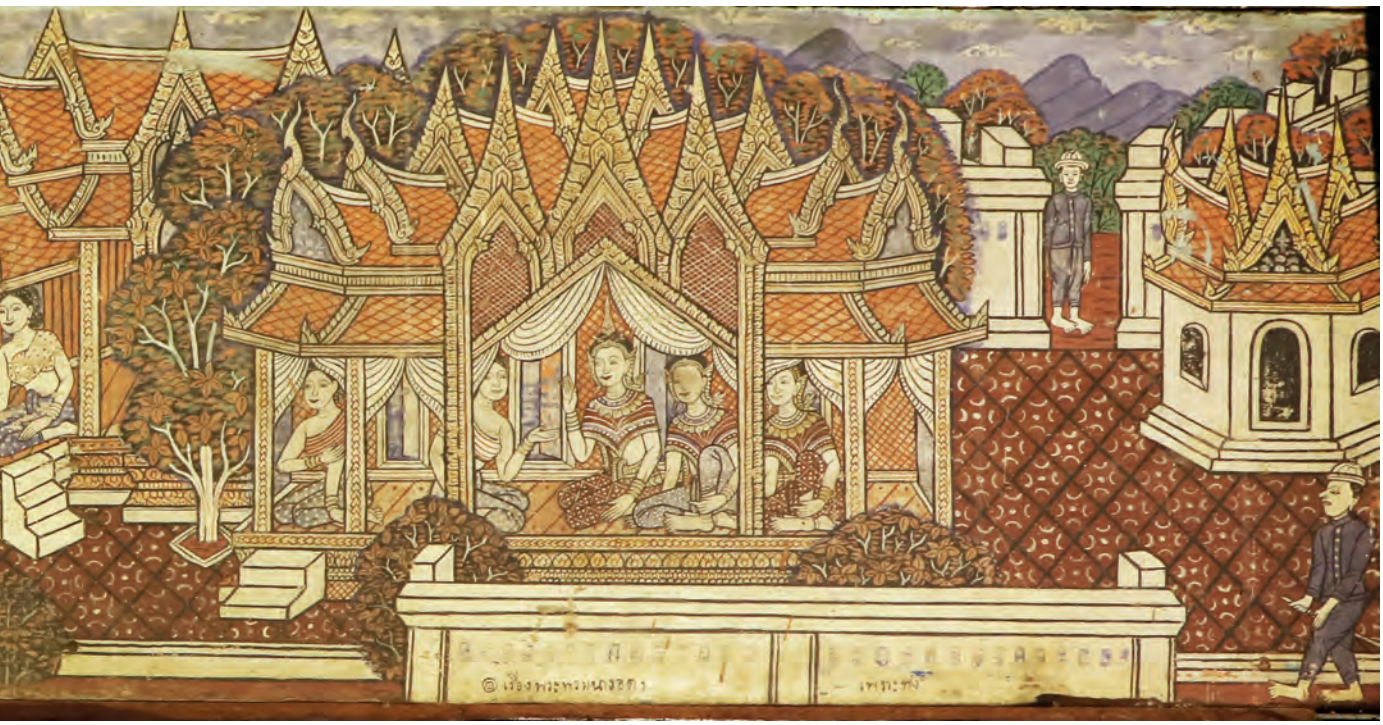
Ten Jātakas Panel 11: Brahma Nārada

The panel represents the *Nārada Jātaka*. King Aṅgati is ruling Mithilā. On a fine full moon night, the king and his companions discuss the perennial question of whether or not deeds bear fruit. The debate highlights the wrong views held by a naked ascetic, an Ājīvaka named Guṇa, who in the end converts them all, including the king, who rejects the idea that karma has any effect and decides henceforth to adopt an amoral lifestyle. He has a wise daughter, Princess Rucā, who debates with her father in verse, drawing on her own memories of past lives which themselves show that karma does bear fruit.

The Bodhisatta has been reborn as a Great Brahmā named Nārada. He surveys the earth below and realizes that the King of Aṅgati needs to be freed from his wrong views. He takes on the guise of a renouncer and, in a glorious form that brings to mind the royal bodhisatvas of Indian sculpture, he descends from the heavens and stands in

the sky in front of the king. After a lively discussion, the king gives up his wrong views and is established in moral conduct. His mission accomplished, the Bodhisatta returns to the Brahmā realm.

The story is made up of verse debates on morality, karma and rebirth, and there is little narrative action to speak of. The scene on the Wat Ban Khong panel is difficult to interpret. On the left, King Aṅgati returns to the palace with his party after visiting the naked ascetic. The right-hand side of the panel depicts his daughter, Princess Rucā, seated at the centre of a pavilion with her attendants. She raises her right hand: is it to



admonish the wayward king and wean him of his wrong views, or is it to call Nārada down to earth? The classic image of the Nārada Jātaka in Thai and other art traditions is a (usually) four-faced Brahmā descending from the heavens to the palace terrace in splendid costume, carrying a pair of baskets with a golden carrying stick over his shoulder. Here there is no such image.

Ten Jātakas Panel 12: Brahma Nārada

Panel 12. Brahma Nārada

To the left, three royal figures sit in an ornate pavilion: Princess Rucā, King Aṅgati and a haloed figure, who can only be the Bodhisatta as Brahma Nārada. The king and princess raise their clasped hands as they listen to the Bodhisatta teach the Dharma about righteousness and unrighteousness and heaven and hell. Outside the pavilion to the right, a large group of ladies raise their hands and listen respectfully. Outside the palace walls is a raised hexagonal platform on which deities stand and scatter jewels to the crowd below, who raise their open hands and tumble over each other in their frenzy to receive a portion. This scene, which reminds one of the royal *dāna* in the Ten Jātakas (*Nemi*, Panel 6) or in *Vessantara* (Panel 8), does not seem to fit into the conclusion of the story.

An inscription on the wall behind them, beside the other gate, reads "the story of Phra Brahma Nārada is finished, complete, just this. It was painted by Phra Thong Kham".

Panel 13. Vidhūrapaṇḍita

The story that follows is an uncanny romance, a bizarre and byzantine adventure starring exotic creatures from various realms. It is a love affair between a *yakkha* and a *nāginī*; its centre of gravity is the human sage Vidhūra, the steward of King Dhanañjaya at the city of Indapatta in the Kuru kingdom.[19]

In the prelude, four kings from four different realms of existence, who had been close to each other in their previous birth, go separately to a park in Kuru to observe the Uposatha in solitude: they are Sakka, king of the gods, Varuṇa, the nāga king, a king of the *supaṇṇas* (that is Garuḍas), and the human King Dhanañjaya. At the end of the day, they meet and talk. They discuss virtue and each of them claims to be superior in this quality. Dhanañjaya's steward is Vidhūra, who is renowned for his wisdom. The kings call upon him to adjudicate, and he does so in such ways that they all praise and reward him.

The nāga king returns to his palace and describes Vidhūra's wisdom and sweet voice to Vimalā, his queen; she is captivated and wants to hear his Dhamma teaching. She feels that if she asks the king to invite Vidhūra he will refuse—and indeed, the sage is so popular that 100 kings surround him to hear his Dhamma, unwilling to return to their own kingdoms. So the nāga queen adopts a drastic ruse: she feigns illness and

[19] Indapatta or Indraprastha is identified as the modern city of Delhi.

tells her husband that she "longs for Vidhūra's heart" and will die if she does not get it. "Heart" is a metaphor for Vidhūra's wisdom; the nāga queen uses the word to invest her wish with urgency. The fact that, up to the very end, the key characters all take the metaphor literally drives the drama of the plot.

Ten Jātakas Panel 13: Vidhūrapaṇḍita

The king is driven to despair: Vimalā has asked the impossible—what can he do? Just then, their resourceful daughter, Irandatī, shows up; she expresses concern at her father's condition and he asks her to seek out a husband, who will bring Vidhūra. The precocious Irandatī knows what to do: she collects fragrant and flavourful flowers and adorns a peak in the Himalayas: there she dances and sings, announcing that she wants a husband, whether a *gandhabba*, a *rakkhasa*, or a nāga, a *kiṃpurisa* or a human. Just then a *yakkha* named Puṇṇaka passes by on his horse. This Puṇṇaka is no ordinary *yakkha*: he is a nephew of the great cosmic King Vessavaṇa, overlord of the *yakkhas*. Puṇṇaka's steed is no ordinary horse: it is a magical Sindh stallion, swifter than the wind. Puṇṇaka sees Irandatī dancing and singing in the mountains—an immortal scene already codified in Indian sculpture more than 2,000 years ago. It is love at first sight, and the *yakkha* draws up before the nāga maiden and volunteers to be her husband and to fetch Vidhūra's heart. Irandatī takes him to her father and he and the queen agree to the marriage, on condition that the *yakkha* fetch Vidhūra's heart, all of them missing the metaphor's message. Puṇṇaka sets to work right away: he goes to his own father for permission to take leave, he goes to Mt. Vepulla to get a gem that belonged to a Universal Monarch, and then he speeds to Indapatta where he challenges the king to a game of dice—with Vidhūra as the stake. The king agrees, and, to his surprise and chagrin, loses. Puṇṇaka sets off with Vidhūra, having him cling to the tail of his horse—an iconic scene that has represented this Jātaka for more than 2,000 years when it was carved on a pillar at the Bharhut stūpa. Where does he take the sage? Off to Black Mountain, where he makes a series of savage attempts to kill him, but fails. In the painting, we see Puṇṇaka lift Vidhūra up to smash him down against the crags. In the end, all of the impassioned *yakkha's* efforts fail; he sits down and Vidhūra teaches him the Dhamma. Vidhūra rides behind Puṇṇaka back to the nāga realm, where king and queen are delighted and Puṇṇaka receives the hand of Irandatī. Then the magic horse

sets out once more with different riders in a changed pecking order: Vidhūra first, then Puṇṇaka, then Irandatī. They fly to Indapatta where they part ways: Vidhūra goes home to his family and Puṇṇaka flies off with his bride to his own city.

The panel depicts all of the important events, but not in a tidy linear order. Reading

from left to right, the story starts on the left, in the palace, with the dice game between Dhanañjaya and Puṇṇaka. An inscription on a palace wall announces "The story of Phra Vidhura is finished, complete, with this panel".

Outside the palace walls, a man on a bicycle and a motorized vehicle proceed through a village along red dirt roads. Is the vehicle a premonition of the covered pickup truck bus or *song thaew* สองแถว? Puṇṇaka sets out on his magic steed with his prize, Vidhūra, clutching at its tail. In the mountains, he lifts Vidhūra up to smash him down against the rocks. Above, the sage sits in calm meditation. Revealing a new hierarchy, Vidhūra rides the horse, with Puṇṇaka and then Irandatī, behind him. Puṇṇaka watches Irandati as she sings and dances in the Himalayas. He asks her father, the nāga king, for her hand. In the far-right corner, Vidhūra, Puṇṇaka and Irandatī return to report to the nāga king in his palace which is, appropriately, set in the midst of water. An inscription on the outer wall describes it as "the realm of the Phraya Nāga".

Ten Jātakas Panel 13: Vidhūrapaṇḍita. A *song thaew*?

Location of the panels on the beams of the teaching hall at Wat Ban Khong

Photographing the panels at Wat Ban Khong

Vessantara Jātaka

The tale of Vessantara, the *Great Birth, Great Rebirth,* or *Great Life,* is an amazing tour de force. It is a deeply moral drama that plays on the conflict between idealism and the human predicament, its social and psychological challenges, and the anguishes it can bring. India's celebrated *Rāmāyaṇa* epic exists in so many versions throughout the subcontinent and abroad that modern scholars speak of "many *Rāmāyaṇa*s". Similarly, there are "many *Vessantara*s", in Pāli, Sanskrit, and Indic vernaculars and in translations into non-Indic languages. There are also the *Vessantara*s of performance and painting; the wood panel paintings are an outstanding example of the latter.

The final story of the *Great Collection*, and of the Jātaka collection as a whole, the *Vessantara Jātaka* is the grand epic of the Pāli collection. It has been a runaway bestseller for over 2,000 years.[20] Appleton and Shaw write that "the *Vessantara-jātaka* lies at the heart of the ritual, storytelling, and collective psyche of Southern Buddhists, an extraordinary story that has inspired festivals, recitals, dramas, poems, [and] art."[21] The late Steven Collins was fascinated by the story of Vessantara and read it deeply. He called it "the wonderful *Vessantara Jātaka*, a text widely known in name at least, but in my view sadly underappreciated." He wrote that: "From the wide range of textual versions available from all over Asia, and from the frequent mention of it in ethnographic reports, we know it to be a central text in all of Asian Buddhism, indeed *the* central text in the Theravāda Buddhism of South and Southeast Asia. It has been, in some (notably urban) contexts, eclipsed only in modern times, and indeed mostly among Buddhist Modernists, by the Life of the Buddha. It is a striking text, full of strong emotions and drama, and it is morally both very striking and challenging."[22]

Table 2. Chapters of the Vessantara Jātaka[23]

Panel 1	1. Dasavara	Ten Boons
	2. Himavanta	Himavanta
Panel 2	3. Dānakaṇḍa	Generosity
	4. Vanappavesana	Entry to the Forest
Panel 3	4. Entry to the Forest (*cont.*)	
Panel 4	5. Jūjaka	Brahman Jūjaka
	6. Culavana	Short Description of the Forest
Panel 5	7. Mahāvana	Great Description of the Forest[24]
	8. Kumāra	The Royal Children
Panel 6	9. Maddī	Maddī, Devoted Wife and Mother
	10. Sakkapabba	The Sakka Episode
Panel 7	11. Mahārāja	Great King Sañjaya
	12. Chakhattiya	The Six Nobles
Panel 8	13. Nagarakaṇḍa	Triumphal Return to the Capital

[20] The *Vessantara* has been translated several times: in English, both Cone and Gombrich, *The Perfect Generosity of Prince Vessantara*, and Shaw in Appleton and Shaw, *Ten Great Birth Stories*, are eminently readable. For a recent collection of studies, see Collins, ed., *Readings of the Vessantara Jataka*.

[21] Appleton and Shaw, *Ten Great Birth Stories* II, p. 507.

[22] Collins, "Preface" to *Readings of the Vessantara Jataka*.

[23] We have somewhat embellished the translations of the titles.

[24] Compound nouns with "great" or "small" are often difficult to parse. Some interpret these as descriptions of the "lesser" (outer, outlying, peripheral) and the "greater" (deep) forests.

The tale of the exiled Prince Vessantara is divided into thirteen chapters. Each chapter is distinguished by the number of verses it contains, and in Thai tradition the chapter and number of verses are so intimately associated that usually the number of verses and the title are inscribed together in paintings and are announced together at the end of recitations of each chapter.[25] Wat Ban Khong panels do not, however, take note of the number of verses. The Wat Ban Khong set depicts two chapters on each of the first seven panels, with the interpolation of a supplementary panel, Panel 3, a continuation of the *Entry to the Forest*. The last chapter, *Triumphal Return to the Capital*, is given on a single panel, the last (No. 8).

Vessantara Jātaka Panel 1: Ten Boons; Himavanta

Panel 1. Ten Boons; Himavanta

The first panel apportions the narrative of the first two chapters into six scenes:

1. Ten Boons: The story opens in Indra's paradise, the auspicious Heaven of the Thirty-Three. Indra's chief queen is Phusatī, a lady of great merit,[26] who is about to pass away and be reborn on earth, where she will be the Bodhisatta's mother in his life to come. Indra grants her ten boons; the *Vessantara Jātaka* unfolds from these boons.

2. Phusatī is reborn and marries Sañjaya, King of the Sivis, in a grand ceremony. They sit before a tall *bai si*.[27] There are two clock towers along the parapets,

[25] See Skilling and Cicuzza, "The Number of Stanzas in the *Vessantara-jātaka*".

[26] Her past deeds of merit through several lives are related in the Jātaka (Appleton and Shaw, *Ten Great Birth Stories* II, pp. 536–538).

[27] A bai si (ใบศรี) is an "unique ritual object that cannot be captured by a translation" (Chris Baker, email 25 August, 2021). Prepared with great care and skill from plants and flowers, it is a key element in many ceremonies, including weddings.

both reading six o'clock. On the gable of a building outside the wall, possibly a barracks, is inscribed the date, Buddhist Era 68, ostensibly the date of the building, but without much doubt a cryptic reference to the date of the painting (see above).

3. To the left of the wedding scene, Queen Phusatī sits on a portico and weeps when she learns about Vessantara's exile. Below this sit Vessantara, Maddī, the two royal children and members of the court, all of them weeping and lamenting.

4. The kingdom is blessed by the possession of an auspicious white elephant, Paccaya by name, who brings rain. The neighbouring kingdom of Kaliṅga

is suffering from drought, and a delegation of Brahmans arrives to ask for the elephant.[28] The unfailingly generous Prince Vessantara readily surrenders the precious pachyderm. Here, and in other donation scenes, the finality of the gift is signified by pouring ceremonial water from a spouted golden ewer (Pāli: *suvaṇṇa-bhiṅgāra*). The Brahmans raise their hands to receive the water.

5. The prince's deed upsets the people, who complain to the king.

6. The Brahmans pile on the back of the elephant and return to Kaliṅga.

[28] There is a Sivi in the *Mahābhārata* and other texts, and scholars have assigned it several identities. Locations proposed for the *Mahābhārata*'s Sivi, like Swat or western India (Gujarat or Rajasthan), do not mesh well with the landscapes of the Pāli Jātaka, with their thick jungles populated by elephants. In the Pāli, Sivi seems to be located in what is now the Indian state of Chhattisgarh, which borders the state of Odisha, site of Kaliṅga. The maps embedded in the illuminated Thai *Three Worlds* manuscripts also suggest central India, as do accounts of northern Thai (Lanna) pilgrims, who travelled to Bodh Gaya in the premodern period.

Vessantara Jātaka Panel 2: Generosity; Entry to the Forest

Panel 2. Generosity; Entry to the Forest

The panel contains two chapters. To the left is Chapter 3, *Generosity*, in which the prince displays his generosity or charitable spirit, as inscribed in a lozenge below the chariot; to the right is *Entry to the Forest*, or, less prosaically, the *Plunge into the Forest*, with the title inscribed in a cartouche below the forest path. The first chapter takes up most of the panel. The prince with his consort and children glide through the forest in a sumptuous chariot pulled by four steeds. A group of Brahmans shows up and asks for the horses; the Bodhisatta agrees and gives them away; and to the left, the Brahmans gallop off. In the heavens above, signified by an elaborate swirl of curly clouds, devas rejoice in the Bodhisatta's merit. A Brahman kneels in front of the chariot and asks for the vehicle itself; this the prince grants, pouring a stream of water from his golden ewer. The Brahman then pushes the chariot up a hill to his village where his family comes out to welcome him; an inscription on the gable indicates that this is "the Brahman's house". This is a scene that is rarely depicted, even in the murals of the grand royal temples of the capital.

The artist, like many other artists and poets before him, delights in this *Plunge into the Forest*: he elaborates the forest scenery with its exuberance of plants and abundance of wildlife, depicting forest blossoms, rocks, trees and animals with sure hand and sharp eye.

The two chapters, *Generosity* and *Entry to the Forest*, are not strictly segregated; they blend and merge, ending at the far right as the royal couple, babes in arms, traverse the forest on foot.

A lozenge inscription below a flock of deer announces that "With hearts of faith, artisan Thai and the lady Chip made (sponsored) this as good deeds".

Vessantara Jātaka Panel 2: Generosity; Entry to the Forest. A Brahman pushes Vessantara's chariot to his home

Vessantara Jātaka Panel 3: Entry to the Forest

Vessantara Jātaka Panel 4: Brahman Jūjaka; Short Description of the Forest

Panel 3. Entry to the Forest

The whole panel is a continuation of the *Entry to the Forest* from Panel 2. To the left is a spacious palace protected by towers and crenelated walls. This is the city of the Cetas; seated in state at centre stage, the king invites the Bodhisatta to stay. The latter explains his mission and declines. In the right-hand section, the royal couple continue their journey. Monkeys frolic in the trees above. Indra sends his divine architect, Vessukamma, to ready a hermitage for the royal exiles, and he flies though the sky, bridging the two scenes. In the Pāli text, he prepares two "leaf huts", but in this and other Thai paintings he erects a cluster of buildings to make a comfortable and stylish hermitage, opulent by most ascetic standards. On the outer wall is a donative inscription which says that "This portion is sponsored by Thit Pho for sake of the religion".[29]

[29] At the end are two ambiguous words, for which see below, Vessantara inscriptions, Panel 3.

Panel 4. Brahman Jūjaka; Short Description of the Forest

This panel contains two chapters, *Brahman Jūjaka* and the *Short Description of the Forest*. The ugly and cantankerous Brahman Jūjaka lives in a village in Kaliṅga with a beautiful young wife named Amittatāpanā, who was given to him by her parents in repayment of a debt. In painting and sermons, the antihero Jūjaka is a comic and pathetic figure, not in the least sympathetic. As a Brahman, Jūjaka is true to form: he wears a short white skirt with his upper torso bare, he has a pinched face with a scruffy beard, a crooked back, a bony chest, and a pot belly; he walks with a stoop, carrying a bag over his shoulder and supports himself with a crooked walking stick. Jūjaka is not a particularly imposing figure.

The Brahman dotes on his young wife, but the village women make her life miserable by constantly taunting her—a beauty like her caring for such a repulsive old man! Amittatā's social torment is usually represented by ribald scenes at the well, a

major public space in the premodern village, but here the artist does not treat us to any such scenes. To improve her situation and avoid having to go to the well to draw water, Amittatā orders her husband to get her some slaves or servants.

It is the *Jūjaka* cycle that brings tension to the plot of the saga of the exiled prince. Amittatā has heard of Vessantara's generosity and she orders her hapless husband to get the royal children and bring them back to serve her. What choice does he have but to agree?—and from this point on the Jūjaka episode, which drives the moral and emotional conflict, pathos and humour of the story, dominates the plot. From here on, the focus is the contrast between the gravitas of the hero, Vessantara, and the tragicomedy of the antihero, Jūjaka.

Vessantara Jātaka Panel 5: Great Description of the Forest; The Royal Children

From the left, along the top register, the artist depicts the country Brahman's village.

The lower register left shows Jūjaka with Amittatā; he holds up a parasol to shelter the tender beauty from the hot sun. She orders him to fetch the generous Prince Vessantara's children for her, and he sets out in quest of the hermit prince's mountain retreat. The first part of his voyage, the *Short Description of the Forest*, is shown in the lower register and the final segment. Jūjaka trudges through the forest—stick in hand, bag over his shoulder—until he reaches the point where a Cetan stands guard.[30] According to the Pāli, the Cetans appoint a citizen to guard the path to prevent anyone from going further and disturbing the prince; in murals and in popular narrative, the Cetan is painted as a rough-hewn hunter, whose fierce hounds drive Jūjaka up a tree as their master prepares to loose an arrow at him. But the crafty Brahman manages to convince the hunter that

[30] "Cetan" means a Cetaputt or citizen of Ceta, but in Thai, it is taken as the proper name of a hunter. The English term "Cetan" and similar words like "Kosalan" and "Magadhan" are curious examples of the artificial creation of adjectives or adjectival nouns through the application of English rules. We use them without blushing, as if they were as natural as "Glaswegian", "Calcuttan", or "Singaporean" (but compare Mumbaikar and Delhiwalla, which are "natural" vernacular terms).

he has legitimate business with the prince, and he sits down with the hunter and his dogs to ask directions.

Panel 5. Great Description of the Forest; The Royal Children

This panel depicts two chapters, the *Great Description of the Forest* and the *Royal Children*. The narrative begins at the left. Jūjaka comes to the retreat of the rishi Accuta, and asks the way to Vessantara's hermitage. A lozenge inscription below the scene announces "This bay was sponsored by lay supporter Thap. [Depicted are] the *Great Description of the Forest* and the first part of *Royal Children*".

Accuta points Jūjaka on the way. As he nears his goal, he stops to sleep to pass time

until Maddī leaves the retreat to collect fruits in the surrounding forest. When the coast is clear, Jūjaka enters the retreat to find Vessantara sitting on the portico with the children beside him. Jūjaka asks for the children; the exiled prince agrees and pours donative water onto the Brahman's hands. Vessantara cannot control his anguish and breaks into tears. To avoid being taken away, the children dive into a lotus pond and hide beneath the lily pads; this is one of the immortal scenes of visual Vessantaras. Jūjaka finds them, binds their wrists with creepers, and beats them with a stick. In the upper register, Jūjaka stumbles on the uneven ground, drops his cane and tumbles over. The children flee, but Jūjaka catches them. At the far right, Vessantara sits alone in his hermitage.

Vessantara Jātaka Panel 6: Maddī, Devoted Wife and Mother; The Sakka Episode

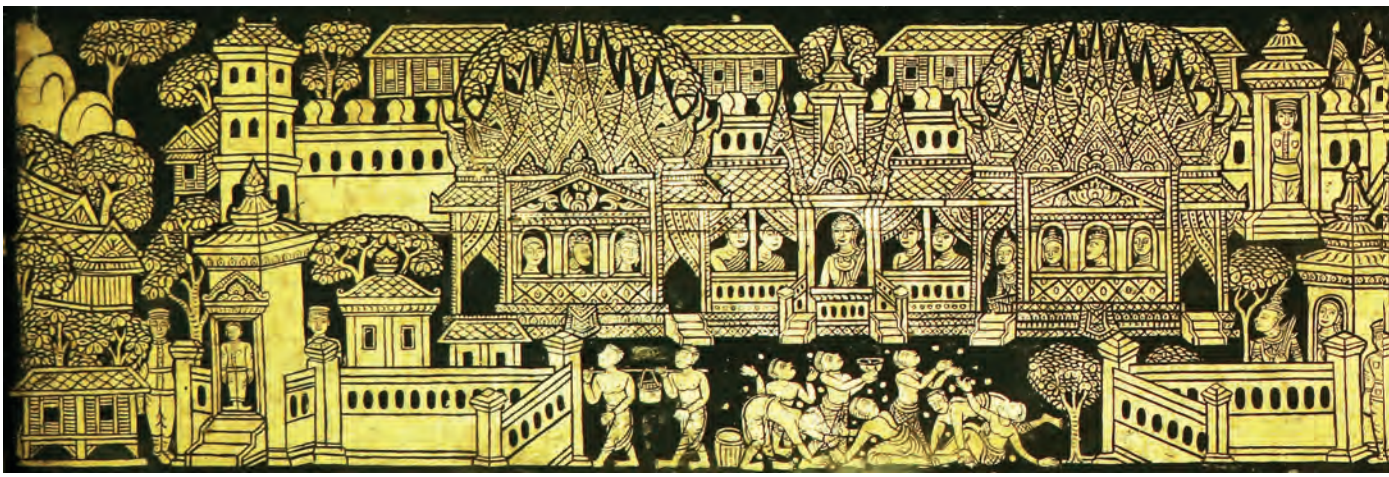
Panel 6. Maddī, Devoted Wife and Mother; The Sakka Episode

The panel contains two chapters, *Maddī, Devoted Wife and Mother* and the *Sakka Episode*. *Maddī* starts in the middle segment. In the top register, the devoted wife sets out to collect fruit, a pair of baskets on a carrying pole over her shoulder. Three devas of the forest observe her from the skies. To prevent her from going back to the hermitage before Vessantara has given the children away and successfully performed his *dāna*, the devas descend and transform themselves into fierce beasts—a lion, a tiger and a leopard—and block her way. She sets her pingo down and pleads with them until they finally let her pass. The next scene is to the left. Maddī returns to the hermitage and finds out, to her despair, that the children are gone. She faints. Vessantara takes her head in his lap and laments.

The right-hand segment depicts the *Sakka Episode*. Indra, aloft in the sky at top left, transforms himself into a Brahman and descends to the hermitage where Vessantara and Maddī sit together on the verandah. He asks the prince to give him Maddī; the prince grants his wish and pours the donative water. Sakka's request is a ruse, however: he has no dishonorable intentions, but asks for Maddī only to return her to Vessantara. This is to prevent the *dāna*-obsessed prince from giving Maddī away to an unworthy recipient. Once the prince has given her away and she has been returned to him, Vessantara cannot give her away again. The next scene returns to the adventures of Jūjaka and the purloined children. Night falls, and Jūjaka climbs a tree, makes a hammock and goes to sleep, leaving the children below, untended. A pair of devas takes on the shape of the royal parents and coddles them through the night.

Vessantara Jātaka Panel 6: Maddī is waylaid by a lion, tiger and leopard

Vessantara Jātaka Panel 7: Great King Sañjaya; The Six Nobles



Vessantara Jātaka Panel 8: Triumphal Return to the Capital

Panel 7. Great King Sañjaya; The Six Nobles

The panel covers two chapters, *Great King Sañjaya* and the *Six Nobles*. The short vignette, at the left, seems to be a genre scene showing country people travelling in the countryside on elephant, horse, buffalo, bull and foot. After this is a long section with a palace scene depicting King Sañjaya in his capital, Sivi. To the left, Jūjaka kneels before the king and turns the royal children over to him in return for a handsome reward. Jūjaka is not only a rogue, but also something of a glutton; to the right of the royal scene, he sits being fed by maidservants. He enjoys his rewards until he overeats and dies. Further to the right, the royals set out in a grand procession to bring Vessantara back from the hermitage to the town: the children ride a stately elephant, the king and queen a horse-drawn cart. The family reunites in the hermitage and weep from sorrow and joy.

Unfortunately a portion of this panel has suffered water damage, with the result that it is clouded by an opaque film, but fortunately the painting itself is intact.

Panel 8. Triumphal Return to the Capital

The scene reads from right to left. The royal party leaves the hermitage behind, deserted and abandoned, save for a single male figure in royal costume seen from behind, to the left: this should be Vessantara circumambulating the hermitage in gratitude before taking his leave. The party wends its way home though the jungle, on elephant, horseback and bicycle, in a grand procession fluttering with flags and pennants and boisterous with buglers, drummers and dancers. When they reach the stately city, there is merriment and rejoicing, and the prince distributes wealth by scattering gems, which the populace receives in outstretched hands or uplifted bowls.

A donative inscription in a cartouche records the names of three donors: "With hearts of faith, Father Ngoen, Mother Ma and Mother Ohn sponsored the making of the story of the City for sake of the Religion. May this be a contributing factor to [our realization of] Nibbāna".

Inscriptions

Some of the panels bear inscriptions and others have none: there is no consistent pattern. Some are labels or captions that give the name of a chapter or identify characters, buildings or places; some are donative and give the names of donors. All of the inscriptions are written in modern (20th century) Thai letters. They are inscribed in cartouches at various points in the story or on the surface of walls in the paintings. A few readings are uncertain because the paint is chipped or flaked.

The inscriptions describe the painted slabs as *phaen* แผ่น and *hong* ห้อง. The Thai noun *phaen* is used for flat surfaces and means "panel", "slab" or "sheet" (a sheet of paper), and is the natural word to use. *Hong* means "room" or "chamber". Traditional architecture did not partition or enclose space to make rooms, as we know them today, in the sense of walled and doored chambers; rather, architectural space was divided into open "bays" defined as the space between a pair of pillars. In mural painting, a bay meant the space available for a single painted scene and, by extension, *hong* could refer to the painted space itself. Here we use the word "bay" for *hong*, to mean a portion or section of the painted panel.

Inscriptions in the "Ten Jātaka" series

References are to panel numbers. Note that the panels are not numbered; we have assigned numbers according to their current arrangement. We give the inscriptions in Thai in the original orthography, followed by a Romanization according to the Royal Institute's general system, followed by the current spelling in square brackets.

Panel 1. Temīya

Not fully legible. The inscription reads เลื้องตเมบ้านฆ้... which might be เลื้องตเม บ้านฆ้อง, "the Temīya story of Ban Khong" (เรื่องตเมบ้านฆ้อง). Unusually, Temīya is spelt teme; in Panel 3 it is spelt เตมี temī, as it is pronounced in Thai. Note that here and in Panel 3, "story", เรื่อง, is spelt เลื้อง with "ล" (ล ลิง lo ling) with the tone mark ไม้โท mai tho, or เลือง without tone mark in Panel 8. In other panels it is spelt with "ร" (ร เรือ ro ruea): in Panels 10 to 13, it is given as เรื่อง and in Panel 9 as เรื้อง (twice). At the time the paintings were done, the diffusion of standardized orthography through mass education was only beginning and words were variously spelt, often following local or dialect pronunciation. The Wat Ban Khong inscriptions are a delightful example of preprint orthographic variation.

Panel 2. Temīya

Effaced.

Panel 3. Temīya

เลื้องเตมีจบเท่านี้ *lueang temi chop thao ni* [เรื่องเตมีย์จบเท่านี้]
The story of Temīya is finished, with this.

Panel 4. Mahājanaka

4.1. (on sail) สำเภาแตกกางทะเร *samphao taek kang tare* [สำเภาแตกกลางทะเล]
The junk breaks up in the middle of the ocean.
4.2. (on the sun) ตะวันเริ่มขึ้น The sun is just rising.

Panel 5. Suvaṇṇasāma

สุวรรณสาม วัดถุ ฯ *suwannasam watthu* [สุวรรณสามวัตถุฯ]
The story (*vatthu*) of Suwannasam.

Panel 6. Nemirāja

6.1. เมืองมิถิลาบุรี *mueang mithilaburi*
The city of (Mithilā)purī
6.2. พระอีน *phra in* [พระอินทร์]
Indra, king of the gods
Here "Indra" is spelt with a long "i", "Phra īn".
6.3. (beneath tree) แผนนี้พระยาเนมิราช *phaen ni phraya nemirat* [แผ่นนี้พระยาเนมิราช]
This panel [depicts] Phraya Nemirat.
6.4. หนทางไปสวัน *honthang pai sawan* [หนทางไปสวรรค์]
Route to the heavens.
Note that here "heaven" สวรรค์ is spelt phonetically as สวัน.
6.5. หนทางไปรรก *honthang pai rarok* [หนทางไปนรก]
Route to the hells.
Note that here "hell" is spelt rarok.

Panel 7. Nemirāja

7.1. นายโยมพิบานไญ *nai yomaban yai* [นายยมบาลใหญ่]
Great Lord Yamapāla.
7.2. เมืองเสวรร *mueang sewan* [เมืองสวรรค์]
Realm of the heavens.
7.3. สาวสวรรค์ *sao sawan* [สาวสวรรค์]
Heavenly maidens.

Panel 8. Mahosatha

(on the wall to the right) เลืองมะโหสด ฯ *lueang mahosot* [เรื่องมโหสถ]
The story of Mahosot.
Here and in the following, "Mahosatha" is spelt "Mahosata". In Pali it is also spelt "Mahosadha".

Panel 9. Mahosatha

9.1 (on the wall to the left) เรื้องพระมะโหสด จบห้อง *rueang phra mahosot chop hong* [เรื่องพระมโหสถจบห้อง]
The story of Phra Mahosot is finished.

Panel 9. Bhūridatta

9.2 (on the wall to the right) เรื้องพระภูริทัต จบนี้ *rueang phra phurithat chop ni* [เรื่องพระภูริทัตจบนี้]
The story of Phurithat is finished with this.

Panel 10. Candakumāra

เรื่องจันทกุมารจบบริบูรณ์แต่เท่านี้ *rueang chanthakuman chopboribun tae thao ni* [เรื่องจันทกุมารจบบริบูรณ์แต่เท่านี้]
The story of Chandakuman is finished, complete, just so.

Panel 11. Brahma Nārada

(on low wall in foreground) เรื่องพระพรมนารอด ฯ เพราะช่าง *rueang phra phrom narot proh chang* [เรื่องพระพรหมนารท เพราะช่าง]
The story of Phra Phrom Narot [was painted by] the artisan Phroh.

Here and in Panel 12, Pali-Sanskrit "Nārada" is written and pronounced "Naa-rought" in Thai. "Phroh Chang" seems to be a name, "the artisan (ช่าง chang) named Phroh (เพราะ)".

Panel 12. Brahma Nārada

เรื่องพระพรห์มนารอดจบบริบูรณ์แต่เท่านี้ พระทองคำเขียน *rueang phra phrom narot chop boribun tae thao ni phra thong kham khian* [เรื่องพระพรหมนารทจบบริบูรณ์แต่เท่านี้ พระทองคำ เขียน]
The story of Phra Phrom Narot is finished, complete, just this. It was painted by Phra Thong Kham.

Panel 13. Vidūrapaṇḍita

13.1 (on palace wall) เรื่องพระวิธุร จบบริบูรณ์แต่แผ่นนี้ *rueang phra witun chop boribun tae phaen ni*
The story of Phra Vidhura is finished, complete, with this panel.
13.2 (on outer wall) เมืองพระยานาค *mueang phraya nak*
City of the Phraya Nāga.

Inscriptions in the "Vessantara jātaka" series

Panel 1

(on gable) พ ๖๘ *pho* 68

Panel 2

2.1 ทานกัณฑ์ *thana kan*
Dānakaṇḍa, the chapter on generosity.
2.2 วันประเวค *wanaprawet* [วนประเวศน์]
Entry to the forest.
2.3 (on gable *jua* จั่ว) บ้านพราม *ban phram* [บ้านพราหมณ์]
Brahman's house.

2.4 ช่างไทย นางจีบ มีใจศรัธาสร้างเปนกุศ *chang thai nang chip mi chaisattha sang pen kuson* [ช่างไทย นางจีบ สร้างเป็นกุศล] Chang Thai, Nang Chip with hearts of faith had this made as good deeds.

Panel 3

3 (on wall) ห้องนีทิดโพสร้างไว้ในพระสาศนา ทานขัน *hong ni thit pho sang wai nai phra satsana* [ห้องนี้ทิดโพสร้างไว้ในพระศาสนา ท่านขัน]
This bay is sponsored by Thit Pho for sake of the religion. Tan Khan [also contributed?].

ทิด is a common abbreviation for บัณฑิต (*paṇḍita*), meaning a man who has been ordained as a monk. The meaning of the last phrase is not clear. It is tempting to read the two words as equivalent to *dānakaṇḍa*, but this chapter has already been depicted, and captioned with the spelling *kaṇḍa*, in Panel 2—while the subject of this panel is the continuation of *Vanapavesana*. It *might* be a name, Tan Khan, "Respected (reading ท่าน) Khan", either a co-sponsor or painter.

The verb สร้าง is spelt without a "*r*" ร เรือ *ro ruea* as ส้าง, and ศาสนา is spelt สาศนา—both common spellings in pre-print writing.

Panel 5

5 (in cartouche) ห้องนี้โยมทับส้างไว้มะหาพนกับกุมานบันต้น *hong ni yom thap sang wai kap kuman ban ton* [ห้องนี้โยมทับสร้างไว้ มหาพนกับกุมารบั้นต้น]
Lay supporter Thap sponsored this bay [depicting] the Mahaphon [chapter] along with the first part of the Kuman [chapter].

For the spelling *sang* see preceding. Kumāra is spelt with final "*n*" rather than "*r*" according to the Thai pronunciation.

Panel 8

8 (in cartouche) พอเงิน แม้มา แม้อ้อน มีใจสัดทาซ่างเลื้องระคอนไว้ในพระสาศหนานิพานะปะจะโยโหตู
pho ngoen mae ma mae on mi chai sattha sang lueang rakhon wai nai phra satsana niphana patchayo hotu [พ่อเงิน แม่มา แม่อ้อน มีใจศรัทธาสร้างเรื่องนครไว้ในพระศาสนานิพพานปัจจโยโหตุ]
Father Ngoen, Mother Ma, Mother Ohn, with hearts of faith sponsored the making of the story of the City for sake of the Religion. May this be a contributing factor to [our realization of] Nibbāna.

Here the use of "father" and "mother" is more or less equivalent to "Mr." or "Mrs." *Nagara* is spelt phonetically as *rakhon*.

In Pāli the final phrase is *nibbāna-paccayo hotu*: this is a common aspiration at the end of deeds of merit such as making offerings, when it is recited orally, or sponsoring manuscripts, when it is written.

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Conventions

Every field of study has its headaches. The headache of algebra is algebra, of physics is formulas, of physical education is regimented physical activity: of Thai studies the headaches are Romanization and the inconsistency of spelling in premodern sources. We standardize the spelling of Pāli names with a preference for Thai spellings. We transliterate Thai according to the general system of the Royal Institute (now the Royal Society).

Photographs

All photographs by the Fragile Palm Leaves/Henry Ginsburg Foundation field team, December 2018.

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