

An Ethnic Puzzle in a Recently Restored 18th Century Manuscript in the Chester Beatty Collection

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ABSTRACT—A richly illustrated Phra Malai text, held in the Chester Beatty collection of Thai manuscripts, was recently restored, so that it could be studied for the first time. It dates from the late 18th century when it was created for a Mon monastery located in present-day Thonburi District. The preliminary section that traditionally precedes the actual Phra Malai journey is identified as a condensed version of the Tipitaka. In many respects the illustrations conform with Thai works of the same era, but a number of anomalies were identified, all of which could be related to aspects of Mon culture. Either a skilled Thai artist introduced Mon elements in order to please his clients, or a Mon artist familiar with Thai art occasionally revealed aspects of his native culture.

Thai illustrated manuscripts (สมุดภาพ *samutphāp*) that can be firmly traced to the late 18th century are rare. Recently at the Chester Beatty Collection in Dublin an illustrated Phra Malai manuscript that had badly deteriorated was painstakingly restored to such an extent that it could be handled and assessed for the first time.² The document is of interest because: it has a secure date; the illustrations are of superior quality; the monastery where it originated can be identified; and the iconography shows an interesting cultural mixture. In this article, I first discuss the date, origin and text of this manuscript before turning to examine the style and iconography of its beautiful and somewhat unusual illustrations.

Date and origin

On the final folio of CBL Thi 1314 the date of completion of the manuscript is given in Khom script (Figure 1): “The third day of the week, the tenth waning day of the tenth month, the seventh of the decade in the year of the hare”. This translates to 12 September 1795.

¹ This article is the reworking of a presentation in Dublin on 21 November 2019. During the writing of this article I was generously assisted by Peter Skilling and Chris Baker. I also thank Laura Muldowney, Angela Chiu, Chris Eade, Kate Crosby, Volker Grabowsky, Patrick Dumon and Patrick McCormick for commenting on earlier drafts, and Jenny Greiner for help over the images.

² The manuscript is now titled: Extracts from the Pali canon (Tipitaka) and Story of Phra Malai. The current catalogue number is CBL Thi 1314. The dimensions are: 120 mm x 620 mm x 80 mm (height x width x depth). An account of the restoration is located at <https://chesterbeatty.ie/conservation/figuring-out-folds/>. All images in this article are © The Trustees of the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin.

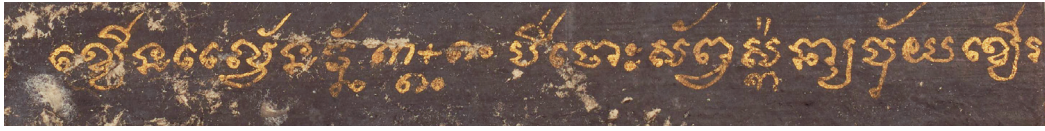


Figure 1. The date on the last folio.

The first leaf has two sentences in Thai.³ The upper sentence (see Figure 2) reads in transliteration: “*Phra Mālai nī Wat Rāchahakhatha thān Phra Sumet, Nāi Mā [and] Nāng Paen pen phū sāng. Nāi Cui khien*”. This can be translated as: “This Phra Malai [manuscript] [of] Wat Rāchahakhatha is donated to the Venerable Sumet. Mrs. Mā and Miss Paen are those who ordered it and Mr. Cui [is] the scribe”.

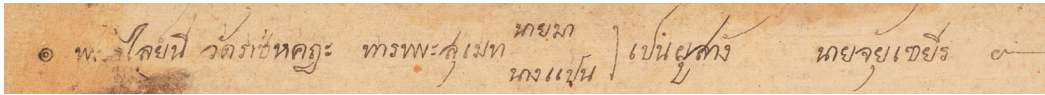


Figure 2. The main sentence on the title page.

The writing is slanted to the right, typical for 18th century documents. The word *Phra* is correctly spelt in its older form. However, the word for “donate”, nowadays spelt ทาน, ends with the letter “จ”, which does not agree with the Sanskrit or Pali spelling *dāna*.

The name of the monastery Wat Rāchahakhatha (วัดราชหคฺฐะ) is problematic indeed. Searches in the data banks listing Thai monasteries provided no match, although the number of wats of which the name begins with “Rācha” is quite limited. There is no word “*hakhatha*” in Thai, Pali or Sanskrit. The ending “*katha*” also does not provide a clue.

Mr. Cui, the scribe, showed his skill in writing Khom in the body of the manuscript, but may have been copying from another manuscript. In writing this title, he appears to have improvised when spelling the name of the monastery. He may have been unfamiliar with the ways that the Thai wrote words of Pali and Sanskrit origin. The use of the letter “*dochada*” (ฎ) in the final syllable does not make sense. After puzzling over this for a long time, I noticed that the letter is similar to the vowel “*Ry*” (ฤ), differing only with a final loop. If the writer intended to use the vowel “*Ry*”, then rearranging the consonants suggests that Mr. Cui was attempting to write Wat Rāchakhrue (วัดราชคฤห์),⁴ the name of a wat dating back to the late Ayutthaya Period and located in Khwaeng Bang Yi Ruea of present-day Thonburi. Earlier it was known as Wat Mon, referring to its ethnic identity, and as Wat Wang Nām Won (whirlpool) referring to a local landmark.

The fact that this monastery was originally known as Wat Mon may help explain the spelling anomalies in the title page. The largest waves of Mons migrating into Siam

³ On the lower part of the title page is an incomplete sentence written in a different, rather clumsy, handwriting and spelling: “*Phū khien nangsue Mālai nī*”. This simply means: “The person who wrote this Malai book.” I tend to dismiss these inelegant scribbles as having been added at a later date. The word *khien* is written with the now obsolete letter *khokhuat*, but this letter has been used irregularly over time (see Anthony V.N. Diller, “Consonant Mergers and Inscription One”, *JSS*, Vol 76 (1988), pp. 46-63).

⁴ For a short history of this monastery and some photographs, see <https://sites.google.com/site/allthaitemple/wad-rachkhvh-wrwi-har-wad-mxy>.

were recorded in 1629, 1660-1661, and 1774.⁵ According to local history, the Mon people who founded Wat Rāchakhrue arrived by boat from Kanchanaburi. In the late 18th century the famous Mon warrior Phrayā Phichai Dāp Hak fought and won a battle against the Burmese invaders on one of the waterways surrounding the monastery site. Phrayā Phichai became one of King Taksin's most trusted generals. After Taksin was executed in 1782, Phrayā Phichai refused to serve the new king and was beheaded in the same year. His ashes rest in a monument in front of the large vihāra in Wat Rāchakhrue. During the First Reign, another Mon noble (Hon) who became the Phra Khleng (minister in charge of foreign trade) had the monastery renovated.⁶ He sponsored the monastery's expansion and may have been the person who obtained a relic from the Indian city of Rajgir (ancient Rājagṛha) in Bihar. This relic was embedded in a new *cetiya* and it is said that from that time the monastery has been known as Wat Rāchakhrue. However, there is no record of a pilgrimage to Rajgir in the late 18th century.

The text

The text tells the story of the monk Phra Malai visiting the heavens. This story was very popular and several hundred Phra Malai texts can be found in manuscript collections around the world. Invariably such manuscripts begin with extracts from the Tipitaka, but these extracts differ in both number and length. The most elaborate versions are a condensed form of the Tipitaka, beginning with sentences from the Vinaya, followed by some lines from the Brahmajāla-sutta, and followed again by passages from each of the seven parts of the Abhidhamma.⁷ The extracts in CBL Thi 1314 are in this elaborate form, beginning with the words from the Vinaya: “*yan tena bhagavā jānata passatā arahatā sammā sambuddhena*”.⁸

The condensed Tipitaka must be regarded as a magical “shortcut”, a phenomenon underlying much of the yantra tradition in Thailand. Thus when “*i svā su*” are drawn in a magical diagram these three syllables stand for the full text of the famous chant reciting Buddhagaṇa, Dhammaguṇa and Samhaguṇa.⁹ In Thailand representing a holy text by using the first syllable of every line has been practiced for centuries.¹⁰

⁵ G.E. Harvey recorded frequent exoduses, see *History of Burma; From the Earliest Times to 10 March 1824, the Beginning of the English Conquest*, London: Longmans, Green & Co, 1925, p. 180, 193 and 197-199. See also R. Halliday, “Immigration of the Mons into Siam”, *JSS*, Vol. 10, Pt. 3, pp. 9-11 and especially Edward van Roy, “Safe Haven: Mon Refugees at the Capitals of Siam from the 1500s to the 1800s”, *JSS*, Vol. 98, 2010, pp. 151-184.

⁶ Van Roy, “Safe Haven”, p. 162.

⁷ Peter Skilling, “Chanting and Inscribing: The ‘Condensed Tripitaka’ in Thai Ritual”, *‘Guiding Lights’ for the Perfect Nature: Studies on the Nature and the Development of Abhidharma Buddhism. A Commemorative Volume in Honor of Prof. Dr. Kenyo Mitomo for his 70th Birthday*, Tokyo: Sankibo Busshorin, pp. 928-962

⁸ Skilling identified this excerpt as coming from the Vinaya Cullavagga, in which Mahākassapa questions Upāli about the Vinaya.

⁹ In the Visuddhimagga known as Buddhānussati Gāthā.

¹⁰ Peter Skilling, “Calligraphic Magic: Abhidhamma Inscriptions from Sukhodaya”, in Naomi Appleton and Peter Harvey (eds.), *Buddhist Path, Buddhist Teachings: Studies in Memory of L.S. Cousins*, Sheffield: Equinox, 2019, pp. 183-210.

Representing the whole Tipitaka in this way would need an overwhelming number of syllables. Instead, one quote from the Vinaya Pitaka, one quote from the Sutta Pitaka and quotes from all seven parts of the Abhidhamma Pitaka serve to magically invoke the whole of the Pali canon.

The illustrations

Many Phra Malai texts are illustrated with standard scenes from the monk's journey,¹¹ but deviations from this practice are not unusual. In the Chester Beattie Library collection there are two other Phra Malai texts (CBL Thi 1310, dated 1797, and CBL Thi 1311, dated 1892) that were embellished with scenes from the last ten Jātakas.¹²

In CBL Thi 1314 the text has been unusually richly embellished. Although the colours have faded, the artistry remains (Figure 3). First, there are twenty scenes showing stations in the life of the Buddha. These all appear in the section of the manuscript inscribed with the condensed Tipitaka. Second, there are scenes from the final ten Jātakas distributed in the section of the manuscript on Phra Malai's travels.¹³

In cases where a Phra Malai text was sponsored for a rural monastery, the same person may have been engaged both for writing the text and illustrating it. On the first leaf, as noted above, Mrs. Mā and Miss Paen mention only Mr. Cui, suggesting that he was someone who not only could copy the Khom letters skillfully, but also had mastered the art of illustration. If that was so, and if Mr. Cui was a Mon, it may explain the unusual aspects of the iconography, some of which conforms with 18th-century Thai manuscript illustrations, while other aspects seem inspired by a tradition that differs from Thai.

Elements that conform with late 18th century Thai conventions

Clothing and ornaments of high-ranking persons and deities

Scattered in many of the thirty illustrations are figures dressed in royal attire, such as the god Indra in scene 7 (Figure 4).¹⁴ His golden conical hat, necklace, breast chain, sash and multiple bracelets are exactly how Thai royalty is bedecked. In CBL Thi 1314 every deity, Bodhisattva, king, queen and courtier has been painted with these ornaments. His dark green skin, and his face in profile with wavy eyebrow and moustache, thick lips

¹¹ Standard are scenes of Buddhist monks chanting during a funeral wake, celestial beings, the monk Malai showing some tortures of those suffering in hell, a poor man offers lotuses to the monk, Phra Malai's visit to the sacred stupa Cūlāmaṇi, Phra Malai meeting Indra, and finally his meeting with the future Buddha Metteyya.

¹² Also in the Wellcome Library there are two Phra Malai texts (Thai 3 and Thai 4) with only the ten last births as illustrations.

¹³ In the variant Thai order whereby the scene of Mahosadha comes before Bhūridatta. See Naomi Appleton, *Jataka Stories in Theravada Buddhism: Narrating the Path*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2010, pp. 71-74 and p. 140.

¹⁴ Indra is playing a lute (*kracappī*, กระจับปี่) with an unusual pattern on the sound box. Possibly it is made of a special type of wood, or from the skin of an animal, such as the leatherback turtle (*Dermochelys coriacea*). There is a similar lute on a 17th century banner in the Jim Thompson collection. See William Warren and Jean-Michel Beurdeley, *The House on the Klong*, Bangkok: Archipelago Press, 2014, p. 101.



Figure 3. Three manuscript leaves inscribed with the condensed Tipitaka.
 (top left) 3. Siddhattha Gotama's birth.
 (top right) 4. The sage Asita with Siddhattha appearing on his head.
 (middle left) 13. Five monks become his first disciples.
 (middle right) 14. The Buddha visits his father's palace.
 (bottom left) 15. The Buddha's half-brother Nanda leaves his bride to be ordained.
 (lower right) 16. The Buddha settling a dispute between the Sakyas and Koliyas



Figure 4. Detail from scene 7: Indra plays the lute.

and prominent nose conform exactly with the way Thai artists drew Indra. Similarly, the faces of men and women follow contemporary conventions for depicting people of the upper classes, with men often shown in profile, and women in three-quarter profile.

The clothing of both males and females of the elevated classes almost invariably have a flower motif, often only visible on small parts of the lower garments (see scenes 2, 4, 5, 7, 10, 12, 22, 24, 25 and 27). This motif is typical for early and mid-18th century manuscripts.¹⁵

Monk's robes

There are fourteen scenes with a person wearing monk's robes. Every time the sanghati is drawn over the left shoulder, stopping before reaching the waistline, while the antarāvāsaka is folded in front and kept in place by a broad sash. This distinctive style conforms with the way monks are depicted in 18th century Thai manuscripts.¹⁶

¹⁵ Henry Ginsburg, *Thai Art and Culture. Historic Manuscripts from Western Collections*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000, p. 55, a manuscript that Ginsburg dated 1700-1725. See also Henry Ginsburg, "Ayutthaya Painting", in Forest McGill and M.L. Pattaratorn Chirapravati, *The Kingdom of Siam, The Art of Central Thailand, 1350-1800*, Snoeck Publishers, Ghent, 2005, pp. 97, 101, 102, 103, 169.

¹⁶ คณะกรรมการฝ่ายประมวลเอกสารและจดหมายเหตุ ในคณะอำนวยการจัดงานเฉลิมพระเกียรติพระบาทสมเด็จพระเจ้าอยู่หัว จัดพิมพ์เนื่องในโอกาส พระราชพิธีมหามงคลเฉลิมพระชนมพรรษา ๖ รอบ ๕ ธันวาคม ๒๕๔๒, สมุดภาพไตรภูมิ ฉบับกรุงศรีอยุธยา - ฉบับกรุงธนบุรี เล่ม ๑-๒ [The committee gathering documents and records for the committee preparing the celebration honoring His Majesty the King, printed on the occasion of the festival celebrating the sixth cycle of his birth, on 5 December 1999, *Illustrated Manuscripts of the Three Worlds, from the Ayutthaya and Thonburi Periods*, Vol. 1-2, Bangkok: Krom Sinlapakon, 1999 (hereafter: *Illustrated Manuscripts*)], Vol. 1, pp. 16, 58, 112, and Vol. 2, pp. 16, 74, 77, 92, 159, 162.

Brahmin attire

There are eight figures depicted as Brahmins, each with a pale complexion and a chignon. In scene 4 two of them are of noble appearance, elegantly dressed with white shoulder coverings. They are shown conversing together. Presumably one of them is Koṇḍañña foretelling that Siddhattha will become either a world ruler or an enlightened teacher. In scene 18 there is a bejeweled Indian king dressed like a Brahmin, complete with the telltale chignon and a white cloth covering both shoulders. Details of the four Brahmins who advise King Ekarājā in scene 27 are worn away, but it can still be seen that they are all richly dressed.

A deity dressed like an elegant Brahmin with shoulder coverings appears in the early 18th century murals in the bot of Wat Ko Kaew Suttharam in Phetchaburi.¹⁷ A late 18th century painting of a hermit also has white coverings over both shoulders.¹⁸

A quite different Brahmin is found in scene 13, namely the greedy Brahmin Jujaka asking Vessantara for his two children. His ugly face, fat belly and simple white wrap are drawn in accordance with Thai illustrations of the Vessantara story over the centuries.¹⁹

Commoners' clothing

The clearest drawing of a commoner's garments is found on scene 15, the ordination of Nanda. The upper part of the wrap has multicolored bands and an end is tucked away around the lower leg (Figure 5).

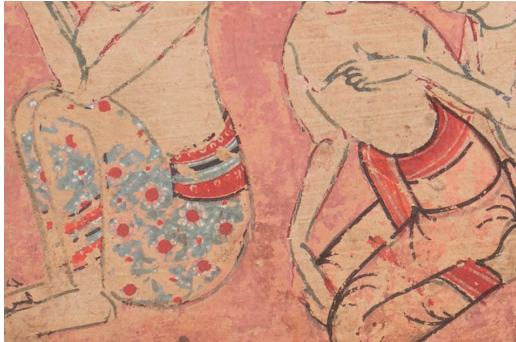


Figure 5. Detail from scene 15: left, an elder male, right, a female showing the upper colorful band wrapped around the lower leg.

Similar clothing is shown on Amarā's mother in scene 25. A couple shown in scene 4 each have a colored ribbon in front of their clothing with the end wrapped around the shin. All other commoners, mainly soldiers, wear cheap wraps that do not reach the knees, comparable to the ผ้าขาวม้า *phākhaomā* casually worn by Thai males today.

We may conclude that the five individuals with a multicolored sash hanging in front from the waist down display the formal dress of ordinary people. Similar clothing is also encountered in late-18th century Thai art.²⁰

Distinctive thrones

The thrones have a distinctive appearance, from bottom upwards as follows: two pedestals; pointed spikes protruding to left and right; bulbous excrescences; then a deep

¹⁷ Jean Boisselier, *La Peinture en Thaïlande*, Fribourg, Office du Livre, 1976, p. 83.

¹⁸ Henry Ginsburg, *Thai Manuscript Painting*, London: The British Library, 1989, p. 67.

¹⁹ All Indians depicted in the Thai version of the Vessantara Jātaka are drawn with ugly faces. Numerous examples are found in Thomas Kaiser, Leedom Lefferts and Martina Wernsdörfer, *Devotion; Image, Recitation, and Celebration of the Vessantara Epic in Northeast Thailand*, Stuttgart: Arnoldsche Art Publishers, 2017, passim. See also Ginsburg, *Thai Art and Culture*, p. 61, *Thai Manuscript Painting*, p. 68 and "Ayutthaya Painting", p. 97.

²⁰ Ginsburg, *Thai Art and Culture*, p. 102, "Ayutthaya Painting", pp. 97, 100, 102, and 103.

indentation, upon which the actual seat broadens out. A piece of cloth hangs down from the middle of the seat, almost reaching the pedestals (see Figure 6).

There are no less than eleven examples of such extravagantly curved seats, namely in scenes 2, 4, 5, 9, 10, 11, 13, 14, 16, 20 and 21. A much simpler form of this throne, revealing what the basic structure was, can be seen in Figure 7, a detail from a Thai manuscript from the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, dated to the first half of the 18th century.²¹

The artist of CBL Thi 1314 apparently has this construction in mind. The elaborate curves and excrescences of the throne are typical of late Ayutthayan depictions.²² An example of the same principle of extravagance can be found in Nimi's chariot in scene 24. The eleven thrones show that the artist was well versed in the conventions of contemporary Thai art.

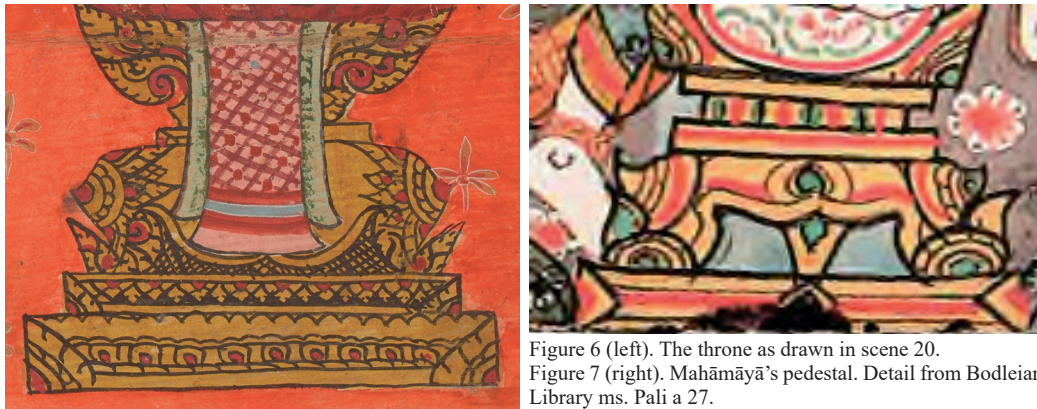


Figure 6 (left). The throne as drawn in scene 20.
Figure 7 (right). Mahāmāyā's pedestal. Detail from Bodleian Library ms. Pali a 27.

Aspects of the landscape

Mountains rise up steeply in scenes 8, 19, 23, 26 and 30, often defying gravity. Some sections have an occasional tuft of plant life. Comparable mountains are found in the oldest undated Thai manuscripts.²³ Most of these mountains have dark shading behind the jagged line of peaks, often in parallel lines, effectively adding a spatial dimension. Similar shadings can also be seen in an undated manuscript from Ayutthaya times.²⁴

Elements that might be Mon

The decorations of the pavilions

Roof structures extend both right and left beyond the margins of pavilions. These roofs are replete with decorative motifs, drawn with freedom and zest (Figure 8).

²¹ Ginsburg, *Thai Art and Culture*, p. 70.

²² For example, *Illustrated Manuscripts*, Vol 1, p. 124. See also Ginsburg, *Thai Art and Culture*, the upper right illustration on p. 64. See also his *Thai Manuscript Painting*, pp. 61, 63 and 97.

²³ *Illustrated Manuscripts*, Vol. 1, pp. 182-185, 188-190, 197, and 200.

²⁴ *Illustrated Manuscripts*, Vol. 1, pp. 190, 192 and 209; see also *Thai Art and Culture*, p. 93.

The multilayered roof of scene 16 is decked with colorful tiles and occupies the whole upper third of the illustration. Similar four-layered multicolored roofs, with some differences in decorative motifs, can be seen in scenes 1, 5, 14, and 16.

While multiple roofs are standard in Thai iconography, the decoration of the tympana in CBL Thi 1314 differs substantially from what Thai artists drew in the late 18th century.²⁵ Thai decoration (*lāi Thai* ลายไทย) uses variations of plant motifs, such as the “eye of the bamboo” (*tā oi* ตาอ้อย), lotus (*dok bua* ดอกบัว), leaf of the candle bush (*phak kūt* พักกูด), ears of rice (*ton khāw* ต้นข้าว), and a range of flowers. When a surface is filled with such decorations, the flowers and leaves invariably strive upwards. By contrast, the tympana in CBL Thi 1314 are filled with loops and curls, many of them curving downwards. There are similar loops on the gable of the entrance porch of Wat Yai Nakhon Chum (วัดใหญ่นครชุมน์) in Amphoe Ban Pong, a Mon monastery going back to late Ayutthaya times.²⁶



Figure 8. The ebullient colorful roof from scene 16.

Another detail that differs from the standard Thai roof is the *chofā* ช่อฟ้า, the decorative ornament at the end of a palace roof. Among eleven *chofā* in CBL Thi 1314, only one points almost vertical, while all others are at an angle of some 30 degrees from the upright position. In contemporary illustrations the tip of the *chofā* points straight up, or sometimes even curves slightly over backwards.²⁷

²⁵ *Illustrated Manuscripts*, Vol. 1, pp. 122-125, 137, 193, 205, 210-211.

²⁶ See <https://www.swapgap.com/post/วัดใหญ่นครชุมน์-อบ้านโป่ง-จราชบุรี-nwshdi>.

²⁷ *Illustrated Manuscripts*, Vol. 1, p. 119, 122, 124, 125, 188.

A stepped platform roof

In scene 15 the artist has placed the Buddha in front of an unusual construction (see Figure 9). Such stepped platform roofs, sometimes called staging roofs, are not found in 18th century Thai manuscripts.

They are typical of the architecture of Myanmar kyaungs, and of some Mon monasteries in Myanmar, such as Mibaya and Mawlamyine Kyaungs.



Figure 9. The roof structure of scene 15.

Common people's hairstyle

A remarkable feature of the illustrations in CBL Thi 1314 is the hairstyle of some common people, as shown in Figure 10. The hair is shaven, not just at the temples, but also on the nape up to the crown.

This illustration has suffered much wear, so that we cannot be certain whether the person on the left is male or female. In scene 4 there is another couple with this hairstyle and again the gender of the person on the left is not clear. In scene 25, the father of Amarā has hair shaven at the temples, leaving only a mop on the top of the skull. Altogether five laypeople are depicted with this hairstyle.

In the ethnographic literature on mainland Southeast Asia there is mention of such a hairstyle. In Robert Halliday's book on the Talaing (the Burmese appellation of the Mon) we find the following:

What the original Talaing style of wearing the hair was may be difficult now to determine. It is interesting to note that the Talaing historian tells us that (p. 20)

Tabeng Shwethi, four years after his accession to the throne of Pegu,²⁸ cut his hair in the Mon fashion. I am told that this was not a cropping of the hair in the European or Siamese way, but a cutting of the ends as if a bowl were upturned and the ends evenly trimmed off around the rim.²⁹



Figure 10. Detail from scene 15, showing the shaven temples of two commoners.

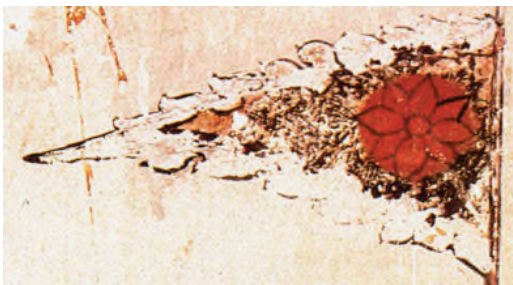


Figure 11. The pennant with the rosette from Wat Pradu Song Tham

Also there is a layperson shown with this hairstyle in a mural in the Mon monastery of Wat Khongkharam in Ratchaburi province.³⁰

Not all commoners in CBL Thi 1314 are shown with this hairstyle. Sujātā's two servants in scene 8 and Amarā's mother in scene 25 are different. The hairstyle of Amarā's mother accords with Halliday's description of 20th-century Mon women: "The Mon women of Siam usually wear the hair long and twisted in a chignon at the back of the head. It is quite different from the Burmese style."³¹

In the murals of Wat Pradu Song Tham in Ayutthaya, there is a parade of groups of soldiers of various ethnic origins.³² One group has this hairstyle of shaven temples and mop on the crown. They carry two pennants, one pure white with a blue border, the other displaying a red circle with an eight-petaled rosette in a brown background and a white border as shown in Figure 11. The rosette may well be the standard Mon way to depict the hibiscus flower. The gable of the oldest building in

the Mon temple Wat Yai Nakhon Chum displays such a flower as its central decoration. This flower seems to be a marker of Mon identity. Perhaps the soldiers are depicted with this pennant to identify their ethnic background.³³

The striking aspect of this hairstyle is the height of the shaven area, leaving the back of the skull bare. A different style, with only the temples shaven, is found in various late 18th and early 19th century Thai sources. A late 18th-century example is found

²⁸ This must be the year 1544.

²⁹ Robert Halliday, *The Talaings*. Bangkok: Orchid Press, 1999 [reprint of the 1917 edition], pp. 19-20.

³⁰ Rita Ringis, *Thai Temples and Thai Murals*, Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 92. See also No Na Paknam, *Wat Khongkharam*, Bangkok: Muang Boran Publishing House, 1994.

³¹ Halliday, *The Talaings*, p. 20.

³² No Na Pak Nam, *Wat Pradu Song Tham*, Bangkok: Muang Boran Publishing House, 1985, pp. 42, and 50-51.

³³ <https://www.voicetv.co.th/read/266724>

in the Chester Beattie collection.³⁴ In 19th century Siam, this hairstyle seems to have become widespread. In an early 19th century cloth painting, showing Vessantara giving away the white elephant, all the non-Brahmin people have this hairstyle.³⁵ A manuscript painting, dated to the first half of the 19th century, also shows common people with shaven temples.³⁶ So do the murals at Wat Wiang Ta in Phrae.³⁷

The face of the Buddha

Southeast Asian artists invariably draw the Buddha as an ideal person, generally drawing upon local concepts of beauty. Thus the face of a Khmer Buddha is distinct from a Lao, Thai, or Burmese Buddha.³⁸

There are eight faces of the Buddha in CBL Thi 1314, all in a distinctive style with minor variations. A good example appears in scene 9 (see Figure 12). The lips are full; the nose is prominent; a line is drawn between the lower lip and chin; there are two pairs of arcs for the eyesockets and eyebrows; and there is a pattern at the base of the ushnisha.

The faces of the Buddha in Wat Khongkharam (Figure 13) have some similarities, a white demarcation at the base of the *ushnisha*, the heavily accentuated lips, and the extra curved line between the lips and the chin. These faces differ from the standard Thai Buddha images.

Wedding scenes

In a Thai wedding, the bridal dowry is placed between the bride and groom, with the groom always on the right side and the bride to his left. However, in the weddings in scenes 1 and 5 of CBL Thi 1314, the women are drawn to the right of the dowry and males to the left. Perhaps the artist was unfamiliar with this aspect of Thai etiquette.³⁹

The artist's idiosyncrasies

The Buddha's ushnisha

When drawing the Buddha's hair, the artist seems fond of a pattern formed with circles or dots. This pattern appears first in scene 1 on a vertically striped curtain. The

³⁴ Ginsburg, *Thai Art and Culture*, p. 93.

³⁵ William Warren, *The Prasart Museum*, Singapore: Ibis Books, 1990, p. 114.

³⁶ William Warren and Jean-Michel Beurdeley, *The House on the Khlong*, Bangkok: Archipelago Press, 1999, p. 102.

³⁷ Vithi Phanichphant, *Wiang Ta Murals*, Bangkok: Amarin, n.d., passim. See also Rita Ringis, *Thai Temples and Thai Murals*, the mural from Wat Phra Sing on p. 96 and the scenes on pp. 132 and 148.

³⁸ Helmut H.E. Loofs, "Biographies in Stone: The Significance of Changing Perceptions of the Buddha Image in Mainland Southeast Asia for the Understanding of the Individual's Place in Some Buddhist Societies", in: Wang Gungwu (ed.), *Self and Biography, Essays on the Individual and Society in Asia*, Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1975, pp. 9-28.

³⁹ In Halliday's short description of the Mon wedding ceremony he does not mention how the couple is seated. The fact that the wedding takes place at the bride's house might be relevant here. Halliday, *The Talaings*, pp. 59-60.



Figure 12. The face of the Buddha in scene 9.



Figure 13. The face of a Buddha in Wat Khongkham.

pattern is a row of five circles, with eight smaller dots surrounding the slightly larger middle circle (see Figure 14). Similar patterns are found on curtains in scenes 4, 5, 11, 16, 27 and 28, though the number and size of the circles as well as the number of surrounding dots in the middle vary.

Comparable curtains with alternating vertical stripes are found in the oldest undated Thai manuscripts that have been preserved.⁴⁰ Another example of a striped curtain is on a manuscript that Ginsburg dated to approximately 1725-1775.⁴¹

In scene 8 this same pattern appears several times on the mountains, following the contours of the rocks, each time with a larger central circle encircled with dots (see Figure 15). Normally only plant life is drawn in these craggy parts of the mountain.

Remarkably this same pattern is found in the Buddha's hair on all illustrations where the Buddha appears, including scenes 7 and 8 when he was still Siddhattha, and in scenes 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, and 20 when he had become a Buddha (see Figure 16).

This appears to be an elaboration of a traditional method to indicate the base of the ushnisha, the cranial protuberance which is the last of the thirty-two signs of the Buddha. In CBL Thi 1314, whenever the Buddha is depicted he is shown with this pattern.

⁴⁰ *Illustrated Manuscripts*, Vol 1, pp. 99, 104 and 210 and in Vol 2 on pp. 32, and 81.

⁴¹ Ginsburg, "Ayutthaya Painting", p. 98.

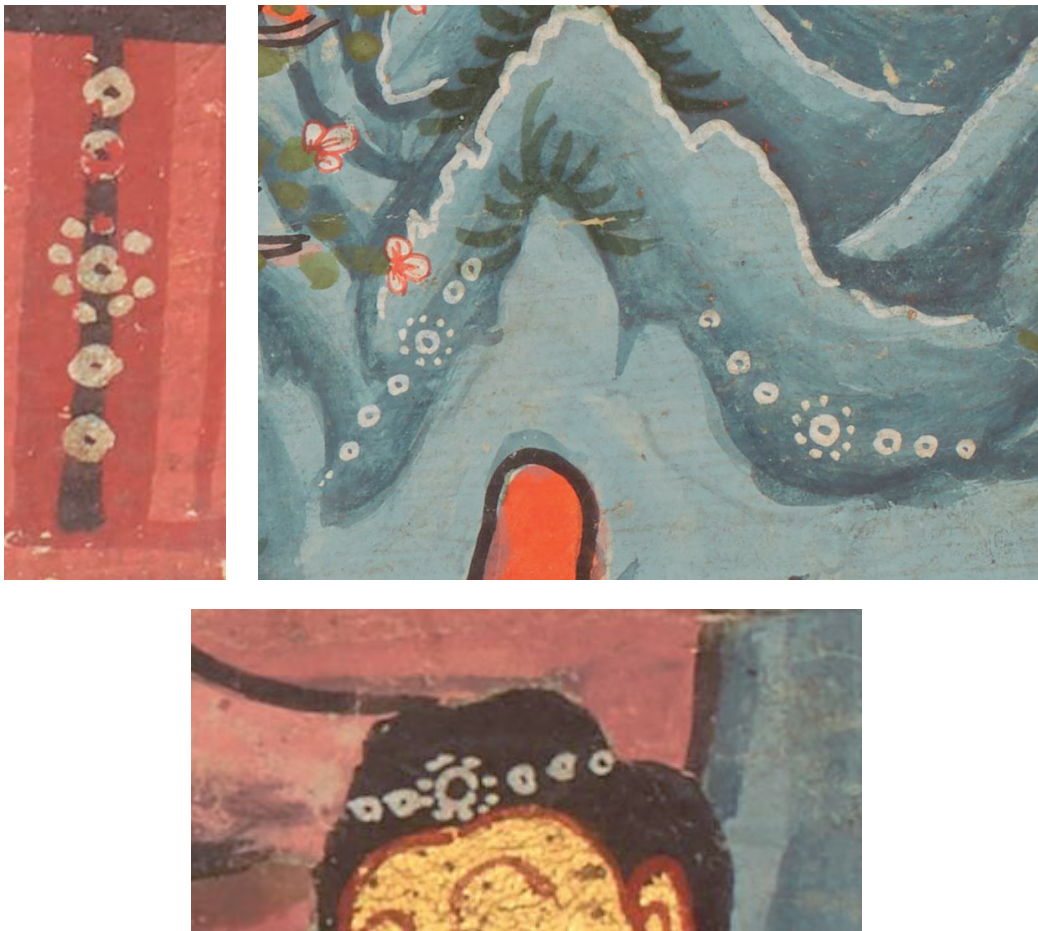


Figure 14 (top left). Detail from scene 1: the pattern on the curtain.
 Figure 15 (top right). Detail from scene 8: the pattern on the mountains.
 Figure 16 (bottom). Detail from scene 8: the first appearance of the pattern in the hair of the future Buddha.

Tilting to indicate movement or emotion

The artist very effectively tilts human shapes in order to imply intention or emotion. In scene 8 Sujātā and Siddhattha lean towards each other, providing an element of intimacy. The same can be seen in scene 25 when Mahosadha meets Amarā for the first time and feels that he may have met his future bride. Quite the opposite effect is achieved in scene 19, where a monk is fleeing a pursuer.

Avoiding equilibrium?

In nine of the illustrations (scenes 4, 9, 10, 11, 12, 14, 16, 18, and 20) the artist draws the viewer's eyes towards the left of the illustration, either by positioning the focus of the scene at left of center, or by portraying movement from right to left. Possibly this reflects a tendency to avoid an equilibrium between the right and left side. Such an avoidance of the middle cannot be found in contemporary Thai art. Could it be that the artist suffered from strabismus or another problem with his vision?

Conclusions

In 2019 technicians at the Chester Beattie Library made a beautiful restoration of a badly deteriorated *samutphāp* from the late 18th century. For eight months until 20 January 2020, the document was part of the exhibition “Thai Buddhist Tales: Stories along the Path to Enlightenment”. I was privileged to see and study the restored document.

Anomalies in the wording on the title page hint that the scribe may have been unfamiliar with the more intricate spelling of Thai words. Some linguistic sleuthing revealed that the manuscript may have been made for the abbot of Wat Rachakhrue, a late Ayutthaya period monastery that was formerly called Wat Mon after the people of Mon extraction who founded it.

The manuscript was embellished with thirty well-executed illustrations. The artist was clearly skilled in the conventions of Thai painting of the late 18th century. He drew the ornaments of persons of high rank, the clothing of the Brahmins, landscapes, the elaborate thrones, the curtains and many other details in accordance with the surviving examples of late 18th-century Thai art.

At the same time, he did certain things that did not conform and thus set the manuscript apart from comparable Thai *samutphāp*.

First, the tympana in the multilayered roofs were not decorated according to Thai rules of decoration.

Second, most of the *chofā* did not point upright.

Third, the Buddha is shown sitting under a distinctive roof that is not Thai, but common in Myanmar.

Fourth, several common people were depicted with a hairstyle that Halliday described as typically Mon.

Fifth, the face of the Buddha differs from the usual Thai depiction, yet is similar to examples in other Mon murals.

Finally, the two wedding scenes differ from Thai weddings because the artist placed females on the right side of the bridal dowry and males on the left.

Perhaps the illustrations were drawn by a Thai artist who knew that he was embellishing a document for a Mon monastery, and deliberately included elements that would please a Mon audience.

However, if Mr. Cui, who is mentioned as having written the text, also wrote the title page and illustrated CBL Thi 1314, it seems more likely that he was a learned Mon who had acquired the art of Siamese illustration, but who occasionally revealed aspects of his native culture.

Appendix: The list of scenes illustrated.

The full manuscript can be viewed at http://viewer.cbl.ie/viewer/object/Thi_1314/1/.
The 30 illustrations are listed below, with the fold numbers from this site.

1. The marriage of Suddhodana and Mahāmāyā (3:2 left).
2. Indra approaches the Bodhisattva in the Tusita heaven (3:2 right).
3. Siddhattha Gotama's birth (5:4 left).
4. The sage Asita with Siddhattha appearing on his head (5:4 right).
5. The marriage of Siddhattha and Yasodharā (6:5 left).
6. The gods assist Siddhattha to escape from his father's palace (6:5 right).
7. Indra playing the lute (7:6 left).
8. Sujātā offers madhupāyāsa-sweet rice with milk (7:6 right).
9. Attaining enlightenment despite attacks (8:7 left).
10. Celebrating the new Buddha (8:7 right).
11. The serpent-king Mucalinda protects the Buddha (9:8 left).
12. The guardian gods offer a receptacle for collecting food (9:8 right).
13. Five monks become his first disciples (10:9 left).
14. The Buddha visits his father's palace (10:9 right).
15. The Buddha's half-brother Nanda leaves his bride to be ordained (11:10 left).
16. The Buddha settling a dispute between the Sakyas and Koliyas (11:10 right).
17. Kassapa at the cremation site of the Buddha (12:11 left).
18. Kings and Brahmins asking for a portion of the Buddha's ashes (12:11 right).
19. A demon pursuing a monk, who probably saves a portion of the ashes (13:12 left).
20. The enlightened one (13:12 right).
21. Temiya Jātaka: Unperturbed while being attacked (14:13 left).
22. Mahājanaka Jātaka: Manimekkhala rescues Janaka (14:13 right).
23. Sāma Jātaka: King Piliyakkha accidentally kills Sāma (15:14 left).
24. Nimi Jātaka: The charioteer Mātali leads Nimi back to the world (15:14 right).
25. Mahā Umagga Jātaka: Mahosadha testing his future wife Amarā (32:31 left)
26. Bhūridatta Jātaka: the Brahmin captures the Nāga-king (32:31 right).
27. Candakumāra Jātaka: King Ekarājā and his Brahmin advisers (46:44 left).
28. Nārada Jātaka: King Angati kneels when seeing Nārada (46:44 right).
29. Vidhura Jātaka: Yakkha Punnaka on his steed with Vidhura hanging on (81:79 left).
30. Vessantara Jātaka: Vessantara giving away his children (81:79 right).



Scene 6. The gods assist Siddhattha to escape from his father's palace



Scene 8. Sujātā offers madhupāyāsa-sweet rice with milk



Scene 12. The guardian gods offer a receptacle for collecting food



Scene 14. The Buddha visits his father's palace



Scene 24. Nimi Jātaka: The charioteer Mātali leads Nimi back to the world



Scene 25. Mahā Umagga Jātaka: Mahosadha testing his future wife Amarā