

Symbolism in the Design of Wat Phra Chetuphon Wimonmangkhalaram (Wat Pho)

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ABSTRACT—Earlier studies have described the cosmological symbolism in the design of Wat Pho, focusing on Mount Meru and the Tavatimsa Heaven, and argued that this symbolism was largely introduced by the renovation in the Third Reign. This essay adjusts this view in two ways. First, the cosmological symbolism was already present from the construction in the First Reign; the Third Reign renovation strengthened this symbolism, but did not originate it. Second, the symbolism has two layers, present in the same design and architectural elements. The first layer is about Buddhist cosmology, while the second concerns the god Indra. Both layers reflect the philosophy of the new state and dynasty in early Bangkok.

Introduction

Several studies of the symbolism and meanings in the design of Wat Phra Chetuphon Wimonmangkhalaram (Wat Pho) have argued that the *wat* was designed to reflect the cosmology of Theravada Buddhism. The layout and architectural elements inside the *wat* can be compared to elements which appear in several cosmological texts.

Samoechai Phunsuwan argued that the *ubosot* (ordination hall; Pali: *uposatha*) and its cloisters symbolise the Tavatimsa (Dawadueng) Heaven on the peak of Mount Meru, the four *wihan* (preaching halls; Pali: *vihara*) represent the Sattaparibhanda (Sattaboriphan) Range, and the surrounding wall represents the exterior wall of the universe. The western area of the complex, where several architectural elements were added in the Third Reign including the *wihan* of the Reclining Buddha, Scripture Hall, bodhi tree, and Teaching Hall, represents the Jambudvipa (Chomphu Continent), Lankadvipa (Lanka Continent), and World of

¹ This article originally appeared in Thai in *Sathapat Wat Pho naeo khwam khit lae kan ook baep sathapatyakam Wat Pho* [The architecture of Wat Pho: philosophy and design] (Bangkok: Amarin, 2009), published for the monastic chapter of Wat Pho and the King Rama I Foundation on the 200th anniversary of King Rama I's death), pp. 257-344. Here the presentation has been slightly adjusted, but the argument and data are unchanged. Translation by Chris Baker with thanks to Niyada Lausunthorn and Peter Skilling. Digital reconstructions by Banana Studio. Thanks to the Fine Arts Department for permission to reproduce images from the Traiphum Illustrated Manuscripts.

Hell (Narok).² Samoechai suggests that this symbolism was evident until the major renovation in the Third Reign, when several new architectural elements were added.

Watchari Watchasin³ argued that the *wat* was not a model of Mount Meru at all, but of *machanimaprathet an wiset nai chomphuthawip*, “the sacred Middle Country in the Jambu Continent,” which figures prominently in the *Trailokawinitchai* (Pali: Trailokavinchaya) of the First Reign, but not in other cosmological texts. Although the study was strongly argued and based on contemporary sources, it overlooked much important evidence.

In this article, I build on these past studies to examine the symbolism and meanings in the design of Wat Pho in the First and Third Reigns (the important periods, as later modifications were minor and had no major effect on the symbolism), using additional sources and analysis, as follows.

First, the two versions of the *Trailokawinitchai*, contemporary texts which I believe provided the main framework of thinking behind the design.⁴

Second, other cosmological texts including Arunavati Sutra (Arunawadisut), Lokabatti (Lokuppatti), Cakkavaladipani (Jakawanthipani), and four illustrated Traiphum manuscripts known as the Khmer-language version, Ayutthaya version, Thonburi version, and Lanna-script version.

Third, murals which are known to have existed in the First and Third Reigns, especially those overlooked in earlier studies.

Fourth, architectural details from the First and Third Reigns subject to new analysis to understand the thinking behind their design.

Fifth, data on the social, economic, political, and cultural history of the early Bangkok era, because I believe that no architectural project exists in a vacuum, but is a product of its time.

My main argument is that the symbolism in the design of Wat Pho was clear and complete since the First Reign, and that the renovation and extension in the Third Reign only confirmed that symbolism through additional detail. The

² Samoechai Phunsuwan, “Sanyalak thang phumijakrawan phai nai khet phutthawat Wat Phra Chetuphon Wimonmangkhalaram” [Cosmological symbolism in Wat Phra Chetuphon Wimonmangkhalaram], *Mueang Boran* 16, 1 (Jan-Mar 1990), pp. 112-123, reprinted in Samoechai, *Sanyalak nai ngan jitrakam thai rawang phutthasatawat 19 thueng 24* [Symbolism in Thai murals from the 19th to 24th centuries BE] (Bangkok: Faculty of Sociology and Anthropology, Thammasat University, 1992).

³ The study appeared first as a Silpakorn University MA thesis in 1990 and was printed as *Wat Phra Chetuphon: machanimaprathet an wiset nai chomphuthawip* [Wat Phra Chetuphon: the sacred Middle Country in the Jambu Continent] (Bangkok: Matichon, 1995). Watchari’s findings do not seem to have been well accepted in academic circles, especially when compared to those of Samoechai.

⁴ On these texts, see Santi Phakdikham, “Traiphum ruela wannakam lokasat phraphutthasasana: khwam samphan kap sathapatyakam thai” [Traiphum or Buddhist cosmological literature: relations with Thai architecture], in *Sathapat Wat Pho naeo khwam khit lae kan ook baep sathapatyakam Wat Pho*, pp. 220-53.

symbolism has two layers, present in the same space. In the first layer, Wat Pho is a model of the Jambu Continent with a centre at the *sisa phaendin* (ศีรษะแผ่นดิน) or Head Land, meaning that Wat Pho is the centre of the world of Buddhism according to the beliefs in the *Trailokawinitchai*. In the second layer, Wat Pho is a model of the Tavatimsa Heaven, reflecting the special prominence of Indra in the ideology of the early Bangkok state.

These two layers are present in the same design and architectural elements. As they tell different stories with different meanings, they might be assumed to conflict, but in fact they are mutually reinforcing. Besides, this kind of combination of two different ideas in a single space is something common in traditional forms of expression. For example, traditional mural paintings often have several stories with different symbols and meanings on a single wall. The combination of two planes of symbolic meaning at Wat Pho is not unusual at all.

Overview of the plan and architecture from the First Reign

The layout and architectural features of Wat Pho seen today date mostly from the renovation made in the Third Reign (1824-1851). Here I will briefly explain the design of the *wat* created in the First Reign (1782-1809) as background for understanding the symbolism.

The *wat* was divided into two areas: an inner area to the east and an outer area to the west (see Figure 1).

In the inner area, the centrepiece of the design was the *ubosot* (which was smaller than the current building), surrounded by peaked *sema* (boundary stones) at the eight directions.⁵ The presiding Buddha image, called Phra Phutthathewapatimakon, was seated in meditation pose on a base lower than the present one. The murals were on the themes of “the Ten Former Lives, the subduing of Lord Jambupati, and the Convocation of the Deities.”⁶

Around the *ubosot* there was a *wihan* at each of the four directions, with the eastern one longer than the others, and two levels of cloisters, abutting on the long sides of the four *wihan*. The inner cloister was taller than the outer one. The outer cloister did not completely surround the *ubosot*, but jutted out from the inner cloister on each side, giving the impression of a redented cloister. At each of the four corners inside the cloister there was a stupa with a *prang* (ปราสาท, a corncob-shaped tower). The two levels of cloister housed a total of 832 Buddha images.⁷

⁵ John Crawford, *Journal of an Embassy to the Courts of Siam and Cochin China* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 107.

⁶ Niyada Laosunthorn, ed., “Jaruek rueang song sang Wat Phra Chetuphon khrang rachakan thi 1” [Inscriptions on the construction of Wat Pho in the First Reign] in *Phrachum jaruek Wat Phrachetuphon* [Collected inscriptions of Wat Pho] (Bangkok: Monastic chapter of Wat Pho, 2001), p. 52.

⁷ Niyada, “Jaruek,” p. 53.

The eastern *wihan* was divided by a wall into two chambers. The front chamber (to the east) housed a Buddha image called Phrajao Trat Nai Khuang Mai Phra Mahapho (The Lord Speaking at the Great Holy Bodhi Tree) seated in the pose of subduing Mara on a throne under a bodhi tree, and had murals on the theme of the Victory over Mara. The rear chamber (to the west) housed a standing Buddha image twenty cubits tall in the pose of halting the sandalwood image called Phra Lokanatsatsadajan, brought from Wat Phra Si Sanphet in Ayutthaya, and had murals on the theme of “the monk meditating on the ten loathsome features of the body and the ten insights to attain enlightenment (อุปลรมาญาน ๑๐).”⁸

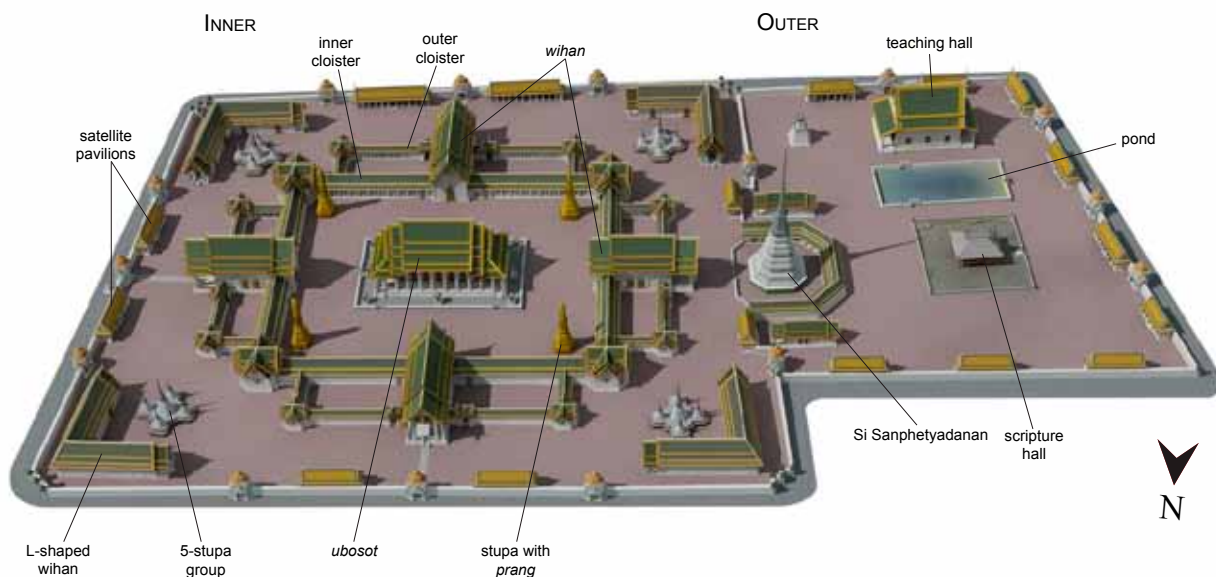


Figure 1. Reconstruction of Wat Pho in the First Reign

The southern *wihan* housed a Buddha image in the pose of subduing Mara with five disciples, called Phra Phutthajao Thesna Thammajak (Buddha preaching the sermon on the wheel of *thamma*), and had murals on the theme of the sermon on the wheel and the sermon at Tavatimsa. The western *wihan* housed a Buddha seated under a *naga* with the rear in the design of a *jik*, or Indian oak tree, and had murals on the theme of the Buddha’s hair relic. The northern *wihan* housed a Parileyya (Palelai) Buddha, newly cast (the only image cast at Wat Pho), with statues of an elephant offering a water pot and a monkey offering a honeycomb in front of the image, and had murals on the Three Worlds cosmology including depictions of Mount Meru, the seven mountain ranges, four continents, five rivers, Himavanta (Himaphan) Forest, and Anotatta (Anodat) Lake.⁹

At each of the four corners of the wall surrounding this inner area there was an

⁸ Niyada, “Jaruek,” p. 52.

⁹ Niyada, “Jaruek,” p. 53.

L-shaped *wihan*, and in the angle of each *wihan* there was a group of five stupa on a single base – a taller central stupa surrounded by others at the four directions (Figure 2).

Beyond the western *wihan* stood a stupa 82 cubits high called the Si Sanphetyadanan, housing a standing Buddha called Phra Si Sanphet which had previously been at the *wihan* of Wat Phra Si Sanphet in Ayutthaya. On three sides around this stupa was a cloister with murals of the Ramakian on the inner walls.¹⁰

In the outer part of the *wat* to the west, King Rama I commanded the construction of a scripture hall aligned with the Si Sanphetyadanan stupa and the *ubosot*, two small *wihan* to left and right, and a bell tower. To the south of this group there was an old *ubosot*



Figure 2. Group of five stupa on a single base

(remaining from the Ayutthaya era when the *wat* was called Wat Photharam) which was modified to become a teaching hall, and a pond dug between this hall and the scripture hall for keeping a crocodile.¹¹

Along the outer wall enclosing both areas of the *wat* were thirteen satellite pavilions containing murals on the 550 *jātaka* stories and texts on medicine and the rishi-poses for massage.¹²

The first layer of symbolism from the First Reign: the Head Land at the centre of the Jambu Continent, Wat Pho at the centre of the world of Buddhism

The layout, architectural elements, and artworks of Wat Pho in the First Reign correspond with details of the Jambu Continent as they are described in the two versions of *Trailokawinitchai* composed in the First Reign.¹³ King Rama I intended to establish Wat Pho as the Head Land, the central sacred space of the Jambu Continent in Theravada Buddhist cosmology. This symbolism reflected the politics and ideology of the early Bangkok state.

¹⁰ Niyada, "Jaruek," p. 52.

¹¹ Crawford, *Journal*, p. 111.

¹² Niyada, "Jaruek," p. 52.

¹³ In 1783, King Rama I commanded the Supreme Patriarch to oversee a recension of the Three Worlds cosmology by a group of scribes and monks using the Pāli canon and commentaries as sources. In 1802, the king reviewed the draft, found it uneven and inaccurate in parts, and commanded another draft. The work was first published in printed form in 1913.

The significance of the Head Land

King Rama I commissioned the first and second versions of the *Trailokawinitchai* in 1783 (before the establishment of Wat Pho) and the revised second version in 1802 (about three years after the establishment of Wat Pho). These texts describe the Jambu Continent as follows:

... the Jambu Continent extends for 10,000 *yojana*, the Himavanta Forest for 3,000 *yojana*, the flood waters for 4,000 *yojana*, the abode of human beings for 3,000 *yojana*. This 3,000 *yojana* is divided into the Middle Country [มัชฌิมประเทศ, *macchima prathet*, Pali: Majjhimadesa], 300 *yojana* long and 250 *yojana* wide, 100 *yojana* around, in the shape of a *taphon* drum. In the territory around, Changkhala Nikhom is the boundary to the east, the Salawa River [Salawanat] is the boundary to the southwest, Setrakannikara Nikhom is the boundary to the south, the Brahmanakham land is the boundary to the west, and the Usirathacha mountain is the boundary to the north. Beyond these boundaries everything is the Outer Upcountry [ปะจันตชนบท, *pajanta chonnabot*; Pali: Paccanta Janapada]; within these boundaries is the sacred Middle Country.¹⁴

.. and this island of the Jambu Continent has the great jewelled Bodhi-Tree Throne on the Head Land at the centre of the realm.... adjacent to that are the Six Stations after the Enlightenment [มหาสถาน, *mahasathan*]: where the Lord [Buddha] stood and he gazed at the bodhi tree for seven days; where he walked in meditation for seven days; where he sat considering the Three Jewels for seven days; where he meditated under the shelter of the Ajapala-higrodha [Achapanikhrot] banyan tree for seven days; where he meditated on the bank of the Mucalinda [Mujalin] Lake and the Lord of the Nagas came and raised his hood to protect him from rain for seven days; where he meditated under the Lord Milkwood tree for seven days. All these places are ranged around the great bodhi tree.... Beyond them are the Great Cities, namely Varanasi, Savatthi, Vaishali, Mithila, Alavi, and Kosambi.... These cities are ranged around outside those Seven Great Places after the Enlightenment.... Beyond them are the outer peoples [ปะจันตพระราชูร, *pajanta ratsadon*; Pali: Paccanta Rattha], namely Kuru, Asakosala, Sonamagadha, and Sivi.... These are called the Upcountry Cities [ชนบทนคร, *chonnabot nakhon*; Pali: Janapada Nagara] beyond the Great Cities, and among those Great Cities are many Upcountry Settlements [นิคมชนบท, *nikhom chonnabot*; Pali: Nigama Janapada].¹⁵

¹⁴ National Archives, Manuscript Section, *Traiphum Lokawinitchai* Vol. 5, No. 5, Cupboard 107, Bundle 2 on the Jambu Continent and Himavanta Forest.

¹⁵ Ibid.

In sum, at the centre of the Jambu Continent is the Bodhi-Tree Throne, surrounded by six places, which together with the throne, constitute the Seven Great Places after the Enlightenment. Beyond them are the Great Cities and then the Upcountry Settlements. All of this constitutes the Middle Country. In the outskirts of the Jambu Continent are the Himavanta Forest and a flooded area.

This geography did not appear for the first time in the *Trailokawinitchai* texts. There is a similar description in earlier cosmological texts such as Arunavati Sutra¹⁶ and similar illustrations in several illuminated Traiphum manuscripts which date to the late 18th century CE. However, the *Trailokawinitchai* has one important difference, namely that the area around the Bodhi-Tree Throne is called the Head Land. This wording does not appear in earlier texts.

Another addition which appears in the second version of the *Trailokawinitchai* (not the first) is the insertion of the Eight Great Places (อัฐมหาสถาน, *atthamahasathan*), the sites of eight miracles in the life of the Buddha, as another ring in the geography between the Seven Great Places after the Enlightenment and the Great Cities.¹⁷

What is the significance of the Head Land in the Jambu Continent? Both versions of the *Trailokawinitchai* explain that it is “the birth place of the important things, namely the Lord Buddha, the Pacceka Buddha, the Buddha’s disciples, the Buddha’s followers, his father and mother, the eighty great disciples, the many householders and Brahmans, and he who has much property and possessions, namely the Great Lord Emperor. All these were born only in this same Middle Country.” The key point is that Buddhism, the Buddha, the *arahant*, and the emperor were all born in the Jambu Continent.

The *Trailokawinitchai* further explains the importance of the Head Land in the destruction and creation of the world at the end of each cycle, as follows:

As for the Head Land, the site of the Great Bodhi-Tree Throne, where the Buddha is enthroned and enlightened under a white umbrella, when the world is destroyed, it is the last to be destroyed, and when the world is re-created, it is the first to appear, before everything else. Hence it is called the Head Land, meaning that it is the head of the Jambu Continent.¹⁸

Similar accounts appear in other old cosmological texts such as the *Lokabatti* which states: “The country that is the Great Bodhi-Tree Throne, when the world

¹⁶ National Library, Fine Arts Department, “Arunawadisut” in *Lokapatti Arunawadisut Pathommun Pathomkap lae Muntontrai* (Bangkok: National Library, Fine Arts Department, 1990), pp. 86-87.

¹⁷ Summarised from Literature and History Division, Fine Arts Department, *Wannakam samai rattanakosin lem 2 (Traiphum Lokawinitchaikatha)* [Literature of the Bangkok era, volume 2: Trailokawinitchai] (Bangkok: Fine Arts Department, 1992), p. 347.

¹⁸ National Archives, Manuscript Section, *Traiphum Lokawinitchai* Vol. 2, No. 2, Cupboard 107, Bundle 2 on the domain of Buddha in the 10,000 universes.

is destroyed, is the last to be destroyed, and when the world is established, it is established first.” But this text gives no further detail. There is no description of the Bodhi-Tree Throne or anything surrounding it. Texts such as the *Arunawadisut* mention the physical surroundings of the Bodhi-Tree Throne, but fail to explain the importance of this space. In sum, other cosmological texts mention fragments about the Bodhi-Tree Throne and Jambu Continent, but the *Trailokawinitchai* is unique in bringing all these fragments together and giving them a new definition as the Head Land.

The Head Land in the *Trailokawinitchai* has another significance. After the Head Land has appeared at the re-creation of the world and before the birth of humankind, a lotus appears that prophesies how many Buddhas will attain enlightenment in the coming era (*kalpa*). A Brahma from the Suddhavasa (Suthawat) level flies down to inspect this omen:

There is a lotus flower that appears as an omen at the site of the Bodhi-Tree Throne. If one Buddha will attain enlightenment, the lotus will have one flower, and if two, three, four or five Buddhas then the lotus will have two, three, four or five flowers. If two, three, four or five flowers, all will be on one stalk.... Then, all the Suddhavasa Brahmans at the Suddhavasa level invite one another to go to see the omen together at the site of the Bodhi-Tree Throne. If the era will have no enlightened Buddha, the lotus clump will have no flowers and great suffering will result. Thus, the Brahmans speak together that it seems that this time the world will be truly dark; all animals will die, and in future will go to the four realms of misery... and the Brahma world will be truly deserted by deities and Brahmans. If the Suddhavasa Great Brahmans see a flower growing on the lotus, they rejoice that this time they will see wonders... this time the realms of misery will have no animals as all will travel to the world of deities and the Brahma world. The deities and great Brahmans and Lord Suddhavasa Great Brahmans exclaim thus, rejoice greatly, and return together to the pure palaces of the Brahma world.¹⁹

The Head Land is thus a sacred space of great importance in Theravada Buddhism. It is associated with the symbol of the Bodhi-Tree Throne that appears in several old cosmological texts. It was given a new name and new importance in the texts of the Bangkok First Reign. It lies at the centre of the Jambuu Continent. It is the birthplace of the Buddha, Pacceka Buddha, disciples, *arahant*, and emperor. It is the site of the Bodhi-Tree Throne where the Buddha will sit when attaining enlightenment. It is the first land to appear at the birth of the world and the last to disappear at its destruction. And it is the site of the omen foretelling the number of enlightened Buddhas at the beginning of an era.

¹⁹ Ibid.

The symbolism of the Head Land at Wat Pho

If Wat Pho is a model of the Jambu Continent, then the *ubosot* represents the Head Land at its centre, and its presiding image represents the Bodhi-Tree Throne. Yet, since every *ubosot* has a presiding image, more evidence is needed to support this identification.

In the *Trailokawinitchai*, as noted above, the Head Land is surrounded by the Seven Great Places after the Enlightenment, then the Eight Great Places, then the Great Cities (given as the Sixteen Great Cities in the second version of the text), and the Upcountry Settlements (given as the Sixteen Great Upcountries in the second version of the text). These must be identified in the images and murals in the complex around the *ubosot*.

Symbolism of the Seven Great Places after the Enlightenment

The seven places where the Buddha sojourned for a week apiece after attaining enlightenment are as follows:²⁰

Week 1: On the Bodhi-Tree Throne beneath the shade of the bodhi tree.

Week 2: At the Amimisa site (northeast from the throne) gazing at the bodhi tree throne without blinking.

Week 3: At the Ratanacankama (Rattanajongkrom) site (between the Amimisa site and the throne) where he walked in meditation.

Week 4: At the Ratanagara (Rattanakhon) site (west from the throne) where he sat meditating on the Abhidhamma in a crystal hall that the gods magically provided.

Week 5: Under a banyan tree called the Ajapalanigrodha (Achapalanikhrot) site (east from the throne), a resting place for goat herders.

Week 6: Under a *jik* tree (Indian oak) called the Mucalinda site (southeast from the throne) where the Lord of the Nagas came and spread his hood to give protection from rain and wind.

Week 7: Under the shelter of a milkwood tree called the Rajayatana (Rachayatan) site. During this week several events took place. In particular, Indra presented him with an olive fruit, and two merchants, Tapussa and Bhallika, gave him food and begged to become his first disciples, after which the Buddha wiped his head and gave them the hairs from his head.

Several Traiphum manuscripts illustrate the Seven Great Places after the Enlightenment with the Bodhi-Tree Throne at the centre and the other six circled around (see Figure 3).

The first week is represented in Wat Pho by the presiding image in the *ubosot*, which significantly is in the pose of meditation, not in the more common pose of subduing Mara.

²⁰ *Wannakam samai rattanakosin lem 2 (Traiphum Lokawinitchaikatha)*, pp. 251-263

The western *wihan* has a Buddha seated under a *naga* with a *jik* tree in the rear. This clearly represents the sixth week. In the First Reign, the murals here were on the theme of the Buddha's hair relic, representing the seventh week when the Buddha presented hairs to Tapussa and Bhallika.

Four weeks are still not identified. There may have been other murals whose subjects are not recorded. The only information on the murals in the eastern *wihan* mentions the theme of the Victory over the Mara, which is invariably painted on an end-wall, usually the front wall. That still leaves the rear wall, the space above the windows on the two long sides, and the spaces between the windows. The latter were usually devoted to *jataka* tales, or the Buddha's life story. In several other *wat* from the First Reign, the Seven Great Places are depicted as part of the Buddha's life story in this space, but such illustrations would be too small to carry the symbolic meaning sought here. Only the end-walls or the space above the windows would be large enough for this purpose. During the First Reign, the space above the windows was usually illustrated with the Convocation of the Deities. That leaves the remaining end-wall. There are examples of this space being used to illustrate one of the Great Locations. For instance at Wat Mai Prachumphon in Ayutthaya, the wall behind the image carries a mural of the Buddha meditating under a tree with the Lord Naga spreading his hood as protection, clearly a depiction of the sixth week.²¹ I suspect that similar illustrations of other weeks may have appeared on the end-walls in the eastern or western *wihan* of Wat Pho.

This incomplete identification of the Seven Great Places after the Enlightenment is not enough to confirm the *ubosot* as the Head Land. So we will proceed to the next ring, the Eight Great Places.

The Eight Great Places

The Eight Great Places are locations of the principal events in the Buddha's life, as follows:²²

1. His birthplace in the Lumbini (Lumphini) Forest.
2. The Bodhi-Tree Throne where he achieved enlightenment.
3. The Isipatana (Isipaton) Forest deer park at Varanasi where he delivered the First Sermon to the five disciples.
4. The forest where he spent the rains retreat alone and the Parileyya elephant took care of him.
5. The place where he tamed the Dhanapala elephant that Devadatta (Thewathat) had released to harm him.
6. The place where he performed the twin miracle at Savatthi, and ascended to the Tavatimsa Heaven to preach to his mother.

²¹ Samoechai, *Sanyalak*, p. 96.

²² Summarised from *Wannakam samai rattanakosin lem 2 (Traiphum Lokawinitchaikatha)*, pp. 263-4.

7. The place where he descended from the Tavatimsa Heaven to preach to his mother, coming down at the city gate of Sankassa, and performing the miracle of “opening the cosmos.”

8. The place where he achieved nirvana between the *rang* trees in the Salavana (Salawan) park in Kusinara.

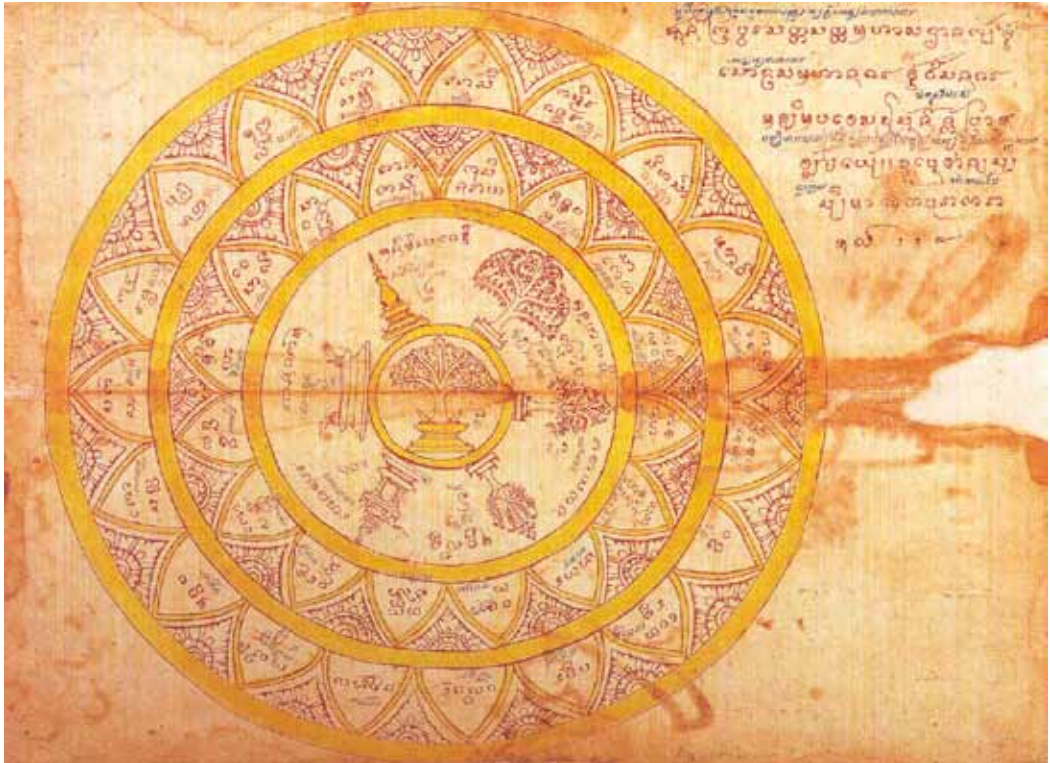


Figure 3. The Jambu Continent from the Lanna-script Traiphum Illustrated Manuscript showing the Bodhi-Tree Throne at the centre, surrounded by the six Great Locations, then the Great Cities, and the Upcountry Places.

In the *Trailokawinitchai* text and several illustrated Traiphum manuscripts, these sites are illustrated with the Bodhi-Tree Throne at the centre and the other seven sites circled around (Figure 3).

At Wat Pho, the Eight Great Places are represented in the north and south *wihan*. The presiding image in the southern *wihan* is a Buddha in the pose of subduing Mara along with five disciples. This represents the third site. The murals inside this *wihan* are on the themes of the sermon on the wheel of the law, apparently another representation of the third site, and on the sermon at Tavatimsa, representing the sixth site.

Murals on the Tavatimsa sermon, especially if they appear behind the Buddha image, usually feature two other key events in the Buddha's life: either the twin miracle at Savatthi before the Buddha ascended to preach to his mother

in the Tavatimsa Heaven, as on the rear wall of the *ubosot* of Wat Chong Nonsi;²³ or the Buddha's descent from Tavatimsa to the Sankassa city gate (Figure 4); or sometimes both, as on the rear wall of the *ubosot* of Wat Suwannaram, Thonburi. The descent from Tavatimsa is less likely because this scene includes the miracle of "opening the cosmos," that allowed the creatures of all three worlds to see one another. Artists usually portray this event against a background of the whole Three Worlds cosmology. Since the murals in the northern *wihan* were on the theme of the Three Worlds, I suspect those in the southern *wihan* did not show the descent from Tavatimsa, but rather the miracle at Savatthi, representing the sixth site.



Figure 4: The Buddha's descent from Tavatimsa Heaven in the Buddhaisawan Chapel (Muang Boran, 1983)

There is some confirmation of this assumption. In the second version of the *Trailokawinitchai*, the twin miracle at Savatthi and the ascent to the Tavatimsa Heaven are related together as part of this same sixth site.²⁴ People of the time saw the miracle and the ascent as part of a single event. Hence, the Traiphum mural in the northern *wihan* most likely showed the descent from Tavatimsa and the world-opening miracle, the seventh site.

The Buddha image in the northern *wihan* is the Parileyya image, the only image cast in Wat Pho. King Rama I must have had a definite purpose for this

²³ Some argue that this image does not depict the *yomok* miracle at Savatthi, the sixth site, as it does not show the *khanthamaphruek* tree, an important element of the event, but more likely shows the Buddha's descent from Tavatimsa to the Sankassa city gate. See Samoechai, *Sanyalak*, pp. 86, 95.

²⁴ Summarised from *Wannakam samai rattanakosin lem 2 (Traiphum Lokawinitchaikatha)*, pp. 264.

image otherwise there would be no reason for such a unique casting. This image clearly represents the fourth site.

Including the image in the *ubosot* which represents the second site (the Bodhi-Tree Throne), the north-south axis has symbols of five of the Eight Great Places. The remaining three (birth, taming the elephant, and attaining nirvana) were probably represented elsewhere in the murals in the north or south *wihan*. There are earlier examples of murals themed on the Seven Great Places and Eight Great Places, such as at Wat Ko Kaeo Sutharam, Phetchaburi, where the scene of the Buddha attaining nirvana was not depicted along with the other sites on the long walls, but appeared as a small inset on the front end-wall in a painting of the universe.²⁵ On the basis of this example, the eighth site on attaining nirvana was probably depicted as part of the mural on the universe in the northern *wihan*.

From this evidence, I am inclined to believe that the four axial *wihan* in Wat Pho represented the Seven Great Places along the east-west axis and the Eight Great Places on the north-south axis.

Symbolism of the Great Cities and Upcountry Places

In the *Trailokawinitchai*, the Head Land is first surrounded by the Seven Great Places and the Eight Great Places, and then by the Great Cities and Upcountry Places. Altogether, these constitute the Middle Country that has the shape of a *taphon* drum.²⁶

The distinctive feature of a *taphon* drum is the tapering at both ends. Wachari Wacharasin noted that the ground plan of the cloisters at Wat Pho is rather similar

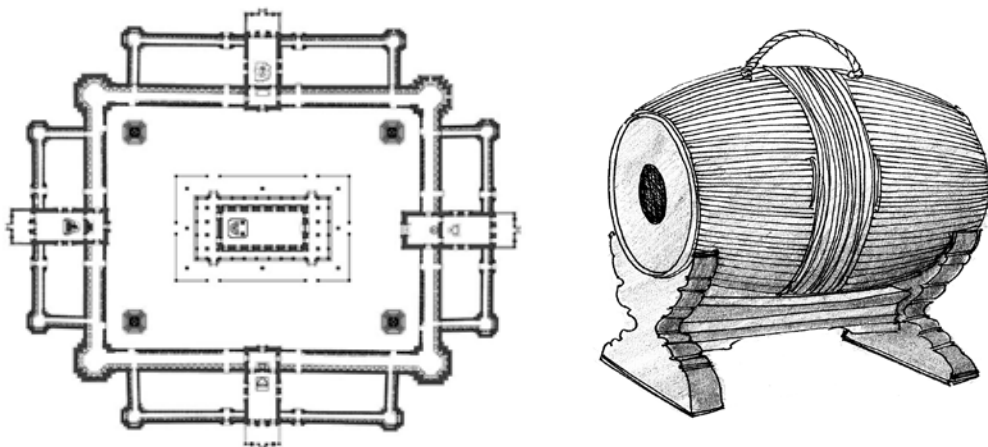


Figure 5: Probable layout of the *ubosot* and cloisters in the First Reign; *taphon* drum

²⁵ Siripot Laomanajaroen “*Naeo khit nai ka nook baep jittakam fa phanang ubosot Wat Ko Kaeo Sutharam pratimanwithaya kap kan sadaengook choeng chang*” [Philosophy in the design of the murals at Wat Ko Kaeo Sutharam: iconography and workmanship], *Mueang Boran* 33, 1 (Jan-Mar 2007), p. 83.

²⁶ *Wannakam samai rattanakosin lem 2 (Traiphum Lokawinitchaikatha)*, pp. 248.

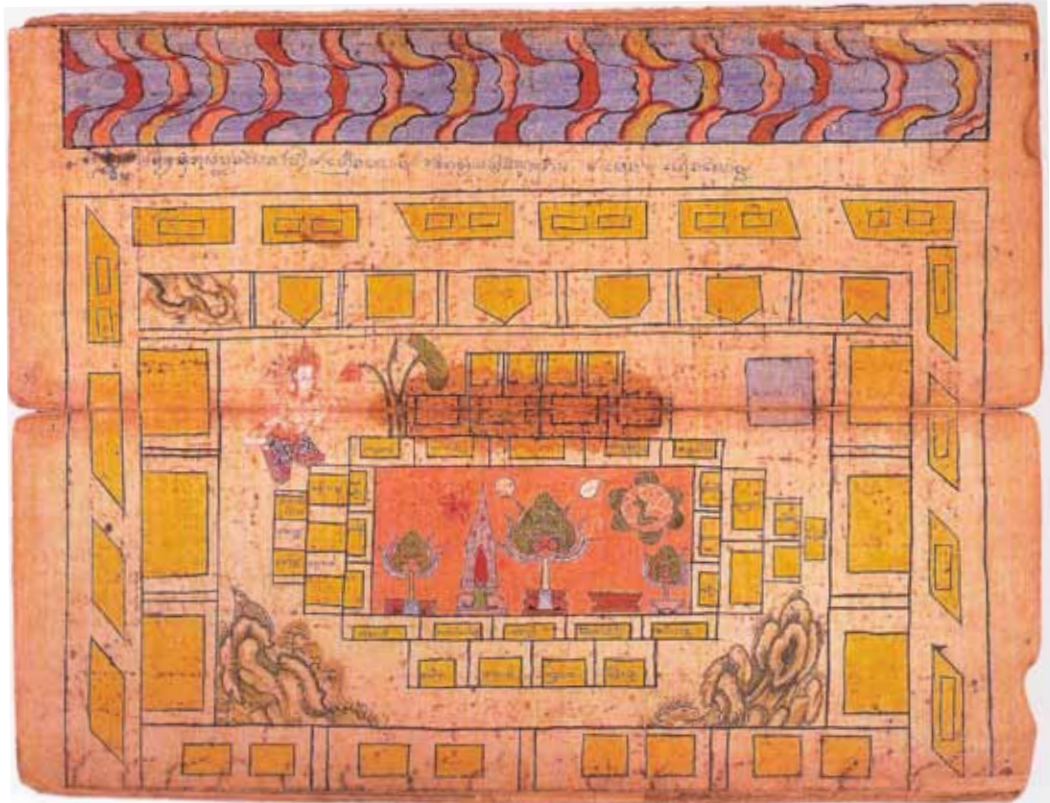


Figure 6. The Jambu Continent in the Khmer-language Traiphum manuscript



Figure 7. Symbols of the Seven Great Places on the Khmer-language Traiphum manuscript: Bodhi tree at centre, then clockwise from top left: Amimisa, Ratanacankama, Ratanagara, Ajapalanigrodha, Mucalinda, Rajayatana.

(Figure 5).²⁷ Wachari also suggested that the inner and outer cloisters represent the Great Cities and Upcountry Settlements, and that the four *wihan* represent the territories beyond the boundaries of the Middle Country in each of the four directions (Changkhala, Setrakannikara, Brahmanakham, and Usirathacha).

This might seem exaggerated, but there is a text that supports this interpretation. In the Khmer-language illustrated manuscript of the Traiphum, which most scholars believe was created in the late 18th century CE,²⁸ there is a map of the Jambu Continent which has

²⁷ Wachari, *Wat Phra Chetuphon*, pp. 109-12.

²⁸ Fine Arts Department, *Samuthaphap traiphum chabap akson tham lanna lae akson khom* [Illustrated Traiphum manuscripts, Lanna script version and Khmer version] (Bangkok: Fine Arts Department, 2004), p. 5.

details and place names that suggest it was created in the early Bangkok era (Figure 6). This map is radically different from the maps of the Jambu Continent in other *Traiphum* manuscripts. Instead of the usual portrayal based on concentric circles, this map resembles an architectural drawing and is uncannily similar to the design of Wat Pho. It could even be called a plan of the *wat*.

The map shows the Jambu Continent at the centre as a rectangular shape with extensions on the four sides that are very similar to the cloisters of Wat Pho, with the same impression of a redented cloister that is found only at this *wat*. In the space on the map equivalent to the area inside the cloisters at Wat Pho, there are images depicting the Seven Great Places (Figure 7). Three are images of trees which correspond to the Bodhi-Tree Throne at the centre (1), a banyan representing the Ajapalanigrodha site (5), and a milkwood tree representing the Rajayatana site (7). There is also an image of a pavilion representing the Ratanagara site (4), another picture that must mean the Ratanacankama site (3), and a *naga* in a pond representing the Mucalinda site (6). The Animisa site, where the Buddha gazed unblinking at the bodhi-tree, may be missing because the bodhi-tree represents both this and the Bodhi-Tree Throne.

The part of the illustration that corresponds to the cloisters of Wat Pho is divided into rectangles containing names of the Great Cities and Upcountry Settlements. At the upper left corner of the cloisters, there is a picture of a Brahma and a lotus, clearly depicting the Brahma's descent at the onset of the era to see the prophetic lotus at the Bodhi-Tree Throne in the centre of the Head Land, as described in both versions of the *Trailokawinitchai* text.

This illustration was composed to show the location of the Head Land at the centre of the Jambu Continent. The artist may have been inspired by the plan of Wat Pho to depict the shape of the Jambu Continent and the Head Land in this way. Alternatively, the illustration may have been composed prior to the Bangkok era and been the inspiration for the plan of Wat Pho.

One way or the other, this document confirms that the design of Wat Pho represents the Head Land at the centre of the Jambu Continent.

The Himavanta Forest

In line with the analysis up to this point, the space outside the cloister in Wat Pho must represent the Himavanta Forest, which forms the outermost region of the Jambu Continent.

The second version of the *Trailokawinitchai* describes the Himavanta Forest in great detail.²⁹ There are 84,000 mountain peaks including five important ones called Sudassana (Suthat), Citta (Jitra), Kala, Gandhamadana (Khanthamathon), and Kelasa (Krailat); seven great lakes; many surrounding forests; an outer ring

²⁹ National Archives, Manuscript Section, *Traiphum Lokawinitchai* Vol. 5, No. 5, Cupboard 107, Bundle 2 on the Jambu Continent and Himavanta Forest.



Figure 8: Depiction of animals in the Himavanta Forest in the Khmer-language Traiphum manuscript.

of water; and a final ring of marsh.³⁰ In addition, this text devotes a great deal of space, equivalent to over 100 pages (compared to less than twenty pages on the geography), to a description of the various animals that live in the Himavanta Forest. It seems that the important part of the Himavanta Forest is the animals.

This description of the Himavanta animals uses a particular technique. It draws on those *jātaka* tales in which the Buddha appeared in his past lives in the form of various animals, such as a patterned coel, white coel, monkey, golden pheasant, the four Rachasi lions, and Mayah bird.³¹ This technique is also used in the depictions of the Himavanta Forest in the illustrated Traiphum manuscripts of the Ayutthaya era, Thonburi era version and Khmer-language version, where various animals are shown with captions explaining that these are Bodhisatta born in the form of animals (Figure 8). These illustrations take up a great deal of space in these manuscripts, in the same way that the description of Himavanta takes up a great deal of space in the *Trailokawinitchai*.

I would thus conjecture that the representation of the Himavanta Forest in the design of Wat Pho would use the same technique as the *Trailokawinitchai* and the illustrated manuscripts, namely using *jātaka* tales in which the Bodhisatta took animal form. And, indeed, the First Reign inscription in Wat Pho recorded that the satellite pavilions around the rim of the *wat* were decorated with the “550 *jātaka* tales.”

³⁰ Summarised from *Wannakam samai rattanakosin lem 2 (Traiphum Lokawinitchaikatha)*, pp. 107-13.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp 120-46.

In addition, the stupas in groups of five on a single base constructed in the four corners of the *wat* represent the 84,000 mountain peaks in the Himavanta Forest. This symbolism was further emphasised in the Third Reign with the addition of 71 stupas and several *khao mo* artificial hills circling the cloisters.

The painting of the subduing of Lord Jambupati in the ubosot

Another feature of the *ubosot* confirms its symbolism as the Head Land.

The First Reign inscription states that the murals inside the *ubosot* featured the Ten Past Lives, Subduing of Lord Jambupati (Mahachomphu), and Convocation of the Deities. In the practise of the time, the Convocation of Deities would have appeared above the windows on the two long sides, and the Ten Past Lives would most likely have appeared between the windows. The Subduing of Lord Jambupati could have appeared on either or both of the end walls.

The illustration of the Lord Jambupati episode from the Buddha's life story on the end-wall of an *ubosot* was not common practise in the late Ayutthaya period or First Reign, as the front wall was usually devoted to the Victory Over Mara and the rear wall to the Traiphum, with either the scene of the Buddha ascending to the Tavatimsa Heaven to preach to his mother or the scene of the Buddha descending from Tavatimsa Heaven to the city gate of Sankassa. The illustration of the Lord Jambupati episode in this location in contravention of usual practise is another feature that is only understandable in the context of a project to make Wat Pho a model of the Head Land and the Jambu Continent.³²

The episode can be summarised as follows. A king called Jambupati sent a magic arrow to summon other lords in the Jambu Continent to an audience. If any lord refused, the arrow pierced a thread through his ear and dragged him to Jambupati's throne, with the result that all submitted and Jambupati was dubbed the Lord Emperor. The Buddha studied this case and found that King Jambupati had merit and could become an *arahant*. He dispatched Indra to fetch King Jambupati. When Jambupati arrived, the Buddha appeared as a great emperor, magnificently arrayed in a splendid palace, overawing Jambupati into submission. The Buddha then delivered a sermon that resulted in Jambupati taking the precepts, entering the monkhood, and eventually becoming an *arahant*.³³

The illustration of this story in the *ubosot* of Wat Pho conveys the idea of the Buddha as the Lord Emperor who is supreme in the Jambu Continent. This

³² However, there is evidence that the murals in Wat Ratburana in the First Reign included the Subduing of Lord Jambupati, but the location within the *wat* is unknown. The scene also appeared in the Phutthaisawan Hall of the Front Palace, but only as a small illustration as part of the Buddha's life story. The only other *ubosot* where this scene features as a prominent illustration is Wat Nang Nong, Thonburi, but the painting dates from the Third Reign, so the depiction in Wat Pho in this era seems unique.

³³ See *Rueang Thao Mahachomphu* [The story of Lord Jambupati] (Bangkok: Sophon Piphat Thanakon, 1921).

symbolism corresponds with the design of Wat Pho as a model of the Jambu Continent, and emphasises the *ubosot* at the centre representing the Head Land.

Illustration of Wat Pho in the First Reign as the Head Land and the Jambu Continent

In the *Trailokawinitchai* and the illustrated Traiphum manuscripts, the Jambu Continent is depicted in a particular form.

At the centre is the Head Land with the Bodhi-Tree Throne, surrounded by the Seven Great Places, the Eight Great Places, the Great Cities, Upcountry Settlements, and Himavanta Forest.

The design of Wat Pho is a model of the Head Land at the centre of the Jambu Continent. The *ubosot* is the Head Land. The presiding image represents the Bo-Tree Throne. The Seven Great Places are represented by the *wihan* on the east-west axis, and the Eight Great Places are represented by the *wihan* on the north-south axis. The Great Cities and Upcountry Settlements are represented by the cloisters, and the Himavanta Forest by the grouped stupas and the 550 *jataka* murals in the satellite pavilions.

The symbolism of the Head Land and the centre of the Buddhist world

Why did King Rama I choose this symbolism for Wat Pho?

The cosmology of the Jambu Continent is an old belief that dates back at least to the Sukhothai era. But this belief had never before been used as the framework for an architectural design.³⁴ The explanation for this innovation lies in the society, politics, and culture of the time.

The fall of Ayutthaya had delivered a great shock to the Thai ruling class because not only had the capital been physically destroyed, but the administrative system had collapsed and the theories that underpinned the state and social order had been undermined.³⁵ From one angle, the foundation of Bangkok appears to be a restoration of Ayutthaya, but from the angle of state ideology, the new kingdom was based on a new set of ideas that were in no way copied from its predecessor.

In the traditional theory of the state in Southeast Asia, the state is a model of the universe according to Hindu-Buddhist belief. The security of the state and the legitimacy of the ruling class depend on their success in explaining their power and the authority of the state in religious terms. They need to harmonise the structure

³⁴ Yet the *ubosot* of Wat Ko Kaeo Sutharam has murals of the Seven Great Places and Eight Great Places and a presiding Buddha sitting in meditation pose just like Wat Pho. Perhaps it was also intended to represent the Jambu Continent and the Bodhi-Tree Throne. The question deserves further research.

³⁵ Nithi Eoseewong, “200 pi khong kan sueksa prawatisat thai lae thang khang na” [200 years of studying Thai history and the way ahead] in *Krung taek Phraya Tak lae prawatisat Thai wa duai prawatisat lae prawatisat niphon* [The fall of Ayutthaya, King Taksin and Thai history: On history and historiography] (Bangkok: Matichon, 2002), pp. 6-9.

of the state with the structure of the universe according to religious belief. The use of cosmologically based designs and symbols reflects the belief that the state will be stable and lasting if it is structured to resemble the universe which is the highest form of reality.³⁶

When the universe of Ayutthaya had disappeared, what cosmology was chosen to underpin the Bangkok state founded in its place?

It is generally accepted that Bangkok was founded on a theory emphasising Buddhism. Superficially, that seems no different from many traditional states, including Ayutthaya. But King Rama I drew on Buddhism as the frame of reference for state power, state policy, and the legitimisation of kingship to a much greater extent than the kings of Ayutthaya. The Siamese elite of the First Reign explained the reasons for the fall of Ayutthaya principally in terms of Buddhist morality. The royal chronicles revised in this era portray the kings of late Ayutthaya as lacking morality: they gained the throne illegitimately, acted cruelly, were not diligent, had no conscience, and performed bad and obscene deeds. All this had led the country into a *kaliyuga*, an era of destruction, ending with defeat at the hands of Burma.³⁷

By attributing the collapse of the Ayutthaya state to the moral failure of its kings, the First Reign elite were arguing that the survival of a state depended on the moral strength of its ruling class. Hence the Bangkok kingdom founded to replace Ayutthaya had to adopt Buddhist morality as the theoretical frame of reference for the new state. Of course, the royal chronicles of Ayutthaya constantly mention the various activities undertaken by the king in the support of Buddhism. Yet Buddhism was not the theoretical frame of reference for government in Ayutthaya to anything like the same extent as in the early Bangkok era.³⁸ One historian has even characterised the emphasis on Buddhism in the First Reign as an attempt to create Bangkok ideologically as a “Buddhist state,” evident in the king’s various activities in support of the religion including the Buddhist Council to revise the Tipitaka, the revision and translation of Buddhist texts, the reform of the Sangha, and the first-ever Sangha Law.³⁹ As part of this emphasis on Buddhism as the theory of the state, King Rama I chose to model the king as a Dharmaraja, a king who ruled according to Buddhist teaching, who patronised Buddhism, and who led

³⁶ Robert Heine-Geldern, *Conceptions of State and Kingship in Southeast Asia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1956), pp. 1-3.

³⁷ Saichon Satyanurak, *Phutthasasana kap thit than kan mueang nai ratchasamai Phrabat Somdet Phraphutthayotfachulalok (pho so 2325–2352)* [Buddhism and political trends in the reign of King Rama I, 1782–1807] (Bangkok: Matichon, 2003), pp. 140-3.

³⁸ Nidhi Eoseewong, “The history of Bangkok in the chronicles of Ayutthaya,” in Nidhi, *Pen and Sail: Literature and History in Early Bangkok*, ed. Chris Baker and Ben Anderson (Chiang Mai: Silksworm Books, 2005), p. 326.

³⁹ Vinai Pongsripian, “Kan phrasasana lae kan jat rabiap sangkhom thai tangtae samai phrabat somdet Phraphutthayotfachulalok thueng samai Phrachomklaoljaoyuhua” [Religion and social order from the First to Fourth Reigns], in *Parithat prawatisat* (Bangkok: Rungsaeng, 2001), pp. 84-110.

the people to attain contentment under the *thamma*.⁴⁰

In terms of architecture, this theoretical stance is consistent with the attempt to make Wat Pho reflect the cosmology of the Head Land.

As explained in detail above, the Head Land in Theravada Buddhist belief is the land that appears first in the world, before Mount Meru and the Tavatimsa Heaven; is the last to disappear at the destruction of the world; is the site of the Bodhi-Tree Throne where the Buddha must be seated to attain enlightenment in this world; is the site of the lotus that prophesies how many Buddhas will achieve enlightenment in a new era; and is at the centre of the Middle Country where the Buddha, *arahant*, disciples, and the wheel-rolling emperor must all be born. As the Head Land is thus closely associated with the birth, survival, and disappearance of Buddhism, it is not surprising that King Rama I chose this symbol to appear in the architecture for at least three reasons.

First, this symbol helped to soothe the feelings of people who had just experienced the great disruption of the fall of Ayutthaya and its impact on society and religion. The image of Ayutthaya being burnt to the ground could easily be compared with the era-destroying fire which brings the world to an end in Buddhist belief. Creating Wat Pho as a symbol of the Head Land bore comparison to the rebirth of the world, of the universe, and of Buddhism.

Second, designating Wat Pho as the Head Land symbolised that the newly founded Bangkok kingdom had become the centre of the Buddhist world, equivalent to the Jambu Continent, the birthplace of Buddhism, a sacred space where the Buddha will attain enlightenment and where disciples, *arahant*, and a wheel-turning emperor will be born.

Third, when the universe must again be destroyed at the end of the era, Wat Pho will be the last surviving space of Buddhism.⁴¹

In sum, King Rama I chose to establish Wat Pho as the Head Land at the centre of the Jambu Continent because it corresponded with his aim to make Buddhism the principal ideology of the state.

The Second Level: Indra and the model of Tavatimsa at Wat Pho

For King Rama I's policy to project the king as a Dharmaraja who governed according to Buddhist principle, no symbol was more appropriate than the god Indra.

⁴⁰ Saichon, *Phutthasasana kap thit than kan mueang*, pp. 193-246.

⁴¹ This idea of being the last surviving site of Buddhism was not a new idea. The popularity of naming places as Nakhon Chum or Nakhon Phrachum is based on a belief that when Buddhism disappears all the relics enshrined in various stupas will congregate (*chumnum*) at this place and be finally burnt together. See Sisak Walliphodom, "Khwan mahasajan khong Kamphaeng Phet" [The wonder of Kamphaeng Phet], *Mueang Boran* 19, 2 (Apr-Jun 1993), p. 33.

Indra in the First Reign: meaning and importance

In Theravada Buddhism, Indra has a major role as the deity who patronises Buddhism and those who abide by its teachings. This appears in many religious texts.⁴² In several episodes in the Buddha's life story, Indra provides support and assistance: he invites the Bodhisatta from the Tusita (Dusit) level of heaven to be born in the human world; he assists the Buddha when he is ordained; he plays a *phin* lute to warn Buddha to walk on the middle path.⁴³

Besides this role as patron, Indra usually has another role in Buddhism as a warrior chief in the Tavatimsa Heaven who occasionally has to make war against the *asura* demons. But, in the First Reign, according to contemporary documents (especially the *Trailokawinitchai*), only his role as a patron of Buddhism is emphasised, and his role as a warrior is scarcely mentioned. For example, in the description of Indra's war against the *asura* demons, Indra gains victory not by fighting, but by displaying such toleration and equanimity in the face of the *asuras'* crudity that eventually the *asura* submit to Indra on account of his goodness, and foreswear doing any harm to him in the future.⁴⁴ This victory won by righteousness, not force, indicates how the qualities of Indra were modified in the First Reign. Many other passages in the *Trailokawinitchai* show Indra as a Dharmaraja, similar to the ideal that King Rama I tried to follow; he gives sermons on the teachings, protects Buddhism, and supports Buddhism in various ways. This aspect of Indra must have been the major reason why the king chose Indra as a symbol of the state and the monarchy.

In addition, one striking aspect of the *Trailokawinitchai* in both versions is that its description of the structure of the universe, with its centre at Mount Meru, focuses on the Tavatimsa Heaven, followed by the Caturmaharajika (Jatumaharachik) Heaven, the first of the six heavens. Earlier cosmological texts had also focused on these two heavens, but the length and detail of the description in the *Trailokawinitchai*, especially the second version, is many times more elaborate, occupying almost 100 pages when printed today.⁴⁵

The Three Seals Law, a collection of law texts assembled in the First Reign, is another document that shows the importance of Indra as a Dharmaraja. It contains a section titled *Lak inthaphat*, "Principles spoken by Indra," which states that these moral principles come from the advice and teachings of Indra for guiding judges and judicial officers in deciding legal cases to achieve pure justice.⁴⁶ In the Three

⁴² Kuaphan Nakbuppha, "Phra In nai wannakhadi sanskrit pali lae wannakhadi thai" [Indra in Sanskrit, Pali, and Thai literature], MA thesis, Chulalongkorn University, 1977, p. 278.

⁴³ Chilwi Hollingka, "Phra In: botbat nai phutthaprawat" [Indra in the Buddha's life story], *Sinlapa Watthanatham* 20, 4 (Dec 1998), pp. 120-2.

⁴⁴ *Wannakam samai rattanakosin lem 2 (Traiphum Lokawinitchaikatha)*, pp. 1014-22.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 948-1042.

⁴⁶ Sasikan Khongsak, "Lak inthaphat," *Warasan Mahawithayalai Sinlapakon* 21-23, 3 (2001-2), pp. 114-56.

Seals Law, Indra again has a role in religious morality.

Another reason why King Rama I compared the king to Indra is bound up with the legitimacy of his ascent to the throne.

As is well known, King Rama I had no claim on kingship by birth, according to the prior practise of Ayutthaya. He was a commoner with a modest position in the government at Ayutthaya. At no time in Ayutthaya history had a noble of such a level been able to ascend the throne.⁴⁷ Hence, the king had to justify his legitimacy and explain it. Indra served as a symbol for this project.



Figure 9. The story of Magha in the scripture hall of Wat Rakhang Kositharam (ASA, 1969)

In Theravada Buddhism, Indra is not a god by sacred birth like other deities. Instead, being Indra is rather like a rotating position.⁴⁸ In Thailand, the most well-known explanation of Indra's unusual status is found in the story of the youth Magha (มขมมานพ, Makhamanop).

The *Trailokawinitchai* relates that Magha was a villager in Ajonkham (Steadfast Village), and a moral fellow. He decided to do good works by building a rest house for travellers at a crossroads. He gathered his thirty-two friends and their wives to help in the construction. As a result of the merit made, after death

⁴⁷ Both King Prasat Thong and King Phetracha had commoner backgrounds, but both were senior nobles with considerable reputations and both had legendary backgrounds that claimed royal blood.

⁴⁸ Kuaphan, "Phra In," pp. 171-5.

he was reborn as Indra to rule over Tavatimsa, along with his thirty-two friends (Tavatimsa means the heaven of thirty-three gods).⁴⁹ However, he did not remain Indra forever. When his merit was used up, he had to return and be reborn in the world, and another human with merit took his place as Indra.

The significance of Indra is that anyone, whether a mere commoner or a powerful king, who accumulates sufficient merit has an equal claim to become Indra. This is not the same in the case of Siva or Ram, the two deities who were the models of kingship in the Ayutthaya era. The symbolism of Indra helped to explain the legitimacy of King Rama I's ascent to the throne, namely that he had accumulated sufficient merit and had no need to lay claim to links of blood and lineage.⁵⁰

In sum, the meanings of Indra acquired major importance in the ideology of the First Reign. King Rama I adopted this ideology because it helped to establish his political legitimacy and claim to the throne, and because it also served as a symbol of his policy to make Buddhist morality and the role of Dharmaraja into the theoretical basis of the early Bangkok state.

Indra as a symbol in the architecture of the First Reign

There are many sources showing that King Rama I compared himself to Indra. His second coronation was held in the Amarintharaphisek Mahaprasat,⁵¹ roughly the "great palace of Indra's coronation," meaning that after this coronation the king had the status of the god Indra. His three residences were ornamented to mean they were those of Indra by adorning the frontage with an image of Indra seated on a throne within a palace. Somdet Phra Wannarat of Wat Pho recorded in the Sangitiyavamsa (สังคีตยวงษ์, *Sangkhitayawong*) chronicle that the frontage of the Temple of the Emerald Buddha during the First Reign carried an image of Indra on the Eravana (Erawan) elephant. The frontage of the Ho Monthiantham in the same complex was the same.

The king donated the residence where he lived while holding the post of Chaophraya Chakri to become the scripture hall in Wat Rakhang Kositharam. Fascinatingly, he commissioned murals on the story of the youth Magha, depicting Magha making merit by building the rest house that resulted in him being reborn as Indra (Figure 9). The symbolism of this mural, along with the donation of

⁴⁹ *Wannakam samai rattanakosin lem 2 (Traiphum Lokawinitchaikatha)*, pp. 1000-3.

⁵⁰ Moreover, the royal chronicles revised in the First Reign pay no attention to the legitimacy of succession based on blood. For example, King Phetracha is described as a villager from Suphanburi, showing a precedent for a commoner ascending the throne. Earlier chronicles had attributed Phetracha with some royal blood. Nidhi, "The history of Bangkok," pp. 315-6.

⁵¹ Naruemon Thirawat and Nidhi Eoseewong, eds, *Phraratchaphongsawadan krung rattanakosin ratchakan thi 1 chabap Chaophraya Thiphakorawong chabap tua khian* [Royal chronicle of the Bangkok First Reign, written version of Chaophraya Thiphakorawong] (Bangkok: Amarin, 1996), pp. 52-61.

the residence, cannot be interpreted in any other way than the king drawing a comparison between himself and Magha.

King Rama I displayed great interest in the story of Magha, Indra, and the Tavatimsa Heaven. Several times, he put questions to the Sangha about Indra within Buddhist belief. For example, he asked whether a person reborn as Indra had the same qualities as the previous incumbent. He also enquired whether at the start of the present era, the Bodhisatta was born as a Great Elect king or as Indra.⁵²

Most importantly, King Rama I changed the name of the capital (after his second coronation) from Krungthep Mahanakhon Bowon Thawarawadi Si Ayutthaya Mahadilokphop Nopharat Ratchathani Buriram Udomniwet Mahasathan⁵³ (named at his first coronation) to Krungthep Mahanakhon Bowon *Rattanakosin* Mahintharayutthaya Mahadilokphop Nopharat Ratchathani Buriram Udomrachaniwet Mahasathan Amonphiman Awatansathit *Sakkhathattiya Wisanukam Prasit*.⁵⁴ “Rattanakosin” means Indra’s jewel. “Sakathattiya Wisanukam Prasit” means that Indra had Visvakarma (Wisanukam, artificer of the gods) build the city. These changes show the focus on Indra. The capital, the centre of the state, was created as the city of Indra, a departure from the Ayutthaya era when the capital was the city of Rama.

Modelling the Tavatimsa Heaven in wat of the First Reign

In current analyses, the architecture of *wat* built in the First Reign is usually interpreted as a revival and imitation of late Ayutthaya style. In fact, these *wat* had some distinctive differences, especially in the ground plan.

Most have a *wihan* or *ubosot* at the focal centre of the *wat*, with a surrounding cloister and stupa in the four corners of the cloisters. Among many instances of this design are Wat Saket, Wat Ratburana, Wat Mahathat, Wat Pathumkhongkha, and Wat Dusitharam.⁵⁵ This design cannot be found in the Ayutthaya era. Some *wat* in early Ayutthaya (and in the Sukhothai era) had surrounding cloisters, but the central building was surmounted by a *prang*, unlike the *ubosot* from the First Reign. In late Ayutthaya, when *ubosot* were often the centrepiece of the *wat*, there was no instance with a surrounding cloister. The First Reign style with a central *wihan* or *ubosot* and a surrounding cloister has no precedent in the Ayutthaya era.

This design is undeniably an attempt to create an architectural model of the universe according to Buddhist theory. But this general description overlooks another difference from Ayutthaya era architecture. Traditional religious

⁵² See *Prachum Phraratchaputcha* [Collected royal enquiries], presented to Somdetphra Yanasangwan, abbot of War Bowonniwet on his 60th birthday, 3 October 1973 (Bangkok: Thai Wattanaphanit, 1973), pp. 69-83.

⁵³ Naruemon and Nidhi, eds, *Phraratchaphongsawadan krung rattanakosin ratchakan thi 1*, p. 7.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

⁵⁵ This design also influenced *wat* built in the Second and Third Reigns such as Wat Arun and Wat Suthat.

architecture was also based on Buddhist cosmology,⁵⁶ but different details can be emphasised within the same framework of belief. In the First Reign, the emphasis was on Indra and the Tavatimsa Heaven.

Changing the central building of the *wat* from a *prang* in late Ayutthaya to an *ubosot* in the First Reign was not a minor shift but had cosmological significance. The Ayutthaya *prang* clearly represents Mount Meru, but the First Reign *ubosot* does not evoke a mountain in the same way. I suggest that the *ubosot* and its surrounding cloister in the First Reign *wat* were not intended as a full model of Mount Meru but only one part of it, the important part, namely Indra's Tavatimsa Heaven.

If the *ubosot* represents Tavatimsa, other elements of the design may be interpreted as follows. The grouped stupas inside the four corners of the cloister, popular in early Bangkok *wat*, are the palaces of the lords of the four directions in the Caturmaharajika heaven. The cloister represents the Sattaparibhanda mountains, and the outer wall of the *wat* is the wall of the universe.

However, some more evidence is needed to support the interpretation of the *ubosot* as Tavatimsa. This evidence can be found in the murals. These follow the standard pattern. On the end-wall opposite the image was the Victory Over Mara episode from the Buddha's life story; above the windows on the long sides was the Convocation of the Deities; between the windows were scenes from the Buddha's life story; and behind the image was a cross section of the universe. On this latter wall, Mount Meru was drawn in a way that emphasised the Tavatimsa Heaven through large size and great detail. For instance, the Culamani (Chulamani) stupa and the Parichattaka (Parichat) Tree were clearly depicted. In addition, the heavens above Tavatimsa were not portrayed. By contrast, at some *wat* where the murals are believed to date from late Ayutthaya, such as Wat Ko Kaeo Sutharam, the upper levels of heaven were portrayed and no special emphasis was placed on Tavatimsa.

In addition, murals of the universe from the early Bangkok era always have Indra depicted in a prominent position. For example, the *ubosot* of Wat Ratburana has various scenes from literary works, always choosing scenes where Indra appears.⁵⁷ Similarly at Wat Dusitharam, Wat Ratburana, Wat Saket, and Wat Samsen, the murals in the *ubosot* all feature Indra prominently.⁵⁸

The *wat* in the First Reign were models of the universe in Buddhist theory, but with emphasis on the Tavatimsa Heaven and Indra. Wat Pho also followed this pattern.

⁵⁶ Other studies of the same opinion include Samoechai, *Sanyalak* and Anuwat Jaroensuphakun, "Ek nai ngan sathapatyakam samai rattanakosin ton ton" [An architectural work of the early Bangkok era], in *Sinlapa sathapatyakam thai* [Thai art and architecture] (Bangkok: Faculty of Architecture, Silpakorn University, 1993), pp. 37-44.

⁵⁷ Santi Phakdikham, "Jittakam wannakhadi thai nai phra ubosot wat ratburana" [Murals on Thai literature in the *ubosot* of Wat Ratburana], *Mueang Boran* 33, 3 (Jul-Sep 2007), pp. 78-82.

⁵⁸ Wilairat Yangrot, "Jakkawan kap phra in nai jittakam fa phanang" [The universe and Indra in mural painting], *Mueang Boran* 22, 4 (Oct-Dec 1996), pp. 81-4.

The model of the Tavatimsa Heaven in the design of Wat Pho

The architecture, art, and layout of Wat Pho in the First Reign should not be interpreted solely as the Head Land at the centre of the Jambu Continent. The layout and symbolism are more complex than this single meaning. There is another layer of symbolism featuring a model of the universe in Theravada Buddhist theory with special emphasis on the Tavatimsa Heaven, corresponding to the emphasis on Indra explained above.

Universe, Mount Meru, and Tavatimsa Heaven in the Trailokawinitchai

The cosmology in both versions of the *Trailokawinitchai* does not differ in general from earlier texts. The world of humans is circular, with Mount Meru at the centre, 84,000 *yojana* high with Tavatimsa Heaven on the peak. Above Tavatimsa are four more levels of heaven (Yama, Tusita, Nimmanarati, and Paranirmitavasavartin) with palaces of the deities, then sixteen Brahma levels with material factors and four levels without material factors. Below Tavatimsa is the Caturmaharajika Heaven of the deities of the four directions, then the abode of the *garuda* and *naga*. The base of Mount Meru rests on Trikuta (Trikut) Mountain, which has a form like three pillars, and the *asura* live on the ground in the space between the pillars. Further below are various hells.

Mount Meru is surrounded by the Sattaparibhanda (seven encircling ranges), with the Sidantara (Sithandon) Ocean between them (Figure 10). Beyond the ranges in each of the four directions are the four great continents, Uttarakuru to the north, Pūbbavideha (Bupphawitheha) to the east, Aparagoyana (Amonkhoyan) to the west, and Jambu to the south, which includes the abode of humans, and many smaller territories.⁵⁹

The second version of the *Trailokawinitchai* summarises as follows:

Anyone who had the power to fly in the sky and look down on the universe and everything else would see the mountains of the universe like the bank of a round lake, Mount Meru surrounded by the Seven Ranges looking like a lotus flower in the centre of the pond, and the four continents looking like four lotus leaves in each of the four directions from the lotus flower.⁶⁰

The account in the *Trailokawinitchai* concentrates heavily on the Tavatimsa Heaven followed by the Caturmaharajika Heaven. Both versions of the

⁵⁹ Summarised from *Wannakam samai rattanakosin lem 2 (Traiphum Lokawinitchaikatha)*, pp. 81-90, 101-3. However, this general description can be found in all cosmological works from Theravada Buddhist tradition. See for example *Traiphum Phra Ruang* (Bangkok: Khlangwithaya, 1972) and Fine Arts Department, *Jakkawan thipani* (Bangkok: Fine Arts Department, 1990).

⁶⁰ *Wannakam samai rattanakosin lem 2 (Traiphum Lokawinitchaikatha)*, p. 103.

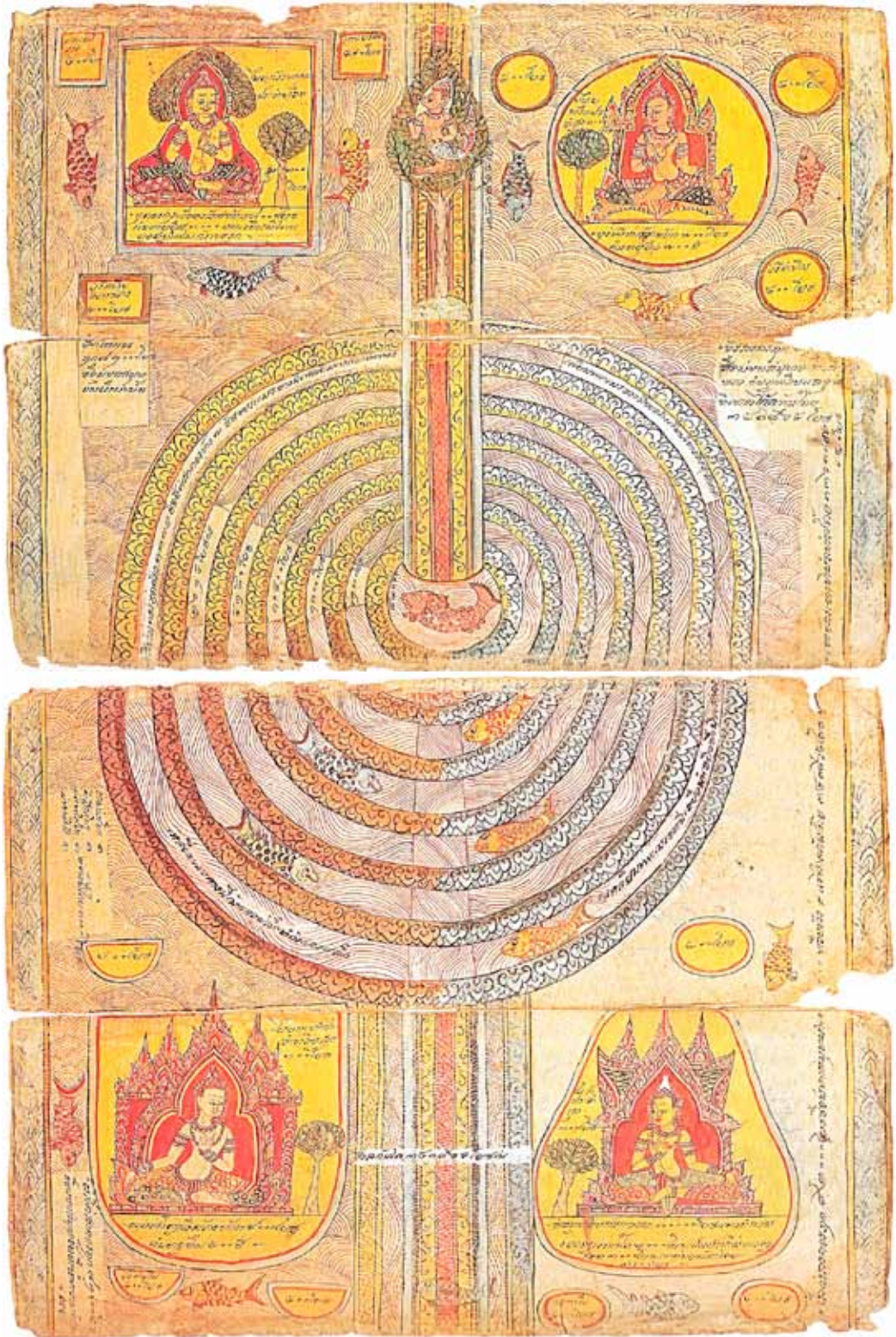


Figure 10. Mount Meru surrounded by the Sattaparibhanda mountain ranges and the four great continents, in the Ayutthaya 6 Traiphum manuscript.

Trailokawinitchai state that the Tavatimsa Heaven is shaped like a *taphon* drum,⁶¹ the same shape as the Middle Country in the Jambu Continent. Indra presides and is lord over all Mount Meru. He resides in the Vejayanta (Phaichayon) Palace with a crystal throne, the Eravana elephant as his vehicle, the Paricchattaka Tree, Culamani Stupa, and the Sudhamma Hall for holding meetings of the gods.

The heaven is surrounded by a golden wall twelve *yojana* high, then a moat two *yojana* wide with many beautiful trees and flowers on both banks. Beyond that is a row of pillars made of silver, gold, crystal, and precious stones. Beyond the embankment is a line of sugar palm trees made of gold and crystal with leaves and fruit made of silver and various jewels. This line of trees marks the outermost boundary of the heaven. Beyond them lies the Pokkharani Lake.⁶²

The Caturmaharajika Heaven of the deities of the four directions is on the peak of Mount Yugandhara (Yukhanthon) (the first of the Seven Ranges). Dhatarattha (Tatharat), lord of the *khonthan*, is in the east, Virulhaka (Wirunhok), lord of the *kumphan*, in the south, Virupakkha (Wirupak), lord of the *yak* demons, in the west, and Vessavana (Wesuwan), lord of all the deities which are not under the other three, to the north.⁶³ To defend the Tavatimsa Heaven there are guard divisions of the *naga*, *garuda*, *kumphan*, *yak*, and lastly the guardians of the four directions.⁶⁴

This structure of the Tavatimsa Heaven is reflected in various architectural features of Wat Pho.

Indra in Tavatimsa at the ubosot of Wat Pho in the First Reign

Several earlier studies have argued that there is no clear cosmological symbolism in the design of Wat Pho in the First Reign, but I believe it clearly represents Tavatimsa on Mount Meru.

The most important element is the frontage of the *ubosot*, which I believe had an image of Indra on Erawan. The evidence is found in an engraving in the journal of John Crawford who, as a British envoy during the Second Reign, visited several *wat* and other landmarks in Bangkok including Wat Pho, which at that time was in the form constructed in the First Reign. Crawford was very interested in Wat Pho and devoted many pages of his journal to describing its art and architecture. The printed version of the journal also has several engravings that appear to depict Wat Pho, even though the *wat* is not named. One illustration shows the Si Sanphetdayan stupa in its First Reign form.

⁶¹ National Archives, Manuscript Section, *Traiphum Lokawinitchai* Vol. 4, No. 4, Cupboard 107, Bundle 2 on the *Trailokawinitchai borichet 2* describing mountains and countries; and Fine Arts Department, *Jakkawan thipani*.

⁶² The second version of the *Trailokawinitchai* states that the walls around the Tavatimsa Heaven have seven levels, but describes only five of them, with the Pokkharani Lake at the outermost level. See *Wannakam samai rattanakosin lem 2 (Traiphum Lokawinitchaikatha)*, pp. 948-53.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 915-8.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 1004-5.

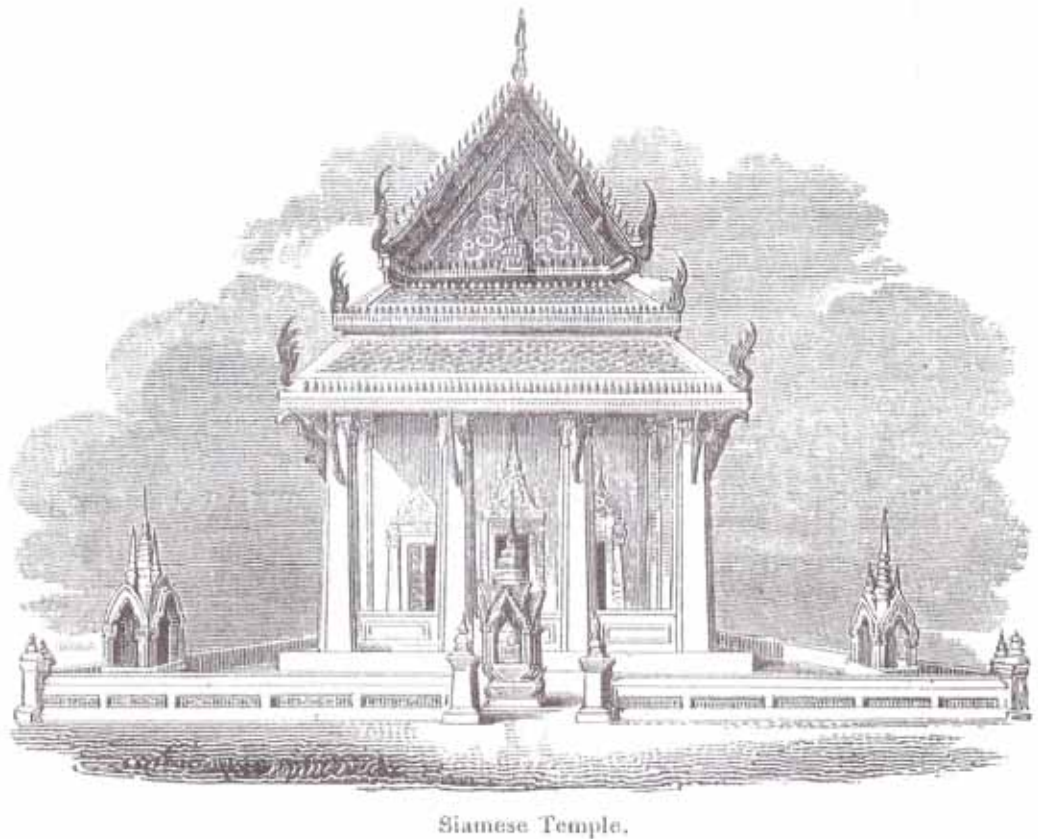


Figure 11. Engraving from John Crawfurd showing the frontage of an *ubosot*, probably Wat Pho as built in the First Reign

Another shows an *ubosot*, captioned only as “Siamese Temple” (Figure 11).⁶⁵ The picture is very detailed and shows good understanding of the proportions and details in Thai architecture (though there are minor errors), especially when compared to the sketches by the French visitors to Ayutthaya, which are so distorted as to be little use for architectural history. The illustration is made from the front. Around the building are *sema* in a five-peaked stupa form and then a crystal wall. The *ubosot* is in a style popular in the First Reign, with a terrace at the front, gable roof with a dual level bird-beak roof extending over the front terrace, three doors with a *prasat*-shaped pinnacle over the central door, and smaller decorative gables over the other two, lotus capitals on the pillars of the porch, and brackets to support the eaves. All of these details are First Reign architectural style. The picture is comparable to the *ubosot* of many *wat* of the era including Wat Ratburana and Wat Suwannaram.

Clearly, the figure on the gable-end is Indra on Erawan. So what *wat* was being depicted here? The five-peaked *sema* suggest that it must have been a very important *wat*. Today, such *sema* are found only at the Temple of the Emerald

⁶⁵ Crawfurd, *Journal*, p. 104.

Buddha. However, other details in the illustration do not match the Temple of the Emerald Buddha, which has *prasat*-shaped gables over its two flanking doors, three levels of bird-beak roof, not two, and decorations on the wall. Also, the building in the illustration looks less tall than the *ubosot* in the Temple of the Emerald Buddha. Besides, Crawford did not record visiting the Temple of the Emerald Buddha.

For these reasons, I think the picture shows the *ubosot* of Wat Pho. It was a very important *wat* in the First Reign, at least as important as the Temple of the Emerald Buddha, and thus more likely than any other *wat* to have the five-peaked *sema*. In addition, we know Crawford visited Wat Pho and made other illustrations there. The picture heads the chapter where Crawford's first topic is his description of Wat Pho.

Some may argue that the gable-ends on *ubosot* of First Reign *wat* usually featured Vishnu on a Garuda, and hence Wat Pho should have been the same. I would argue that gable-ends of all major buildings in the First Reign featured Indra on Eravana, including the Phra Monthian cluster in the palace, the Ho Monthiantham in the Temple of the Emerald Buddha, and the Amarintharaphisek Throne Hall. Most people assume that the *ubosot* of the Temple of the Emerald Buddha had Vishnu on Garuda, as at present, but a contemporary document, the *Sangitiyavamsa* composed by Somdet Phra Wannarat of Wat Pho, states that at first construction the gable-end had Indra on Eravana.⁶⁶

The popularity of Indra on Eravana in First Reign architecture reflects the importance of Indra in the new ideology of the early Bangkok state, as described above. The *ubosot* of Wat Pho represented the Tavatimsa Heaven, symbolised by Indra on the frontage.

Other symbols of Tavatimsa

If the *ubosot* represents the Tavatimsa Heaven, elements in the surrounding architecture should match other elements in the cosmology.

The four stupas at the corners of the cloister represent the Caturmaharajika Heaven, with each stupa representing one of the gods of the four directions. The form of these stupas, as seen today, appeared in the Third Reign when the height was raised by three cubits, but the style and placement did not change.

Several studies have identified the two cloisters as the Satthaboriphan Mountains, but I believe they represent the walls around the outside of the Tavatimsa Heaven, which in the *Trailokawinitchai* have seven levels. Both versions of *Trailokawinitchai* mention that Tavatimsa is shaped like a *taphon* drum, and the same shape is suggested by the plan of the cloisters. The Satthaparibhanda

⁶⁶ Somdet Phra Wannarat Wat Phra Chetuphon, translated by Phraya Priyatithamthada, *Sangkhitayawong phongsawadan rueang sangkhayana phrathamwinai* (Bangkok: Fine Arts Department, 1978), pp. 428-430.

Mountains are represented by the grouped stupas in the corners outside the cloister. Here, King Rama III added thirty-one stupas to strengthen this symbolism. The courtyard outside the cloister represents the Sidantara Ocean between the seven ranges.

The four continents beyond these ranges are most likely represented by the angled *wihan* in the four corners of the courtyard, while the satellite pavilions represent the minor territories. The wall of the *wat* represents the wall of the universe.

However, these identifications are based on rather limited evidence and may be faulty. Even so, the importance of Indra to the First Reign and the appearance of Indra on the frontage of the *ubosot* suggest that the *wat* was designed as a model of the Tavatimsa Heaven.

The Third Reign renovation: strengthening the symbolism of the Head Land and Tavatimsa Heaven

In my opinion, the renovation of Wat Pho in the Third Reign did not modify the design and architecture to introduce any new symbolism, but only clarified and strengthened the existing meanings by adding new artistic and architectural details.

The Third Reign renovation in brief

By the Third Reign, Wat Pho was thirty years old, and many parts of the fabric were dilapidated. After the king had visited the *wat* to present *kathin* robes and had seen the poor condition, he commanded a complete renovation in 1834,⁶⁷ completed with a great celebration in 1848.⁶⁸

The changes can be summarised as follows (see Figure 14).⁶⁹ The old *ubosot* was totally replaced by the larger building seen today. The base of the presiding image was raised to three levels high, and the number of disciple images was increased from two to ten. Murals were painted with forty-one stories of the leading disciples. The Mahosot *Jātaka* was illustrated in the space above the windows, and depictions of the Caturmaharajika heaven and other heavens were painted on the beams above the pillars on both sides in the second register on both end-walls.

The doors of the *ubosot* were decorated on the outside with mother-of-pearl

⁶⁷ Records of the First Reign for C.S 1193, *Samnao jaruek phaensila wa duai kan patisangkhn Wat Phra Chetuphon* [Copies of the marble inscriptions about the renovation of Wat Pho], no. 31/1, bundle 13 of *samut thai dam*.

⁶⁸ Chaophraya Thiphakorawong, *Phraratchaphongsawadan krung rattanakosin ratchakan thi 3* [Royal Chronicles of the Bangkok Third Reign] (Bangkok: Fine Arts Department, 1995), p. 130.

⁶⁹ Summarised from Niyada Laosunthorn, ed., "Jotmai het rueang kan patisangkhn Wat Phra Chetuphon" [Records of the renovation of Wat Pho] in *Prachum jaruek Wat Phra Chetuphon* [Collected inscriptions of Wat Pho] (Bangkok: monastic chapter of Wat Pho, 2001), pp. 57-70.



Figure 12. The *ubosot* today.

placed around the rim of the cloister, interspersed with twenty *khao mo* artificial hills (Figure 13).

Two new stupa were built flanking the Si Sanphetdayan stupa, and a new cloister around all three stupa. Sixteen new satellite pavilions were built around the rim, and the beams between the pillars at both levels were illustrated with the 550 *jātaka* as before. On the terraces at both ends of these satellite pavilions were placed figures of foreigners, two in each pavilion, for a total of thirty-two images.

The Third Reign renovation also expanded the *wat* to the west, resulting in the ground plan seen today. A new *wihan* was built with a reclining Buddha, murals based on the Mahavamsa chronicle from Lanka on all four walls, murals on the history of early disciples and patrons of the Buddha between the windows, and a Sri Lanka bodhi tree planted beside.

The old scripture hall was demolished and replaced by a crowned *mondop* to store the Tipitaka, with murals inside about the nine Buddhist Councils that revised the text through history, flanking pavilions on all four sides, and a bell tower.



Figure 13. A *khao mo* artificial hill in Wat Pho

The old teaching hall was demolished and totally rebuilt. On the second register of the western terrace, murals were painted of *pret* (suffering ghosts) during the miracle of Buddha opening the cosmos. The pond that used to be between the teaching hall and the scripture hall was renovated with a new perimeter, and artificial hills placed both beside and in the pond. A western-style building was built to the east. North of the Tipataka *mondop*, a Missaka garden was created with various trees and six *khao mo* artificial hills. The gates in the wall of the *wat* were demolished and rebuilt in the crowned style seen today.

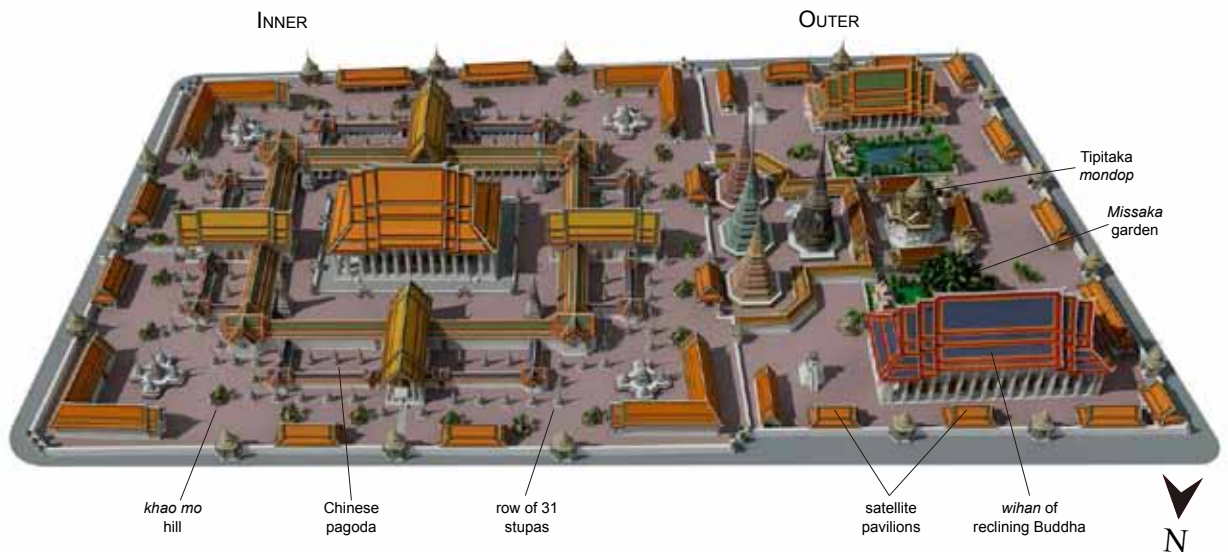


Figure 14. Reconstruction of the layout in the Third Reign

Expanding the symbolism of Tavatimsa on the peak of Mount Meru

Samoechai Phunsuwan offered a clear and powerful interpretation of the symbols of Mount Meru and Tavatimsa in Wat Pho of the Third Reign,⁷⁰ with which I agree almost completely. The key points can be summarised as follows.

In this renovation, more images of *kumphan* and *yak* were added to the doors of the terrace around the *ubosot*, and also depictions of the guardians of the four directions were added on the beams above the pillars inside. These images correspond to a passage in the *Trailokawinitchai* about the guards of the three levels of the Tavatimsa Heaven being *yak*, *kumphan*, and the guardians of the four directions respectively. These additions strengthened the identification of the *ubosot* with the Tavatimsa Heaven.

The symbolism of the area around the *ubosot* and cloisters as Mount Meru was strengthened by three additions in the Third Reign renovation. First, images

⁷⁰ Samoechai, *Sanyalak*, pp. 155-67.

of the sun and moon were painted on the beams above the pillars on the front terrace, corresponding with *Trailokanawitchai's* statement that the sun and moon orbit around Mount Meru in a clockwise direction. Second, the additional six-level Chinese shrines in the courtyards between the outer and inner cloister may represent the floating palaces of the gods (อากาศวิมาน, *akat wiman*) in the six levels of the sensual world arrayed around the central axis of the universe. Third, the sugar palm trees planted in the courtyards between the outer and inner cloisters symbolise the boundary of the Tavatimsa Heaven, following the second version of the *Trailokawinitchai* which states that the outermost boundary of the Tavatimsa Heaven is a line of sugar palm trees.

All additions confirm that the *ubosot* and cloisters represent the Tavatimsa Heaven on the peak of Mount Meru, as had already been designed in the First Reign.

Additions in the western area: strengthening the symbolism of the continents

In Samoechai's interpretation, the many additions to the outer area of the *wat* to the west represent the Jambu and Lanka Continents. He drew a comparison with the practise during the First Reign of devoting the upper part of the rear wall of an *ubosot* to murals of Mount Meru, with a prominent role for the Tavatimsa Heaven, and the lower part to illustration of the Jambu and Lanka Continents and the World of Hell (Narok). He suggested that the eastern area of the *wat* corresponds to the upper part of such murals and the western area of the *wat* to the lower part. There is a correspondence between the layout of the *wat* and the location of various elements in the illustrations of the Traiphum in the murals. In short, the eastern area of the *wat* represents Mount Meru and the Tavatimsa Heaven while the western area represents the Jambu and Lanka Continents.

In the western area, the Lanka Continent is clearly represented by the new *wihan* of the reclining Buddha. The murals are on the theme of the Mahavamsa chronicle from Sri Lanka. A Sri Lanka bodhi tree was planted beside the *wihan*. The beautiful design of the Buddha's footprint plays with many symbols meaning Lanka. Everything in this complex symbolises Lanka.

The central complex in the western area represents the Jambu Continent, and the symbolism was strengthened by the Third Reign additions of the new stupa flanking the Si Sanphetdayan and the *mondop* over the Tipataka with murals on the nine Buddhist Councils following the text of the Sangitiyavamsa chronicle. The World of Hell is represented by the Teaching Hall with illustrations of passages from the Tipataka about hell and ghosts on the beams above the pillars on the front and rear terraces.

Strengthening the symbolism of the Head Land and Jambu Continent

Part of the Third Reign renovation clarified and extended the representation of the Head Land in the Jambu Continent.

The illustrations of the fans of the Monastic Council of both the town-dwelling and forest-dwelling orders, both in the city and upcountry towns, and of the various seals of the Sangha on the walls and windows inside the *ubosot*, clearly convey that the Buddha is supreme in spiritual matters. Similarly, the illustrations of the 374 cities of Siam on the second register of the cloister, and the statues of foreigners of thirty-two languages in the satellite pavilions, convey that the Buddha is supreme in worldly matters. In sum, these depictions convey that the Buddha is dominant in both spiritual and worldly matters throughout the Jambu Continent.

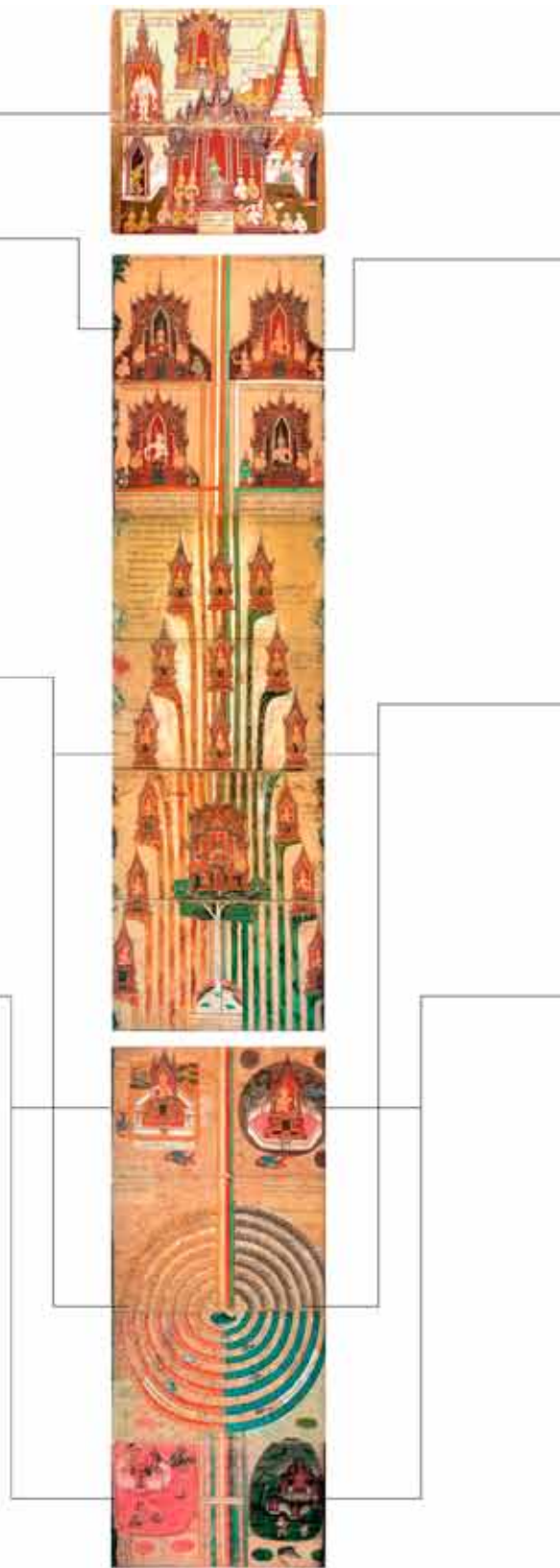
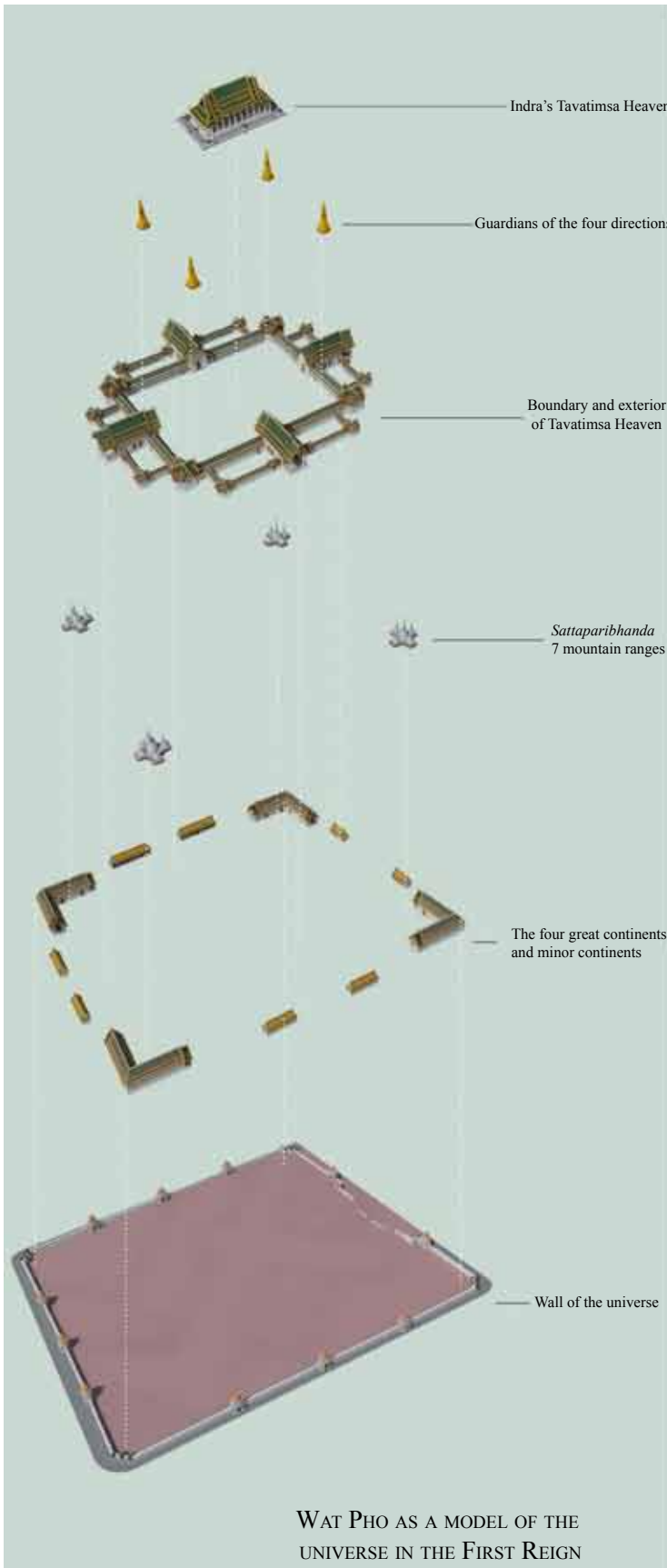
King Rama I intended the *ubosot* of Wat Pho to represent the Head Land, the centre of the Jambu Continent, and symbolise the wheel-rolling emperor, ruler over the Jambu Continent, through murals on the subduing of Lord Jambupati. King Rama III clarified and strengthened this message by using more realistic symbolism, such as depicting the cities and towns subordinate to Siam and the various orders subordinate to the central Sangha. This symbolism projected Wat Pho as the Jambu Continent, the centre of the Buddhist world, and as the political power centre of Siam at the same time.

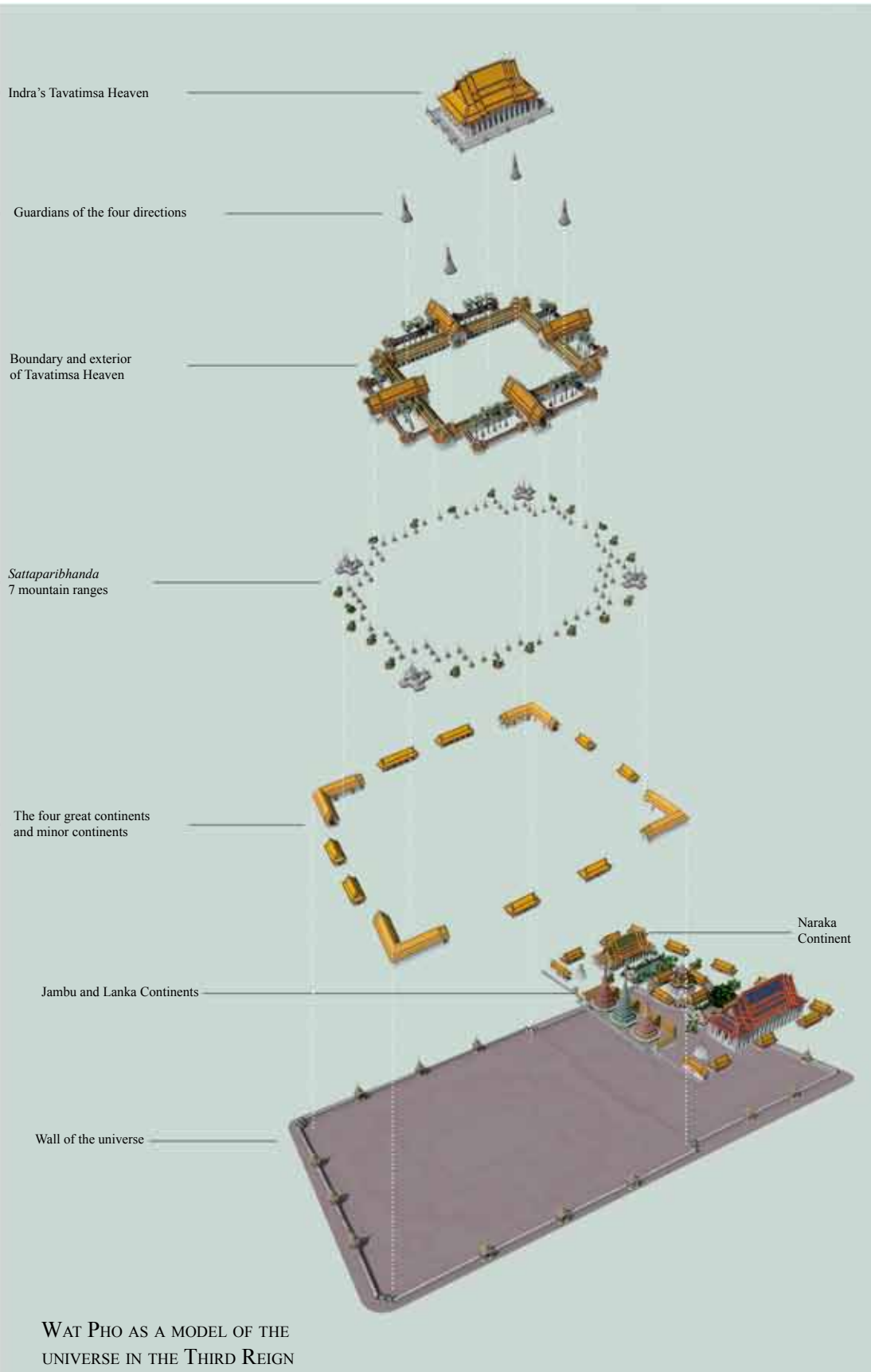
The addition of the thirty-one stupa and twenty *khao mo* artificial hills in the courtyard outside the cloister made the representation of the Jambu Continent both stronger and more realistic.

The expansion of the *wat* to the west, especially the addition of the *wihan* with the reclining Buddha to represent the Lanka Continent, may have further significance for the symbolism of the Head Land.

In the final folds of the Ayutthaya, Thonburi, and Khmer-language versions of the Traiphum illustrated manuscript, there are “maps of the Buddhist world,”⁷¹ always in three parts (Figure 15). The first map shows the geography of the Jambu Continent in Theravada Buddhist theory, including the Bodhi-Tree Throne (Head Land), seven mountain ranges, great cities, upcountry settlements, and Himavanta Forest. This is an imaginary map, with some key incidents of the Buddha’s life inserted. The second map is like an extension of the first one, showing the geography of Suwannaphum (Southeast Asia) including places such as Burma, Lanna, Siam and Cambodia. This map is more realistic than the first and shows locations of actually existing places. The third map shows the Lanka Continent and is similar to the second, being more realistic, and showing locations of actually existing places.

⁷¹ The phrase “maps of the Buddhist world” was coined by Michael Wright for the untitled maps that appear after the map of the Three Worlds. I find it a very appropriate phrase and beg to borrow it here. The illustrated manuscripts are: Ayutthaya version, no. 6; Ayutthaya version, no. 8; Thonburi version, no. 10; Thonburi version, no. 10/n; and the Khmer-language version. See the analysis in Michael Wright, *Phaen thi phaen thang nai prawatisat lok lae siam* [Maps of places and routes in the history of the world and of Siam] (Bangkok: Matichon, 2005), pp. 33-53.





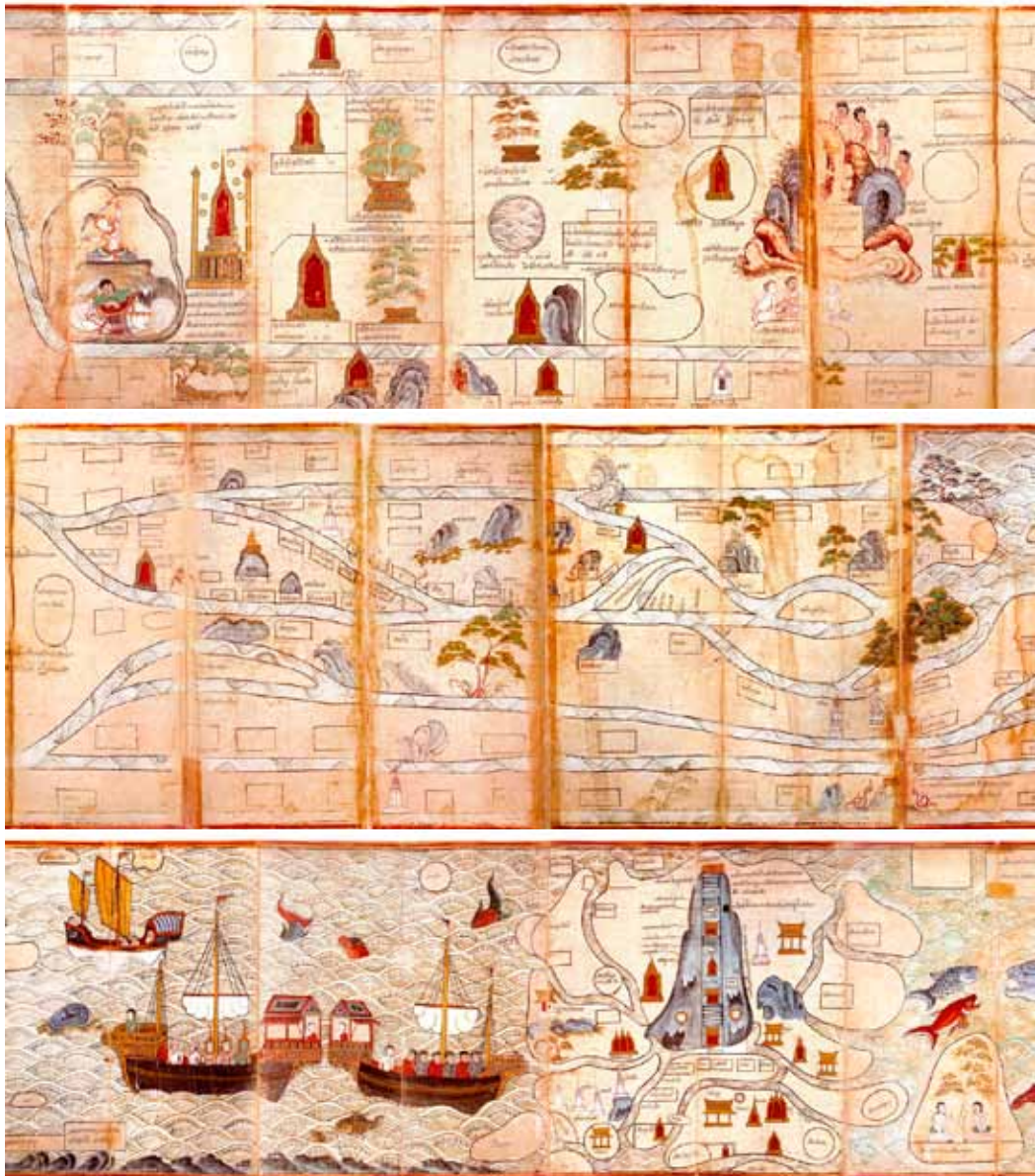


Figure 15. Three maps of the Buddhist world from the Thonburi 10 Traiphum manuscript

This sequence of maps corresponds to the design of Wat Pho. The eastern area of the *wat*, like the first map, represents the Jambu Continent, including the Head Land, seven mountain ranges, great cities, upcountry settlements, and Himavanta Forest. The illustrations of places subject to Siam in the cloister and the statues of foreigners in the satellite pavilions correspond to the second of the “maps of the Buddhist world”, showing places in Southeast Asia beyond the Jambu Continent. The western area of the *wat*, dominated by the symbolism of the Lanka Continent and elements of the Jambu Continent and World of Hell, corresponds to the third and final map in the manuscripts.

Conclusion

The fact that Wat Pho was built to represent the Head Land at the centre of Buddhism and the Tavatimsa Heaven of Indra was recorded in sources of the time. Phra Chamni Wohan, a poet of the First Reign, wrote verses in praise of the king that refer to the construction of Wat Pho, as follows:

Wat Pho, from a bodhi-tree seed at the time the Buddha confronted Mara
 a bodhi-tree shelter over the seated Buddha – this is the head!
 the king, joyful in his faith, supports the Buddhist religion
 let us build with bricks and quickly finish what remains

wihan at all four directions, an *ubosot*
 cloisters low and high, with narrow corners
 if you see the L-shaped *wihan*, there are scenes by craftsmen
 halls with rishi bending and flexing their bodies into poses⁷²

see the splendid *stupa*⁷³ over five fathoms tall
 as if to challenge the Vejayanta palace in the high heavens
 at the upper level in the cloisters are drawn
 the many places where everyone bows in constant subjection

monk's quarters are built to fill up the space
 wooden houses of great value, all new
 a hall to chant tales and prayers, so beautiful
 the king willingly offers all this to inspire others to seek merit⁷⁴

This excerpt confirms the argument of this essay. The design and symbolism of Wat Pho was complete in the First Reign. The Third Reign renovation only strengthened the symbolism with added detail.

The symbolism in the design of Wat Pho has two levels of meaning layered in the same space. First, the *wat* represents the Head Land at the centre of the Jambu Continent, symbolising the foundation of Bangkok as the centre of the world of Buddhism in the First Reign. Second, the *wat* is a model of the Tavatimsa Heaven of Lord Indra, the deity adopted to symbolise the new ideology of King Rama I as a Dharmaraja, and Buddhism as the ideology of the state.

⁷² Meaning the paintings showing therapeutic yoga.

⁷³ Here the original, ปดฺฐปติเรกเสณ, is unscrambled as สดฺฐป อติเรก เส็น[ตั้ง].

⁷⁴ Phra Chamni Wohan, *Khlong sansoen phrakiat phrabat somdet Phraphutthayotfachulalok* [Verses eulogising King Rama I] (Bangkok: Office of Literature and History, Fine Arts Department, 2003), pp. 66-7.

