

The Hidden Jātaka of Wat Si Chum: A New Perspective on 14th and Early 15th Century Thai Buddhism

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ABSTRACT—In *Past Lives of the Buddha*, a beautiful, lavishly illustrated book published in 2008, several contributors offered new understandings of the famous series of 15th-century Jataka illustrations that had been found deep inside the walls of the *monthop* of Wat Si Chum, just outside the ancient city of Sukhothai. Pattaratorn Chirapravati demonstrated that the series of Jataka had from the outset been intended to be placed in the dark and inaccessible corridor of the *monthop*. Pierre Pichard argued convincingly that the building represents an unfinished stage of a much taller edifice. This article builds on these new insights with two propositions. First, the content of an inscription contemporary with the building of Wat Si Chum suggests that the Jataka may have been deliberately hidden to prevent them from being permanently lost in the year 2000 of the Buddhist Era. Second, while Pichard’s argument that a taller building was intended seems valid, several features of the base suggest that the upper portion would have been in the form of a sanctuary tower (*prang*).

In 1891, the French architect Lucien Fournereau visited Wat Si Chum, the site of a long abandoned Buddhist monastery situated just outside the old city wall of the town of Sukhothai. The most striking building there was the *monthop*¹ (มณฑป), a huge square block-like building in which a giant seated Buddha was encased, partly visible from outside through a tall doorway. At present, the building and the large image have been restored and are part of the Sukhothai Historical Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. When Fournereau visited, it was a ruin. In the wall at the left side of the entrance there was a ragged hole, which he measured and recorded as 35 cm broad and 53 cm high.

In 1877, a Siamese government official, who had been instructed to search for old inscriptions, had entered that hole and discovered a large inscription lying

¹ From the Sanskrit *maṇḍapa*, “pavilion”, “open hall”, or “temporary shed (erected on festive occasions)”. Here the term is transcribed according to the way the Thais pronounce the word. Others, such as Skilling (et al.), prefer to be guided by the Indic roots of the word and write *mondop*.

on the floor of a tunnel-like stairway. This inscription, known by epigraphists as Inscription II, or Charuek Wat Sichum (จารึกวัดศรีชุม),² was duly shipped to Bangkok where it can still be found. It proved very difficult to decipher and until now there remain doubts as to what was intended in some passages. The script revealed that this inscription was probably incised during the later part of the 14th century CE. It is almost certain that its author was a Buddhist monk, known to us as Si Sattha, even though the possibility that King Lithai caused some passages to be written has also been suggested.³

At present the entrance has been enlarged to a height of 1.40 m, but in 1891, Fournereau had to lie on his stomach and squeeze through the narrow opening to enter the tunnel. Once inside, the height of the tunnel suddenly increased to over two meters, but the whole corridor remains only 40 to 43 cm broad, allowing passage only to a thin person shuffling sideways. With the help of a blazing torch he noticed that the corridor led to a narrow stairway that wound upwards through the walls of the *monthop*, eventually ending on the roof. To his great excitement he also noted that over the whole length of the tunnel, the ceiling was covered with stone slabs that were decorated with incisions that proved to be very skilfully made drawings, each slab also possessing a short text written in ancient characters.

Fournereau had sufficient knowledge of Buddhist lore to recognize that the depictions related to the Jātaka stories, and when he discovered that these Jātaka followed exactly the order in which they occurred in the Tipitaka, as published in 1877 by Viggo Fausbøll, he knew that he had made an important discovery. During the following five days, he spent many hours in this corridor, studying and making impressions of the segments of the ceiling. He reported that he suffered great discomfort, not only because of the stench of a thick layer of bat droppings, but especially because of the smoke emitting from his torch. While moving up and down the narrow stairway he must have rubbed off sections of the plaster covering the sides; there are still some fragments of the original plaster that reveal a rich decoration.

The ceiling slabs were made of a type of stone that easily flaked. In his amateurish eagerness, Fournereau must have severely discoloured the stone with his torch. By making gypsum impressions, he also damaged and destroyed part of the very treasure he had discovered. At the end of his five days of discovery, Fournereau was able to declare that these ceiling slabs contained depictions of the first 99 Jātaka stories. Photographic reproductions of most of Fournereau's rubbings were published posthumously, so that we can still gain an impression of what he had

² Published in *Prachumcharuek phak thi 8: Charuek Sukhothai* (Bangkok: Fine Arts Department, 2547 [2004]), pp. 101–111.

³ See the discussion in A. B. Griswold and Prasert na Nagara, "King Lödaya of Sukhodaya and his Contemporaries," Epigraphic and Historical Studies, No. 10, *Journal of the Siam Society*, Vol. 60, Pt. 1, January 1972, pp. 75–134.

seen. Only a few slabs have been preserved in such a way that the original art can be appreciated. The most famous one is probably number 23, depicting Bhojājānīya Jātaka, on display in the National Museum in Bangkok; the dark brown colour probably attests to thick fumes, spread by candles and torches of early visitors to the corridor, such as Fournereau. The casts that Fournereau made are probably still stored in Paris.

It is clear that those who carved these beautiful engravings had gone to great trouble, and this immediately led scholars to suspect that such beautiful illustrations were meant to be displayed somewhere else, and that they were stored in the ceiling for some unknown temporary reason, a period of warfare being the most feasible hypothesis. Griswold and Prasert summarize the generally accepted view at the time: “Representations of Jātakas, more than any other category of Buddhist art, are intended for the edification of the general public, so it is certain that these were not made to be installed in a dark stairway where they could be seen only with the aid of a candle.”⁴ Art historians have discussed various possibilities as to what monument should have been decorated with the slabs that had been hidden in Wat Si Chum. Coedès suggested in 1924 that they had been intended for Sukhothai’s Wat Mahathat, a thought taken up by Griswold in 1967 and later, from 1981 onwards, in many publications by Betty Gosling.⁵

Part 1: *Monthop* Wat Si Chum re-examined

In 2008, a remarkable, richly illustrated book appeared in Bangkok, edited by Peter Skilling, entitled: *Past Lives of the Buddha: Wat Si Chum, Art, Architecture and Inscriptions*.⁶ In this book the various theories on the hidden Jātaka are examined and a veritable array of new insights presented. Three of these will be highlighted in the first part of this article: the question of the intended location of the Jātaka depictions; the likelihood that the monk Si Sattha built the remarkable *monthop*; and speculations on the intended shape of the *monthop*, had it been completed.

The Jātaka depictions and other art objects in the hidden corridor

From her measurement of the ceiling slabs, M.L. Pattaratorn Chirapavati reports that most of them were approximately 15 cm thick, circa 65 cm long and 82 cm broad. The fact that they extended into the brickwork proves that the slabs had been an essential part of the narrow corridor: they had apparently been decorated

⁴ Griswold and Prasert, “King Lōdaya of Sukhodaya”, p. 77.

⁵ G. Coedès, *Recueil des inscriptions du Siam, Première Partie: Inscriptions de Sukhodaya* (Bangkok: Bangkok Times Press, 1924), p. 177; A. B. Griswold, *Towards a History of Sukhodaya Art* (Bangkok: National Museum, 1967), pp. 27, 49; Betty Gosling, “Why Were the Jātakas ‘Hidden away’ at Wat Sīchum?” *Journal of the Siam Society*, Vol. 72 (1984), pp. 14–18.

⁶ Peter Skilling (ed.), *Past Lives of the Buddha: Wat Si Chum, Art, Architecture and Inscriptions* (Bangkok: River Books, 2008).

first and subsequently placed *in situ* at the time when the building of the *monthop* was in process. This meant that the scholarly discussion on the intended location for these Jātaka depictions can be laid to rest: from the outset they were intended to be in the dark corridor. Pattaratorn confirms a view that had first been suggested in 1990 by a young art historian.⁷

Pattaratorn also draws attention to the fact that a Buddha footprint had been engraved on a very large stone at the turning of the stairway and that it also was placed so that it decorated the ceiling. This is the only place that this important symbol has been found in such a position. Normally, the symbol is found on ground level or on a dais.

She then discusses the possible reason for “hiding” this series of skilfully incised pictures, suggesting that they were “used by monks as reminders of the Buddha’s lives as well as to enhance or complete the ideological program of the site, which was dictated in part by textual and ritual traditions, and in part by the need to participate in merit making.”⁸ She refers to the existence of hidden relic chambers, one in Sri Lanka and one in Wat Ratchaburana in Ayutthaya. In the second part of this contribution I shall refer to the relic chamber in Wat Ratchaburana again.

Inscription II and the building of the monthop

In *Past Lives*, Pattaratorn Chirapravati also provides us with a series of arguments for assuming that the Buddhist monk Si Sattha was the moving force in the construction of Wat Si Chum’s *monthop*. She points out, among other things, that Si Sattha’s largest inscription, the one found inside the tunnel, is such an unwieldy object that it is unlikely to have been transported over a large distance; that the writing is very similar to that on the Jātaka depictions in the tunnel; and that the inscription reveals that Si Sattha obviously possessed sufficient wealth to build such a large monument.

The inscription discovered in 1877 had probably originally been placed in the gathering hall directly in front of the entry of the *monthop*.⁹ Deciphering the inscription proved difficult, not only because some parts had become illegible, but also because some lines at the lower end of the front of the stele should apparently be read in conjunction with the end of the text on the back of the stele. The inscription opens with a summary of the major meritorious feats of the Buddhist monk Si Sattha. The next forty lines deal with his family background, which is

⁷ Banlue Khoraumatch in an MA thesis, submitted to Silpakorn University, as summarized by Pattaratorn Chirapravati, “Illustrating the Lives of the Bodhisatta at Wat Si Chum”, in Skilling, *Past Lives*, p. 26.

⁸ Pattaratorn, “Illustrating the Lives of the Bodhisatta”, p. 23.

⁹ Lucien Fournereau, *Le Siam Ancien, Archéologie, Épigraphe, Géographie* (Annales du Musée Guimet, vol. 31, 2, Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1908), p. 10, collected the information that an inscription once could be found there (Fournereau mistakenly assumed that it had been Inscription III, probably because he confused the town Nakhon Chum with Wat Si Chum).

traced to Pha Mueang, the ruler of Mueang Rat, who joined forces with Ban Klang Hao to conquer Sukhothai. This part confirms what was already known of the early political history of the region and adds further details to our knowledge.¹⁰

Then follows what may be described as Si Sattha's autobiography. The following forty lines tell about his youth as a young nobleman, his bravery and accomplishments. Then, distressed by the sudden death of his young son, he resolves to become a forest-dwelling monk. The rest of the inscription, beginning on side two, deals with his spectacular merit-making activities, some of them apparently during the ten years he resided in Sri Lanka, some while traveling, others again in what is now Northern Thailand. This list is obviously not chronologically ordered and therefore this account of his pious deeds presents a confusing puzzle. Pattaratorn solves at least one part of this puzzle by noting that Si Sattha must have visited the famous and massive Dhanyakataka stupa in India.¹¹

On his return journey from Sri Lanka, Si Sattha brought along skilled craftsmen to build monuments as well as two precious major relics of legendary fame. The lower parts of the inscription are only partly legible. They deal mostly with the miracles that were caused by the relics over lengthy periods of time when Si Sattha showed them.

The reference to Sri Lankan craftsmen forms by itself a major element in the chain of reasoning that links Si Sattha with the *monthop* of Wat Si Chum. The depiction of the faces of many of the rulers and Bodhisattvas, notably in the first half of the series of 99 Jātaka, in particular the shapes of their faces, the arched eyebrows, the half-circle chins, and the way the lips are depicted, definitely do not conform to any style of Thai art. They have clearly been strongly influenced by 14th-century Sinhalese art,¹² and may well have been the work of the craftsmen mentioned in the inscription.

All available evidence points to the fact that Si Sattha's stele stood directly in front of the *monthop* of Wat Si Chum. It is sometimes overlooked that there is a second hidden corridor in the *monthop*, directly opposite the rough entrance to the Jātaka stairway. In contrast to the corridor that Fournereau had examined, it reputedly led downwards. Since this second corridor was considered unstable and insecure, its entrance was bricked up in 1981. Taking the content of the inscription into account, the hypothesis that this second downward-leading corridor led to a

¹⁰ Incidentally, this inscription mentions Ram Khamhaeng's father's title Si Inthrahit, confirming a name found in the first line of the Ram Khamhaeng Inscription. Since Inscription II was only discovered in 1877, it should be clear that King Mongkut, who died in 1868, cannot have composed Inscription I, as has been suggested by Piriya Krairiksh.

¹¹ Pattaratorn, "Illustrating the Lives of the Bodhisattva", p. 20.

¹² Bonita Brereton, "The Wat Si Chum Engravings and their Place within the Art of Sukhothai", MA thesis, University of Michigan, 1978, pp. 33–36. Compare for example faces in the famous engraving of the 23rd Jataka (the Bhojājānīya Jataka) with stucco figures from the Northern Temple in Polonnaruwa, see Senarat Paranavitana, *Art of the Ancient Sinhalese* (Colombo: Lake House, 1971), Figure 101.

chamber, directly under the giant Buddha image, that was intended to house at least one of Si Sattha's relics, seems plausible. Only a costly and possibly dangerous re-opening of the bricked-up lower corridor might clarify this matter.

The intended shape of the building

A very exciting argument that contributes to a better understanding of the monthop of Wat Si Chum is found in Pierre Pichard's chapter in *Past Lives*.¹³ Pichard presents an overview of all monthop in Northern Thailand and notes that the one at Wat Si Chum shows unusual features. Not only is this monthop unique in possessing a hidden corridor that ends on the flat roof, but its base is disproportionately heavy; apparently a much taller building had been envisaged. The sloping inner walls are also unique, pointing to the builders' intention to close the ceiling above the Buddha's head. The upper lintel that protrudes from all other monthop is missing at Wat Si Chum. Finally, Pichard notes that more than 400 of the usual total of over 500 Jātaka depictions are missing. He concludes that the building is incomplete and unfinished, and that the hidden corridor was intended to continue in a much taller structure. The reason for it being unfinished is not clear; some speculate that Si Sattha died before completion, others that warfare between Ayutthaya and Sukhothai disrupted the project.

Pichard then presents us with a drawing of a hypothetical monument, one that Si Sattha might have had in mind when he began building. Here he assumes that the model was Chedi Ko Kut in Lamphun. He especially draws attention to the massive base of that Chedi (see the left part of Figure 1), and then projects how the unfinished upper portion of Wat Si Chum's *monthop* would have appeared (on the right half of Figure 1).

Pichard's arguments that the *monthop* of Wat Si Chum represents an unfinished construction and that a much taller building had been envisaged are convincing. However, his suggestion that a building in the form of Chedi Wat Ko Kut had been intended is less so. Chedi Wat Ko Kut, like other edifices of that type has five diminishing levels, with the base of each level approximately twice as broad as its height, resulting in a pyramidal shape rising at an angle of approximately 60 degrees. In assuming that the present *monthop* of Wat Si Chum was intended as the lowest of five diminishing levels, Pichard ignores the fact that the *monthop* is much too high in respect of its width. Therefore, Pichard's conjectural shape ends up with much too steep a pyramid.

Another objection to taking the Chedi Wat Ko Kut as the intended shape is that it is a solid construction, with nothing like the large hollow space, the tall entrance and the huge Buddha image of the *monthop*. Then, Pichard's idea that the hidden corridor was intended to continue upwards through all remaining four levels, thus

¹³ Pierre Pichard, "The Mondop at Wat Si Chum: New Perspectives", in Skilling, *Past Lives*, pp. 41–57.

allowing artists to hide the illustrations of the remaining 447 Jātaka in the ceiling, must also be treated with caution, since the diminishing size of the levels would leave less and less room for a corridor: already at the third level there simply would not have been sufficient space for any type of accessible corridor. A final objection to taking the Chedi Wat Ko Kut as the model is that each level ought to possess twelve niches (three on each side) for placing Buddha statues. The *monthop* of Wat Si Chum was built without such niches.

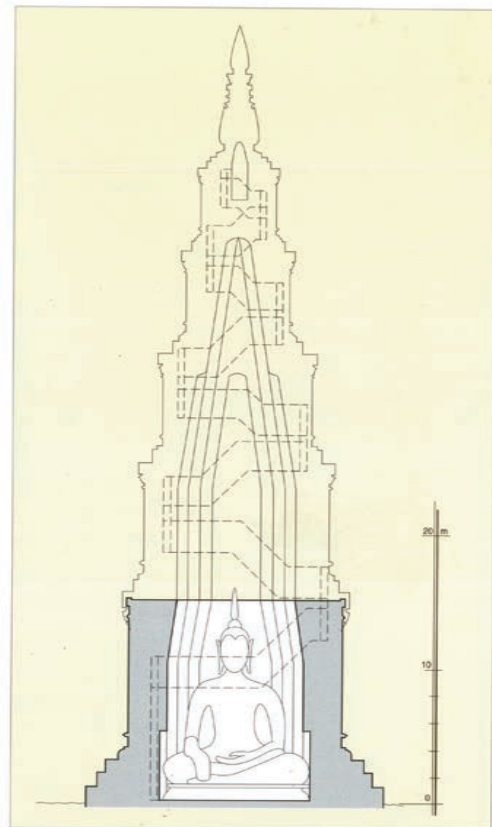
While rejecting the Chedi Wat Ko Kut model, I still think that Pichard's architectural and historical arguments, in particular about the way Wat Si Chum's *monthop* differs from other Thai *monthop*, together with evidence from Si Sattha's inscription, make a plausible case that Si Sattha had planned a much taller structure. I would like to propose an alternative structure.

I would like first to draw attention to a feature of the Wat Si Chum *monthop* that has received little attention, namely that there is an unfinished stairway at the western side of the building (see Figure 2).

In my view the beginning of a stairway on the western side, flanked by massive



2.25 Chedi Kut Kut at Wat Chamathewi, Lamphun, from the south. Aligned with a modern wihan on its east side, the chedi stands on a three-stepped massive base. Compare the base of Wat Si Chum, fig. 2.1 or 2.1a.



2.26 Conjectural outline of the building as originally planned.

Figure 1. Pichard's suggestion as to the intended shape of the *monthop* (*Past Lives*, p. 56).

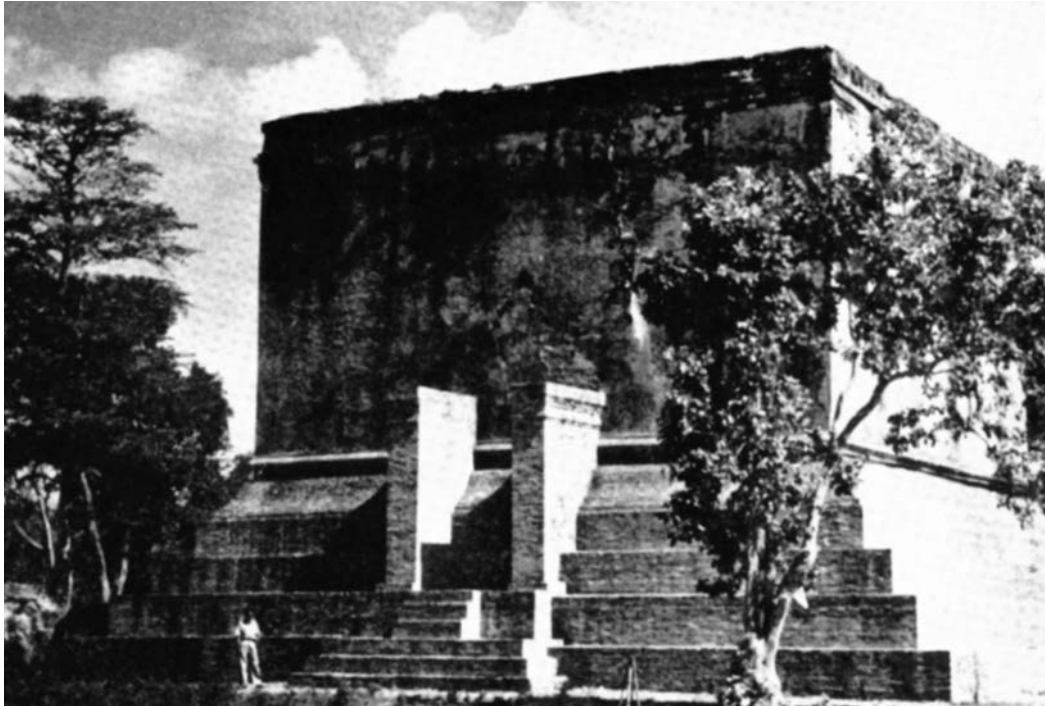
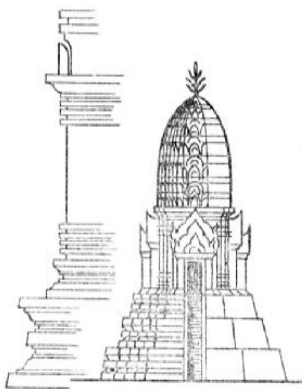


Figure 2. The unfinished western stairway. Illustration 17, in *Prachum Silacharuek, Phak thi 5* (Bangkok: Prime Minister's Department, B.E. 2515 [1972]).



*Classic Phra Prang
up to the 16th century*

Figure 3. The Thai *prang*, from Silpa Bhirasri, *Thai Buddhist Art (Architecture)* (Thai Culture, New Series, No. 4, Bangkok: Fine Arts Department, 1970), p. 19.



Figure 4. Wat Mahathat, Ayutthaya, photographed in 1907.

walls, is an important clue as to the shape that Si Satta was constructing. Such steep stairways, leading to an upper niche, can be found in many Khmer-style sanctuary towers, *prang* (ปราสาท), throughout the region, but not on other Siamese religious buildings (see Figure 3). Pichard himself refers to three *prang* that were standing in the immediate surroundings during the time the Wat Si Chum *monthop* was being

constructed, each with a square interior cella under a high corbeled vault.¹⁴

According to his inscription, the much-traveled Si Sattha on his return journey from Sri Lanka had passed through Ayutthaya, a Thai city where the *prang* was the most imposing feature of monastic buildings (see Figure 4). I propose that Si Sattha intended to build a very large *prang* at Wat Si Chum. As to the depictions of the remaining 447 Jātaka, the existing hidden corridor in Wat Si Chum could have led to a space, directly above the large Buddha image. Here there would be no need to use heavy slabs for showing the remaining Jātaka, as in the roof of the corridor. Si Sattha and his artisans could have devised a more efficient and compact method of placing the illustrations of the remaining birth stories. The *monthop* is of a size, large enough to construct a second level space, with a floor surface of some 16 square meters, possessing a dome-like ceiling. With the exception of the floor, all surfaces would be covered with the remaining 447 square incised slabs. In the middle sufficient room would remain to place an image of a seated Buddha. The twelfth-century Kubyaukgyi temple in Myinkaba, Myanmar provides an example of what such a hollow space would look like; especially since its walls originally were covered with slabs depicting all 547 Jātaka. (see Figure 5)¹⁵



Figure 5. Kubyaukgyi temple, Myinkaba (after Helmut Köllner and Axel Bruns, *Myanmar (Burma)* (Munich: Nelles Verlag, 1997), p. 125).

¹⁴ These are the *prang* of Wat Phra Phai Luang (Pichard, “The Mondop at Wat Si Chum”, p. 53).

¹⁵ For details, see Aung Thaw, *Historical Sites in Burma* (Government of the Union of Burma: Ministry of Union Culture, 1972), pp. 62–3, and Guy Lubeight, *Pagan: Histoires et légendes* (Paris and Pondicherry: Kailash editions, 1998), pp. 308–13.

Part 2: The motivation to build *prang*

The evidence from contemporary Ayutthaya

In her contribution to *Past Lives*, Pattaratorn mentions that Wat Ratchaburana in Ayutthaya had a *prang* with a completely sealed space, partly covered with mural paintings, many of them scenes from Jātaka stories. She suggests that these inaccessible paintings were not meant to be viewed but, like those of Wat Si Chum, were part of a sacred program, inspired at least in part by written texts. Pattaratorn suggests these hidden spaces were imitations of Sinhalese relic chambers and that making and hiding the Jātaka depictions was a meritorious act.¹⁶

The *prang* of Wat Ratchaburana was reputedly built in 1424, some fifty years after the *monthop* of Wat Si Chum. Nobody knew of the existence of the hidden space until September 1957, when some thirty treasure hunters were caught digging into the monument. The gang had already removed a large number of precious objects (reputedly amounting to about 200 kilograms of gold) but fortunately had not been able to remove everything. Not long afterwards Thai archaeologists discovered that deep inside and below this *prang* was a crypt consisting of three levels (see Figure 6). The upper level was empty and apparently had never been used to store objects. From the middle level more than 2000 objects were identified (partly *in situ* and partly confiscated from the robbers), among them a ceremonial sword, a shoe, a crown, a fan, ritual containers, many Buddha images from

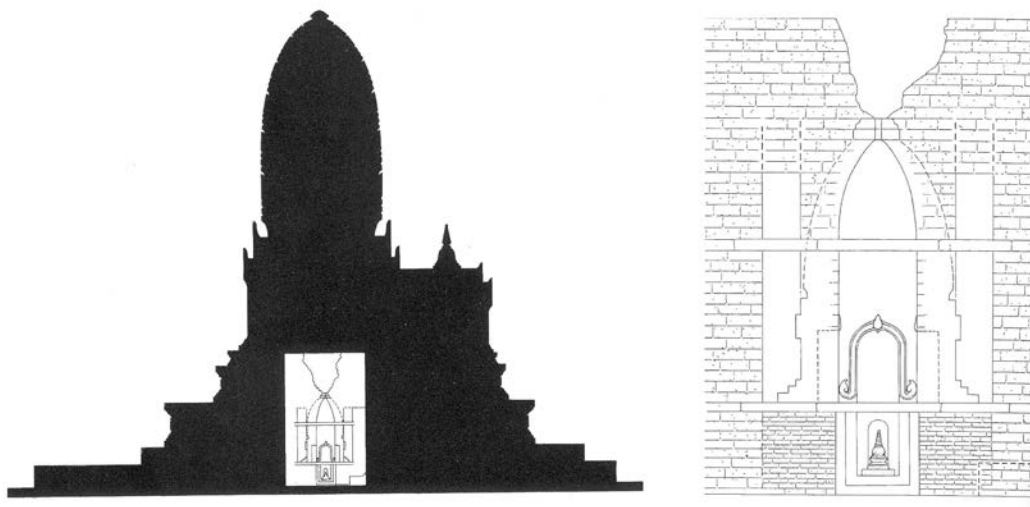


Figure 6. Plan of the crypt of Wat Ratchaburana, Ayutthaya (after Fontein, *De Boeddha's van Siam*, p. 80)

¹⁶ Pattaratorn, “Illustrating the Lives of the Bodhisattva”, p. 23.

various epochs,¹⁷ and a single coin issued by Sultan Zain-ul Abidin of Kashmir (r. 1423–1474). Most interestingly, the thieves had not yet found the deepest level, a relatively small space containing a single iron object in the form of a stupa. This iron form encapsulated a brass stupa, that in turn contained a copper one, then a silver one and finally one made of gold (see Figure 7). Inside the latter was a crystal in the shape of a stupa (which I assume to have been the casing of the relic), a small Buddha image of solid gold, and a small golden inscribed plaque.¹⁸

While Pattaratorn is right in observing a parallel between the *monthop* of Wat Si Chum and the *prang* of Wat Ratchaburana, Wat Ratchaburana is not the only monastery with a *prang* in which precious objects had been hidden. Fontein reports that some twenty golden objects were recovered during restoration work on the *prang* of Wat Mahathat in Ayutthaya.¹⁹

The treasures hidden in these massive buildings were discussed in the early 17th century. In his account written in 1638, van Vliet mentions that large treasures of gold and silver had been buried under the Buddha images in some monasteries, and continues:



Figure 7. The golden relic holder from the crypt of Wat Ratchaburana, Ayutthaya (after Fontein, *De Boeddha's van Siam*, p. 76)

... also many rubies, precious stones, and other jewels have been put away in the highest tops of some towers and pyramids, and these things remain there for always for the service of the gods. Among the Siamese fabulous stories about the immense value of these treasures are told. The people say that with the treasures lying under the idols of Wat Syserpudt [Si Sanphet] and Nappetat [Mahathat] a ruined kingdom could be restored.²⁰

There can be little doubt that “the highest towers and pyramids” meant the *prang* and other forms that capped the major monastery buildings.

Taking into account the unfinished back staircase, the rather massive square base of the *monthop*, together with the fact that at least two *prang* of Ayutthaya were used to hide Buddhist treasures, a case can be made for assuming that Si Sattha

¹⁷ One of these Buddha images, in the Pala style, is described in G. Coedès, “Note sur une stèle Indienne d’époque Pāla découverte à Ayudhyā (Siam)”, *Artibus Asiae*, Vol. 22, Pt. 1/2, 1959, pp. 9–14.

¹⁸ Jan Fontein, *De Boeddha's van Siam* (Zwolle: Waanders, 1996), pp. 79–81. On p. 76 is a photograph of the golden relic-holder.

¹⁹ Fontein, *De Boeddha's van Siam*, p. 79

²⁰ Chris Baker et al., *Van Vliet's Siam* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2005), p. 156.

intended to build a *prang*. Since Pattaratorn has argued convincingly that the Jātaka slabs in the Wat Si Chum *monthop* were intentionally hidden in the dark and narrow corridor, I am inclined to connect the hidden treasures of Ayutthaya *prang* with the hidden Jātaka of Wat Si Chum.

The ominous year 2000, a motivation for hiding Buddhist treasures

Not long before Si Sattha's building of the *monthop*, there was a scholar of renown, known as Phaya Lüthai (ภैयाลือไทย), the ruler of Sukhothai, who reigned probably from 1347 to around 1370. He is generally credited with being the author of the Traiphum treatise that inspired Thai artists for five hundred years. In 1357, Lüthai caused an inscription to be incised in which a dire prediction is spelt out in detail.

The background to Lüthai's prognostication is found in the Tipitaka. Nearly at the end of the Vinayapitaka, in the tenth chapter of the Culavagga, is a section that deals with the ordination of women. It recounts that Mahāpajāpati, the foster-mother of the Buddha, was the first woman to approach the Buddha with a wish to join his order of ascetics. At first the Buddha refused to allow female ordination, but after mediation by Ananda, he relented. While reluctantly allowing women to become *bhikkhuni*, the Buddha stipulated that candidates should agree to undergo an amended ordination ritual and, once ordained, to obey a series of special rules. After agreeing to allow women to join the order, the Buddha is reported to have added a wistful rider:

If, Ânanda, women had not received permission to go out from the household life and enter the homeless state, under the doctrine and discipline proclaimed by the Tathāgata, then would the pure religion, Ânanda, have lasted long, the good law would have stood fast for a thousand years. But since, Ânanda, women have now received that permission, the pure religion, Ânanda, will not now last so long, the good law will now stand fast for only five hundred years.²¹

While modern exegesis tends to interpret the words "a thousand years" and "only five hundred years" not literally, but as "for a very long time" and "much less longer" respectively, early commentators of the Buddhist scriptures came to a different conclusion. When Thera Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa wrote his commentaries on the sacred Buddhist texts, he realized that the Buddha had died more than 900 years earlier. When he came across the Buddha's prediction that, because of the admission of *bhikkhunis*, the *dhamma* would last only 500 years, yet the teachings had apparently not disappeared, he solved this anomaly by surmising

²¹ Cullavagga, X, 1, 6. T. W. Rhys Davids and Hermann Oldenberg (tr.), *Vinaya Texts*, Part 3 (Sacred Books of the East, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969 [1885]), p. 325.

that the statement had been corrupted and that Buddha must have said “five thousand years” instead of “five hundred years”.

Buddhaghosa assumed that the Buddha had properly foreseen the end of the *dhamma*, but also assumed that the disappearance of the *dhamma* would occur gradually. Thus the Sri Lankan tradition of the five stages of corruption came into existence:

During the first thousand years, the power to become an *arahant*²² will disappear.

During the second thousand years, monks gradually will neglect the rules of the Vinaya, and eventually even the moral precepts will be neglected.

During the third thousand years, first the last book of the Abhidhamma, and retrogressively its other six books will be lost, the same will happen to the Vinaya, then follow the Suttas, and eventually even the Jātakas will be forgotten.

During the fourth thousand years the monks will forget the proper way to carry the alms bowl and how to wear the yellow robes, ending by suspending the alms bowl from a carrying-pole and of the robes retaining only a small bit of yellow cloth to wrap around the neck, the wrist or the ear.

During the fifth and final thousand years the Buddha’s bodily relics will gradually be less and less honoured.

Finally, 5000 years after Buddha’s death, all his relics will spring out of the reliquaries in which they are enshrined, these will fly to the Mahāthupa at Sri Lanka, where they will assemble, then fly through the air to Bodhgaya in India where they will form themselves in the semblance of the Buddha, and be consumed in a great holocaust.

Mankind will then live in a miserable, immoral state, but eventually the next Buddha, named Metteyya (Sanskrit: Maitreya) will descend from the Tusita heaven.²³

In his inscription (Sukhothai Inscription 3), Phaya Lüthai refers extensively to the disappearance of Buddhism in stages. He warns his readers that in 3099 years the religion will have disappeared. In referring to the second stage of the gradual decline, Lüthai, as others before him had done, reverses stage three and two, telling

²² The *arahant* is a title given to a person who has attained enlightenment and who, when passing away, will reach *nirvana*.

²³ R. Spence Hardy, *Eastern Monachism* (Bibliotheca Indo-Buddhica Series Vol. 49, 1989 [1850], pp. 427 ff. See also John S. Strong, *The Experience of Buddhism* (Wadsworth Publishing, 2008), p. 53.

us that the scriptures would disappear before the rules of the Vinaya.²⁴ Moreover, he assumes that the scriptures will not gradually be forgotten during the coming millennium, as Buddhaghosa's commentary suggested, but that this would occur instantaneously in the year 2000 of the Buddhist Era (BE).

I suggest that Lüthai's dramatic and alarmist interpretation has not been given the attention it deserves. He clearly states that a major threat looms:

... ninety-nine years from the year this relic will be enshrined, the Three Pitakas will disappear. There will be no one who really knows them, though there will be still some who will know a little bit of them. As for preaching the Dharma, such as the Mahājāti [the Vessantara Jātaka], there will be no one who can recite it; as for the other Dharmajātakas, if the beginning is known the end will not be, or if the end is known the beginning will not be.²⁵

This inscription has a date²⁶ in June 1357 AD, which corresponds to 1901 BE. Lüthai warns his readers that exactly in the year 2000 BE, various essential texts, such as the Jātaka, will “disappear”.

This eschatological interpretation, with its prophesy of a dramatic and sudden loss of major religious texts, may well have been the motivating factor that explains a series of remarkable activities in 14th and 15th century Thai Buddhism. It may, for example, be the reason why Lüthai had a replica of the Sri Lankan Buddha footprint made, and why he had copies placed around the kingdom. Worshipping the Buddha footprint was believed to have the same effect as paying homage to an offshoot of the very *bodhi* tree under which the Buddha had reached enlightenment: it would enable the worshipper to be reborn in heaven and remain there until reborn in human form in the time of the Buddha Metteya.²⁷ This was a method to survive through the terrible time when the religion would be lost. In his inscription of 1357 AD, Lüthai wrote that soon people would not have the means to make merit and hence eventually everybody would be reborn in hell. Faithful Buddhists still had a final chance to ensure that they would see the future Buddha Metteya.²⁸ The remarkable cult of relics, that has been amply documented for the 14th and early 15th century in

²⁴ G. Coedès, “The Traibhumikathā: Buddhist Cosmology and Treatise on Ethics”, *East and West*, Vol. 7, 1957, p. 349.

²⁵ A. B. Griswold and Prasert na Nagara, “The Epigraphy of Mahādharmarāja I of Sukhodaya”, *Journal of the Siam Society*, Vol. 61, Pt. 1, 1973, p. 99.

²⁶ “Śakarāja 1279, year of the cock, eighth month, fifth day of the waxing moon”, Griswold and Prasert, “The Epigraphy of Mahādharmarāja I”, p. 94.

²⁷ Barbara Watson Andaya, “Statecraft in the Reign of Lü Tai of Sukhodaya (ca. 1347–1374)”, in Bardwell L. Smith (ed.), *Religion and Legitimation of Power in Thailand, Laos, and Burma* (Chambersburg: Anima Books, 1978), p. 8.

²⁸ See Griswold and Prasert, “The Epigraphy of Mahādharmarāja I”, pp. 102–103.

inscriptions as well as in the Jinakalamani and the Mulasasana, suggests that these thoughts were shared by many.

Lüthai's inscription forecasting the imminent loss of essential elements of religion clearly states what ought to be done at the time when he wrote the inscription: devout Buddhists had a mere 99 years during which they could worship Buddha's footprints, offshoots of the *bodhi* tree, and various relics. His awareness of the limited time left provided him also with a strong motivation to hide the essential texts and illustrations in massive *prang*. These treasures were stored deep inside brick monuments in order to protect them against future destructive fires and inundations, thus providing the poor, ignorant future generations, who had the misfortune to be born after the year 2000 BE, with the means to rediscover them and so to regain access to the *satsana*.

Therefore Si Sattha's project of hiding the Jātaka in the *monthop* (the first stage of a giant *prang*) was inspired by a wish to circumvent the imminent loss of essential texts. This would explain why a textual summary of the story is incised on each Jātaka depiction. In Ayutthaya similar considerations may well have motivated the builders of the *prang* of Wat Ratchaburana to cover the walls of the crypt with depictions of the Jātaka stories, among other images, and to entomb not only a relic but also a very large number of Buddha images deep inside the walls of the *prang*.

The *prang* of Wat Ratchaburana in Ayutthaya may be considered as a giant "time capsule", designed not only to survive the demise of Buddhism but also to provide devout people with the means of tidying over to the next Buddha, Metteya. Similarly, the unfinished monument of Wat Sri Chum of Sukhothai was intended as another such "time capsule" with one corridor leading upwards to depictions of a complete set of Jātaka stories and another corridor leading down underground to a chamber under the Buddha image, where Si Sattha intended to install one of the relics of the Buddha that he had brought from Sri Lanka.

Lüthai's preoccupation with the looming 2000 disaster may well date from the time he wrote the Traiphum. This formidable undertaking was not the result of combined effort: he enumerates an impressive list of sources as well as the six learned men and their entourage with whom he discussed the organization of the work. This systematic description of the cosmos was a novelty, not only in its scope, but especially in that it was written in the local vernacular. In 1952, Coedès suggested already that Lüthai wrote the treatise with the aim of preserving essential knowledge in view of the dangerous year 2000.²⁹ It does not seem too far-fetched to argue that the fearsome year 2000 was not Lüthai's private whim, but that it was shared in the intellectual circles he mentions.

The idea of a spreading panic would help explain several unusual features of late 14th and early 15th century Thai Buddhism. There is the unusual religious

²⁹ Coedès, "The Traibhumikatha", p. 349–50.

content of most of the inscriptions of the time, describing miracles when relics are displayed, listing merit-making occasions and the wish to be reborn in the time of Metteya. These descriptions and such declarations were incised in stone in order to be a record that would last beyond the year 2000, when mankind would be deprived of so many means to ensure a positive rebirth. Also the geographical spread of these inscriptions coincides with the living space of the intellectual circles mentioned by Lüthai.

This hypothesis would also help explain why the number of inscriptions dwindles suddenly after the mid 15th century. The force of a doomsday prophesy is spent as soon as the critical date is passed.

Conclusion

Ever since Lucien Fournereau crawled into its hidden passageway in 1891, Wat Si Chum has posed a challenge to scholars. The contributors to the 2008 publication *Past Lives of the Buddha* have argued convincingly that the 99 Jātaka depictions were intentionally hidden in the *monthop*'s passageway. They have also suggested that the current structure was intended as the base of a much larger building to house the total series of over 500 Jātaka stories, and that the prominent monk, Si Sattha, was most likely the progenitor of this grandiose project.

While agreeing to most of these findings, in this article I offer three suggestions. First, the model for the unbuilt upper levels of the monument would not have been Chedi Wat Ko Kut but a *prang*. Second, the *prang* would have enshrined not only the Jātaka depictions but also relics, as found at Wat Ratchaburana in Ayutthaya. Third, the motivation for such constructions and other religious projects in this era was the fear, on the approach of the ominous date of 2000 BE (1457 AD), that Buddhism was destined to decline and disappear, and some action was needed to give Buddhists, born after that date, a chance to rediscover the lost parts of religion.

In many older provincial towns there are *prang*, often in monasteries called Wat Mahathat (Mahādhātu, the Great Relic). In a preliminary overview (see the Appendix), I have identified a dozen sites, eleven of them possessing a *prang* called the Great Relic. If my interpretation is correct, in each of these colossal monuments that was built before the ominous date of 2000 BE, there will be a relic chamber deep inside the *prang*. Consequently, I suggest that all ancient Mahathat monuments in the Thai region should be examined by the Thai authorities in order to establish whether there are still undisturbed relic chambers inside.

Appendix: Ancient monuments related to the cult of relics

Ayutthaya: Wat Mahathat (1384)

Phetburi: Wat Mahathat

Ratburi: Wat Mahathat Worawihan, known locally as Wat Phra Si Rattana Mahathat.

Nakhon Sithammarat: Wat Phra Mahathat (mid 14th century)

Lop Buri: Wat Phra Sri Ratana Mahathat (late 13th century)

Nakhon Pathom: Phra Pathom Chedi, built over a *prang*

Phra Pathon: the base of a *prang* (reputedly built in 1272)

Suphanburi: Wat Phra Sri Ratana Mahathat, an ancient *prang*, with an inner staircase leading to a small chamber in the top

Phitsanulok: Wat Phra Sri Ratana Mahathat and Wat Chulamani, remains of a huge *prang*

Chaliang: Wat Phra Sri Ratana Mahathat

Chiang Mai: Wat Chedi Luang, not a *prang*, but a *chedi*, dated 1441, ruined in an earthquake in the 16th century

