

THE GOLDEN MERU¹

by

Phra Saroj Ratananinman

Cremation, as a final ritual for our dead, has always met with various criticisms. The most important one is that it discourages Art and never produces Architecture, when compared to burial and interment of the dead. True, it is the reason why we have no edifices such as the Pyramids or the Tomb of Halicarnassos, which rank among the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. We Siamese are, no doubt, great builders, as any one can see by our religious buildings and the regal splendour of our royal edifices. But somehow or other we subscribe little or nothing at all to funerary art. It is not that we are thrifty, as it is too common knowledge that in Siam "the dead sell the living." Custom may be blamed for the discouragement of funerary art. Cremation takes place at public crematoria at various *Wats*.

All these introductory remarks are only intended to show that for commoners, poor and rich alike, funerals give no chance to the artists. Now I come to my main subject: the Golden Meru (พระเมรุมาศ, เมรุกลางเมือง or the crematorium of a King.). It is quite a different undertaking to ordinary cremations. Those who maintain that cremation does not produce art or architecture will have to withdraw their statement as one can demand nothing more with regard to the creation of this particular gem of national artistic enterprise. Only artists are employed, from the supervising heads to the ordinary artisans for manual labour. Strange to say, these men hold hereditary posts, Their fathers were employed in the Ten Departments of Edificers or were in the Royal Household before them. The apprehensive one may say that these *meru* workers are a waste of salary, for they only work when the king is dead. The answer to this is, how can we let them starve when the king is alive?

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Surely some other work can be found for them. To send them away means other professions and localities². When the time comes, in an emergency we could hardly trace them again. Why don't we train new young men to take their places when necessity arises? Well, where can we get such brave men? I want a man to drive my car every day and cannot get him. How can I get a man to drive those gigantic Royal Chariots of Victory (พระมหากษัตริย์ราชรถถอยฎาหาร) when he will have to do it only once in a blue moon?

Enough of preliminaries. Let us look back to the records of the *golden meru* of olden times. We know very little about them except that the site of the *meru* was always given away as temple ground and new *wats* were erected on them, such as Wat Phra Ram where King U-T'ong was cremated, Wat Rajabūrna where Chao Ai and Chao Yi, who killed each other, were cremated. King Ekāt'osarot built a *meru* for his brother King Naresuan, the Great, whose remains were brought down to Ayudhya. The grand *meru* was 37 *wah* high complete with cardinal *merus* and circumambient cloisters. The priests engaged in the ceremony were recorded as ten thousand! For this great king we feel that his dignity was belittled on account of the size of his *golden meru*. Many Kings after him humbly honoured his greatness by ordering that their *meru* should never exceed the height of his.

Now we come to the *golden meru* of another king who is more familiar to us and to Europeans than any other king of Ayudhya. It was the gigantic *golden meru* of King Narai. The height was 68 *wah* the span was 8 *wah*. It was higher than the Golden Mount (ภูเขาทอง). How they did it and why it was of such a mountainous size is beyond our understanding. The *golden meru* of King Tiger was too pretentious when compared to that of a great king. It was 51 *wah* high and of 7 $\frac{1}{2}$ *wah* span. All these big *meru's* took no less than a year

²As a matter of fact, they had plenty of other artistic work to do while the King was alive. Ed.

to build and it must have been the time when our creative ability had reached its highest point. From this time on the sizes of the *golden meru* were gradually reduced but the splendour and decoration still remain.

The *golden meru* of the Ratanakosin period is of our period, and although exact copies of Ayudhya funerary architecture, they are more pretentious and later on very much more refined in material and workmanship. We have documentary records and detailed drawings and photographs back to the *golden meru* of King Phra Chom Klao of the Fourth Reign. So while mentioning about the heights and spans of this type of architecture, let me give those of other kings of Ratanakosin period. For the Fourth Reign the height was 23 *wah*. For the Fifth Reign the height was 21 *wah* and 4 *wah* span. For the Sixth Reign the height was $22\frac{1}{2}$ *wah* and $3\frac{1}{2}$ *wah* span.

Here is Sir J. Bowring's narrative of the building of a *meru* :

"The building of the *Meru* or temple in which the burning was to take place, occupied 4 months ; during the whole of which time between three and four hundred men were constantly engaged. The whole of it was executed under the personal superintendence of the Kralahome. It would be difficult to imagine a more beautiful object than this temple when seen from the opposite site of the river. The style of architecture was similar to that of the other temples in Siam ; the roof rising in the centre, and thence running down in a series of gables, terminating in curved points. The roof was covered entirely with scarlet and gold, whilst the lower part of the building was blue with stars of gold. Below, the temple had four entrances leading directly to the pyre From the roof depended immense chandeliers which at night increased the effect beyond description. Sixteen large columns running from north to south supported the roof. The entire height of the building must have been 120 ft. in length about 50 ft. and breadth 40 ft. platform about 7 ft. In the centre was a raised high platform about 7 ft. high which was the place upon which the urn containing the body was to be placed ;

upon each side of this were stairs covered with scarlet and gold cloth.

“This building stood in the centre of a piece of ground of about 2 acres extent the whole of which ground was covered over with close rattan-work in order that visitors might not wet their feet, the ground being very muddy.

“This ground was enclosed by a wall, along the inside of which myriads of lamps were disposed rendering the night as light as day. The whole of the ground belonging to the adjoining temple contained nothing but tents - - - ”

Here is another account by Carl Bock about royal funerals :

“Orders are issued for ‘general mourning’ which consists of shaving the head but, though generally observed, the practice is not now enforced. Instructions are at once sent to the governors of the northern provinces where the large timber abounds requiring them each to furnish one of the four large logs for the centre pillars of the Phra Meru. These logs must be of the finest description and very straight 200 ft. long and proportionately large in circumference-which I am told, in case of the queen’s funeral was not less than 12 feet.

“Besides these large pillars, twelve others of smaller size are demanded at the same time from other governors, as well as other necessary materials. As sacred custom will not tolerate the use of pillars that have been used on any former occasion, new ones must always be obtained for the funeral obsequies of a king. Four pillars are very difficult to find of such enormous dimensions, and, besides, they can be floated down to Bangkok, only at those seasons of the year when there is plenty of water in the Menam ; hence the frequent long delays in the completion of the Phra Meru. When these four great pillars reached the landing *i.e.* Tachang, the task of raising them up from the river was more than by ordinary labour. I was told that convicts were given many hours liberty to come and help. Tavoy men from our Ban Tawai then came to chop those pillars and their dexterity in straightening them up was well known.

Arrived at the cremation ground the 4 principal pillars are planted in the ground 30 ft deep, one at each corner of a square and not less than 40 ft. apart, and leaning slightly inwards so as to form the frame work of a tapering tower, about 170 ft. high on the top of which is erected a pagoda-shaped octagonal spire adding from 50 to 60 ft. more to the height of the structure. This upper part is so covered with yellow-coloured sheets of copper and tinsel-paper as to resemble a cone of gold, for at such an elevation the deception is not apparent and the effect is really very striking.

“At each of the four corners of this lofty pyramid are erected by means of the 12 smaller posts, four covered structures, extending out from the main pillars about 4 feet one on each side. Each of these has a pagoda-shaped spire, also decked with tinsel of the same general form as the central one but not as tall by 50 or 60 ft. Between each of these corner buildings is a gaily decorated porch, facing each cardinal point of the compass. The Phra Meru is thus completed, the receptacle for the royal body that is to be cremated.”

Enough of the observation by European eyes, let us now return to the actual procedure how a *golden meru* is built. The order for submitting designs and appointing the general staff to be responsible for carrying out the operation comes from very high up; in former days, it came from the king himself. The size and style of architecture for the *meru* were also included in the royal command. The artists then set their heads and hands together and after a short time a design or two could be produced. With few alterations one would be selected and the actual execution can proceed whenever the season and supply of materials allow. Rainy season is to be avoided and meanwhile laying stock of materials goes on. Heads of various staffs are appointed. This consists of the carpenters who are responsible for the strength and stability of the building, carvers who are responsible for the decorative forms of architectural ornaments such as ช่อฟ้าใบระกาปลาร้า ทวยหน้าบัน บันแถลง, and decorators

who are responsible for beautifying the edifice. The designers this time start their full sized details, for without these the work cannot start. The details are not drawn on paper, as one would expect, as they are too large. They are drawn on the temple floor of Wat Mahathat, and whenever the space is needed for congregation mats and carpets are simply placed over them ; and whenever carpenters, carvers or decorators want to consult sizes or shapes of any parts they are always there. The work will thus go on for about three or four months. Then authorities will ask when the *golden meru* will be finished so that the dates of various rituals and the day of the royal cremation could be fixed. After long consultation and adding many more days grace, the date is fixed, and from that day on our troubles begin. Things do not go as they should, materials run short or get spoilt, men appear sick and look as if they will drop off. To ask for postponement is impossible and people come asking every day whether the work will be finished in time. To add insult to injury, we have visitors on the Phramane ground laughing and appraising the progress of our work. At that stage, the addition of more men to assist would hinder rather than help, because the kind of work requires patience and skill, haste and bad handling is risky. Besides space is limited.

On the day of the arrival of the royal urn, of course, the *golden meru* is not finished. There has never been any record yet of the Phra Meru being finished before the arrival of H.M. the King. Workmen will keep on at it until they are chased down the steps and always as a rule leaving a ladder, a coat or a hat up there.
