

PHRA CEDI

by

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No one visiting a Siamese monastery, popularly known as a *wat*, would fail to notice a certain structure, pyramidal in form with a slender tapering spire at the top. The structure is known in Siamese as a *chedi* or a *Phra Cedi*. In one *wat* there may be just one *chedi* of a fairly large size, or there may be several of them of varying sizes and decorative schemes. When we talk of a *Phra Cedi*, the first word *Phra* is just an honorific, meaning "exalted", from the Sanskrit *vara*. The honorific is usually prefixed to an object of veneration pertaining to religion or royalty. The second part, *chedi*, is the Siamese equivalent of the Pāli *cetīya* and the Sanskrit *caitya*. This kind of a monument referred at first to the tumulus raised over the ashes of the dead. In Siam nowadays it just means a sacred monument or a reliquary. To understand the development of the *chedi* one must go back to ancient times.

In one of the books of the Buddhist Scripture, the *Dhammapada*, there is the story of a disciple of the Lord Buddha who was gored to death by an ox. He was cremated and the Buddha commanded that a pile of earthwork be raised over his ashes, thereby constituting a tumulus, or *chedi*. Such a custom of raising earthen mounds over the ashes of a saint was not unknown to Brahmans and Jains of olden times.

Scholars now distinguish such monuments as the *chedi* in four categories, namely :

1. *Phra Dhātuchedi* (*Dhātucetīya* in Pāli), containing what is supposed to have been the Buddha's own ashes;
2. *Phra Boripokachedi* (*Paribhogacetīya* in Pāli), containing articles supposed to have been personally used by the Buddha, such as his begging bowl and robes. Under

this category is also included the four sacred sites in connection with the history of the life of the Buddha; namely, his birth-place at Kapilavastu, the place where he became enlightened (Bodhagayā), the place where he preached his first sermon (Sarnāth) and the place where he died (Kusinarā);

3. *Phra Dhammačedi* (*Pāli, Dhammačetiya*), the depository of his teaching or law;
4. *Phra Udesikačedi* (*Pāli, Udesikačetiya*), which takes the form of a reminder of religion, such as the image of the Buddha.

The first category, known also as a *Stūpa* in Sanskrit, or *Thūpa* in *Pali*, is also called *sathūp* in Siamese. It is sometimes referred to in Siamese as *Phra Sathūpčedi*. In Ceylon it is *dhātugabba*, which has been anglicized into *dagoba*. Curiously enough, there is the well-known word *pagoda*, meaning temple, shrine or *čedi*, which sounds somewhat similar.

In several of the bigger *wats* there is only one *čedi* of large proportions. This would be the *Phra Dhātučedi*, of the first category. Usually the *wat* possessing such an important monument would be known as Wat Phra Mahādhātu, meaning the *wat* of the great reliquary of the Lord Buddha. It has been traditional for a royal city to have a Wat Phra Mahādhātu. Here in Bangkok there is a Wat Mahādhātu behind the National Library. Another one, a Wat Phra Sri Mahādhātu, built some fifteen years ago, is in the northern suburb of Bangkok, near the Donmuang aerodrome. At Lopburi there is also a Wat Mahādhātu to the west of the railway station. The towns of Ayudhya, Pissulok and Sukhothai also have one each. This indicates that these towns have been at one time or another a capital city.

These *ācedi*-monuments are fundamentally similar in structure though details in their decorations may differ. A *ācedi* may be divided for analytical purposes into four parts, namely: the plinth, the dome-shaped structure called the bell, the platform and the spire. There are of course many styles of *ācedi* in Siam and neighbouring countries, but those in Bangkok are mostly confined to the style known as the Ceylonese; and they are the ones described above.

If we compare this type of *ācedi* with the well-known *stūpa* of *Sūñci*, we see at once that the Siamese type of *ācedi* is obviously developed from it in that both have a simple round tumulus surrounded by a balustrade. This round tumulus has become the "bell" or dome-shaped structure of our *ācedi*, which, by further architectural development may often take a rectangular form, with or without reduced angles or corners and other decorations. The balustrade becomes the plinth of our local type with many superimposed tiers ordained by traditions of architecture. The lowest tier is sometimes widened to form a terrace for circumambulation. Above the dome-shaped structure at the "neck of the bell" (คอระฆัง) is a small quadrangular platform called in Siamese *banlang* (*Pāli pallanka*) with a number of colonnades above it. This platform is characteristic of the Ceylonese style. The platform might have been a place where a symbol of the relic within was deposited. Above the platform we come to the slender tapering spire. The lower part of this latter section consists of circles diminishing in diameter, superimposed one upon the other, called in Siamese *plong chanai* (ปล้องจันทน์). The word *chanai* is the name of a musical instrument of the hautboi kind with many circles round its body. Hence the above name. It is perhaps the same as the Malay *suranci*, a kind of a hautboi which is again to be found in Persia. These circles, or *plong chanai*, have no doubt been developed from the idea of tiered parasols diminishing in diameter as they rise to the top of the spire. Sometimes the circles take the shape of lotus flowers known in Siamese as the *bua klum* (บัวกลุม), meaning lotus

clusters. Above the circles is the *plī*, or plantain bud, so called on account of its shape. This again may be divided into the upper and lower *plī* with a round ball in between. At the culminating point of the upper *plī* is another round ball, called in Siamese *yūd nam khāng* (หยาดน้ำค้าง), or dewdrop. I am particular in describing the various parts of the *čedi*, for they are fundamentally similar to the spired roof of the King's Palace, which is called in Siamese *prāsād*, from the Sanskrit *prāsād*, a storeyed building.

The composition of a *Phra Cedi* may be compared with that of the *śikhara* of the Hindu temple. That part of the *čedi* called the bell would then correspond to the *garbha*, or chamber in the Hindu *śikhara*. In a large sized *čedi* there is of course a chamber inside the bell. The *banlang*, or platform, of a *čedi* is the *devagriha*, i.e., God's house, in the *śikhara* and the spire of a *čedi* is the actual *śikhara*, referring to the mountain peak on which gods in Hinduism are supposed to live. The dewdrop of a *čedi* is equivalent to the *kalasa* or *kumbha* in the Hindu *śikhara*, meaning a water-pot. I introduce the Hindu *śikhara* into my description of a *čedi* because some of the *čedi* and some of the *prāsād* of the royal palaces have conventional tops like the Hindu *śikhara* instead of the more common tapering slender spires. The Hindu *śikhara* is called in Siamese a *prāng* (ปราสาท) and in shape is like the cob of the Indian corn, a characteristic example of which is the tower-tops found in Angkor Thom. The *prang* in Siam has undergone a series of developments, the latest of which may be seen in the big *čedi* of Wat Arun, colloquially called Wat Chang, opposite Wat Po on the other side of the river. Such monuments are generally called *prang* instead of *čedi*, although their purpose is similar to that of a *čedi*. It is, in fact, a *čedi* in the shape of a *prang*.

The gigantic *čedi* at Phra Pathom was formerly a dome-like structure with a *prang* on top. A replica of the original *čedi* may still be seen in the precincts of the great monument. This original *čedi* was later, in the reign of King Mongkut, completely covered by the present big *čedi*.

To sum up then there are three types of *āedi*, namely: the one with a tapering slender spire, which is the most frequently met with; the one with a *prang* on top; and the one which is a *prang* entirely.

If one looks at the spires of the *prāsād*, or royal palace, one will notice that there are also two kinds of them. One is the slender tapering spire shooting up from the middle of the roof, such as may be seen in the case of Dusit Mahāprāsād in the Grand Palace; and the other is a *prang* placed on top of the roof in a similar way, only one example of which exists. It is at the Royal Pantheon in the precincts of the Chapel Royal of the Emerald Buddha. One will note at a glance that the slender tapering spire of a *prāsād* is, in structure and composition, similar to the first kind of a *āedi*. The only difference lies in the superimposed circles above the platform of a *āedi*, the lower part of which becomes, in the case of the *prāsād*, a number of flat pieces with pointed tops arranged round the axis. Its upper part rises in three diminishing tiers of "lotus clusters". Such an upper part is in some instances found on the spire of a *āedi* too. The flat pieces with pointed tops are called *hēm* in Siamese, from the Sanskrit *hema*, meaning gold. Hence the King's Palace of the *prāsād* type is called *prāsād yod hem* in differentiation from the *prāsād yod prang*, the *prāsād* with a *prang* on top.

The Siamese word *hēm*, from the Sanskrit *hema* meaning gold, is of course derived from the Sanskrit *hima* (snow). Now the Himalaya has a peak, the Kailās, where Siva is supposed to dwell. The Himalaya is referred to in Siamese as Hemabanphot (from *hema parbata*, the golden mountain, so called from the gold-like glitter of its snow). Our flat pieces, which go by the names of *hēm*, derive their names from this simile. Siamese royalty in the later period of Ayudhya adopted the outward forms of the *Khmer* theory of divine kingship, in which the monarch is more or less identified with godhead in the person of Siva, the Hindu paramount

god, and was therefore expected to dwell on what is made to correspond to the *śikhara* of Kailās where Siva supposedly dwells. Unable perhaps to build a *śikhara* in wood superimposed on the roof of a *prāsād*, a structure in the shape of a *chedi* had to be put up instead. In order to have something resembling a *śikhara*, a conventional symbol of the golden mountain, or *hēm*, is added to the slender tapering spire. The case of the *prang* being superimposed on top of a roof to represent a *śikhara* like the one at the Royal Pantheon in the precincts of the Chapel Royal of the Emerald Buddha should be taken to be exceptional for it is the only one in existence in the whole country. It was probably not meant to be a human dwelling at all.

There is yet another type of edifice in some of the monasteries which has a spired roof like a *prāsād* or *chedi*. This is called a *mondop*, from the Sanskrit *mandapa*, referring to temporary shed or building attached to the *śikhara*. Here in Siam, however, the *mondop*, such as the one on the raised platform to the north of the Chapel Royal, serves to house the Holy Scriptures. A *mondop* and a *prāsād* are similar in superstructure with the exception of the latter's having a ground plan somewhat like a Greek cross with four more or less projecting porches on each side, while the *mondop* has a square floor without the many superimposed roofs.

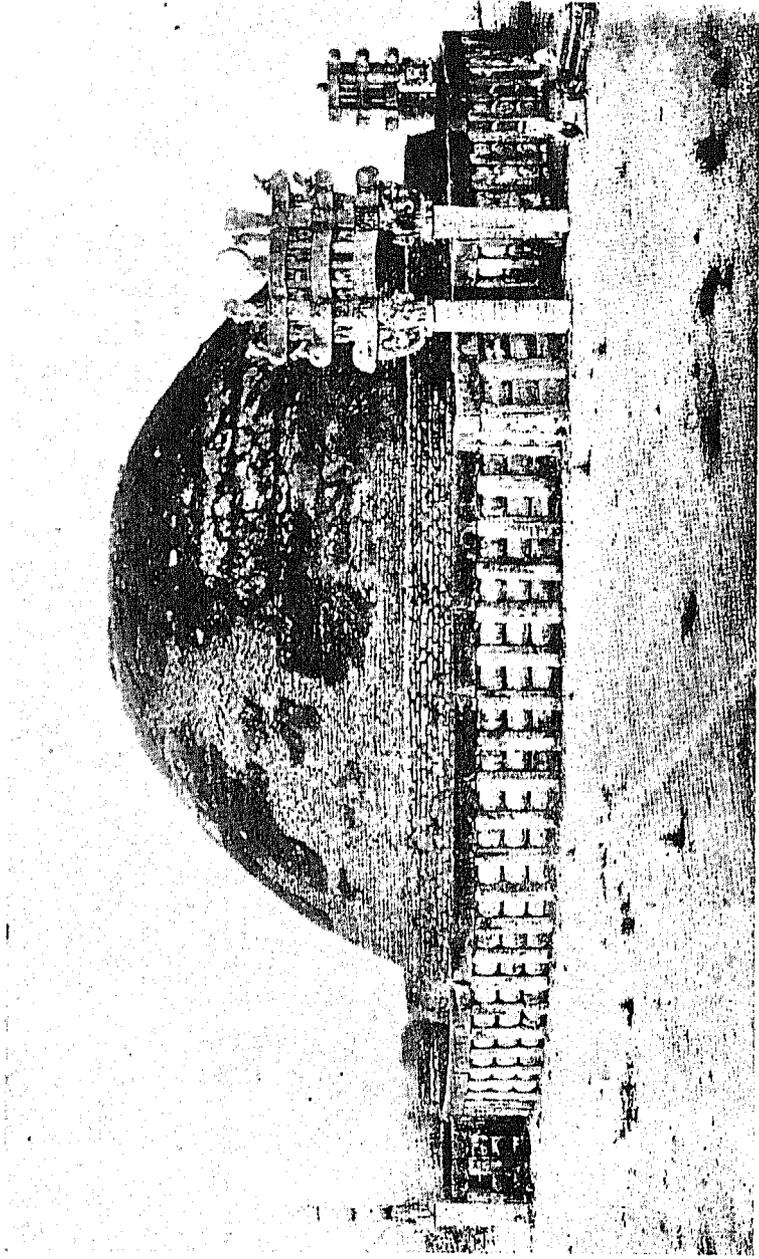
I have deviated too long from my main subject — the *chedi*. I shall now pick up the thread of my story. Besides the first type of *chedi* there are of course other types to be found in *wats*, among which the most numerous is the fourth type where a Buddha-image or images are deposited as already mentioned. It used to be popular belief that to build a *wat*, to have a Buddha-image cast or to erect a *chedi* or any other religious monument was meritorious. Moreover persons who erected a *chedi*, in addition to gaining merit thereby, desired it to serve as a place where they could have the ashes of their departed dear ones properly deposited in an atmosphere of sanctity in the same way as Christians used to

deposit the remains of their departed relatives near the cross. Hence these čedi both large and small are to be found everywhere in monasteries or infrequently in uninhabited places perched on high by a mountain side.

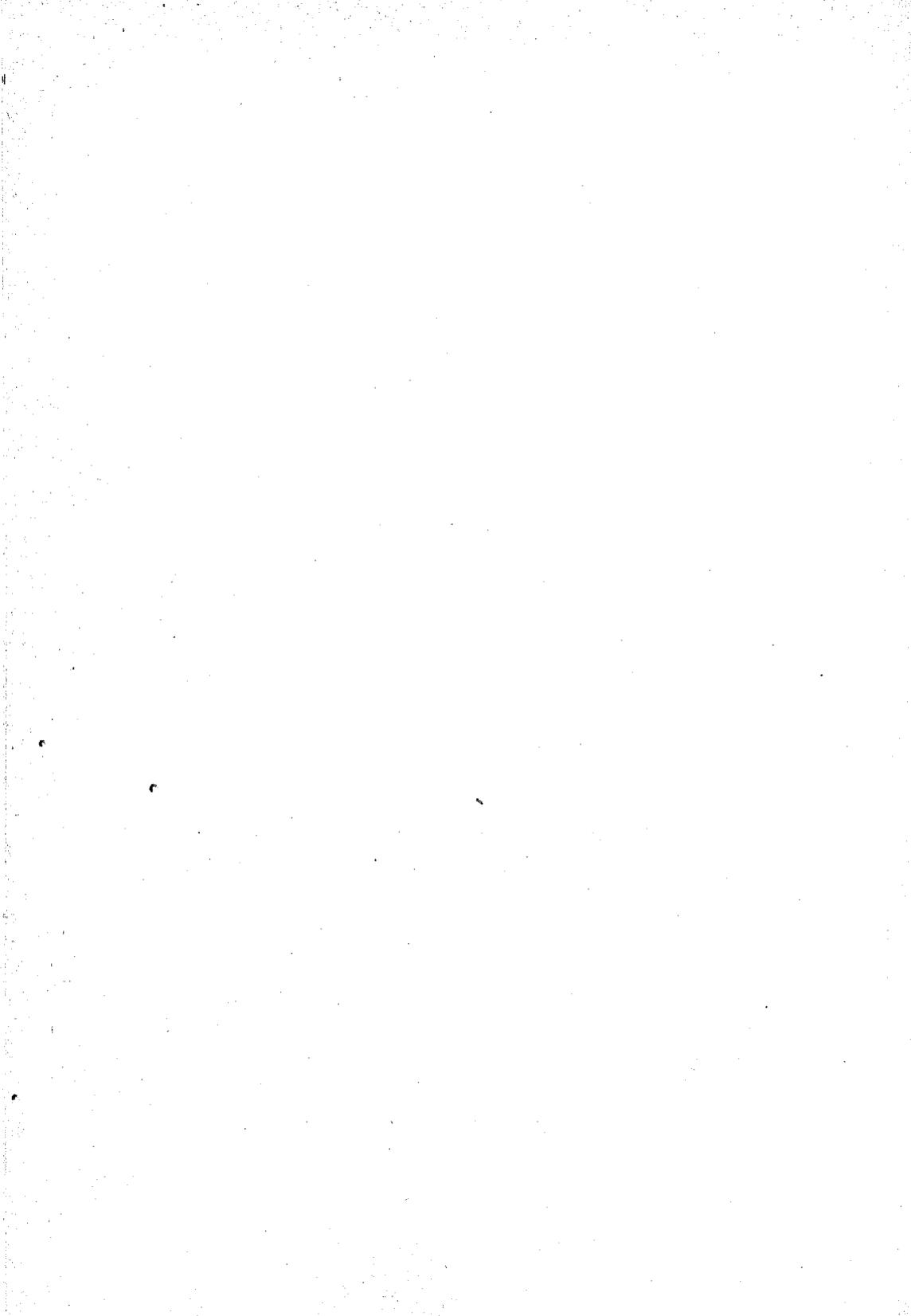
Later the building of these čedi degenerated, and cheap inartistic ones were constructed with nothing sacred deposited within but the ashes of the common dead. In fact enterprising Chinese artisans cast some of these čedi ready-made in cement in detachable parts. Thus some wats on the outskirts of big cities are studded with these cheap čedi. In the north and the northeast provinces people sometimes build brick cells in the shape of a čedi and deposit therein the ashes of their dead. They do not call these monuments čedi but *kū*, that is, cells.

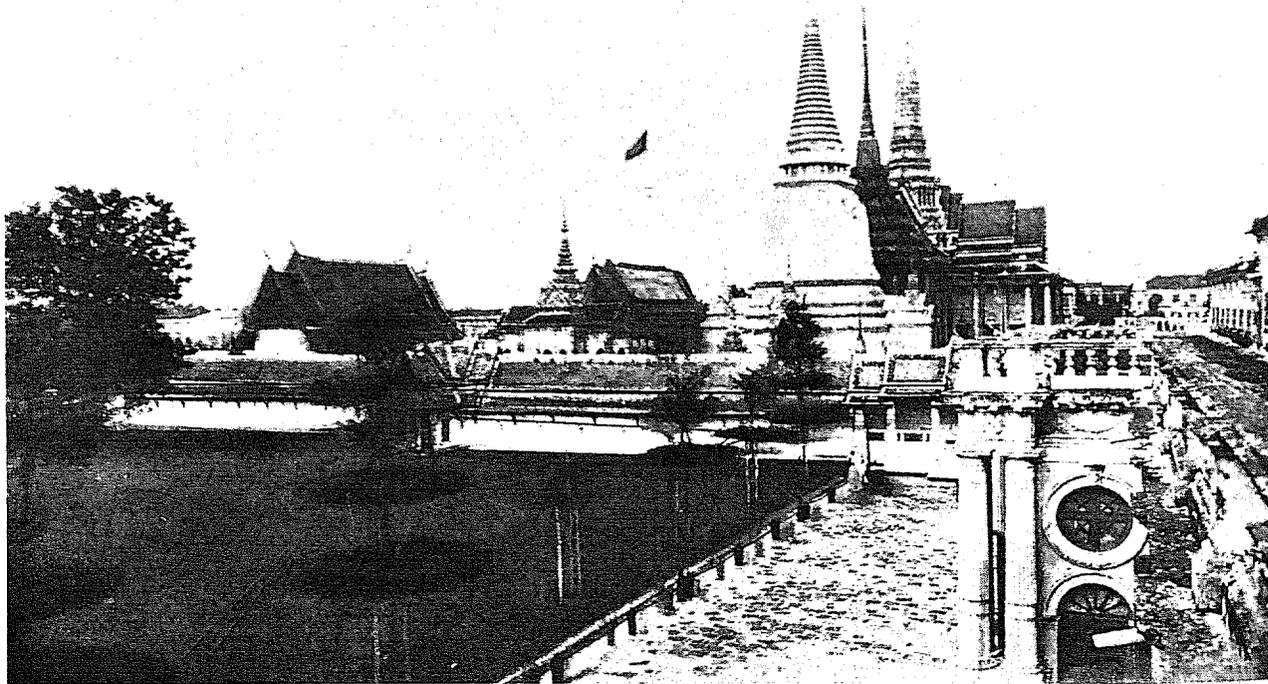
In building a čedi in the old days, in addition to depositing in it images of the Buddha, valuables such as jewels and gold were also included as offerings to the Buddha. Such a custom has in later times one undesirable effect, for the čedi is partly destroyed by treasure hunters.

Bangkok, June 1952



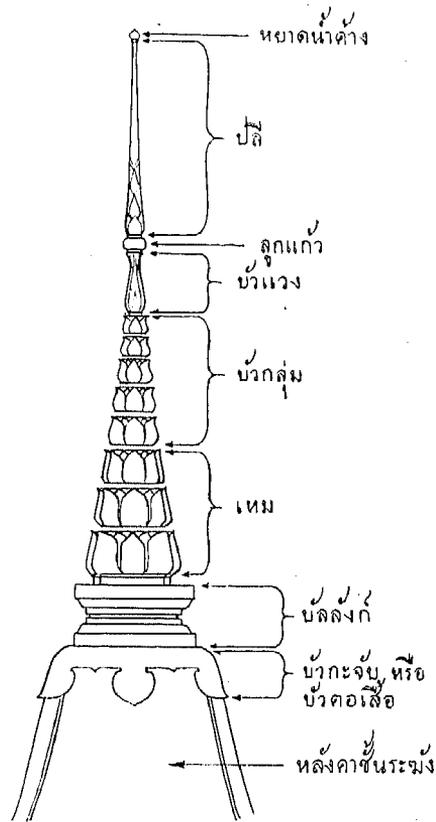
The Buddhist stupa at Sañci, India.



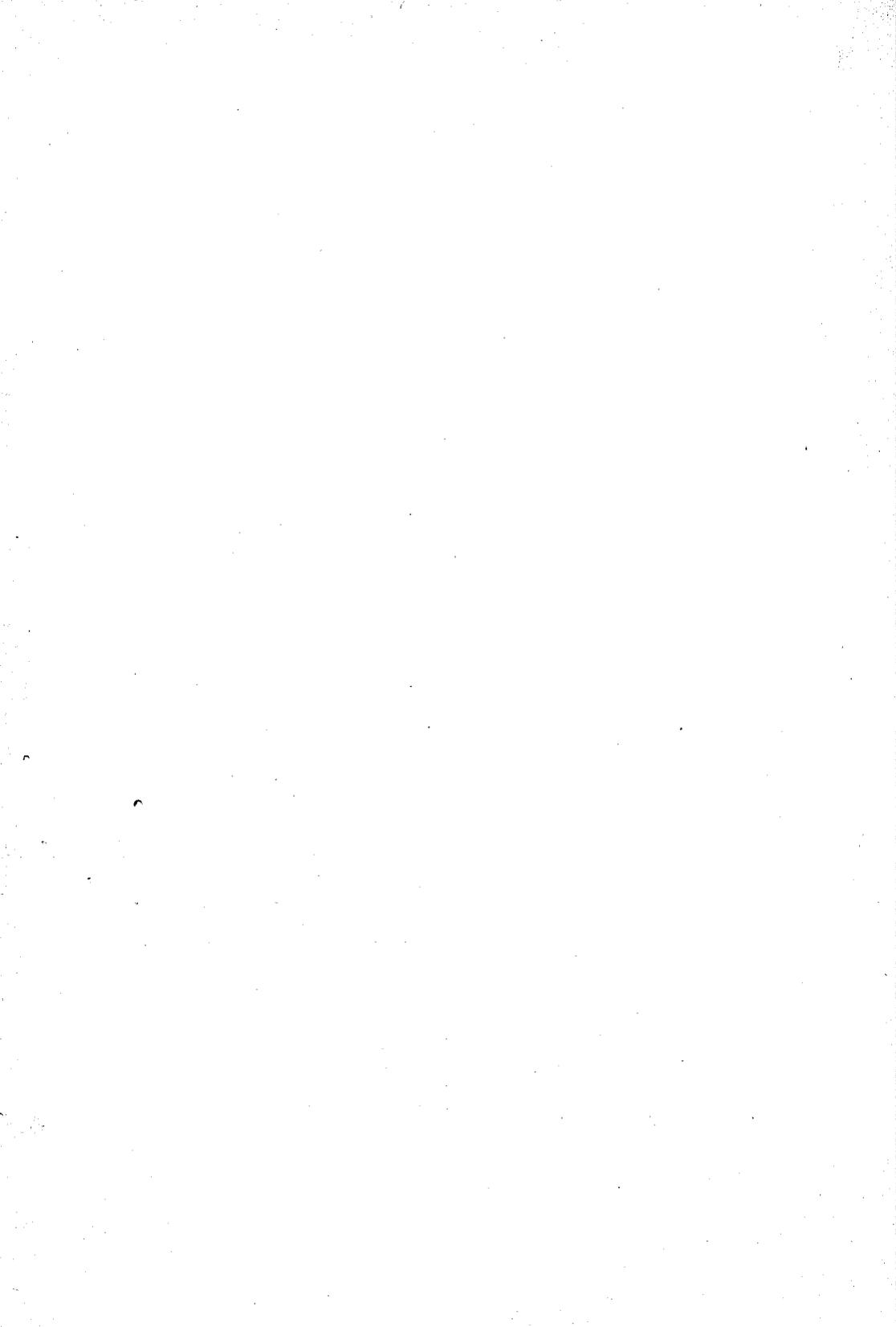


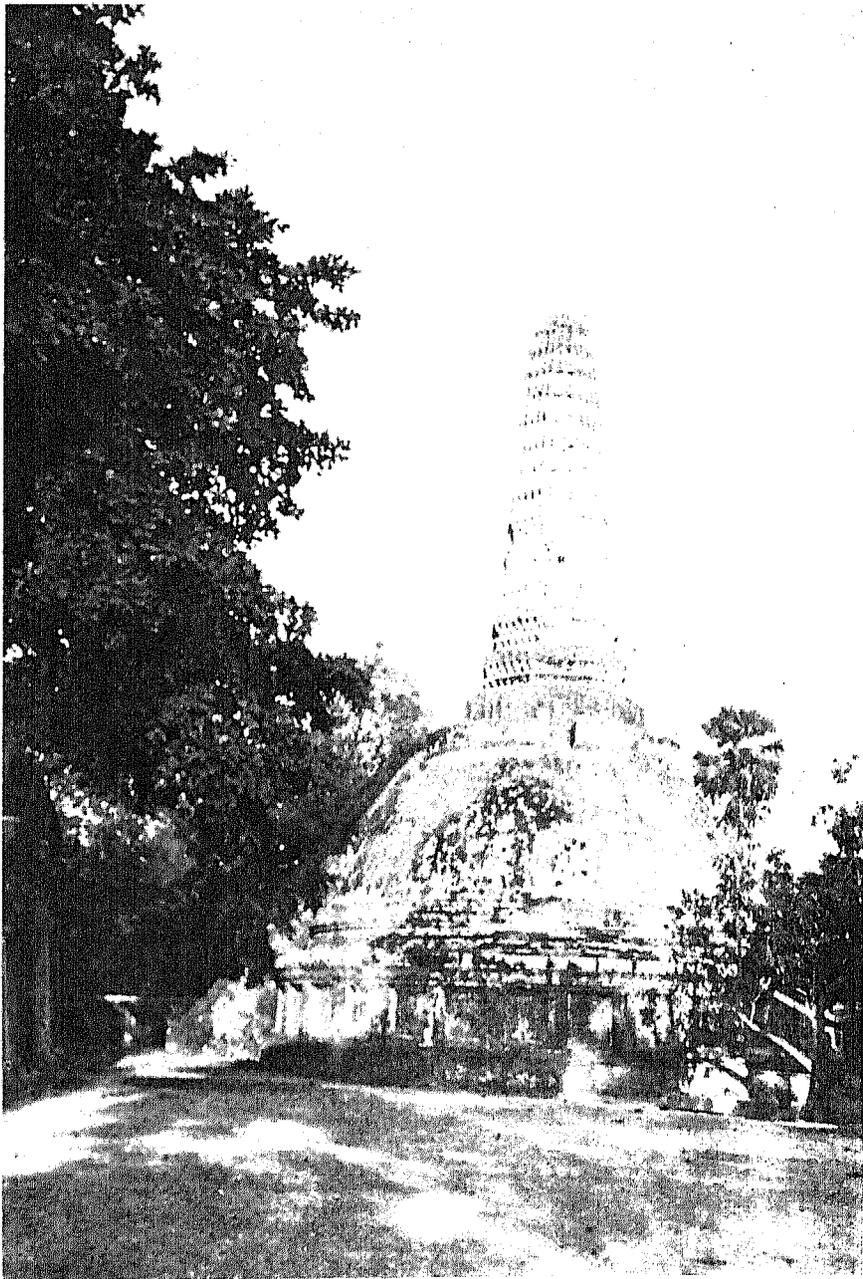
*Phra cedi, the mondop and the Royal Pantheon in the Chapel Royal
of the Emerald Buddha at the Grand Palace, Bangkok.*





The spire of the Prāsād. From top to bottom the parts of the spire are as follows: the dew drop; the plī or plantain bud; the round ball; the bua waeng or fillets; the bua klum or lotus cluster; the hém; the balang or platform; the neck; the bell.



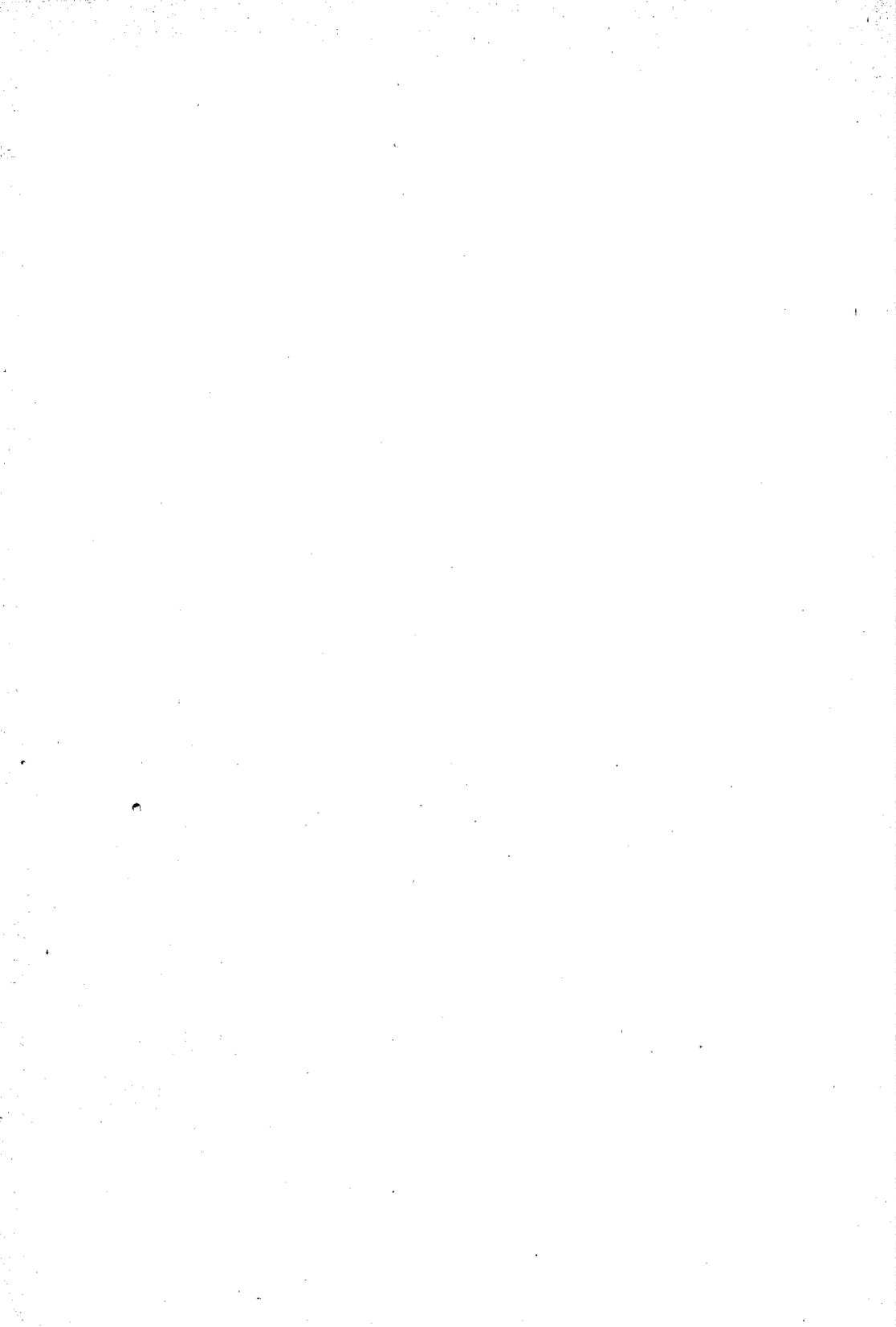


*A replica of the original cedi of Phra Pathom
at Nakorn Pathom.*



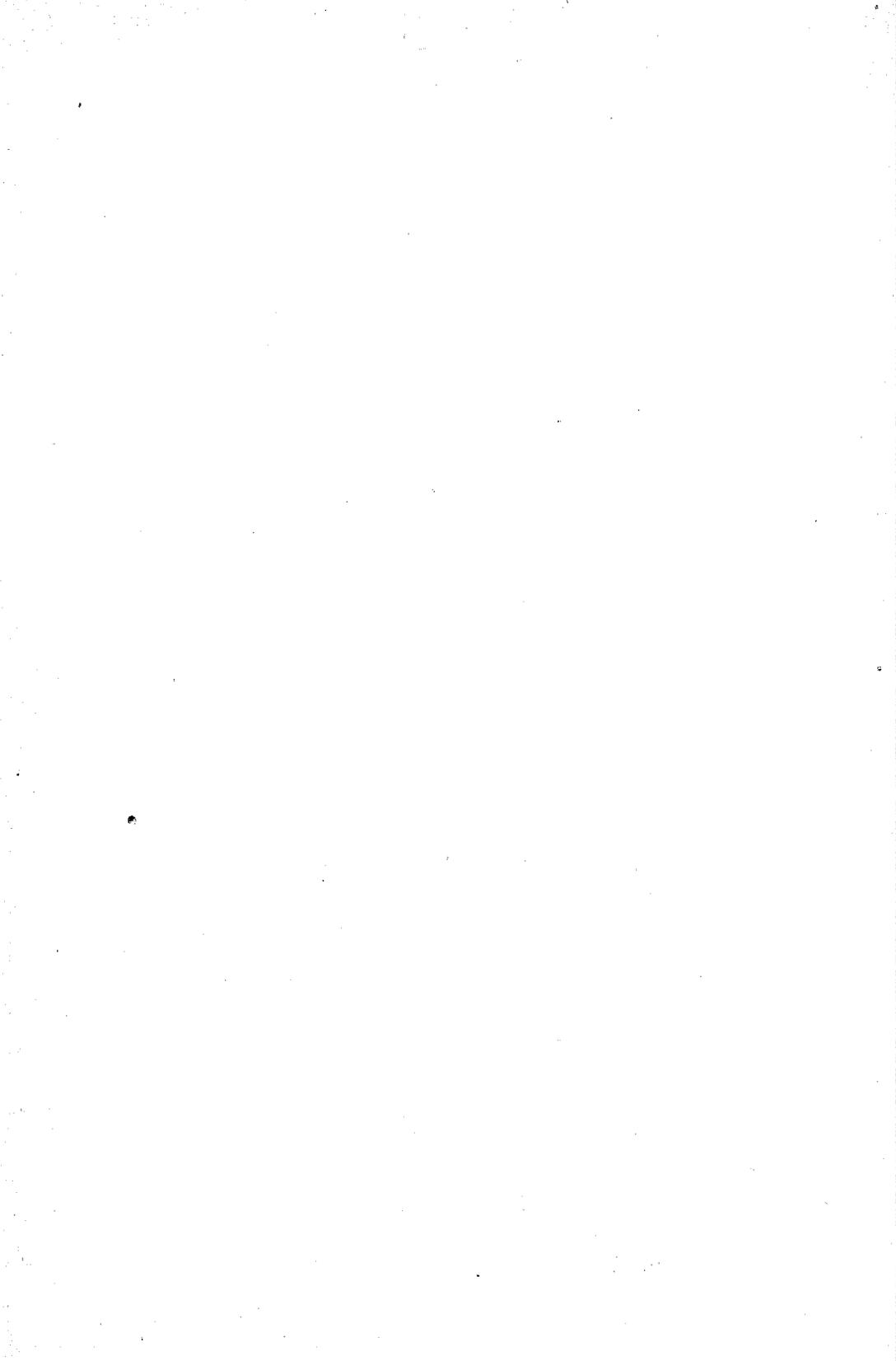


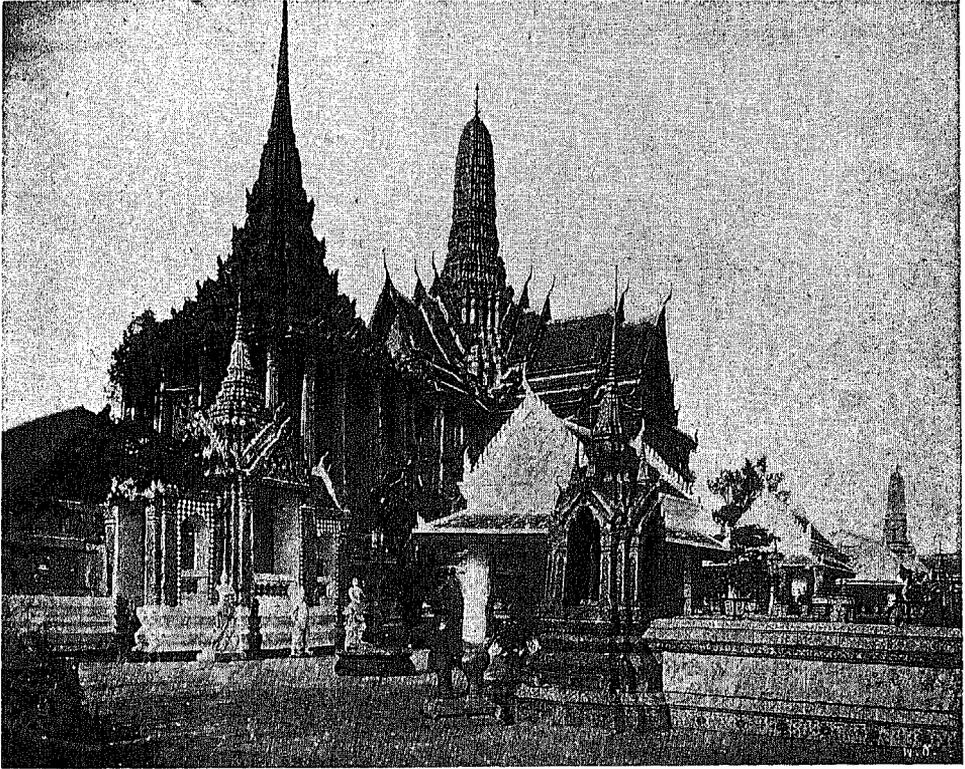
*The big Buddhist cedi (stupa) of Phra Pathom
at Nakorn Pathom*



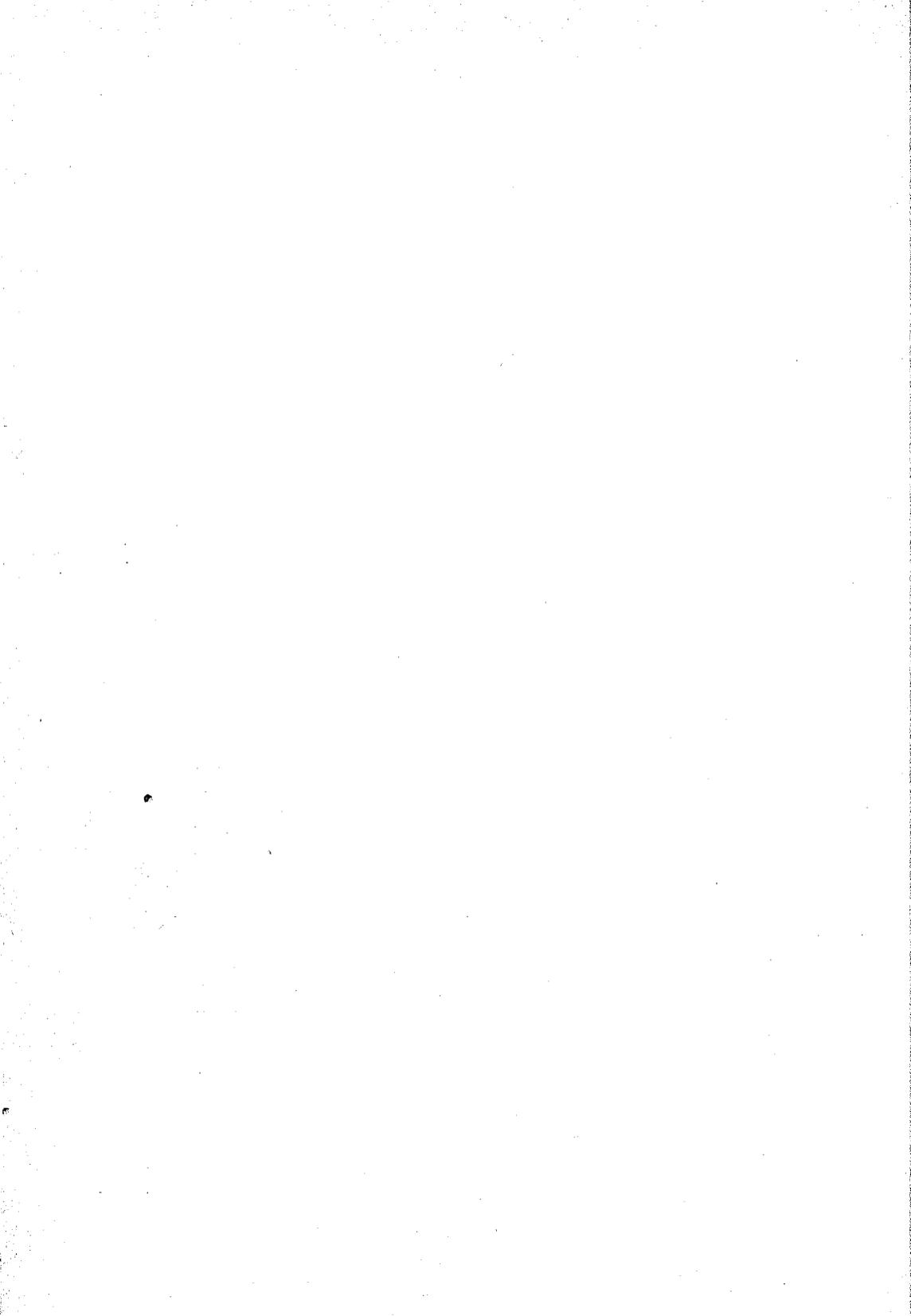


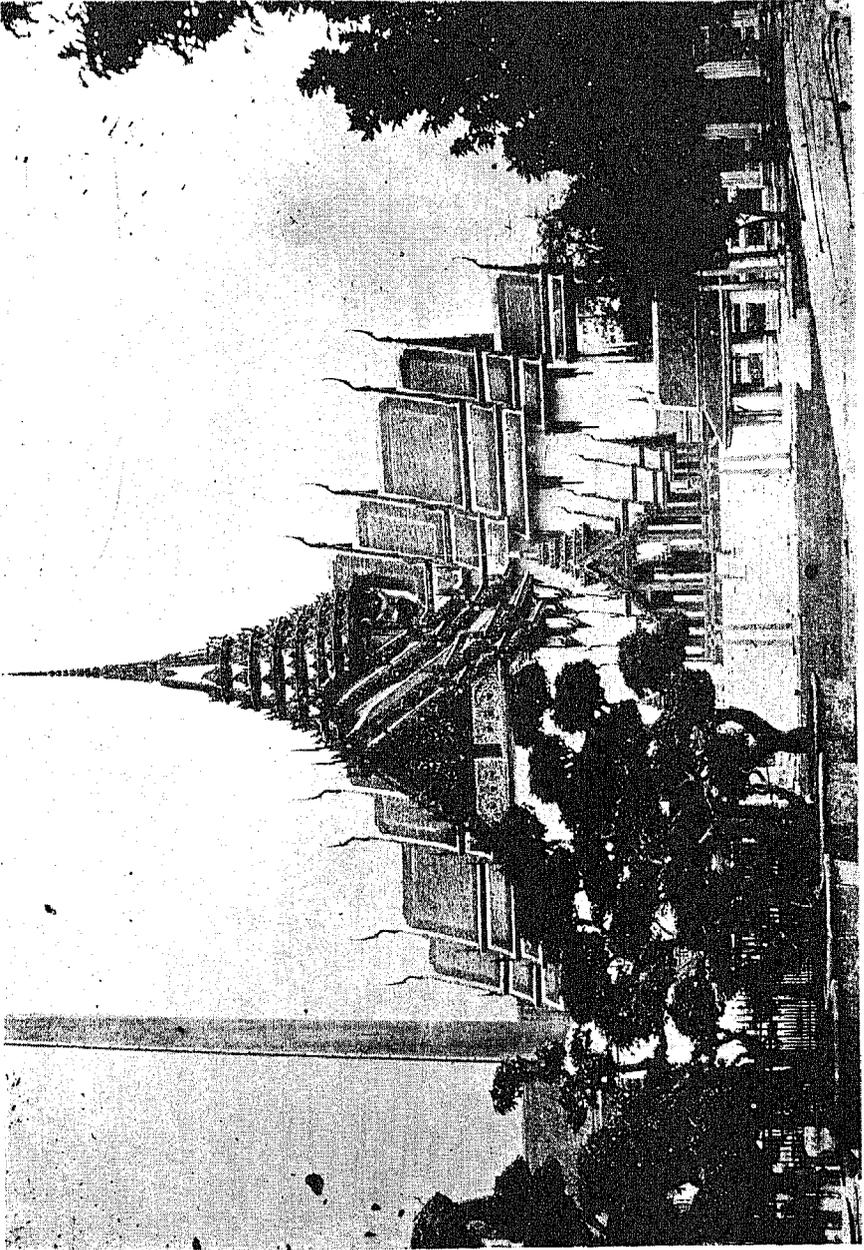
The phra prang at Wat Arun, Bangkok.





The mondop and the Royal Pantheon, in the Chapel Royal of the Emerald Buddha at the Grand Palace, Bangkok.





Dusit Mahāprāsāt, the Grand Palace, Bangkok.

