THE ORIGINS OF SUKHODAYA ART

by

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The problems concerning the origins of Sukhodaya (Sukhot'ai) art are of interest far beyond the circle of those who specialize in Siamese culture. Since they refer to a period that is relatively near to us in time, there is a chance they may help us to know more of some of the principles that were also involved in the formation of the earlier Indianized arts of South-east Asia. Reciprocally, viewed in this wider perspective, it may be that we can identify factors in the making of Sukhodaya art that would not be so readily recognizable if our field of study remains too narrow.

In considering the Indianization of the earlier peoples of South-east Asia, I came to the conclusion that a people might undergo extreme Indianization, in which case their art was never more than a copy of the Indian, as for example at Dvāravatī or the Pagan kingdom of Burma; or they might undergo thorough but not extreme Indianizaion, in which case they retained certain preferences or a way of doing things of their own. This led them to mould Indian culture in a certain distinctive way, which gained in force as the Indian influences declined. Examples are Champa, central Java and the kingdom of the Khmers. A third possibility was that a people in a peripheral locality might remain marginal to Indian culture, and have only a limited cognizance of the Indian cultural pattern. An example would be pre-Majapahit Bali, or West Java, or, to go outside South-east Asia, China under early Buddhist influence. Such marginality may be a stage leading to fuller acculturation, or after a time the Indian influence may recede without ever having been very dominating.

Now it seems to me that we can best understand certain characteristics of Sukhodaya art if we regard the Thai people when still under Khmer rule, and indeed for some time after they achieved their independence, as being marginal to Indian culture. I am using here the term Indian culture in a wide sense, to

include all derived manifestations, such as Khmer, Sinhalese, Dvāravatī, etc. In reading King Rāma K'amhêng's famous inscription, it appears to me that the prominence there accorded to animism, not only in the popular belief, but also in the official religion, stamps the Thai of that time as still being marginal. Moreover, the paternal rule, the freedom from taxation and so on, are really indications of a simpler social organization, untrammeled as yet by any strict attention to Indian codes. Do we not all realize in the world of today how the complexities of modern life, which we are all supposed to relish, have to be bought at the cost of a great many rules and regulations, and especially a very heavy burden of taxation.

It is in this context of marginality to Indian culture that the high quality of the best Sukhodaya sculpture is most readily understood. Had the Indianization been more thorough during the earlier part of the period, iconography not plastic conception would have been the overruling characteristic. This would have prevented the universality of appeal that enables us to recognize the finest Sukhodaya sculptures as among the world's greater art.

I do not need to enter upon an analysis of Sukhodaya sculpture because this has already been done in a truly admirable manner by Mr. A. B. Griswold in his article "The Buddhas of Sukhodaya".[1] I fully agree with his conclusion that, while no doubt the Pali commentaries, and probably Dvāravatī, Bayon and Ceylon images provided the iconographical points, in making the primary Sukhodaya images the highly gifted Thai sculptors were very free to follow their own trance impressions, which would be to some extent influenced, consciously or unconsciously, by the living models provided by the monks of the day. And here I must mention an interesting point contributed by M. Coedès. In a recent article he repeats,[2] what he had already observed many years ago,[3] that the aquiline noses and small chins of the Thai

1. *Archives of the Chinese Art Society of America*, VII, 1953.
2. G. Coedès, "L'art siamois de l'epoque de Sukhodaya (XIII-XIV siècles): circonstances de son eclosion, " *Arts Asiatiques*, 1955, p. 292.
3. G. Coedès, "India's Influence upon Siamese art," *Indian Art and Letters*, 1930 p. 35

soldiers figured on the 12th century Angkor Wat reliefs contrast strongly with the straight noses and wide chins of the Khmer soldiers immediately following. On the other hand the Thai facial features closely resemble those of the Sukhodaya Buddha images.

To me, at any rate, this status of marginality to developed Indian culture is an aid to appreciating what Mr. Griswold has in mind when he says of Sukhodaya sculpture that "it really comes nearer to Gupta art in spirit than Dvāravatī art itself ever came."[4] If I were to choose a comparable parallel anywhere in South-east Asia, it would be the beautiful and very nearly contemporary figures of "ascetics" produced in the West Javan kingdom of Pajajaran.[5] Or outside the South-east Asian region we might think of Chinese Buddhist sculpture after 500 A.D., when this had produced a style of its own.[6]

As Mr. Griswold has so ably demonstrated, to think in terms of iconographical influence from this or that centre of Indian culture could give us but a very imperfect understanding of Sukhodaya sculpture. But with architecture I think that the situation is different. Here the Thai, in the construction of Buddhist buildings, decorated in the appropriate manner, would probably have less personal experience to encourage a departure from the spirit of their teachers' ideals. That at least is my working hypothesis. The identification of these teachers, and the nature of the foreign influences that were at work, become a much more important consideration in the study of the architecture than in that of the sculpture. It is essential to an understanding of the genesis of Sukhodaya art as a whole, and indeed of Siamese culture generally.

For a critical analysis we have to set out almost from scratch. Sukhodaya architecture, perhaps because it lacks the

4. *loc. cit.*, p. 27.
5. R. Heine-Geldern, "Vorgeschichtliche Grundlagen der Kolonial-Indischen Kunst", *Wiener Beitrage zur Kunst- und Kulturge-schichte Asiens*, vol. viii, 1934, figs. 12, 15, 16.
6. O. Siren, "Indian and other influences in Chinese sculpture" in *Studies in Chinese art and some Indian influences*, India Society, London, pp. 28. 29.

universality of appeal of the sculpture, has not yet attracted the attention of art historians, and we have practically only the descriptive accounts of visiting French architects.

The Thai of Sukhodaya were undoubtedly most eager to learn, and were already showing that highly developed power of assimilation which Prince Damrong rightly pointed out to be one of the leading Siamese characteristics at all periods. Now from whom were they learning? In his recent article M. Coedès, discussing the political and psychological circumstances in which Sukhodaya art originated, has sought to show that both the peculiarities of the sculpture and of the architecture arose from a desire, perhaps unconscious, for expression in a manner which would be exactly the opposite of the Khmers, from whom they had just obtained their independence. But when we consider how frequently conquerors, such as the Mongols in China, have been ready to learn from their enemies of more advanced cultural attainments, this solution does not commend itself so well as it might seem to do at first sight. It is indeed curious that M. Coedès expresses no surprise when he goes on to mention that the Thai of Ayuthya, who in the very next century invaded Cambodia more than once, and so can have cherished no very strong love for the Khmers, were yet ready to change all their laws and system of government to accord with the usages of the Khmer capital, as well as to accept a good deal of influence in art and royal ceremonial. Clearly we should be wise to consider whether some other influence might not have been attracting the attention of the Thai of Sukhodaya which would account for the peculiarities there observable.

In my studies of the development of the earlier Indianized cultures I have found it most valuable always to bear in mind the important principle of stimulus and response, which is a most active factor in culture change. For example, while Philippe Stern spoke of the Chams at the end of the IXth century looking round for new inspiration as a reaction againtst their own previous art, I preferred to think rather in terms of response to a stimulus, in this case the stimulus of Indo-Javanese art, which

about that time was also influencing the Khmers.[7] So now here, in the light of that conclusion, and in the hope of testing the principle further, I look round to discover whether some new stimulus, for the time being more active than that of the Khmers, was eliciting a response from the Thai.

The result of this enquiry is even better than might be expected. I find not only that a stimulus from Ceylon—I use the word not to imply a momentary impulse but a wave of influence lasting some time—I find that such a stimulus from Ceylon must have not only been powerfully affecting Sukhodaya since its independence, but that the same stimulus was, and had indeed for some time before, been strongly affecting the Khmers. Hīnayānist influences from Ceylon had been active in Cambodia even in the XIIth century, and late in the XIIIth Chou Ta-kuan speaks of the Hīnayāna as one of the three chief religions of the capital, where it appealed especially to the oppressed masses. So inimical indeed was Hīnayāna Buddhism to the old established order among the Khmers that Briggs in his book *The Ancient Khmer Empire*, speaks of the movement as forming a veritable "fifth column."[8]

Thus we see that both the Siamese and the Khmers in the XIIIth century were responding to this powerful new stimulus from Ceylon. If resulting forms of religious architecture were thenceforward different from the classical products of the Khmers, that is not because the Thai were avoiding Khmer styles, but because the Ceylon influences were different. The situation is therefore the same as with the sculpture, where the facial features of the Sukhodaya images are so different from the Khmer images, not because Thai sculptors were looking for the opposite but, at least in large measure, because the Thai physiognomy happens to be different from the Khmer.

I want now to emphasize the strength of the Ceylon influence that is exhibited in the Sukhodaya architecture, and especially to draw attention to some important points that have

7. H. G. Quaritch Wales, *The Making of Greater India*, London, 1951, p. 155.
8. L. P. Briggs, *The Ancient Khmer Empire*, Philadelphia, 1951, p. 242.

been overlooked by other observers. But I do not wish to give the impression that Khmer influence was completely in abeyance at Sukhodaya; it was simply very secondary as compared with the Sinhalese. The contingent of Thai that we see on the Angkor Wat bas-reliefs had clearly imbibed something of Khmer military methods, and no doubt they made use of what they had learnt when they rebelled and took Sukhodaya, apparently by frontal assault. King Rāma K'amhêng did not disdain to make the script he had learnt from the Khmers the basis of the new alphabet he introduced. So too with architecture. Coedès,[9] says that the Thai did not want to build Khmer type temples, of which they had an example under their eye in Wat P'ra P'ay Luang, built at Sukhodaya by the Khmers in the XIIth or XIIIth century when the city was still under Khmer rule. Nevertheless, it is at Sukhodaya, though the date is uncertain, that the Thai built Wat Sisavai, in which the modifications that transformed the Khmer *prāsād* into the Ayuthyan *prang* have already started. Leaving this aside, by reason of its uncertain date, one can easily see that Khmer pediment borders, ending in *nāgas*, were integral parts of many of the Buddhist shrines at Sukhodaya. In fact, it appears likely that a basic type of Buddhist reliquary, to which I shall refer later, was introduced by the Khmers. The Khmer influence was only temporarily overshadowed by the intense stimulus from Ceylon. Set in motion by King Parakrāma Bahu of Ceylon towards the end of the XIIth century, this wave lost most of its force after a century or so, with the consequence that Khmer influences in art once more became paramount at Ayuthya, and even had some considerable effect on the state religion, mainly as regards the royal ceremonies.

I shall now briefly mention some Sukhodaya and Sawankalok temples in which Sinhalese influence is well-known, having already been recognized by other observers. First, there is the *stupa* of Wat Chang Lom, in which the base appears to be supported by a row of elephants, in a manner typical of Ceylon. Then there is

9. *Arts Asiatiques*, 1955, p. 283

Wat Sri Chum, with its remarkably thick-walled *vihāra*, through which an interior staircase takes one to roof level. This severe looking building must have been modelled on the XIIth century Thuparāma at Polonnaruwa, Ceylon. The latter has a similar interior staircase which takes one up to a parapet. I still remember how, when I visited Ceylon a year after my visit to Sukhodaya (which was in 1927) what a strong impression this resemblance made on me at the time. It was of course in Wat Srī Chum that the series of fine outline drawings of Jataka scenes was found, their style closely approximating to certain XIIth century Polonnaruwa paintings. One in particular may be mentioned here, because it shows the kind of royal crown from which the Siamese crown was later developed in a much more tapering form, in accordance with a general tendency in art to which I shall be returning. As to Wat Mahāthāt, Sawankalok, I only wish to point out the typically Sinhalese post-and-rail structure that is such a noteworthy feature there.

So much for what is already familiar. Now I propose to consider a type of building, known as the *chedi Thai*, which certainly presents the greatest problems in Siamese architecture, and for which no satisfactory solution has hitherto been proposed. Perhaps the most outstanding example is the main *chedi* of Wat Mahāthāt, Sukhodaya. Before considering the *chedi* proper, I will deal with the four annexes, one having been built on to each side of the basement. In particular I wish to consider the design of the pediment borders (Fig. 1). This has been much misunderstood in the past, with the result that a most important document bearing on the strength of the Sinhalese influence has been overlooked.

It will be noticed that the principal features are a *simha mukha* or *kāla* head from which depend bands entering the mouths of inward-facing *makaras*, whose feet and somewhat leafy tails can be easily distinguished. Now Claeys[10] dismissed these annexes as being of Khmer style, an opinion which was uncritically

10. J. Y. Claeys, *Archaeologie du Siam*, p. 57

accepted by le May.[11] Parmentier, writing about the same time,[12] knew better than to turn to a Khmer model, for he was aware that long before this period the *makara* had been replaced by the *nāga*. However, he did no more than note its analogy to primitive Khmer and ancient Indian arches. He did not think in terms of the contemporary influences which went to the formation of Siamese art. If one does so, one is bound to make a comparison with the remarkable arch in the Lankātilaka temple, C.P. Ceylon, which was built in A.D. 1342, a time when the revived Gupta traditions of the Polonnaruwa period were still active in Ceylon (Fig. 2). One cannot doubt that this was precisely the sort of motif that was available a hundred or so years earlier when Sinhalese influence was first making its full power felt in Siam.

In the Sukhodaya pediment border the main decorative features are the rosette in the centre and, running along the band, the spiral design with the volutes forming expanded flowers. One may also mention that the double spiral below is well known in mediaeval Sinhalese art.[13] Now if we turn to the arch in the Lankātilaka temple of A.D. 1342 in Ceylon we see that the *simhamukha* and *makaras*, the latter retaining more fishy tails, are very similar. The band itself is differently decorated, and Coomaraswamy in his great book on mediaeval Sinhalese art says that "the intermediate space (of the band) is variously treated."[14] It may therefore be that *makara* arches decorated in the way we find at Sukhodaya are also known in Ceylon, not necessarily in architecture. Or it may be that we owe the pleasing combination to Siamese initiative. Actually in the Lankātilaka temple the band is decorated with small *kinnaras* in human form. But the floral voluto design is certainly familiar in mediaeval Sinhalese art, for example in book covers (Fig. 3).[15]

11. R. le May, *A Concise History of Buddhist Art in Siam*, Cambridge, 938, p. 11 ').
12. H. Parmentier, "L'art Pseudo-Khmer au Siam et le Prang" *Journal Greater India Soc.*, 1937, p. 109; *L'art Architectural Hindou dans l'Inde et en Extrême Orient*, 1948, p. 190.
13. A.K. Coomaraswamy, *Mediaeval Sinhalese Art*, London, 1908, fig. 53.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 84.
15. *Ibid.*, fig. 31.

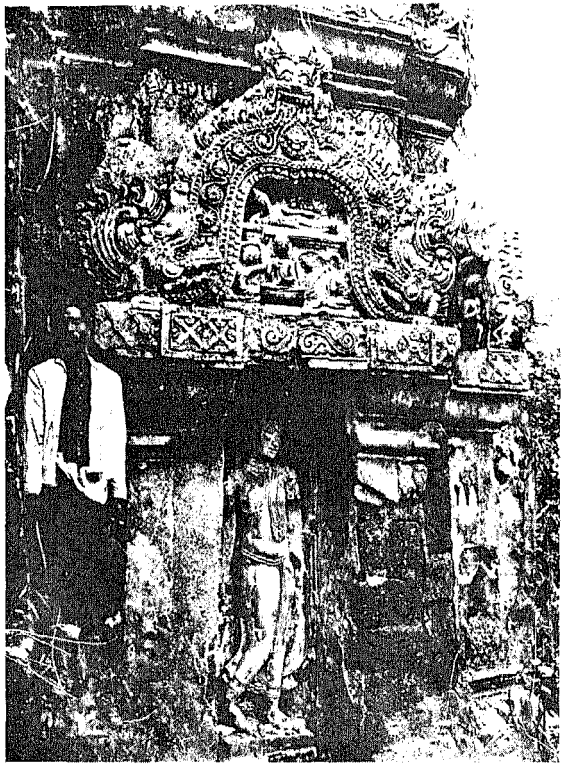

Fig. 1. Wat Mahathat, Sukhodaya.
(From L. Fournereau, *Le Siam Ancien*)

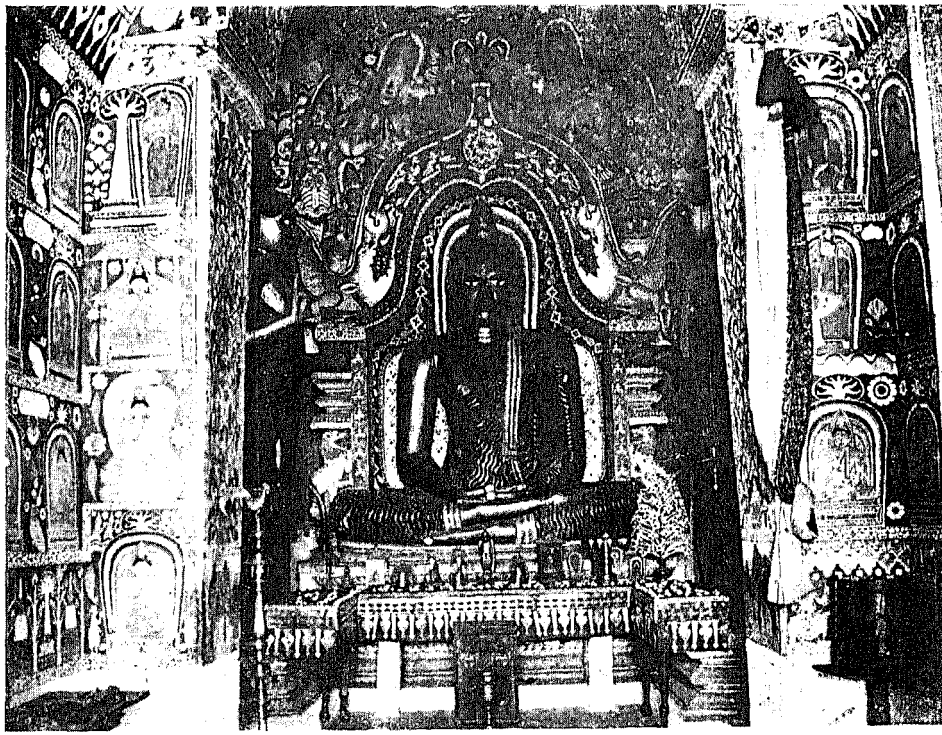

Fig. 2. Lankātilaka Temple, C.P. Ceylon.
(After A.K. Coomaraswamy, *Mediaeval Sinhalese Art*, London, 1908)

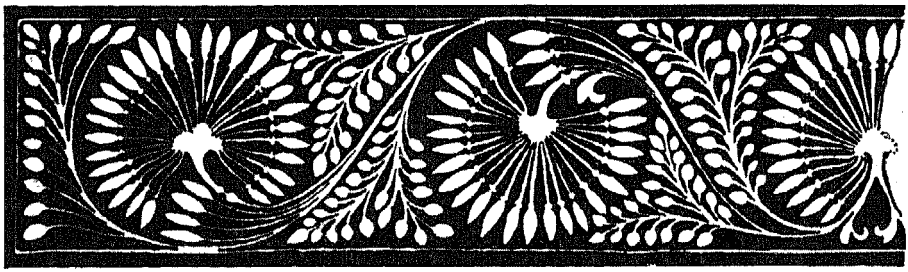

Fig. 3 Design on Sinhalese Book Cover

(After A.K· Coomaraswamy, *Mediaeval Sinhalese Art*, fig. 32)

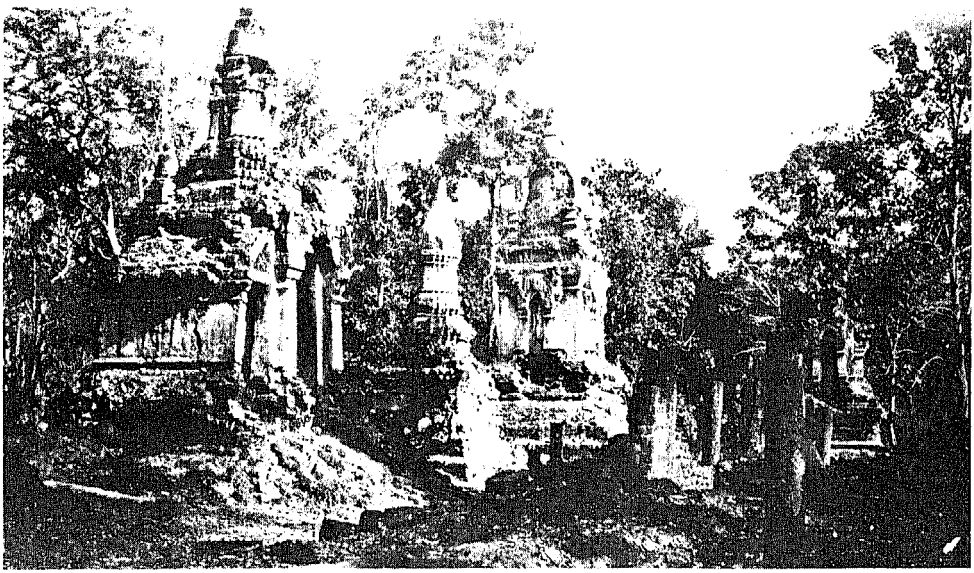

Fig. 4. Wat Chedi Chet Thèu, Sawankalok

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Fig. 5 Wat Chedi Chet Thêu, Sawankalok

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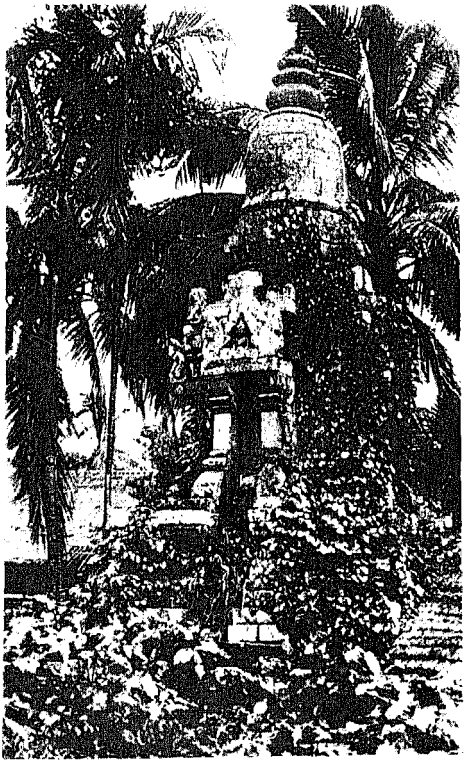

Fig. 6. *Stupa* of Prah Khau Pursat

(After H. Parmentier, *L'Art Architectural Hindou*, fig. 144. Permission to reproduce requested from L'Ecole Française d'Extrême Orient)

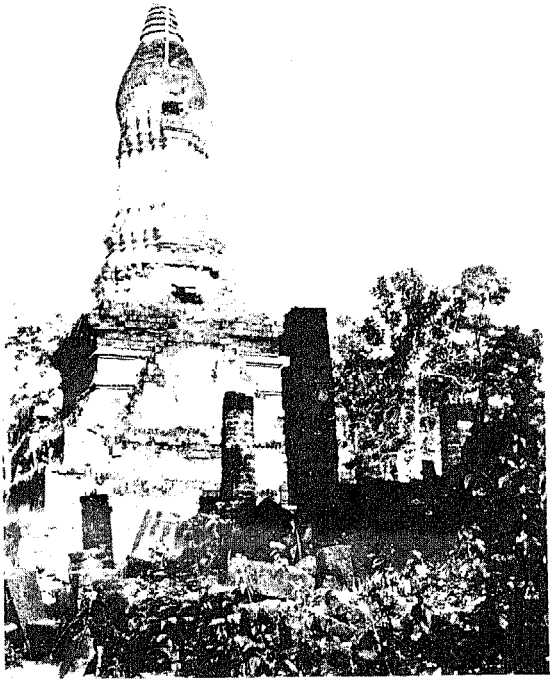

Fig. 7. Wat Chedi Chet Thêu, Sawankalok: the main *chedi*

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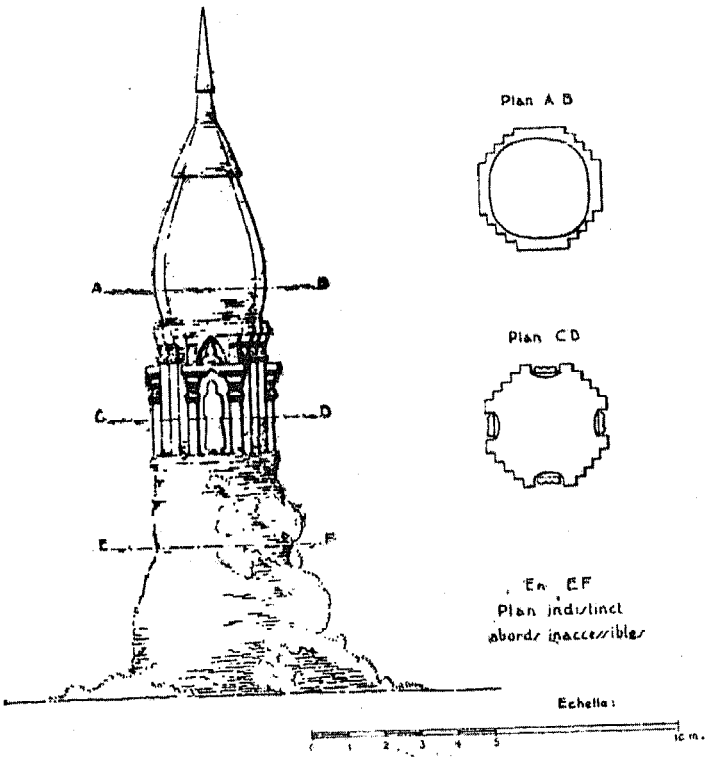

Fig. 8. Wat Arannik, Pitsnulok

(After J. Y. Claeys, *L'Archaeologie du Siam*. Permission to reproduce requested from L'Ecole Française d'Extrême Orient)

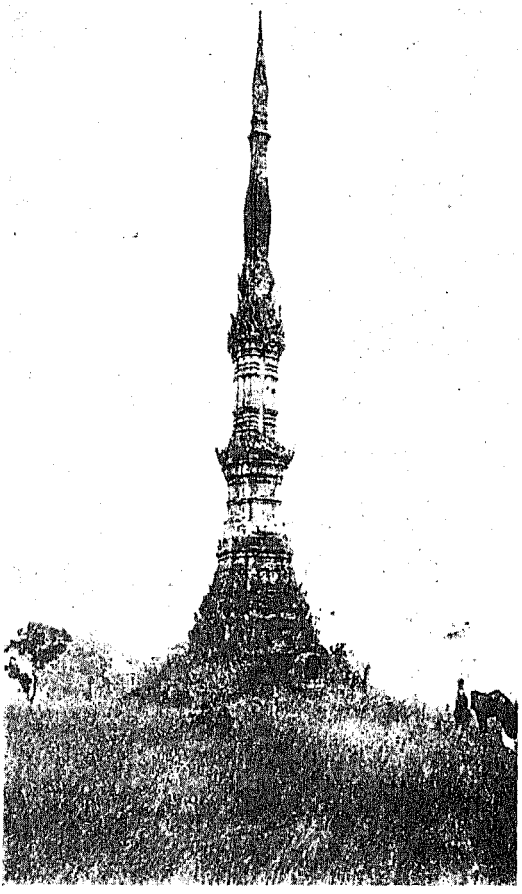

Fig. 9. That Phong Pheng, Ban Na Sui Tranninh

(After H. Parmentier, *L'art Architectural Hindou* . . . . fig. 198. Permission to reproduce requested from l'Ecole Française d'Extreme Orient)

I mentioned *kinnaras* as forming the decoration of the band in the Ceylon arch, and it may well be that this points to a Sinhalese origin of the *kinnaras* that terminate the pediment borders of one of the other annexes of Wat Mahāthāt. Certainly nothing comparable can be found in Khmer art.

I have already mentioned one or two typically Sinhalese decorative motifs, and I would not be surprized if much of Thai ornament is closely related to that of Ceylon. But such a comparative study has not yet been carried out. One temple at Sawankalok, Wat Nang Phya, has a *vihāra* which is, or was, largely covered with a rich ornament in stucco. It should provide the most valuable material for such a study.

Now I come to the question of the origin of what is perhaps the most distinctive type of structure in Siamese architecture, the *chedi Thai*, of which a good example is the main *chedi* of Wat Mahāthāt, Sukhodaya. So far we have only been considering its annexes, which do not seem to be essential to this type of tower-like building. Now let us consider the *chedi* itself more closely. One may say that it consists of three major portions, a basement in several stages, a more or less cylindrical but pilastered central portion, crowned by a slightly bulbous, rather elongated *stupa*. "Whether this form of tower is a creation of the Thai or the result of some foreign influence I cannot say," wrote Coedès in 1930.[16] I think we shall find that both factors had a part in its production.

At the same time Coedès went on to suggest that the structure probably represents a reliquary in the form of a funerary urn, raised on a high pedestal.[17] I am afraid that here I must disagree. If there is any relationship to the funerary urn, I think it must certainly be the other way round. I propose to show that the pilasters, with cornice and plinth, of the central portion, are architectural elements that have been reduced by certain changes to vestigial form.

16. G. Coedès, "India's influence upon Siamese Art," *Indian Art & Letters*, 1930, p. 34
17. Ibid., and *Arts Asiatiques*, 1955, p. 285.

At Wat Chedi Chet Thêu at Sawankalok, one can see side by side the type of shrine that I believe to have been the original form, and the finished *chedi Thai* (a rather small example) that was developed from it (Fig. 4). The former is a simple type of *prāsād*, or sanctuary tower, in which most of the upper fictive stages have been replaced by a Buddhist *stupa*. In the developed *chedi Thai* the stages of the basement have been considerably heightened, the *prāsād* proper has lost its porches, real and false, and the pilasters have been much reduced.

On the other side of this *chedi Thai* there stands a structure that appears to represent another experiment, that of raising the reduced *prāsād*, not on a high tiered basement, but on the shoulders, as it were, of another *prāsād*. Probably the weight and other mechanical difficulties were disadvantageous to the general acceptance of this experiment. Certainly the *prāsād* raised on a high solid basement was adopted as the definitive type, and built as the main relic shrine in the chief temples of Sukhodaya and Sawankalok. The mixed type is, however, of special interest as showing the raised *prāsād*, though reduced in size, still retaining its pilasters and false porches.

Now let us consider more closely the original type of *prāsād* which was at the start of this evolution (Fig. 5). We may examine one of those existing at Wat Chedi Chet Thêu. The combination of *prāsād* with crowning Buddhist *stupa*, that constitute the building, is found also in Burma, Java and Cambodia, and the idea seems so obvious that it may well have occurred independently to Buddhist architects more than once. However, I am inclined to think that so far as Siam is concerned the type was introduced from Cambodia. The pediment borders are typically Khmer, ending in *nāgas*. Few examples still survive in Cambodia, but one that appears to be old and may represent the prototype, exists at Pursat (Fig. 6).[18]

The main *chedi* of Wat Chedi Chet Thêu illustrates quite clearly the change which I think has taken place in the earlier

18. H. Parmentier, *L'art Architectural Hindou*. Fig. 144, Stupa of Prah Khau, Pursat.

prāsād. There is the high pyramidal basement, the reduplicated plinth, and on the central portion the pilasters remain more strongly marked than was the case at Wat Mahāthāt, Sukhodaya (Fig. 7).

Consider now the elevation of Wat Arannik, Pitsnulok, of which Claeys fortunately has provided us with a careful drawing (Fig. 8).[19] This affords what appears to me to be a striking confirmation of my theory. This *chedi Thai* is of the definitive fully formed type, with tall basement, but the central portion still retains its porches and is readily recognizable as essentially a *prāsād*, not merely the pedestal of a *stupa*.

The ultimate possibility in height and attenuation of this form was never reached in the Sukhodaya kingdom: but it was later in a rather curious Lao construction, That Phong Peng at Ban Na Sui Tranninh (Fig. 9).[20]

I am well aware that my attempt to trace the development of the *chedi Thai* is crude and imperfect. Given detailed photographic documentation, as well as adequate skill and patience, there exists, I feel sure, a wonderful opportunity for someone to apply here the detailed methods perfected by Philippe Stern at Angkor. But that is for the future. In the meantime I think a few tentative conclusions can be drawn.

The architecture of Sukhodaya does show a true evolution with the production certainly of one strikingly new and original form, the *chedi Thai*. Further research may well show that such evolution at Sukhodaya was also shared by other types of structure, such as *vihāras*, and in other departments of art, particularly decoration. At Ayuthya, where Khmer influence was much stronger, the more normal type of Khmer *prāsād*, or sanctuary tower, was preferred, and this underwent a comparable evolution at the hands of Siamese craftsmen, resulting in the *prang*. The evolution of the *prang* has been traced by Parmentier,[21] but in view of what we have seen of the growth of the *chedi Thai* it is

19. J.Y. Claeys, *op. cit.*
20. H. Parmentier, *op. cit.* Fig. 198.
21. *Journal Greater India Society*, 1937, p. 11; *L'art Architectural Hindou...*, p. 210.

impossible to accept his conclusion that the *prang* was the only entirely new form realized in Siamese architecture. The two forms, though products of different periods, and under different influences, are really parallel solutions to the need to satisfy a desire for monuments in which vertical lines were to be stressed at the expense of horizontal mass. Inevitably the creation of both new forms involved the reduplication of certain parts and the simplification of others.

Apart from the evolution which we have been discussing, originality in Siamese architecture was at all periods secured by the skill and good taste with which the Siamese craftsmen synthesized into new forms the elements borrowed from Cambodia, Ceylon and also from Burma (I am thinking of the Burmese *phyathat* more particularly). There was never any mere copying such as I have said characterized some of the older arts of what I have called the "western zone" of Greater India. Nevertheless, I must point out that one factor which did much to make for originality in the Khmer, Cham and Indo-Javanese arts appears to have been lacking. This was the unconscious pressure from a previous civilization which, as the Indian influences wore off, tended to give direction to the evolution. But it is easy to see that, in view of the highly developed Siamese power of assimilation, and the zeal with which the Siamese maintained the Buddhist religion and Buddhist art throughout the centuries, any such unconscious urge, had it in fact existed, would have had little chance of making itself felt.

I realize that much of what I have set forth is in the realm of hypothesis; and necessarily so in a field that has only just begun to attract analytical study. It is to be hoped that others will soon come to grips with the details of these problems, the final solution of which is of importance both locally and for wider comparative studies.