

## THE GOLDEN MERU<sup>1</sup>

by

*Phya Anuman Rajadhon*

The royal crematorium is popularly called in Thai "Phra Mane Thong," or the Golden Meru. Meru is the name of the cosmic mountain where the gods of the Buddhists dwell. It forms the center of the universe and is surrounded by seven concentric mountain ranges, separated from each other by seven annular seas. Indra, the King of the gods of Buddhism, lives in his glittering, golden mansion right on the top of this golden mountain, surrounded by similar golden mansions, smaller in size and grandeur, of the lesser gods.

The conception of the structural form of the Thai heavenly abodes of the gods differs radically from that of the Hinduized ancient Khmer or the old Cambodians. In the Thai conception the house of a god has a slender, spired roof glittering with gold; in the Khmer it has a dome-like structure not unlike that of an Indian corn cob. It is called *Shikara* in Sanskrit and *Phra prang* in Thai. In the precincts of the Emerald Buddha Temple both of these types exist. The difference is no doubt conditioned by the materials used in their construction. The former is made of wood and the latter of stone. Siva, the great Hindu god, whom the ancient Khmer revered, lives in his *prang*, or domed palace, on the snow-white Mount Kailasa, or Krailat in Thai. Indra, the king of the gods of the Buddhists, lives in the divine palace, which in the Thai conception possesses a tapering, spired roof, on the Golden Mount Meru. The two mountains, Mount Kailasa and Mount Meru, are situated imaginatively somewhere in the great Himalaya range whose peaks, clad in perpetual snow, glisten in shifting hues of white and gold.

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1. Based upon a lecture delivered on May 27, 1956, at the site of the Golden Meru erected on the Phramane Ground for the cremation ceremonies of the late Queen Grandmother, Her Majesty Queen Savang Vadhana.

We have transposed symbolically the Mount Meru of the Buddhist paradise to the open space north of the Grand Palace in Bangkok which was called in the old days *Thung Phra Mane*, a name that survives in its English version as "Phramane Ground." This name is derived from that of the royal crematorium erected on this open space whenever a king or a high royal personage died. The Thai in a late historical period adopted the cult of the divine king from the old Khmer. The king was Siva, the God himself, who must be reverently treated as such by the people, whether in speaking or in other activities. Hence, the Thai language, when used officially and ceremoniously in connection with the king, and to a certain extent with other royal personages, has a different set of vocabularies of Pali, Sanskrit and Khmer words.

When a king, his queen consort or the heir apparent dies, he does not die in the ordinary sense of the word, but translates himself to the heavens. He is dressed in his traditional royal robes, with his spired crown befitting that of a divine king, and is ceremoniously placed in a golden urn called *lot* in Thai, or *kosha* in Sanskrit, meaning a "sheath." The golden urn is the phallic symbol of the great god Siva; it is called *linga* in Sanskrit. By a stretch of the imagination, the domed Khmer structure might also be considered a symbol of that great god.

The temporary royal crematoriums erected on the Phramane Ground vary in shape, size, and other decorative details. Their design is not stereotyped, except that their pinnacles always end in a tapering spire of the Thai abodes of the gods, or in a dome-like *shikara* structure. There may be one such pinnacle, or there may be three in a row. The traditional king's palace, or throne, may be seen in the examples of the Dusit Maha Prasad Palace with its single spire, the Chakri Maha Prasad Palace with its three spires in a row, and the Royal Pantheon in the precincts of the Temple of the Emerald Buddha which has a *shikara*, the domed structure.

The Golden Meru erected for the cremation ceremonies of the late Queen Grandmother was a replica of the Golden Meru of

His Majesty King Vajiravudh and that of His Majesty King Anand Mahidol. Save in a few minor decorative details in the surroundings, it was exactly the same as those two. It was an edifice perched very high on a platform of two terraces. It rose gracefully with its five-tiered roof culminating in a slender finial capped by a seven-tiered white umbrella-like canopy. This multiple umbrella, called *svetachatra* in Thai, is a symbol of royalty. The king has nine, and other royalties lower in rank have seven and five, respectively. The ceremony of raising this multiple umbrella is conducted by the reigning king of the time just a few days before the royal cremation takes place. It is the culmination of the work of erecting the Golden Meru.

Above the base of the spire there are four human faces, one on each of the four sides. In the popular mind, they constitute the fourfold face of Brahma, the Hindu god, the creator. Perhaps it is also the fourfold face of Lokeshvara, one of the Bodhisattva or Buddha-elects of the Northern School of Buddhism, or Mahayan, which adorns the gateway of Angkor Thom at Angkor Wat in Cambodia. It is known that the Khmer, during one period in their history, adopted Mahayan Buddhism. There is ample significance which may be attached to this fourfold face, but now it serves only as a decorative element of architecture.

We will not list the names and the definitions of all the architectural details of the Golden Meru. They may be noted in the diagram and on the list accompanying this article. But we would point out that the spire surmounting the multiple roof of the Golden Meru has architectural elements similar to those of the Phra Chedi or Pagoda. An example may be seen in the golden Phra Chedi in the Temple of the Emerald Buddha. Both structures were very probably developed from the same original source.

As we study the superstructure, that is, the multiple roof, we observe that it possesses five tiers. These tiers were evolved from the contraction of a five-storey building into one multiple roof. On its four sides are triangular-shaped pieces, which are suppressed porches. The larger ones in the middle are derived

from the structure of real porches, while the smaller ones serve only as added decorative pieces of subordinate composition. Why is there such a multiple roof? Traditionally, the king's palace is called a *prasad*, a word of Sanskrit origin which means literally a storeyed building, but which now in Thai has been modified to mean a king's palace with a spired roof. In our literature a king lives in a *prasad* of five or seven storeys with a spired roof. But in the old days an actual storeyed dwelling place, either of the king or of the people, was not tolerated. This was because of a reverence toward the human head, believed to be the seat of man's vital spirit, called *hwan* in Thai. No one was permitted to place himself above the head of anyone, and the people lived in a house of one storey only. This was true also of the king. But, traditionally, a king lives in a five- or seven-storeyed palace. Because in actual practice this could not be done, five or seven storeys were suppressed into a multiple roof.

In looking at the Golden Meru in its entirety, one sees little that is different from the architecture of a traditional throne. This similarity was, of course, intentional. Below the place of the throne, which serves as the funeral pyre, there are two concentric terraces. At the base of the actual throne there are two rows, one above the other, of mythological beings. The lower part on either side contains figures of the *garuda*, a bird with certain human properties, which is holding a *naga*, a mythological snake. In the upper part are figures of *deva*, or gods, kneeling and raising their hands in a worshipful attitude. It will be remembered that on the slopes of the Golden Mount Meru are the houses of minor gods. Below them, each *garuda* has his abode in a silk cotton tree. The two terraces of the Golden Meru signify the two realms of such mythological beings in Paradise. These figures of *garuda* and *deva* do not necessarily appear in the two terraces of the Golden Meru. But figures of the gods holding fan-like pieces in worshipful attitudes often appear round the lower terraces as decorative motifs. The theme of two rows of these mythological beings occurs also in the royal golden chariot which bears the royal remains to

the Golden Meru. It occurs frequently also in mural paintings in many of the temples. Such paintings, and these figures in a throne and in the royal golden chariot may be seen in the National Museum in Bangkok.

Attached to the Golden Meru at the head of the stairway on its eastern side is a structure called *grūha* in Thai. It served in the old days as a room for the removal of the outer covering of the urn before it was taken up onto the royal funeral pyre. Nowadays the royal urn, with its outer covering glittering with gold and precious stones, is borne by a lifting device right up to the royal funeral pyre, and the outer covering of the royal urn is removed there, instead of in the *grūha* house.

Within the precincts of the Golden Meru there are four corner edifices connected by fences. Two of these edifices do not stand at corners. The reason is obvious. If they were erected at the true corners they would have to be placed at the back of the royal pavilion where the reigning monarch holds his state memorial service. This would be inappropriate because during the service, at these four corner edifices, called *sam-sarng* or *khot sarng* in Thai, monks must recite ritually certain chapters from the Buddhist Scriptures. Each corner edifice has a closed partition on the inner sides so that the monks in them will be unable to see what is going on in the Golden Meru. It is thought that the partitions were so placed in order to prevent the monks from being distracted from their recitations by people visiting the Golden Meru, and in particular by women. During the long ceremonial period of former times, princesses and court ladies with their retinue of matrons and girls often came out from the Grand Palace through a closed cloth corridor in order to perform certain meritorious rites for the royal remains. There may have been better reasons for these closed partitions in the corner edifices, but this is the one that is commonly accepted.

The royal pavilion where the reigning king presides during the ceremony needs no explanation. Outside the precincts of the Golden Meru near the northern gateway there is a small pavilion.

Here the reigning king waits while the royal urn is removed by the lift from the giant golden chariot and placed on a royal palanquin on which it is carried thrice in an anti-clockwise direction round the Golden Meru before being raised onto the pyre. This small pavilion contains little more than a tent or an umbrella under which the reigning monarch is protected from the sun.

It will be remembered that the prototype of the Golden Meru, the cosmic mountain, is surrounded by seven mountain ranges. The royal crematorium should also be surrounded by seven enclosures, but this has not been practical. The concept of seven enclosures was, therefore, reduced to that of three, and finally to one in the construction of the Golden Meru of the late Queen Grandmother. Any crematorium in the grounds of a wat or a monastery built with a spired roof and with a real or even nominal enclosure is called a *Mane*, i.e., the name of the Mount Meru minus the words *Phra* and *Thong* in *Phra Mane Thong*. A crematorium with an ordinary roof, possessing neither spire nor enclosure, is not called a *Mane*. It is spoken of merely as a crematorium or as a funeral pyre.

In former days the Golden Meru was erected on a grand scale. Situated around the main edifice, there were four other similar, though smaller, structures. They were called *Mane Thit*, or the Meru of the four cardinal points of the compass, because they were so placed. This *Mane Thit* was very probably a development from the gateway building that led into the enclosure of the main edifice. In a Hindu temple such a building is called *gopura*. In a Buddhist temple it is called *Viharn Thit*, or the *vihara* of the four cardinal points of the compass. Such a *Viharn Thit* may be seen either at Wat Po or at the great pagoda of Phra Pathom.

The erection of the Golden Meru was costly even in the old days. His Majesty the great King Chulalongkorn realized this, and in order to save the repeated expense he chose the site where the National Library now stands as the place to erect a permanent royal crematorium. This idea, however, was dropped. But His

Majesty ordered that the Golden Meru for the cremation of his own remains be reduced in scale and grandeur, and this royal wish was carried out. His Golden Meru, if one may judge from the old photographs of it, fell far short of the grandeur of the earlier ones, but it was erected on a scale appreciably larger than any of those raised since his time.

The center of the universe, the glittering, golden mansion of the King of the gods of Buddhism, surrounded by the abodes of the lesser gods on the top of the cosmic mountain, and further surrounded by the seven mountain ranges separated by the seven seas, has become the symbolic structure in which the remains of the kings and queens of Thailand are translated into the heavens. No edifice more fitting could have been devised. The Golden Meru is one of the supreme architectural concepts of the Thai imagination.

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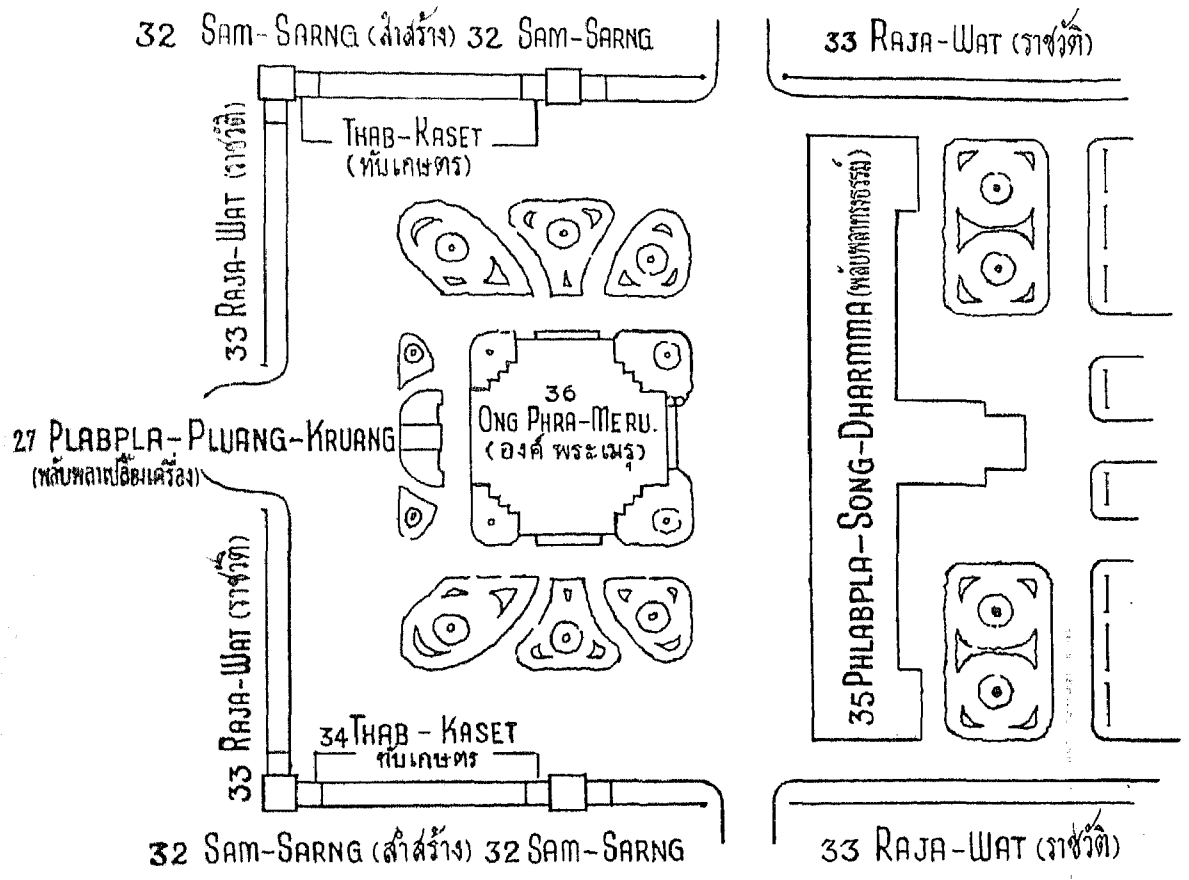
## Architectural Details of THE GOLDEN MERU

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|----------------------------------|---|
| 1. Chat                          | Umbrellas in tiers.   |
| 2. Yod                           | Spire (upper part).   |
| 3,6. Luk Keo                     | Glass tips, tops or caps. Ornamentation formed by a repetition of small convex dots having the shape of beans.  |
| 4. Phi-yod                       | Spire (lower part). The space above the frieze.   |
| 5. Bua-kloom                     | Tiers of ornaments having the shape of lotus petals.  |
| 7. Na Bhrom                      | The Four-fold Face of Brahma.   |
| 8. Bal-lang (Palanka)            | Bed, platform or chair supporting divine figures of royal personages.   |
| 9. Koh-Rakhang                   | Pyramidal element corresponding to the dome of the Thai traditional Chedi (Stupa).  |
| 10. Thong-mai                    | Inner framing of the wooden structure.  |
| 11. Ban-thalang                  | Small gables placed in front of the main ones.  |
| 12. Naga Pak                     | Head of Naga fixed at the angles of each tier.  |
| 13. Krachang                     | Decoration in the shape of upright leaves.  |
| 14. Cherng-klawn                 | The skirting of the eaves.  |
| 15. Khan-thuey                   | Brackets.   |
| 16. Bua-plai-sao                 | Lotus decoration at the top of the posts.   |
| 17. Sao-yaw-mai-sibsong          | Group of three square pillars, or posts, at each angle of square-planned building, which form a twelve-angled plan.   |
| 18. Phaeng-rae-khaw-song         | Perforated partition between the rafters and the tops of main posts.  |
| 19. Chat-nua-chit-kadhan         | Umbrellas in tiers above the crematory.   |
| 20. Pracham-yam-ok               | A four-petal flower decoration placed at the angle of pillars or posts and at about half way up them.   |
| 21. Chat-bang-phleung            | Movable screens to protect crematory fire from view.  |
| 22. Chit-kadhan                  | An iron-grating platform on which the urn is placed for cremation.  |
| 23. Karb-bhrom-sorn              | Decoration at the outer corners and at the base of each pillar.   |
| 24. Chat-prong                   | Tiers of umbrellas with ornamental perforations.  |
| 25. Tharn-singha                 | A base supported by Singha (lion).  |
| 26. Sao-khrom-chanuan            | Passageway lamp-posts.  |
| 27. Phabpla-plaung-kruang        | Pavillion where the urn containing the royal remains which have been kept in state is changed from one to be placed on the crematorium.   |
| 28. Than-pathama                 | A base or pedestal representing lotus petals in tiers.  |
| 29. Tala-patra                   | A fan or face-screen used by the Buddhist monks; in art angels (Dhevada) hold this fan.   |
| 30. Than-khlang                  | Plinth.   |
| 31. Ground plan of the Meru area |   |
| 32. Sam-sarng                    | Elevated pavillion placed along the enclosing fence where Buddhist monks recite portions of scripture at the royal cremation.   |
| 33. Raja-wat                     | A latticed, ritual fence decorated at intervals with small, tiered, paper umbrellas. It is erected around the area in which ceremonies are performed when they take place in the open air, in order to exclude evil influences. |
| 34. Thab-kaset (Phra Rabieng)    | Royal verandah.   |
| 35. Phlabpla-song-dharma         | Royal pavillion where the king observes religious precepts and alms-giving.   |
| 36. Ong Phra-meru                | The Meru structure.   |

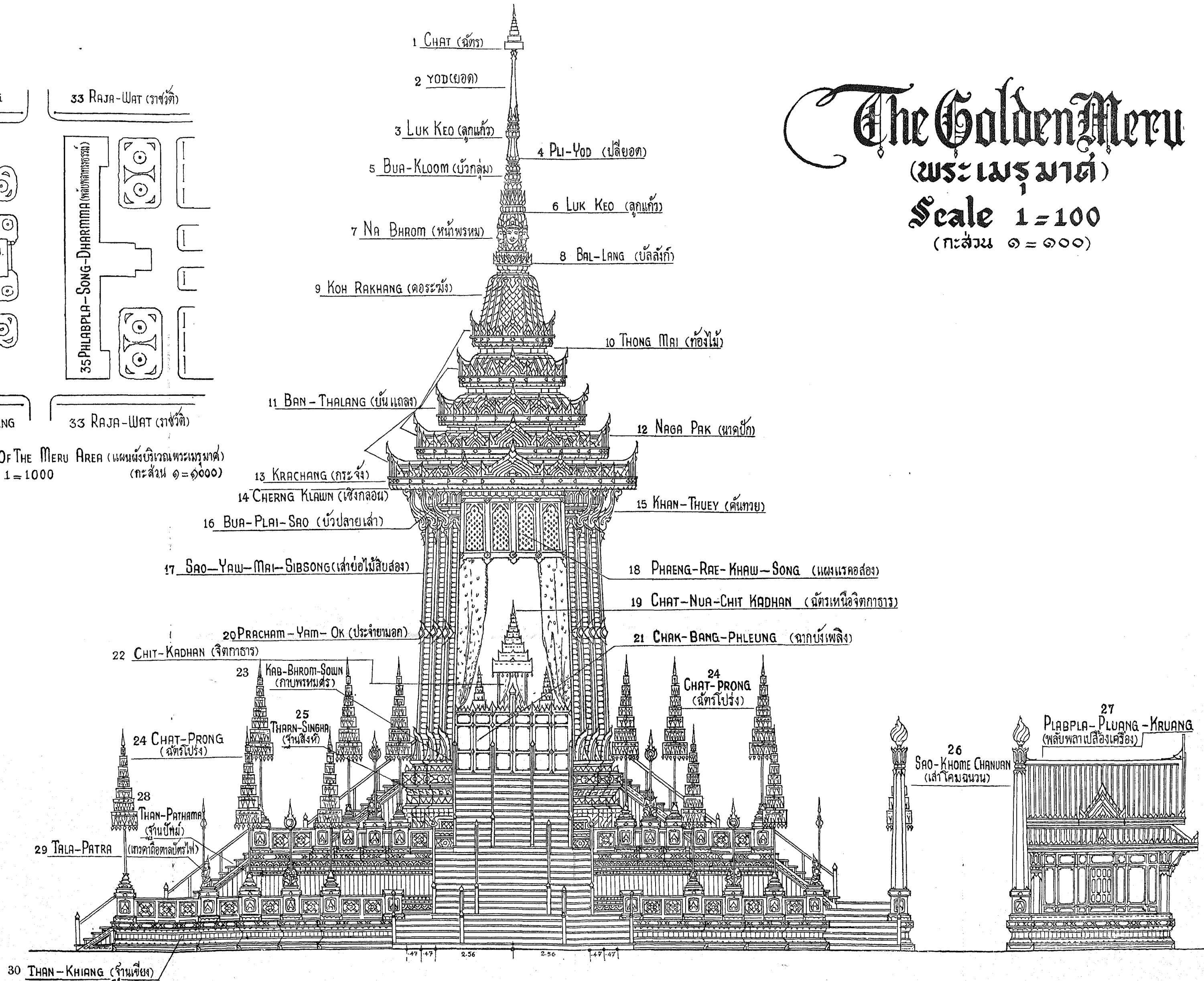


# The Golden Meru

(พระเมรุมาศ)  
Scale 1=100  
(กะส่วน ๑ = ๑๐๐)



31 GROUND PLAN OF THE MERU AREA (แผนผังบริเวณพระเมรุมาศ)  
SCALE 1=1000 (กะส่วน ๑=๑๐๐๐)



30 THAN-KHIANG (ฐานเชิง)

