

REVIEW ARTICLE

TWO SHRINE CHRONICLE TRANSLATIONS

In memory of

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The Crystal Sands: The Chronicles of Nagara Śrī Dharmarāja

David K. Wyatt, ed. & trans.

*Data Paper No. 98, Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University
Ithaca, N.Y.; Cornell University, 1975; 264 pp.*

The Thāt Phanom Chronicle: A Shrine History and its Interpretation

James B. Pruess, ed. & trans.

*Data Paper No. 104, Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University
Ithaca, N.Y.; Cornell University, 1976; 76 pp.*

Among the bequests of the Buddha are his relics. But of course the Buddha, being in *nirvāṇa*, cannot acknowledge any veneration these relics receive. This is not to say that veneration is without fruit. "As, sire," the *Milindapañha* has explained, "when a mass of fire has gone out and there is no fuel, people by their own sturdiness, strength, and energy, each man acting individually, having twisted a stick and produced a fire, do with this fire work that is to be done by a fire---even so do *devas* and men, after making a site for the jewel of the relics of the Tathāgata himself who has attained final *nibbāna* and does not accept, then practising the right procedure with the objective support of the Tathāgata's jewel of knowledge, achieve three attainments" (trans. I.B. Horner, vol. 1, p. 135). In *The Thāt Phanom Chronicle* (p. 26), the same idea is expressed by the Buddha himself: "It is as if, fire being absent, wise people were to bring dry sticks of wood and rub them together in order to create fire, which would be brought into being through their wishes."

In the volumes under review, two American scholars have provided translations of Thai accounts of some of these stick-twisting activities. The fixed centrality of the relic and the fleetingness of human existence are themes that especially pervade the Nakhôn Si Thammarât chronicles so painstakingly analyzed by Professor Wyatt. The chief texts Wyatt has used, his Version A (ตำนานเมืองนครศรีธรรมราช) and Version B (ตำนานพระธาตุนครศรีธรรมราช) have been frequently reprinted, but he provides a verbatim transcription from the manuscript of Version A, and it proves to be more complete than the printed editions have indicated. His analysis of the documents comprising this late eighteenth or early nineteenth-century A.D. manuscript, furthermore, demonstrates how important may be that uncharted territory, the *function* of the Thai book: the main purpose of this one "is to establish, or rather to reaffirm the establishment of, a political and economic order in which the chief elements are assigned lands and labor" (p. 21). For us, the chronicles are interesting on this score but on many others as well: in the events the chronicles relate that must be placed in the twelfth to fourteenth centuries there is somewhere a layer of truth that historians of political events will want to uncover; linguists and philologists will appreciate having the actual words of a regional text; cultural historians will want to come to grips with a particular style of history-writing and to trace the use of myth; art historians now have easily accessible materials for the writing of a history of the Monastery of the Great Relic Stūpa. Wyatt hopes for a second volume which will provide "a synthetic and analytic treatment of the early history of Nagara"; perhaps this will still appear. But anxiousness for such a volume should not prevent us from admiring the care and precision gone into this one, which includes 64 pages of introduction, 55 pages of Thai text (Version A, and transcriptions of two hitherto unpublished texts), and 122 pages of translation. Wyatt has demonstrated either that historians must be adept philologists, or that we need a new class of philologists who will be able to present Thai historical documents to us. As for the translations, which are carefully annotated, the nature of the material is such that most readers who take the trouble to go through the Thai

texts will come up with quibbles and perhaps a few errors, but Professor Wyatt's translations are so far superior to partial ones I made some years ago that I am hesitant to criticize him in print.

Just one of the many areas in which the chronicles have significance lies in the realm of the history of Buddhist legends. The *A-yu wang chuan*, an early Chinese translation of the lost Sanskrit *Aśokāvadāna*, tells the story of relics deposited in the Ganges by King Ajātaśātru and guarded by a revolving wheel from which iron swords project (see J. Przyluski, *La légende de la l'empereur Açoka*). Led to these relics, King Aśoka could not recover them until, upon the advice of a monk, a plum was thrown into the water. A Pali version of the tale appears in the *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī* and in the *Thūpavaṃsa* (pp. 35-41). The *Thūpavaṃsa* was apparently composed in Sri Lanka in the twelfth century A.D., and although the *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī* is attributed to the fifth-century commentator Buddhaghosa, doubt can be expressed concerning this tradition. In both texts, guarding the relics is a *yanta* or device which revolves in the wind; around its edges are figures holding swords. It is put out of commission by the god Vissakamma, who shoots an arrow at it. The Pali version of the story is the one which appears in the Thai life of the Buddha, the *Brah Paṭhamasambodhikathā*. The question is whether the variant which appears in the Nakhôn Si Thammarât chronicles is necessarily derived from the Pali texts. In a recent article (*Journal Asiatique* 264 [1976]: 97-116), Eugène Denis has described the Burmese versions of the tale and suggested that they have as their source the *Aśokāvadāna*. One detail in Wyatt's Version A (p. 82) implies that the same might hold at least partly true for the Nakhôn texts; there, in a parallel to the Pali versions, Vissakamma (ms.: วิศษณุกัณ) descends to give the relics to Aśoka, but previously the device is calmed by a "medicinal leaf" --- an element recalling the plum of the *A-yu wang chuan*. It is not difficult to hypothesize historical circumstances which would explain the connection: the northern Indian *Aśokāvadāna* or its descendant would have made its way to Burma by the eleventh or twelfth century and then would have been carried to the Peninsula; the Nakhôn chronicles themselves provide evidence of twelfth-century relations with Burma. An even more interesting question is

whether the Pali versions might be part of the same historical process. It would not be a matter of southeast Asian traditions being transported whole to Sri Lanka (cf. Eveline Porée-Maspero, *Etude sur les rites agraires des Cambodgiennes*, pp. 738, 770ff.) but of Indian Ocean trade prompting the interdependence of legends, ideas, and texts. We do know something about the vigorous commercial rivalries of the period (see the article by Kenneth R. Hall and John K. Whitmore in their *Explorations in Early Southeast Asian History*, Michigan Papers on South and Southeast Asia No. 11, 1976; some of the evidence collected by S. Paranavitana in *Ceylon and Malaysia* is also usable). Of course if the story of King Aśoka's recovery of the relics deposited by Ajātaśatru did not make its way to Sri Lanka until the eleventh or twelfth century, the *Sumāṅgalavilāsinī* cannot be as old as is traditionally thought.

The name of the device guarding the relics is in the Thai tradition *phāpphayon*—today a 'motion picture'. In the *Brah̄ Paṭhamasambodhikathā* (pp. 526, 528 in the 1962 Bangkok edition) there is ไม้ทวนหรือเครื่องเวียนอยู่: 'a revolving cloth automaton with wooden statues holding swords'. This seems self-contradictory, and the more common spelling ภาพยนตร์ or ภาพยนตร์ (today's "cinema") seems preferable. The evidence from the Burmese and the Pali texts, the latter having a *vālasaṅghātayanta* (Denis's suggestion, "machine held together with horsehair rope", is perhaps the most satisfactory rendering of this puzzling compound) indicates that the device is a *yanta* or *yantra*. And the spellings in Wyatt's Version A manuscript—ภาพพยนตร์, ภาพพยนตร์, ภาพพยนตร์—suggest that *bhāva* is intended, not the word for cloth. Wyatt doesn't translate *bhāvayanta*. 'Motion picture' is today too restrictive. We could say 'whirligig'. If we knew whether the statues holding swords were supposed to be seen, when in motion, as a solid barrier or as a single shifting figure, we might determine if a word from the prehistory of the Western cinema might do service: 'fantascope', 'phénakistiscope', 'kinetoscope', 'daedaleum', 'kineograph'. Perhaps the art is still alive, if only in a transformed state; what exactly was Sunthôn Phū thinking of when he wrote (in "Nirāt Phra Pathom") of a man who รู้ผูกหม้ายภาพพยนตร์ มนต์จิ้งจก?

James B. Pruess's *Thāt Phanom Chronicle* unfortunately suffers in comparison. True, Dr. Pruess has not, as Professor Wyatt has, intended to lay out before us the irreducible documents. His book is instead a translation of the *Urangkhanithân*, a shrine chronicle put together by Phra Thep Ratanamôli, abbot of Wat Phra Thāt Phanom. It was first published in 1947 and has frequently been reprinted. The problem is that the history of Thāt Phanom cries out for the same kind of analysis provided the Nakhôn Si Thammarât chronicles by Professor Wyatt. In addition, as a translation, *The Thāt Phanom Chronicle*—despite many admirable renderings of difficult passages—falls short of the standard set by *The Crystal Sands*.

While the Nakhôn chronicles draw on legends known from Pali literature and present accounts of events that may actually have occurred as long ago as the twelfth century, the Thāt Phanom chronicle appears to be (it cannot now be proven) an invention of the seventeenth century, a construction of a mythical past from bits and pieces of historical legends, none of which had any necessary tie to the monument itself. The early chapters of the abbot's *Urangkhanithân* are said to depend on a palm-leaf manuscript, the later on other sources. The antiquity of the text in this manuscript and the faithfulness with which it has been reproduced or rewritten in the *Urangkhanithân* are hard to measure. Among the guiding themes of this text seem to have been the generalities Pruess puts forward in his introduction—the “ideal model of human society” and the forces of disorder. To few readers, however, will the text's reflection in these English pages seem a “reduction of chaotic social experience into orderly and comprehensible terms”, as the introduction concludes; at least initially, the effect is of making experience even more chaotic. There are ordering motifs absent in the Nakhôn chronicles: the Buddha's prediction, for instance (so important in the inscriptions of King Kyanzittha of Burma), and the anecdotal explanation of place-names. The device of reincarnation provides another thread of continuity—one, indeed, which anthropologists might force to reveal insights into a people's sense of social fabric. And the spatial political structure—the one of the center, the four of the directions—is a recurring theme which is not taken up in Pruess's introduction, but which most

probably had political immediacy for the author or author of the text, as Phiset Čhiančhanphong has suggested (*Sinlapâkôn* 20, nos. 1-2 [May-July, 1976]: 157).

Yet the effect of *The Thât Phanom Chronicle* is still rather chaotic. The problem is more textual than analytical. The translation is an imperfect rendering of a book (the *Urangkhanithân*) whose sources and whose relationship to these sources are mysterious quantities. The position of the history of Thât Phanom in southeast Asian or Buddhist historiography (terms Professor Wyatt uses in his foreword) cannot be determined without establishing specific relationships. First of all, among words: Pruess, for instance, usually gives *Gotapūra* where the *Urangkhanithân* (I apologize if the seventh printing, which I have, differs from the eighth, which he has used) has โศตบอง; we want to reach some kind of understanding of the connection with โศตบูรพ์ and โศตบูรพ์ (*Tamnân phra thât phanom*, in *Prachum tamnân phra thât* vol. 2), โศตระบอง (*Phongsâwadân nua* and *Khamhaikân chao krung kao*), โศตเทวราช and โศตบอง (British Museum ed., *Phra râtchaphongsâwadân krung sayâm*, pp. 17, 18), and so forth. Then there are the relationships among the texts: the nineteenth-century *Tamnân phra thât phanom* may not merely be "a condensed version" (Pruess, p. 3) of the *Urangkhanithân* source; it is possible that both depend on still older texts. The analysis of almost any passage demonstrates the futility of trying to do much with the materials at hand: both the *Tamnân phra thât phanom* and the *Urangkhanithân*, as an example, provide the text of a now illegible inscription (of 1614 A. D.?) at Wat Phra Thât Phanom; the *Tamnân*'s version has been rewritten in Central Thai while the *Urangkhanithân*'s version appears incomplete.

Dr. Pruess must nevertheless be thanked for bringing to the attention of scholars materials which for years have been sadly overlooked. Of course the collapse of Thât Phanom in August 1975 puts these materials in a strange and affecting light. A special issue of *Sinlapâkôn* (May-July 1976) provides some indication of the incredible discoveries that have resulted. The original structure, that represented by the carved bricks (a large number of which are salvageable), would

date from about the tenth century and provides evidence for cultural connections with Champa. There may have been a restoration and rededication in about the twelfth century, and minor changes would have been made at the beginning of the seventeenth century (a conclusion which depends on the evidence of the ?1614 A.D. inscription). The monument assumed its present form only at the end of the seventeenth century, in the course of a rebuilding carried out by Phôn Samek, a charismatic monk from Vientiane. Fourteen thousand objects have been recovered, most of them deposited at that time. There are 1,660 Buddha images in good condition, and a total of 1,015 inscribed objects of one sort or another. The oldest inscribed Buddha image dates from 1613 A.D., and an inscription in one of the many relic chambers fixes the time of restoration as 1693-1702 A.D. (not far from the dates of 1690-92 given by the *Urangkhanithân*). An excellent preliminary analysis of the inscriptions is found in that issue of *Sinlapâkôn*, and when the inscriptions are fully published they will be an immensely precious resource for our understanding of the history of Buddhism in Thailand. The same holds true, of course, for the images. (As for the appearance of the monument prior to its collapse, the reader can be directed to a special issue of the journal *Muang Bôrân* which appeared in 1975.) For the great stūpa of Nakhôn Si Thammarât we have the textual traditions but not the complete archeological evidence. For Phra Thât Phanom, the archeological evidence has been tragically cast before us; the textual traditions exist but have not yet been presented to us in the form in which they are needed.

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