

THE "SIAMESE BRASS CANNON" IN THE FIGURE COURT OF THE ROYAL HOSPITAL, CHELSEA, LONDON

R.S. Scrivener

A cannon captured by the Burmese in the sack of Ayuthia in 1767 has for nearly 100 years been on display in London.

The Royal Hospital at Chelsea was founded in the 17th Century by King Charles II, to serve as a home for old soldiers wounded in England's wars. It still serves this purpose, and the "Chelsea Pensioners" in their traditional uniform are a familiar feature of that part of London.

In the main courtyard of the Hospital there is a large brass cannon, before which is a notice with the following inscription :-

Brass Cannon (Siamese)

This brass gun made about 1623 at Singora in Siam and captured by the Burmans at Ayuthia in 1767 was taken by the British in the Third Burmese War 1885-1887. The gun bears inscriptions in Arabic, Malay and Burmese one of which refers to Sulayman Shah the Victorious King.

The Governor of the Royal Hospital, General Sir Anthony Read, has kindly allowed me to see the documents relating to the cannon in the Royal Hospital's archives. A letter amongst them shews that the gun was presented to the Royal Hospital by the Government of India in October 1887, but the reason for the presentation is not recorded, and the letter presenting it makes no reference to Siam, referring to the cannon as "a Burmese trophy gun". In the letter the weight of the gun is given as "Tons 1.4.0.0" and a sketch gives its length as 11 feet 10½ inches and its bore as 4¼ inches.

The remaining material of interest in the archives of the Royal Hospital relates to the inscriptions on the gun. There are 11 inscriptions in all. Two of these are in Burmese. One has been translated as "Taken Dwarawadi Year 1128" and an accompanying note states that Dwarawadi "is an ancient Burmese name for Siam," and that 1128 of the Burmese era is the equivalent of 1766-1767 A.D. The other inscription in Burmese has been translated "What King Gasndwah has attained cannot be taken".

The nine other inscriptions, all in Arabic or Malay, are inlaid in silver lettering. They presumably precede in date the above Burmese inscriptions, which would one assumes have been added after the capture of the gun at Ayuthia. The first Arabic inscription has been translated as follows :

“O Lord of the Flag and the Standard
 O Lord of Bounty and Favours
 O Lord of Grace and Beneficence
 O Lord of Might and Vengeance”

This is followed by a Malay inscription which has been translated as follows:—

“The Lord Ahmad, an Arab by descent, to the Lord, whose essence is wondrous, with his speech, wisdom and courtesy, says in the Arab tongue”

which is followed by an inscription in Arabic translated as:—

“O Thou who art forgiving and pardoning
 O Thou who art grateful and the concenter of faults
 O Alas for the bodies!
 Glory be to God! God is most great”

The next inscription is in Malay and has been translated as:—

“The gun is made, is made, it is finished, give thanks to God, to be a sign to drop down favours, for the slaughter of the Unbeliever, a curse upon him”

This is followed by an Arabic inscription translated as:—

“Remember thou, O stranger, to earth we must return. Pursue valour in War. The promise of the Lord that we shall come to Paradise”

and then by a Malay inscription in similar terms translated as:—

“Remember, remember thou O stranger: to earth we must return. Pursue victory in warfare. God’s pledge to enter Paradise”

The next inscription, also in Malay, has been translated as:—

“A Land of Peace is Paradise, Paradise is a place of mercy too, and full of delights also; we dwell there everlastingly in bliss”

This is followed by what is described as an inscription written in 1636, in Malay, translated as:—

“The King, a Prince of noble and ancient family, who has been in possession of this Kingdom and the neighbouring provinces, many hundreds of years”

It is followed in the archives by a note:

“1634. The King was named Phra-chao-Pra-Thong”

Finally there is in Arabic an inscription translated as:—

“The Sign of Sultan Sulayman Shah, The Victorious King.....
A.H. (or A.M.) 1063” (which has been interpreted as 26 September 1623 A.D.)



