

# Mai Han Akat

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According to a widely accepted theory, the history of the Thai methods for writing short /ă/ between consonants is composed of 4 stages.

1. The oldest known inscriptions use consonant reduplication to indicate short /ă/ : วนน = วัณ. Therefore, the oldest Thai method for noting /ă/ is supposed to have been consonant reduplication.

2. In 1361 A.D., a rival method appears for the first time in inscriptions.<sup>1</sup> This method uses a horizontal, slightly curved stroke now called mai han ākāt ไม้หันอากาศ or mai phat ไม้พัด which is placed on top of the second consonant, sometimes attached to its last stroke, and which replaces the second, the reduplicated consonant: วนน > วน्ह = วัณ.

3. The use of mai han ākāt quickly became popular in the 1360ies, as attested by an increasing number of inscriptions, and during a period of time both methods were used by the scribes. That period of transition lasted for about 40 — 50 years. The older method of consonant reduplication was rather fast abandoned.

4. By around 1400 — 1410 A.D., the mai han ākāt had been generally accepted, because hereafter, the inscriptions, with few exceptions, have the mai han ākāt, and no reduplicated consonants.<sup>2</sup> The scribes shifted the position of the mai han ākāt to the left, which is the position it now has : วน्ह > วัณ.

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1. หน้า 2520 หลักภาษาเขมร 27.- ประเสริฐ 2514 ผลงาน 50.- Griswold/Nagara 1973 Epigraphy 113. The reference is to inscriptions no. 5 Pā Mamuang (Sukhōthai) 1361 (2) and to no. 7 Pā Mamuang (Sukhōthai) 1361 (4), the most recent editions of which can be found in Griswold/Nagara's article mentioned above.-It should be mentioned here that in 1972, in a joint article by Griswold and Nagara, inscription no. 2 Phra Mahā Thāt (Sukhōthai) is dated to c. 1345 A.D. (Griswold/Nagara 1972 King Lōdaiya 84). The inscription has mai han ākāt and the article says that the mai han ākāt is here attested for the first time. However, Professor Dr. Prasert na Nagara has assured me several times that for himself, he has always favoured a post-1345 date, i.e. 1359 or later, because the inscription has mai han ākāt, and recently he has confirmed his position (Nagara 1984 Reconsideration p. 2).

2. For instance: ประเสริฐ 2514 ผลงาน 50.

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Inversely, that theory is used to date inscriptions which have no date. An inscription which has only reduplicated consonants and no mai han ākāt, is assumed to be earlier than 1361 A.D.<sup>3</sup> An inscription with both, reduplicated consonants and mai han ākāt, is supposed to belong to the period of transition, 1361 — c. 1400. Finally, an inscription that has mai han ākāt only, is thought to be younger than 1400 — 1410 A.D.

However, there are reasons to wonder whether the above outline of the history of the notation of short /ă/ is entirely correct, although it seems to be a result of extensive studies of inscriptions from Sukhōthai and from the Lān Nā.<sup>4</sup>

A look at the history of Thai writing in the area creates the first doubt.

George Coedès thought that the ancient Thais used a proto Thai script based on Mon or Khmer, that in 1283 A.D. King Rām Kham Hāng improved that proto Thai script by adding Khmer features and tonal markers, and that out of Rām Kham Hāng's innovations developed the classical Sukhōthai script which, handed down via Ayuthayā and early Ratanakosin, became the modern Thai script.<sup>5</sup>

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3. For such reasoning concerning inscription no. 11 Khao Kop (Nakhòn Sawan) Face 1, see: Griswold/Nagara 1973 Epigraphy 113.- ประเสริฐ 2514 ผลงาน 48, 50.- Another example is the dating of inscription 1.8.1.1 Wat Bāng Sanuk (Phrā) to 1339 A.D. and not to A.D. 1399 (Griswold/Nagara 1979 Second Oldest 63).

4. See the text editions and studies by ฉ่ำ ทองคำวรรณ, ประสาร บุญประคอง and เทียม มีเต็ม in ศิลปการ and in ประชุมศิลาจารึก, and by A.B. Griswold / Prasert na Nagara in the Journal of the Siam Society.

It should be noted, however, that George Coedès was not particularly impressed by the presence of mai han ākāt. He dated inscription no. 2 Phra Mahā Thāt (Sukhōthai) to the reign of Phayā LōThai, thus pre-1347 (see also footnotes 11 and 19 below).

5. In 1925, Coedès thought that the Thai peoples, around A.D. 950 or before, used a common proto Thai script which they had derived from Mon. No specimen had survived or had been found, but the letters would have been similar to the Tham script of Lān Nā or Kengtung. Thais arriving in Sukhōthai modified their proto-Thai script under the influence of Khmer script. Later, Rām Kham Hāng modified the script for a second time, again under the influence of Khmer letters. He also seems to have invented the tonal markers called mai ek and mai thō. Rām Kham Hāng's alphabet then became the classical Sukhōthai alphabet, which also spread up to the Lān Nā (Coedès 1929 Tamnan 10 — 15).

Later, Coedès modified his view. Writing in 1927, he and Burnay considered the origins of the Sukhōthai script and deduced the previous existence of a proto Siamese alphabet that had been derived from Khmer. Afterwards, again under the influence of Khmer letters, Rām Kham Hāng changed that proto Siamese alphabet to a new, Sukhōthai script which after his death became the classical Sukhōthai alphabet. Coedès and Burnay thought that the old proto Siamese alphabet was similar to or even identical with the Lao script of Luang Phra Bāng (Burnay/Coedès 1927 Sukhōdaya Script 88, 101).

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Singeravelu showed that Rām Kham Hāng also used Grantha script for his reshaping of the old proto Thai alphabet.<sup>6</sup>

Inscription fragments recently found in Wat Kān Thōm near Chiang Mai suggest that along a contact zone between Mon and Thai (both Yuan and Siamese) reaching from Lamphūn to central and Northeast Thailand into Laos, a proto Thai script came into being, based on letters used by Mon around 1150 A.D. or earlier; that already this proto Thai script was mixed with Grantha; that King Rām Kham Hāng was one, possibly the most advanced, of the renovators of the proto Thai script; that the nowadays so — called “Sukhōthai” script was not invented particularly in Sukhōthai; that many features of Rām Kham Hāng’s remodelled script (as it appears in his inscription of 1292 A.D.) were not taken up by his successors; and that it was basically the old proto Thai script, slowly developing in the hands of generations of Yuan and Siamese scribes in a number of localities, with a particular impetus around 1260 — 1310 A.D., which became the ancestor of the present Thai script via Sukhōthai, Ayuthayā and Ratanakosin.<sup>7</sup>

As for Lān Nā’s Tham and Fak Khām scripts, the former seems to be a derivative from the later Lamphūn Mon script<sup>8</sup>, and the latter is a mixture of elements of the proto Thai and Tham scripts.<sup>8a</sup>

Thus, whatever the theory concerning the exact origins of the Rām Kham Hāng, the “classical Sukhōthai”, Tham and Fak Khām scripts — they can be supposed to be derived from South Indian scripts, from Mon, Khmer and Grantha.

The writers of ancient Khmer and Mon scripts had two methods to indicate to their readers that the short /ǎ/ which is never written but automatically follows or is inherent to a consonant letter, was not to be pronounced: They either traced a more or less horizontal stroke (virāma) over the consonant of which the short /ǎ/ was to be silent; or they wrote that consonant twice (consonant reduplication). It seems that the virāma method was the older one, and the consonant reduplication

6. Singeravelu 1969 A Note.

7. Penth 1984 Wat Kān Thōm Inscriptions, เพนซ์ 2528 จารึก วัดกานโถม.

8. Griswold 1963 Yudhiṣṭhira 226.- Penth 1973 Yuan-Schrift.- เพนซ์ 2526 ประวัติ 20.-

8a. Penth 1985 New Evidence p. 7. The version of my lecture as printed in the Newsletter contains errors. For instance, the lecture ended on p. 6 with “additional attention”. The rest, from the beginning of the next paragraph (“Thus...”) to the end, was part of a different lecture.- On p. 7, column 1, line 6, read “proto Thai” instead of “Sukhōthai”.- In the chart, the line topped by “8” should be marked “Tham”, not the line topped by “12”.

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method a younger innovation<sup>9</sup>, and that the Khmer, but not the Mon, eventually ceased to use the virāma.<sup>10</sup>

It would have been logical for the Siamese and Yuan, when they began to adapt Mon or Khmer scripts for their Thai dialects, to take over also the two methods of cancelling the short, inherent /ǎ/. There seems to be no reason why they should not have done so, nor why they should have selected one method, for instance consonant reduplication, and have left the virāma method by the side. One has therefore a good reason to assume that the early Thai scribes knew and used both methods.

Since consonant reduplication may have been fashionable for Khmer script at the time, the Sukhōthai scribes, because of their closeness to Khmer writing, can be expected to have followed the trend and to have used consonant reduplication more often than virāma. The Thai scribes further north may have favoured the virāma. That could be the reason why as late as c. 1393 A.D. the Sukhōthai version of the Nān — Sukhōthai pact has both, consonant reduplication and mai han ākāt, whereas the Nān version of the pact has only mai han ākāt.

For Coedès, use of mai han ākāt and use of reduplicated consonants were but two methods towards the same aim, the second of the two consonants representing the mai han ākāt.<sup>11</sup>

Griswold and Nagara observed that the virāma appears to have been the predecessor of the mai han ākāt. However, they did not go into details, and did not draw conclusions from their observation.<sup>12</sup>

The evolution of the virāma from a cancellation symbol to a vowel sign probably goes back to a change in the concept of its function by its Thai users, or perhaps to a subtle misunderstanding. At any rate, its working mechanism seems to have become understood in a slightly different way by the Thai scribes.

The change of concept may have come about by such letter groupings as ทัจ (modern ทัจ) which was no longer understood to represent a pronunciation according to the traditional concept

“/d/ and its short, inherent /ǎ/ plus /ñ/ minus its short, inherent /ǎ/”

9. Aymonier 1901 Cambodge II, quoted in Griswold/Nagara 1973 Epigraphy 129.

10. จ้า 2520 หลักภาษาเขมร 28.

11. Coedès 1929 Tamnan 12.—See also footnote 4.

12. Griswold/Nagara 1973 Epigraphy 146.

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(dǎ + ñǎ — ǎ)

but as an entity or as a fixed formula

“/d/ plus short /ǎ/ plus /ñ/” (d + ǎ + ñ)

In other words : The traditional concept or understanding “Keep the first short, inherent /ǎ/ but drop the second short, inherent /ǎ/” changed to “Keep the first /ǎ/” and to “Pronounce short /ǎ/ between 2 consonants” This, it seems, may have been how the virāma, formerly a suppressor mark for the short, inherent /ǎ/ of the second of two consonants, became a letter for short /ǎ/ in between two consonants. That change of concept probably also was the reason why later scribes moved the mai han ākāt from the right to the left, a visual indication of the sequence of pronunciation: Consonant — short /ǎ/ — consonant.

The reasons for the eventual choice of the mai han ākāt over reduplicated consonants probably had to do with certain peculiarities of the Thai dialects, Siamese and Yuan. Both have many words ending on a consonant without inherent /ǎ/, which was bound to cause clumsiness in writing: An expression like วัน นั้น had to be written วันนนน.<sup>13</sup> Another difficulty would have been created by pairs such as ตั้ง and ตง. Still other difficulties would be coming from such words as พร and ผล, and spellings like ขว and หว in inscriptions (modern ขัว and หัว) further attest to the difficulties the scribes had with consonant reduplication.

The notion that the mai han ākāt originally was related to the second consonant, and not to the first, was not easily lost. An inscription of A.D. 1445 has the mai han ākāt already in its modern position, to the left above the space between the two consonants. However, at the end of a line and at the beginning of the next line, the word วัน is divided ๗-ัน. In contrast, already in 1404, inscription no. 10 C.S. 766 had divided ๗ — น.

A second doubt in the validity of the above mentioned theory concerning the history of the writing of short /ǎ/ is created by the fact that we either do not know or only have assorted views on the date of a good number of early inscriptions. In other words, we do not know the year in which a number of inscriptions were written, and thus we cannot very well use these inscriptions to back a theory on the evolution of the mai ākāt. I do not want to enter here in a discussion of the weaknesses underlying certain datings but would like to refer the reader to an article by Michael

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13. Inscription no. 3 Phra Mahā Thāt (Nakhōn Chum) 1357 actually has /๗นนนน/.

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Vickery in this Journal where many weak points are discussed and references given.<sup>14</sup>

If it is thus possible to have serious doubts about the validity of the theory of the mai han ākāt being a latecomer in Thai writing, the practical question arises: Which are the inscriptions that have mai han ākāt and can be supposed to be older than 1361 A.D. ? Out of a number I shall mention only three.

One example is a group of 4 inscriptions on the Mahādhātucetiya, the main stūpa of Wat Phra Thāt Hariphunchai, Lamphūn. They accompany 8 Buddha images and have mai han ākāt as well as reduplicated consonants. When I first saw them, I dated them and the images to 1360 — 1380 A.D.<sup>15</sup> Later, on evidence from chronicles, and corroborated by an art historical analysis involving the Buddha images,<sup>16</sup> I had to change my mind to about 1330 A.D.<sup>17</sup>

Another example are the Sukhōthai Jātaka inscriptions from Wat Mahā Thāt, now in the staircase of Wat Sī Chum. They are usually dated to about the middle of the 14th century, presumably post-1361 because some of them have mai han ākāt (others have reduplicated consonants). On reasons supplied by epigraphy, they can be supposed to date from around 1330 A.D.<sup>18</sup>

On similar grounds, one can assume that the Jātaka engravings are those mentioned in inscription no. 2 Phra Mahā Thāt (Sukhōthai), and that that inscription dates, not from the 1360ies, but from around 1340 — 1345 A.D.<sup>19</sup>

In conclusion, it seems that there are good reasons to consider a new theory to the effect that the mai han ākāt was known to and used by Thai scribes before 1361 A.D. Definite proof is still lacking, such as an inscription with mai han ākāt and with a date before 1361, but in the meantime it seems to be fruitful to keep an open mind and to accept the possibility that some of our inscriptions with mai han ākāt are older than previously thought. Double consonants and mai han ākāt are no safe criteria for the age of an inscription.

14. Vickery 1978 Guide.

15. เพชร 2526 ปะระวัติ 76.

16. Krairiksh 1984 Earliest Datable Images.

17. Penth 1984 Inscriptions.

18. Gosling 1981 Inscription 2 p. 18, 30, 36, 38.—Griswold/Nagara 1972 King Lōdaiya 77, 125.

19. Already in 1920, Coedes supposed that the inscription was written in the time of Phayā Lō Thai (Coedes 1920 Origines 236, 243). See also footnotes 1 and 4 above.