

NOTES AND COMMENTS

On the "Strangeness" of Inscription 1: Comments on Michael Wright's "A Pious Fable: Reconsidering the Inscription 1 Controversy: A 'Demonic' View;" and Michael Vickery's "Piltdown 3: Further Discussion of the Ram Khamhaeng Inscription," *JSS* 83(1 & 2) (1995)

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It is always interesting to consider new ideas about Thailand's history, and recent articles by Michael Wright and Michael Vickery provide a lot of new material for consideration. In these articles, both Wright and Vickery build upon an already elaborate assemblage of earlier theories that were intended to substantiate their contention that Sukhothai Inscription 1 ("the Ram Khamhaeng inscription") is not a thirteenth-century work, as dates in the inscription indicate, but is, rather, a product of the nineteenth century. There are many reasons to think that the inscription is what it purports to be, a contemporaneous (or near-contemporaneous), highly laudatory description of the old city of Sukhothai as it existed in the reign of Ram Khamhaeng in the late thirteenth century. But opposing views are interesting, and like Wright, I hope that the avenues of communication among historians, art historians, ethnologists, and linguists will remain open. I would like to take this opportunity to address some of the new ideas that Wright and Vickery have introduced into the Inscription 1 debate.

Both Wright and Vickery point out a number of anomalies and peculiarities in the inscription, and as Wright correctly notes, its "strangeness" is a quality that both the proponents of its authenticity and its detractors generally agree on. That small consensus is heartening, but reasons that are now being suggested for the anomalies are more divergent than ever before.

Of particular interest is Wright's suggestion that Inscription 1 may not have been solely the work of King Rama IV (r. 1851–1868), as revisionist historians in recent years have claimed, but may have been the work of a "staff of scholars" whom the king (either before or after his accession) commissioned to research

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the early Sukhothai period (1995, 95–6). While Wright considers Inscription 1 a brilliant, "extremely erudite" piece of pre-modern scholarship, possibly based on "literature available in Bangkok's libraries" as well as up-country sources, he attributes its unique character to the fact that it is also an instructive fable or myth with little historical value and cites as possible sources nineteenth-century oral traditions (no longer available for comparison), "earlier fantastical literature" (also not extant), local myth, "oracular fantasy" derived from a seance (97, 99), and nineteenth-century political ideology.

Because of the lack of substantiating documentation, Wright's theory is troubling. But the corollary that the theory necessitates is even more so: that King Rama IV, believing that he had produced a respectable history, or alternately, an instructive fable, went to extreme lengths to cover up his endeavors (a very large conspiracy would have had to be involved). According to Wright, there was no deception: some of the inscription's fantasy was probably included as a "clue, deliberately planted by its conscientious authors" to indicate that the inscription was fable, not history. If we did not "cotton on," that is our fault, not the fault of the writers (p. 99). But, in both the *History of the Four Reigns* (the official history of the Rama IV reign) as well as in a 1856 communication to the French envoy to Siam, C. de Montigny, it is stated unequivocally that the inscription had been found in Sukhothai (Griswold and Prasert 1971, 181, 184–5). And the king, claiming to be unable to decipher the strange Thai script in which it was written, solicited a number of scholars, both Thai and European, to help with a translation. Under the circumstances that Wright proposes, the pillar can only be described as a forgery, intended to deceive. As Wright correctly points out, there was nothing wrong with the king having set out to commission a Thai history or an instructive fable (would anyone think otherwise?), but the attempts at cover-up that Wright's theory demands are inexplicable. If Rama IV considered the work his learned men had produced too "fantastical," why go through the great pretense of trying to get it translated? If the king considered it acceptable history or a pious fable, why not give credit where credit was due? Whatever the reasons (Wright does not suggest any), it is difficult to connect such subterfuge with the serious scholarship, intellectual prowess, and moral values with which Rama IV is universally attributed and with which he himself seems to have taken pride.

Equally disturbing is Wright's conclusion that all present-day researchers who support the authenticity of Inscription 1 are politically biased and that our research is flawed because of patriotic presumptions that we refuse to abandon (1995, 101–2). According to Wright, the traditionalists refuse to accept the "clear-headed" research of those who challenge the inscription's authenticity because, "for [the authenticity-supporter], Siamese or foreign, Inscription 1 is the foundation of the Thai script and writing system, Thai Buddhism, Thai nationalism, Thai militarism or Thai democracy ... and all that is rational, modern and desirable in Thai society" (p. 101). Of course, the statement is absurd, and Wright's blanket condemnation of everyone who does not agree with him does not lend itself to meaningful communication. Since he does not

cite any specific instances of political bias, one can only respond on a similar level: that is, that Wright's final assessment of the Inscription 1 controversy as a twentieth-century debate over political ideology rather than as scholarly enterprise is indicative of his own bias. His remarks cannot apply to the serious scholars (whatever their conclusions) who have attempted to formulate their opinions from honest, painstaking research and an objective assessment of historical data.

In contrast to Wright, Michael Vickery in his article "Piltdown 3" provides a vast amount of scholarly detail and interpretation on which to dwell, to question, and to learn from. Like Wright, he focuses on some of Inscription 1's anomalies, and those peculiarities provide a common ground on which the supporters and non-supporters of authenticity can communicate. (Because the endnotes in Vickery's article are numbered incorrectly, the article is not always easy to follow. As well as I can figure out, the correct numbers should be calculated as follows: notes 1–47, correct; notes 48–61, subtract 2; notes 62–96, subtract 3; notes 98–172, subtract 4; notes 174–199, subtract 5; notes 201–240, subtract 6.)*

Like Wright, Vickery elaborates on earlier theories that King Mongkut was the author of Inscription 1, and also like Wright, he suggests that more than a single person was involved in the process (1995, 143). In a copy of part of the inscription that the king sent to the British envoy, Sir John Bowring in 1855, the king incorrectly transcribed the name of Ram Khamhaeng's father, a matter that has led some scholars to doubt his (Rama IV's) authorship. But Vickery explains the mistake as resulting from the king having inadvertently copied the wrong draft, one of several that might have been written before the text was engraved in stone. Yet, there is no evidence of such a draft, and the question of who might have composed it is not addressed. While the theory might help explain earlier twentieth-century theories, it only complicates the history of the inscription itself.

In spite of our differences (and there are many), it is encouraging, however, to read that Vickery now agrees that my own conclusions about the Ram Khamhaeng period (which I based on information in Inscription 1 and a study of Sukhothai's architectural remains) are accurate (1995, 107). Vickery is mistaken, however, when he asserts that I have "taken up [his] position on the value of [Inscription 1] as a historical source" (p. 106) and that my views "would not have yet been possible were it not for the work of those who since 1986 have been criticizing [Inscription 1] publicly" (p. 107). Nothing could be farther from the truth: here Vickery is taking credit for conclusions that I published several years before the suitability of Inscription 1 as a historical source was seriously questioned. I have proposed a date of 1292 or 1293 for the Inscription's execution (1991, 40).

In order to help set the record straight, I should note that my interpretation of the Sukhothai period is based on a study of Sukhothai religious architecture

* *Ed. note:* An errata sheet for Vickery's article is available from The Siam Society.

that I began in the early 1970s. My first paper on the subject was presented at the First International Conference on Thai Studies in New Delhi in 1981 and was published in 1982. Scattered throughout this paper there are six references to Vickery's works, on which I depended a lot for the formulation of my own ideas, and for which I am still grateful. But my last Vickery footnote (1982, 22, n. 85) states, that with the exception of Inscription 1's "postscript" ("Epilogue 2," lines 4.11–27), which had long been recognized as a later addition (Cœdès 1924, 37–8; Griswold and Prasert 1971, 192–3; Vickery 1978, 207–8), "it should perhaps be apparent by now that I am not one of those (Chand, Guide [1976], p. 30; Vickery, "Historiography" ([1978], pp. 203–4) who consider Inscription 1 ... to have been written later than the reign of Ram Khamhaeng."

I elaborated on this footnote in a 1983 doctoral dissertation (History of Art, University of Michigan), in which I presented my 1970s and 1980s architectural research in full. There (p. 115, n. 18), I stated:

It has become fashionable in the past few years to suggest that Inscription 1 does not actually date from Ram Khamhaeng's reign, but is a propaganda piece dating from the Lu-thai period (1347–c. 1370). The arguments are interesting, I think, but inconclusive. Although Vickery gives some support to a *mid-fourteenth century date*, [1978, 208, 209; italics added], he continues, apparently without equivocation, to designate Ram Khamhaeng's reign to the historical period [a term he uses to distinguish it from an earlier, "protohistorical" period, which he defines as one that has been historically "reconstructed solely from writings of a later period"] (pp. 193, 203–208). M. C. Chand contends that material in Inscription 1 was copied from earlier manuscripts, and is therefore historically valid (Guide [1976], 29–30). My own reasons for supporting Inscription 1's authenticity [validity is the word I believe I should have used] will, I think, become apparent in the chapters below.

The picture of the Ram Khamhaeng period that I painted in 1983 included the following remarks:

Sukhothai in the late thirteenth century corresponds in many of its cultural details to a stage of development that anthropologists label "formative" or "chiefdom" society (Kottak 1978, 225–6) or the "era of regional development and fluorescence" (Steward 1949, 18–20) ... Intermediate to "primitive" tribal societies and the fully developed state, the "chiefdom" or "regionally distinct group" is characterized by a number of easily recognizable features: small pre-urbanized communities grouped together under loosely structured political control; intensive agriculture supported by extensive, but localized, irrigation works; the development of intellectual disciplines such as mathematics, astronomy, and writing; the introduction of regionally distinctive styles in arts and crafts such as weaving and ceramics. Social structure was based on kin

and lineage groups; government was paternalistic and functioned by means of generosity rather than coercion. Government as well as the lives of the people centered largely around agricultural matters; the soil and the water and the change of the seasons were the focus of political and religious ceremonial attention (Kottak, 225–32; and Steward, 12–14, 16–21).

In the 1970s it became apparent to me that Sukhothai's largest architectural landmarks, visible today (as they must have been in the nineteenth century when Rama IV visited Sukhothai), were not there in the Ram Khamhaeng period, for none are mentioned in Inscription 1's comprehensive description of the city. Viewed from a thirteenth-century perspective, however, Sukhothai was indeed the fine and wondrous city that Ram Khamhaeng eulogized. A new religion, Theravada Buddhism, had been introduced into, but had not yet stifled, the old socio-politico-religious structure, and (we are told) the people were happy and the muang was thriving. But formative periods (whether in politics or religion or art) are inherently unstable, and the city was still in its infancy. As things turned out, the Ram Khamhaeng period would bear little resemblance to the historical periods that emerged in the following century.

I am glad that Vickery's picture of the Ram Khamhaeng period agrees with mine. I must emphasize, however, that my 1983 conclusions were based entirely on a careful consideration of information in Inscription 1 and on an abundance of data derived from the architectural remains that could be identified with the inscriptional evidence. I would like to reiterate that in no way was my picture of the Ram Khamhaeng period influenced by Vickery's (or anyone else's) allegations that Inscription 1 was unacceptable as a historical source.

There are other points in Vickery's article that warrant comment. He mentioned several instances when I was "confused" by what he had previously written. Although as I now re-read the passages in question, they still seem to imply the meaning I originally attributed to them, I regret any misinterpretation on my part. In other instances, Vickery has not responded to earlier arguments of mine, apparently because he has not read them. Publication of my 1996 book, which is based on the 1983 dissertation, was delayed for a decade because of concerns about Inscription 1, but is now available (with my original views on early Sukhothai still intact). Other works of mine have been available for some time, and I hope that they will eventually help to clarify some of Vickery's misconceptions about my work.

But to return to the "strangeness" of Inscription 1. Yes, as Michael Wright astutely observed, most of us agree that there are many strange (or "peculiar" or "anomalous" or "unique") things in Inscription 1, and it only makes sense that those peculiarities be carefully noted and analyzed. Attributes that seem strange to us in the twentieth century might be expected in an inscription that dates from a period for which there is no other written documentation for comparison: as a product of the thirteenth-century, Inscription 1's peculiarities are intriguing rather than troubling. What is especially unfortunate is that for

the anomalies to be acceptable as a product of the nineteenth century (for which an abundance of comparative literature survives), it is necessary to postulate increasingly complex and circumlocutory theories ("epicycles" in Vickery's terminology) to support the claims.

It has been said that "when the researcher finds himself multiplying hypotheses in order to cling to a belief, he had better heed the signal and drop the belief" (Barzun and Graff 1957, 95). Isn't it time to drop the epicycles, the name-calling, the put-downs, the faulty claims of attribution, and the accusations of political bias that the Ram Khamhaeng controversy has engendered? Let's return to basics, read Inscription 1 as it is, savor its peculiarities, and try to learn what its strangeness has to tell us about a period of Thai history that is, itself, a historical anomaly.

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