

## A TRANG CAVE TEXT OF 1614 AD

Anthony Diller\*

On the first day of June, 1902, Prince Narisranuvattivongse visited a cave near the town of Trang, having been informed by a local headman that an inscription—or more accurately, a painted text—was to be found high on the cave wall. The Prince's travel notes show that he spent an hour and fifteen minutes at the site, called Khao Sam Bat, during which time he transcribed what he could read of the cave text and noticed some statuary fragments. Nearly a century has passed since the Prince's visit and local wasps have recently been observed establishing their nests adjacent to the text on the cave wall. Accordingly, it seems prudent to preserve a current record of this important historical source lest its condition further deteriorate. That is the purpose of this brief note and accompanying plate. A fuller study of the significance of the text and of its site would be an important future project.

Prince Narisranuvattivongse made the cave excursion while on an inspection tour of telegraph lines and facilities, for which he was responsible. As the cave hill is situated some 120 meters east of the Trang River, he was able to approach the site by boat. The nearby area was described as thinly settled with scattered houses and plantations of coconut and taro, a description that would hold today, although rubber trees and overgrown pepper gardens are now in evidence immediately adjacent to the cave. Beyond to the east is Wat Phrai Son. The hill itself is a modest outcrop of limestone karst rising about 25 meters from the flat river plain. Thick overgrowth of vines and thorny bushes now hinders entrance to the cave, which may have been easier to enter in former times. Artifacts found in the cave support the conclusion that it has been inhabited during several periods: in remote prehistoric stone-tool using times, in a pottery-using period and again more recently in the Ayudhian era, accounting

for the plaster statuary fragments noticed by the Prince—and the wall text.

The cave is of modest proportions, less than a hundred meters in total length, with the main opening facing west and a narrow chimney-like opening to the east. It consists of three chambers, the outer two of which have a comparatively flat floor. The front chamber is relatively well-lit and airy but the Prince reported that the stench of guano prevented him from venturing into the more remote chambers. In this inner area there is a niche, perhaps partly natural, where an image may have been installed. It was near the cave's mouth that the Prince saw on the concave wall overhead twelve lines of reddish ochre lettering, parts of which had been obliterated (Figure 1).

Unfortunately, since the Prince's visit the text has undergone further deterioration and in its current degraded state a complete translation would not be feasible. However, by relying on the Prince's transcription, a good sense of the text can be ascertained: the text was produced (line 1) by a Buddhist community, with several senior monks, who are named (lines 1–2), and a number of novices (line 3), who inhabited the cave or at least its immediate environs. The community was established at the site, referred to as Khao Sa Bap, to uphold or restore the religion (lines 3–4; the familiar inscriptional phrase *loek sasana* is used). Male and female laity are also mentioned, including local leaders, officials and other lay supporters (lines 6–7; items read as *khun nang*, *krommakan*, and *sapparut*), who join in upholding the religion with the hope of obtaining merit and release from suffering (lines 7–9).

The remainder of the text commemorates the installation of an image in a year which

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\* Faculty of Asian Studies, Australian National University, Canberra, ACT 0200, Australia



Figure 1 Text on the cave wall in the mid 1990s

Prince Narisranuvattivongse was able to construe as equivalent to 1614 AD, i.e. (Buddhist Era) 2157, although little of the year designation, which is spelled out in words (lines 9–10) rather than given in numerals, remains for us to read confidently at present. More legible is the reference to Friday, the second day of waxing moon of the seventh lunar month (lines 10–11). Regarding the year, it is worth taking note of the letter *cho*’, apparently in the expression *cho*’-*sok* (line 11) which is still legible. This expression normally refers to a Chulasakarat date ending in the digit - 6. Note that the Chulasakarat equivalent of the year above is 976, providing good confirmation for the reading that Prince Narisranuvattivongse was able to make in 1902. Such a reading would represent the earliest dated Thai language text from the Trang area and, it would seem, from the west coast of southern Thailand generally. The date would also nicely coincide with the period of the first Thai manuscript texts known from east coast sites such as Nakhon Si Thammarat and Phatthalung.

A curious issue arises at this point in the Prince’s travel notes: he draws attention to similarities between the writing he saw in the in the cave and late-Ayudhian Thai script as written

at Wat Pa Mok during the reign of King Thai Sa (r. 1709–1733), a century afterwards. He did not go on to imply—given his reading of the date as above—that the cave text had been backdated by a century. Such a conjecture would be highly improbable: comparison with southern Thai handwriting of the early seventeenth century reveals strong similarities and suggests contemporary composition. In fact, in the opposite chronological direction, a good comparison could be made with the writing system used on the base of the Shiva of Kamphaeng Phet, firmly dated to the equivalent of 1510 AD (Inscription 13), even though the two texts are separated by time, location and written medium. Similarly, the cave text shows spelling conventions found in the Wat Phra Sadet text of Sukhothai (Inscription 15), dated to 1525 AD, as well as some similar mid-Ayudhian lexical usages, such as cognates of the word *sappurut* used to designate the lay Buddhist community.

The fact that Trang is mentioned as a locus of Buddhist activity in seventeenth-century west-coast texts helps to provide some of the wider context to the Khao Sam Bat cave community. The chronicles of Nakhon Si Thammarat represent Trang as among the twelve towns

