

## The Antiquarian Society of Siam Speech of King Chulalongkorn

*Translator's introduction.*<sup>1</sup> This speech is a key text in the history of Thai history. It was delivered in 1907 as part of celebrations for King Chulalongkorn becoming the longest reigning king of Siam (see endnote 32). It inaugurated a society which devoted itself, over the following quarter-century, to unearthing and publishing old texts. Two historians have recently drawn attention to the speech's importance. Thongchai Winichakul calls it "a landmark of historical scholarship in Siam".<sup>2</sup> Maurizio Peleggi notes its attempt to create "a uniform historical memory".<sup>3</sup> Part of the interest of the speech is that the memory it sketches is very different from the standardised version of Thai history which evolved over the following half-century.

The speech was reprinted in *Sinlapkon*, 12, 2 (1968), 42-46. The only two footnotes in that printing were the archival reference (endnote 35 here), and the observation mentioned in endnote 5. The other notes are mine.

Most of these are about words. Many words used in the speech have since changed their meaning. For example, the modern term for history (*pravatisat*) had not come into usage, and the King used both *borankhad* (now meaning archaeology) and *ruang rao* (story, narrative) to express the meaning. In the translation, I have chosen a single English term for such words, but given the Thai original in a endnote.

All of us who have come to this meeting are interested in studying and researching the ancient history<sup>4</sup> of our country. As our number is increasing, I see the time is appropriate to found a society under the name of the Antiquarian Society.<sup>5</sup> No better time can be found than to begin from today.

Those many countries<sup>6</sup> which have been formed into nations<sup>7</sup> and countries uphold that

the history<sup>8</sup> of one's nation and country is an important matter to be known clearly and accurately through study and teaching. It is a discipline for evaluating ideas and actions as right or wrong, good or bad, as a means to inculcate love of one's nation and land.<sup>9</sup> Bad events serve as reminders of what we should avoid and prevent happening again at the time we are "doers" like actors in a play. Good events make us inspired and proud to make things as good or even better than before. Whoever studies about his country with good intent will get only valuable benefit and no blame, as I've already summarized.

The histories of all the countries which man can remember have sources for only 6000 years. But this includes histories which are unbelievable and mixed with legends. Texts with high reliability fall within 3000 years. But most of today's countries emerged around 1000 years ago when there appeared written records which are reliable evidence, not just symbols in the shapes of birds and other pictures that have to be interpreted. But knowledge which extends back this far is found in countries where society<sup>10</sup> at this time had progressed to the practice of using written documents. If a country is still a jungle, with no knowledge of writing or passing on by word of mouth, then knowledge extends back only one or two generations. There are still countries like this.

Siam is a country that has the misfortune to have been attacked by its enemies more violently and destructively than any nation (that has engaged in war. Old written documents<sup>11</sup> which ought to be examined have mostly disappeared. The history which survives is less than the reality by far. But in fact we know that Siam flourished in certain periods extending back 1000 years. This is known to those interested in the history of Siam. There are written documents that can be cited but they are available only in certain periods, and cannot

be compiled into a continuous history over 1000 years.

There is another saddening fact. In the old times, the practice of compiling written documents was less prevalent than in other countries. People remembered things and passed them on by word of mouth. We were not a nation that did not pass on history by word of mouth like the negritos.<sup>12</sup> Yet we were not a nation that liked to write books, so things were only passed on by word of mouth, and in truth these are so vague, odd, and repetitive as to be unbelievable. But there's even worse. For the later periods, the royal chronicles of the old capital<sup>13</sup> are accepted as the history of Siam. Statements other than those written in the royal chronicles are treated as legends. Few people consider them worthy of note. Most dismiss them as legends without submitting them to scrutiny and comparison. This misconception of the royal chronicles makes people believe that the history of our nation and country began only with King Ramathibodi I's foundation of Dvaravati-Si Ayutthaya. History which is older than this and worth consideration has been rejected completely, because 400-500 years is reckoned enough to satisfy the desire for knowledge.

In truth the name "royal chronicles" was created to be true to the document. The intention in compiling royal chronicles is to give an account of the rulers of the country in succession down to the time of writing. Any political events in the chronicles are intended as part of the biography<sup>14</sup> of the ruler to show whether that ruler's reign was happy or troubled, good or bad. The intention is not to deal with Siam in general. Hence the word "chronicles" honestly reflects the work done. It's not that we don't know what the word chronicles means. But if we carelessly misconceive them as a history of Siam, then the contents will fail to live up to expectation. Anyone who has read the history of other countries will state that this history of Siam is really nothing. It just deals with the rulers. I'd like to say I've heard people speak like that. But not from any of you sitting here. This matter is just a reminder that this misunderstanding of the word "chronicles" can make people critical and also uninterested in knowing our history.

Siam was divided in some times and united at others. Its rulers came from various races and various dynasties. The chronicles choose to deal

only with that time when Siam was united as a single kingdom in the later period, and choose only the Thai ruling dynasty which came down from the north. Even the Thai dynasty established in Sukhothai is not mentioned except once in a reference to Khun Phirenthorathep during the reign of Phra Maha Chakraphat.<sup>15</sup> There are other major cities for which there is only visual evidence such as Nakhon Chaisi and Lopburi of even greater vintage. We have found no history which refers to these two cities reliably, only occasional references in other books or legends. As for Nakhon Si Thammarat which exists to this day and is of true Thai race, its people are misrepresented as outsiders, counted among the twelve languages.<sup>16</sup> This sort of narrow view extends right down to Krung Si Ayutthaya or Ayotthiya, the settlement on the east bank at Pratakucham, which King U Thong founded before building Phranakhoon Dvaravati. There are bases of *jedi*<sup>17</sup> still existing to this day which the rulers of Dvaravati renovated such as: Wat Phanan Choeng; Wat Yai Chai Mongkhon which was at the centre of the old city; Wat Si Ayotthiya; Wat Doem which was a forest monk temple to the north of the city; Wat Kudi Dao; and Wat Maheyong which was a forest monk group southeast of the city. Although all these were renovated, and the chronicles in each case rightly use the word "renovation" rather than "build anew", the earlier history of ancient Ayutthaya is not described at all. Perhaps it was considered so well known that it did not have to be recorded. Perhaps it was deliberately not recorded for some reason important at the time. Perhaps there were other separate chronicles which dealt with these matters, such as the Northern Chronicle,<sup>18</sup> but these volumes were lost at a time of disaster for the country. Perhaps the chronicles we have include only what people knew was not contained in the Northern Chronicle, but that volume had disappeared completely or in part. So important people<sup>19</sup> of the time were asked to add more. But because of old age and forgetfulness they could not remember, or remembered the same things over and over again. If those who asked for the writing had been committed and thoughtful they might have pressed the important people to say more. But there were few people interested in ancient history at that time, and they were satisfied that the royal chronicles of Krung Dvaravati were

old enough, as I have said, and so did not press for a clearer account. It's very disappointing but even in my time I've heard important people relating much material<sup>10</sup> about Krung Dvaravati beyond those compiled into the royal chronicles. But they are not in any record,<sup>11</sup> only passed on by word of mouth. Those prepared to listen are becoming fewer all the time. Those telling are getting confused and repetitive because they are getting older and older and their memory is getting worse and worse. Younger people are getting less and less interested in listening. Lots of material is being lost in this way because it is not written down.

Because of this I'm happy to see that all of you take an interest in the chronicles and the rebirth of the history of the nation.<sup>12</sup> It is to be hoped that the lack of interest in the country's history will not deteriorate rapidly as before, and that those becoming members of this society are mostly people with the skill to listen to history, to compile with eye and ear and with knowledge of other countries' histories, and to sift what is important and unimportant, better than those who do not have foreign discipline.<sup>13</sup>

This time is a good opportunity for us to seek history from foreign countries, both in Europe and Asia, which had contact with us in the past, even hostile countries such as Burma. There is a principle in the study of any material from these foreign countries that we should understand that country's disposition. For example, Burma is a country which likes to brag about the power<sup>14</sup> of its kings. We know this already. When reading these books, we should treat this with a pinch of salt. History by Europeans may be exaggerated to make readers become fascinated and buy lots of books. Take the example repeated everywhere at present that Muang Thai has a palace under water.<sup>15</sup> In China no-one escapes from Chinese-style thinking that treats us either as Chinese or as barbarians who do various unusual things. The way to appraise any history from foreign countries is to use the important principle of sympathy<sup>16</sup> and thinking from the Thai perspective. If any history differs from the tradition and way of thinking of we true Thai,<sup>17</sup> we should consider it carefully and not rush to believe it.

It's fortunate that from ancient times Buddhist monks who were also scholars have written histories in the Pali language of how religion was

established in countries of the region. There are also written histories of countries counted as Thai such as Lan Chang and Chiang Mai which may be investigated for the truths they have. Yet we often treat these as religious books. Nobody looks for the historical meaning which can be combined with the chronicles or the country's history. As a result, there are certain periods for which we cannot see a way to research and clarify the material, and hence put them aside and don't study them further.

With this direction and commitment, we should succeed. As I've already said, even though this is only the first meeting of the society, I'd like to persuade all of you to make up your minds that we will collect the historical materials of the country of Siam for every city,<sup>18</sup> every race,<sup>19</sup> every dynasty, every era to compile a history of Siam over the past 1000 years. This history must start from the capital sometimes known as Hang Hang or Chang<sup>20</sup> which was the old settlement of the Thai race, down through Chiang Saen, Chiang Rai, Chiang Mai, Sawankhalok, Sakkhothai, old Ayutthaya, new Ayutthaya, Lavo, Lopburi, Nakhon Chaisi, Nakhon Si Thammarat, and cities which ruled other cities such as Kamphaeng Phet, Chainat, Phitsanulok, Muang San, Suphan, Kanchanaburi, and Phetchaburi, which were important at some era in the past, and are now joined together as united Siam. With a broad scope like this, we cannot hope to find complete material throughout or to make the account truly reliable. Whatever material we can collect, that will be sufficient, even material which is not credible such as tarman, and the various Lao books about Buddhist prophecy. We should pay attention to such writings because it is only their beginnings which follow the taste and belief of those people; they still have material worthy of attention which should be noted down. This will not be criticised. The only thing is to check whether they are genuine. Don't bring in fake materials written by evil people who claim they are old but really are just something made up.

The idea is not to create a history of Siam quickly. I hope that we will help one another to collect the historical evidence and help one another to appraise the material and clarify what is not yet clear through each applying his wisdom and intelligence. There is no need to claim that something is correct or not. Whenever an opinion

is formed, write it down, and send it to the secretary of the society who will collect all the material in one place. When there is enough material to print as a book then print it as someone's contribution to the history of Siam. The contents can then be examined and evaluated whether they should be included in the history of Siam. The history that any person knows should be written down because word-of-mouth accounts are repetitive or are being forgotten through old age every day. The sources should be indicated so others can see and follow them up. If someone else reinterprets the material or has better sources, we should not be ashamed, because we studied the material according to the knowledge and opinion of the time. If someone comes up with better interpretation and more accurate reasoning, we should happily appreciate the major benefit of having a clearer and more reliable history of

Siam. In order that this society should be a society of the capital, I have authorised the use of the symbol of a dragon with a crystal ball held in the mouth<sup>17</sup> which is an old royal seal. I have brought it to display here. The reason for using the image of a naga or dragon is because the naga, dragon or snake was worshipped in the various countries of this region before anything else which came later. So it can be taken to symbolise the thinking and intention of this society from now on to pursue the historical data of the past 1000 years. I hope that you all will be happy with this symbol and will count today which is the end of an auspicious royal time<sup>18</sup> as the founding day of this society.<sup>19</sup>

Palace of Krung Dvaravati Si Ayutthaya<sup>20</sup>  
2 December Rattanakosin era 126<sup>21</sup>

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation*, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), p. 162.

<sup>2</sup> Maurizio Peleggi, *Lords of Things: The Fashioning of the Siamese Monarchy's Modern Image*, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002), p. 131.

<sup>3</sup> *โบราณคดี*, *Borankhadi*. Now the term is used to mean archaeology. But at the time of this speech it had not acquired this meaning and was being used in its literal sense, "ancient studies", hence the conventional English translation of the society's name as the Antiquarian Society. Indeed, in its call for historical research, the speech conspicuously ignores any study of inscriptions, monuments, or archaeological remains, which is remarkable given the interest shown by King Mongkut, the fact that Lunet de Lajouquièrre had begun his archaeological research, and the location of the speech among the ruins of Ayutthaya. Pathumrat Kethulhai notes that at this time and in this speech, *borankhadi* meant "old accounts which have written records and use documents (*tammachon*, chronicles) as sources", see "Patthanaikan borankhadi nai prathet thai (Development of archaeology in Thailand)", *Muang Boran* 21(1-4), January-December 1995, especially pp.32-34. Luang Boribon Buriphan (1935, quoted by Pathumrat, p.33) recorded that the

Antiquarian Society "made no study of ancient monuments but examined many old books on ancient matters connected to the Thai chronicles".

<sup>4</sup> *สมาคมโบราณคดีสยาม* (*samakham sip suta khong buran nai prathet sayam*, literally society to investigate ancient things in Siam) in the title, footnoted in *Sinlapakon* as "spelt as in the original", but *โบราณคดีสยาม* (*borankhadi samason*) here and elsewhere in the text.

<sup>5</sup> *ประเพณี*, *prathet*.

<sup>6</sup> *ชาติ*, *chat*.

<sup>7</sup> *เมืองเก่า*, *muangrao*.

<sup>8</sup> *แผ่นดิน*, *phueudin*.

<sup>9</sup> *บ้านเมือง*, *banmuang*.

<sup>10</sup> *หนังสือเก่า*, *nanngsu kao kao*.

<sup>11</sup> *คนดำม้วนผม*, black people with curly hair.

<sup>12</sup> *กรุงเก่า*, *krung kao*; old capital, meaning Ayutthaya.

<sup>13</sup> *ประเพณี*, *prathet*.

<sup>14</sup> See *The Royal Chronicles of Ayutthaya*, tr. Richard D. Cushman, ed. David K. Wyatt (Bangkok: Siam Society, 2000), pp.23-26.

<sup>15</sup> *ภาษาต่างประเทศสิบสองภาษา* *ภาษา* *สิบสองภาษา*. The "twelve languages" is a conventional phrase meaning, roughly, all foreign languages. The origins are obscure. Foreigners depicted on the shutters at Wat Pho are described as *ชาวต่างประเทศ*.

<sup>16</sup> *เจดีย์*, *jedyathan*.

<sup>17</sup> *จารึกพงษาวดารเมือง*, *phongsawadan mueang*. "Written in 1807 by Pira Wichianpricha (Noi) who was a *pundit*

serving in the *Wang Nu* during the reign of Rama I of Bangkok. . . . The document was probably based on some old, scattered documents from the Ayutthayan period. Prince Damrong believed that the author also recorded randomly from oral traditions. The work was compiled in a rather confusing manner, with the dates being very hard to pinpoint, and the same stories or events being recorded again and again in different forms. However, it is quite a useful document, for it deals with Thai history prior to the foundation of Ayudhya." Charvit Kasetsiri, *The Rise of Ayudhya: A History of Siam in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1976), pp.166-167.

<sup>19</sup> ช้างเผือก ฝูหง, *phu luk phu vai*.

<sup>20</sup> ช้างขาว, *khao khwam*.

<sup>21</sup> จอมมเหศวร, *jotmahaet*.

<sup>22</sup> ช้างเผือกเมือง, *chaet banmuang*.

<sup>23</sup> วิเชียรตัง, *wichai tang prathet*.

<sup>24</sup> บารมี, *barumi*.

<sup>25</sup> I have been unable to explain this reference.

<sup>26</sup> นามจุฬ, *nam jul*.

<sup>27</sup> ไม้ราช, *thai rao thae*.

<sup>28</sup> เมือง, *muang*.

<sup>29</sup> ช้าง, *chaet*.

<sup>30</sup> พระที่นั่งสุทไธสวรรย์,

<sup>31</sup> มณเฑียรมาตุลี, *mankon hap kaeu*.

In 1907, King Chulalongkorn's reign surpassed the thirty-nine years of King Ramathibodi II of Ayutthaya (c. 1491-1529) and thus became the longest in the history of Siam. The event was celebrated with ceremonies in Ayutthaya from November 30 to December 2. See *Chomathet phraratchaphiti*

*ratchamanghla phisek v.s. 126. 127* (Records of the celebrations of auspicious royal time, 1907 and 1908), (Bangkok: Fine Arts Department, 1984). See also the description in Peleggi, *Lords of Things*, pp.129-132.

<sup>32</sup> A few years later, Prince Damrong wrote about the founding of the society as follows: "The King himself became president and appointed the present monarch [Rama VI] as vice-president, and Phraya Boranratchathanin (Phon Dechakup), governor of Ayutthaya monthon, as secretary. He chose many members of the court and officials who had studied *borankhadi* to be members of the Antiquarian Society. . . . He made the Library of the Capital the offices of the society. From then until now the society has published many books." See *Tannan ho phrasamat*, Bangkok: Sophon Phiphanthukon, 1916, p. 133. The year after this speech, the future Rama VI made his famous visit to Sukhothai. The society continued to collect and publish old books until 1932.

<sup>33</sup> The celebration of the longest reign was single-mindedly historical in style and setting. A traditional-style timber throne hall, possibly modelled on the descriptions of seventeenth-century European travellers, was built on the site of the old royal palace in Ayutthaya. The speech was delivered in this palace as the climax of the 3-day event. Peleggi describes the event and reproduces a photo of the palace (*Lords of Things*, pp.129-132 and Figure 17).

<sup>34</sup> From records of the Fifth Reign 44/14, Important Records Department, National Archives (thus footnoted in *Sinlapakorn*). The speech is also in records of the Fifth Reign, Miscellaneous papers, 15/5.