

## OBSERVATIONS ON WAT SI CHUM

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It is not possible to read *Past Lives of the Buddha*, reviewed elsewhere in these pages, without it affecting one's own views.\* Here is a summary of my opinion: that the engravings are more likely to date from the second quarter of the fourteenth century than the third; that in addition to cultural relationships with the Mon lands of Lower Burma and with Sri Lanka, there was one with the imperial Buddhist style of Yuan China; that the number 100 was quite deliberately chosen, as a distant reflection of the idea that 100 Jātaka stand for the ten perfections; and that the never-built superstructure was planned as an evocation of the Mahābodhi temple.

Betty Gosling may have been wrong about an association between the engravings and Wat Mahathat, but her understanding of stylistic sequence—that the engravings are older than the stuccos of Wat Mahathat—appears correct (1991; 1996). A similar chronological point can also be made by examining the engraving of an adorant on the footprint at Wat Traphang Thong (Fig. 1), which was carved in 1359 or 1360 and installed on Khao Phra Bat Yai (Inscription VIII; Griswold & Prasert [subsequently G&P] 1973c:102–3 & fig. 6; Di Crocco 2004 pl. 81). Although trained in the style of Wat Si Chum, the artist has altered the proportions of the halo, increased the elaboration of the diadem, lengthened and narrowed the forearm, and on the lower part of the garment has added an extensive array of belts and sashes, nowhere in evidence at Wat Si Chum. The differences are greater than one would imagine as the responsibility of an adventurous son working at the time his conservative father was still laboring at Wat Si Chum. No, the Wat Si Chum engravings must be older.

This means, for me, in the reign of King Lö Thai, which came to an end (probably) in 1346 or 1347. I concur with Griswold that Inscription II dates from his reign because no later monarch is named (G&P 1972: 112 n. 46). But was Wat Si Chum constructed before or after the composition of Inscription II, and before or after Si Sattha's ten-year trip abroad? The date of his return—1341 or after—is based on the assumption that the Tooth Relic, which he observed, was taken to Gampola (Kambalai in the inscription) south of Kandy only after it became the capital in that year (G&P 1973b). Since there is little or nothing in the inscription

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specifically pertaining to Wat Si Chum, it would appear that it dates from about 1342, the engravings from soon thereafter, with work on Wat Si Chum ceasing with the accession of Mahadharmaraja in 1347, and the shift of sacred activity away from the Wat Si Chum – Wat Phra Phai Luang area toward the south.

There are also, however, reasons for thinking that Wat Si Chum was built before Si Sattha's trip—though ultimately the question must be left open. Among the activities described in Inscription II (at 2.2.10) is the foundation of a fine and beautiful Buddha image, followed by words that can be understood to mean “engraved here” (Prasert 1998:161, differing from Cœdès 1924:68, G&P 1972:119, and National Library 1985: 47 n. 97). If “here” is Wat Si Chum, then the image—and conceivably the *mondop*—could have been established in the 1320s. Furthermore, the *wihān* facing the *mondop* has characteristics that appear to place it in the early post–Ram Khamhaeng period—giving the same date to the *mondop*, if it is contemporary (Gosling 1996: 120–21). Somewhat strengthening this line of argument is the relationship with Chedi Ku Kut, as noted by Pichard. Evidence of contact with Lamphun in this period can also be found in the style of the letters in the inscriptions on the repoussé sheets uncovered at Phra That Hariphunchai, dated by Hans Pentz to 1325–45 (1988/89: 366) and by Piriya Krairiksh to ca. 1328 (1988/89: 183). (I may have been wrong to have rejected their proposals [1997: 299 n. 35].) If the Wat Si Chum *mondop* really was built before Si Sattha's trip, then Inscription II validates the foundation and shows that even greater ones lay ahead.

The walking Buddhas appearing on the Lamphun sheets bear a relationship to a Mon sculpture discussed by Gutman (2002) in an article that provides a welcome addition to the scanty evidence of stylistic interconnections, Rāmaññadesa and Sukhothai (and Lan Na). It could be conjectured that the scenes of the last ten Jātaka on eleventh-century boundary stones at Thaton (Piriya 1974; Luce 1985:(2) pls. 92–96) had painted counterparts, and that these paintings represented the core tradition (rather than one ultimately Khmer) out of which the Wat Si Chum engravings grew. In such a case facial modeling of a Sri Lankan type and motifs like the conical headdress would be elements absorbed by an extant practice. At any rate, outside the realm of art, connections with Rāmaññadesa are well established, in cosmology (G&P 1973c: 92–99), law (Huxley 1996: 122–25), and the syntax of the Thai language, as seen in Inscription II (Bauer 1993). As for the location of the stupa at “the gathering point of all the Lord's relics” (2.2.18), in the middle of “Lord Kris's city” (2.2.23), insufficient attention has been paid to Rāmaññadesa (Gosling 1981:14–29; National Library 1985: 62). Perhaps it stood in ancient Phan, that is, Martaban (as confirmed in G&P 1973c: 93), an identification with modern Pa-an, fifty kilometers to the north, on the Salween (Prasert 1998: 161; Gutman 2002: 40) not being sustainable. My understanding would be that Si

Sattha saw himself as a reincarnation of a person named Lord Kris (not Krishna himself), who had built the “Śrīdhāṅakatakā,” the great stupa at Amaravati, a somewhat mythical place for Si Sattha, which he may never have actually visited and which had overtones of the Mahabodhi temple, just as Griswold thought (G&P 1972: 123 n. 136).

There is another stylistic element in the Wat Si Chum engravings—one which also seems to lead to insights into the planning of the *mondop* as a whole. This is the Yuan dynasty imperial Buddhist style, as developed in the workshop of the Nepalese artist Aniko. At Wat Si Chum, the link is manifested in the choice of technique, line engraving on stone, a Chinese medium, and in the incorporation of Chinese floral motifs. These motifs would not appear had not their usage been previously validated in Buddhist painting. Traders might have brought copies of the line-woodcut illustrations of the Tripitaka produced in Hangzhou in the early fourteenth century (Weidner and Berger 1994: 306–08), but more was very likely involved, the result either of patronage on the part of traders who were part of a far-flung network, or of diplomatic contacts, such as a tributary mission to the Chinese capital in 1319 (Flood 1969: 227; see also Sen 2006: 305–06). Floral emblems resembling those at Wat Si Chum (though they are scattered, not isolated) appear in murals in the circumambulation corridor of the assembly hall at the Shalu Monastery, Central Tibet (Fig. 2). They are incorporated into scenes of one hundred Jātaka, executed in the Yuan imperial style of the Aniko workshop, between 1306 and 1334 (Vitali 1990: 105–07). It was the understanding of the Third Karmapa Rang byung rdo rje that Aryaśūra, author of the Sanskrit-language Jātaka collection, the *Jātakamālā*, had originally intended to compose one hundred Jātaka, ten for each Buddhist Perfection, but died after writing only thirty-four. Rang byung rdo rje took it upon himself to complete the project, and so he wrote an additional sixty-six himself, and it is these one hundred Jātaka that are depicted in the corridor, left, behind, and right of the assembly hall (Tropper 2001, 2005).

Monks at Wat Si Chum, I suggest, had knowledge of this project, and it informed the design of the *mondop*. The Pāli Jātaka is arranged in chapters of ten, and at least one chapter ending was indicated in the Wat Si Chum inscriptions. What brought synergy to the Thai and Tibetan enterprises was the text important at Pagan and in thirteenth-century Thailand and Cambodia, the Pāli Buddhavamsa, in which the ten perfections (*pāramī*) are listed, prior to the description of the twenty-eight past Buddhas. (The ten perfections also appear in a Mon inscription, found in Bassein, for which an early fourteenth-century date has been proposed [Guillon 1999: 158–59] and may be referred to in Sukhothai Inscription VI (6.3.11–12; G&P 1973a: 165 n. 27].) There must already have been an association between the last ten Jātaka (the Mahānipāta Jātaka) and the individual perfections, as is attested later in Thailand.

The full iconographic program cannot be reconstructed, but surely the Mahānipāta Jātaka were painted on the walls of the staircase-tunnel, and surely the ten perfections were a fundamental aspect in the planning. The passageway was like the circumambulation corridor at Shalu. As a staircase, however, it had another point of reference, namely the staircase leading to a terrace, as in the Mahābodhi temple at Bodhgaya and at all the temples at Pagan that follow this model. Passage from one perfection to the next is also an ascent, and the *mondop* made spiritual progress concrete in three dimensions. This way of looking at the monument also suggests that what was originally intended for a superstructure was a Mahābodhi-like tower.

The suggestions about a planning process and execution in the first half of the thirteenth century cannot be reconciled with Dr. Prasert ๓ Nagara's analysis of the epigraphic evidence (1998: 163–65). True, additional discoveries could alter the conclusions to be drawn from epigraphy; the evidence of the inscription of Wat Kamphaeng Ngam (Sd. 13), 1350 CE, for instance, which apparently has many instances of superscript *a* (*mai han akat*), is not discussed in the cited literature (*Čhāriuk* 1983: 302–08). By and large, however, Dr. Prasert's arguments can only be countered by making different assumptions: that lithic inscriptions represent a very small proportion of what was being written at the time, that hardly anybody thought in terms of improvements or of being up to date, and so that therefore an innovation could circulate for decades before appearing on stone (cf. Penth 1985). Of course exactly the same kind of argument can be made about depictions of the human figure, and that is why my observations will not resolve the issue. Still, all students of the subject will depend mightily on the book edited by Peter Skilling.

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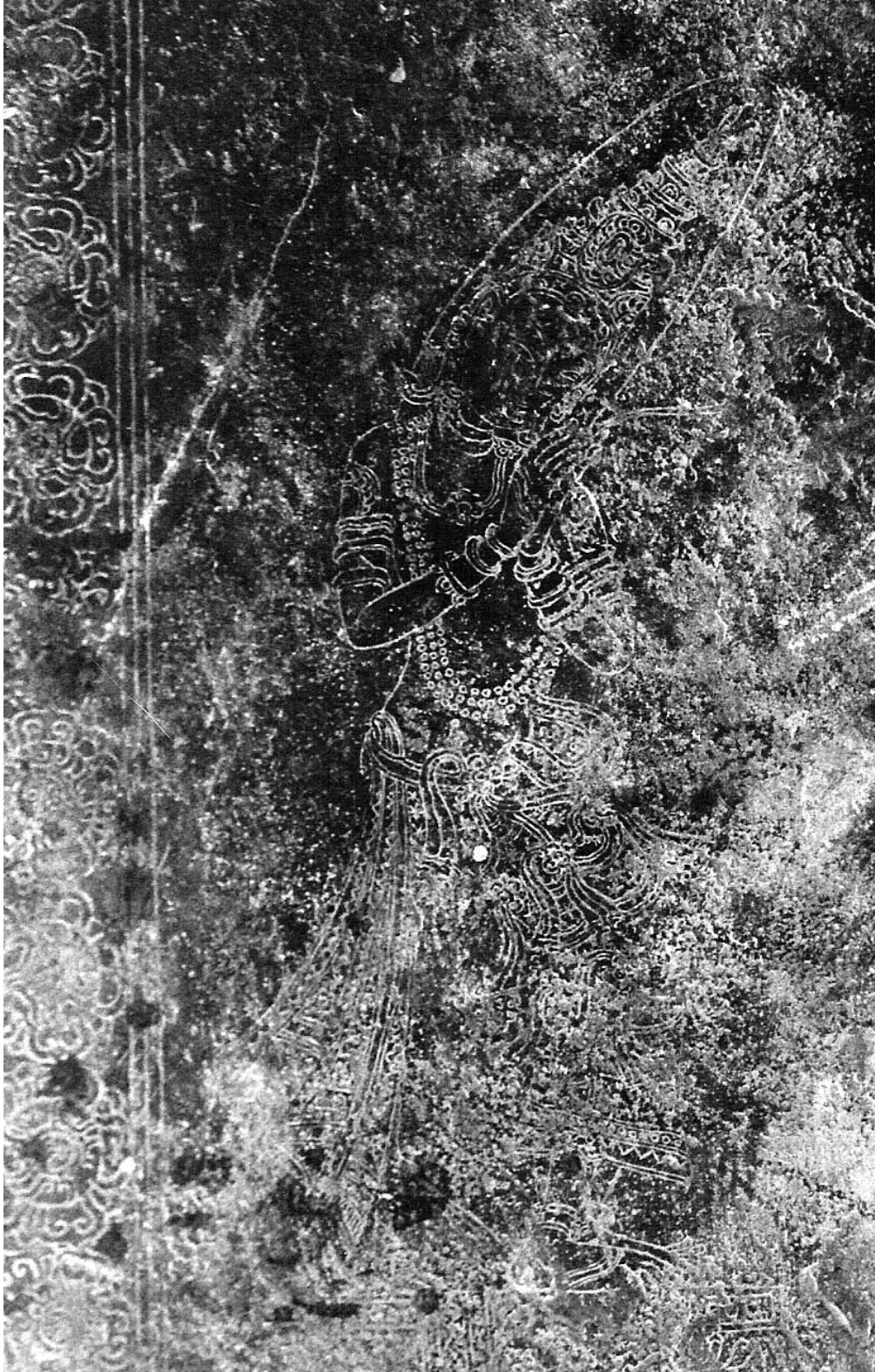


Fig. 1 Engraved footprint, Wat Traphang Thong, Sukhothai. Detail of divine adorant. (Author's photograph)



Fig. 2 Shalu monastery, central Tibet, circumambulation corridor. Detail of mural, showing kneeling adorants and floral motifs. (Photograph by Rob Linrothe)