

# 1. The Sukhothai Historical Park Development Project

## **The regional significance of the Sukhothai kingdom**

### *Historical significance*

A change in the political and artistic climate of South-East Asia evolved in the thirteen and fourteenth centuries, marking a turning point in the history of that region. The major kingdoms such as Kampuchea and Pukam, both of which had enjoyed wide power and were culturally very advanced, had begun to decline, making way for the setting up of younger but stronger civilizations. The new kingdoms born during this time were Lanna, Lanchang, Moh-ta-ma and Sukhothai. The establishment of Theravada Buddhism in Sukhothai, another important change, unified all the people of the Kingdom. This branch of Buddhism, known also as 'Lankawong' Buddhism, was propagated by monks who came from Sri Lanka. The development of this school of Buddhism in South-East Asia during the thirteenth century A.D. coincided with the economic and political development of the region.

In addition to trading and initiating diplomatic relations among themselves, the kingdoms in this region also established relations with the great powers of China and the Middle East. At its height Sukhothai possessed the widest boundaries in the region, had the strongest military power, and was a centre of religious, artistic and literary learning. The kingdom's capital was situated in a culturally strategic position,

for its openness encouraged travellers, most of whom were traders, to pass through, bringing with them the products and ideas of other civilizations. A major reason for the popularity of this capital in South-East Asia was that it was the center of Theravada Buddhist instruction. Monks and citizens from neighbouring kingdoms such as Lanna, Prae and Lanchang often journeyed here to study religion, Sukhothai soon became a cultural centre and travellers came from as far as Lawo (Kampuchea), Suphannaphoum, Nakorn Sri Thammarat and Moh-ta-ma to exchange ideas and techniques. After Sukhothai's fall and submission to the kingdom of Ayudhya, it continued to be a spiritual centre for many years. This fact is substantiated by descriptions engraved on Sukhothai stone tablets.

The first Sukhothai dynasty (before the kingdom became independent from Khmer rulers) ended in the reign of Poh Khun Sri Nao Nam Thom. The Phra Ruang dynasty began in the reign of King Sri Intraditya. During the reign of his son, Ramkamhaeng, Sukhothai's boundaries expanded into a vast empire covering the entire area of present-day Thailand. This king governed his people in much the same way as a father governs his children; the aim of his government was to rule the citizens with justice. Ramkamhaeng was the first king

to establish and patronize Theravada Buddhism, and he adhered closely to the rules and regulations of that religion, encouraging his people to study the scriptures and to listen to the teachings of the monks on sabbath days. By adapting the Mon and Khmer scripts, he invented the Thai alphabet and in 1292 he wrote the first Thai stone inscription upon which much of the present restorations are based. In addition to this, he established firm trade relations with other kingdoms. (He never levied any taxes on trade.)

King Mahathammaraja Lithai, Ramkamhaeng's grandson, was a generous patron of the arts, and during his reign the arts of sculpture and architecture reached their height. Unfortunately, later generations of Sukhothai kings were unable to maintain their power and by the end of the fourteenth century the kingdom surrendered to an attack by soldiers from the kingdom of Ayudhya and became incorporated into that kingdom. Although it was now Ayudhya's vassal state, Sukhothai still retained its role as a spiritual and cultural center. By now, Sukhothai's art style had become influenced by the heavier style of the more worldly Ayudhya kingdom.

#### *Culture and religion*

Sukhothai was a model capital city of its time. Beside housing government buildings and religious institutions, the city was also the centre of trade and communications. The Buddhist, animistic and Brahminic ceremonies and festivals mentioned in the stone inscriptions were all held here. The existence of Brahminic shrines, such as those at Wat phai Luang, Sam Ta Pa Daeng and Wat Sri Sawai, indicates that the major religion before the advent of Theravada Buddhism was

Brahminism. Religious practices before Sukhothai's independence were probably modelled after those in neighbouring Kampuchea and composed of a mixture of Brahminism, Mahayana Buddhism and animism. By the time of the Phra Ruang Dynasty, Sri Lanka-inspired Buddhist structures had mushroomed all over the city. The lotus-bud *chedi* (a tall square-based stupa topped by the shape of the lotus bud, symbolic of the Buddhist faith), an invention of Sukhothai architects, now predominated in temple architecture. Thousands of Buddha images were cast in every shape and size, for it was believed that those who brought about the casting of a Buddha image would gain merit. Large bronze Buddha images such as Phra Buddha Sihinka (the image presented to the Thais by the Sri Lankans), Phra Buddha Chinarat, Phra Sri Sakyamuni and Phra Buddha Chinses were and still are national treasures revered by Thais.

According to a stone inscription, at one time the Supreme Patriarch of the Mon kingdom was invited to reside in Sukhothai to teach the scriptures to the kings; at another, Sukhothai monks travelled to the kingdom of Lanna to spread the word of the Buddha. King Mahathammaraja Lithai, the most pious of Sukhothai kings, did much to promote the Buddhist religion, encouraging his people to gain merit and to observe Buddhist rites. A great number of temples were built during this king's reign and today their ruins are situated both within and outside the ancient city walls.

The temples of Sukhothai can be divided into three categories:

Aranwasee temples, which were built a short distance outside the city towards the west for monks who wished to practise meditation. Temples in this category

include Wat Aranyik and Wat Saphan Hin.

Kamawasee temples, which were built mostly for the public. Religious ceremonies were often conducted there.

Nakornwasee temples, which were usually built by the nobility within the vicinity of the city. According to general belief, Wat Mahathat, a Nakornwasee temple, was the centre of the universe. Here, people of all classes gathered to receive Buddhist instruction and to participate in religious ceremonies.

#### *Sociology and technology*

The ancient city of Sukhothai followed a very advanced city plan, with the agricultural and industrial areas clearly separated from each other. The city was surrounded by three earthen walls, separated from one another by a moat which in ancient days provided the citizens living within the walls with full protection. Water dykes scattered outside these walls channelled water from higher areas for use in the city; canals were used as drainage. Large ponds in the middle of the city stored the major part of the water supply as they do today.

Archaeological evidence shows that an ancient road, the Phra Ruang Road, which was formerly lined on either side by a canal connected ancient Sukhothai to all the major northern cities of the kingdom. The flat rice-farming areas in the north-east were irrigated by canals and by water dykes which channelled water from the Mae Lamphum Canal. Ceramic production was a major industry in Sukhothai and today the remains of the kilns where these ceramics were fired are situated north of the city. The ceramic ware included dishes, bowls, cups, dolls, ceramic tiles (used as water pipes) and a variety of building materi-

als. These ceramics constituted a major export item and were transported by junk to places as far away as Indonesia, Japan, and the Philippines. The surviving bronze Buddha images attest to the Sukhothai craftsmen's skill in metallurgy. In addition to the casting of sacred sculptures, household utensils such as knives, cups and tools were also cast in metal, but only for local consumption.

#### **Thailand's artistic heritage**

According to a stone inscription found in Ayudhya many years after Sukhothai's fall, the Ayudhyan king Naresuan brought an army to perform an important ceremony called Phiphat Satya at Wat Sri Choum in Sukhothai, affirming Sukhothai's continued importance in matters regarding religion. As vassals of Ayudhya, the citizens of Sukhothai gradually left their homes to help fight Ayudhya's war against Burma, which lasted for about two hundred years. By the beginning of the 16th century all of Sukhothai's inhabitants had migrated to Ayudhya on orders of the Ayudhyan king. Sukhothai became overrun by the jungle and its beautiful structures were left to waste away with time.

In the 18th century King Rama I moved many Buddha images in the ancient sites of Sukhothai to the major temples in Bangkok. The king's interest in Sukhothai sparked a revival of Sukhothai studies among the people. The artefacts which he 'recovered' from the jungle became recognized for their artistic value and soon copies of Sukhothai sculpture were newly cast for modern day worshippers. New knowledge of the Sukhothai civilization from stone inscriptions - the making of the Thai alphabet, the Lankawong school of Buddhism, the 'Triphoum Phra Ruang' in-

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structions in verse and the prevailing system of government - have helped to reveal some of the thought patterns of the Sukhothai people. For the first time, the Thais of the Bangkok Period (18th to 19th centuries) began to realize that their cultural origin and heritage lay in the ancient civilization of Sukhothai.

#### **Reasons for the establishment of the Sukhothai Historical Park**

A hundred and twenty-six ancient structures numerous ponds, dams, reservoirs and ancient kiln sites comprise the Sukhothai Historical park. Damage caused by time, and more recently by treasure - hunters and local settlers who live amid the archaeological remains, has threatened its very existence. If the government had not placed the 70 square kilometres of land under its protection, the continued use of tractors and cranes for agricultural and industrial purposes in nearby areas would have led to the total destruction of this historical city. In order to stop its rapid decay, the restoration team has conducted much archaeological surveying and research. The staff will ensure the upkeep of all the ancient sites in Sukhothai, and only the architectural structures which are about to disintegrate completely will be restored. To restore a whole city, organized and co-ordinated planning is essential.

The project plans can be divided into two parts: (1) the restoration of ancient sites and (2) the planning and design of the landscape. The aim is to restore the historical atmosphere of the ancient city as well as to provide an efficient system of public facilities for the convenience of tourists and sightseers. While implementing these plans, the economic and social well-being of the ancient city's present inhabitants will be a major consideration.