Political Landscapes of Capital Cities

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In *The Political Landscape*, Adam T. Smith convincingly argues for due recognition of the natural landscape in the formation of early complex polities by drawing on multiple references to the Classic Maya, Urartian, and Mesopotamian cultures.¹ The natural landscape and specifically bodies of water were also critical in the formation of the political landscapes in Asia, including the modern geobody of Thailand. Of the over ninety rivers (*maenam*), tributary rivers, and canals (*khlong*) in Thailand, only two are considered principal river systems: the Chaopraya and the Mekong (figure 4.1).² The Chaopraya River has long been a focus for cultural, religious, and political activity in Thailand and is seen as life affirming, providing fish for nourishment and water for agriculture. Along the banks of the river lie a number of ancient and modern capital cities including two of the most powerful and long lasting Siamese kingdoms and capital cities in Thai history:⁴ Ayutthaya (1351–1767) and Bangkok (1782–present).⁵

This chapter examines the dynamic relationship between Bangkok and its geopolitical setting in the late eighteenth century. Following Smith’s understanding of the formation of political authority in and through landscape, which is at the same time coherent and distinct from neighboring polities,⁶ the formation of Bangkok as a political unit in space is highlighted through the city’s geographic location along the Chaopraya River and the construction of the capital’s symbolic and political seat of power, the Grand

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² Beyond the Ashes

³ The Making of Bangkok as the Capital City of Siam

⁴ Melody Rod-ari

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⁷ The Making of Bangkok as the Capital City of Siam

⁸ Melody Rod-ari
Figure 4.1. Map of Central Siam. (From John M. Echols Collection, Cornell University Library; image in public domain source)
This essay argues that both were carefully chosen to emulate the former capital city of Ayutthaya. Examination of the Grand Palace in Bangkok, remnants of the former Grand Palace in Ayutthaya, and royal chronicles illustrates that there was a concerted effort by King Rama I (r. 1782–1809), the founder of Bangkok and the Chakri dynasty, and his advisors to create a direct link between Bangkok and the former capital. This link was both symbolic and actual, which is demonstrated by the physical layout of Bangkok, the architectural similarity of both Grand Palaces, as well as King Rama I’s reuse of building materials from Ayutthaya. As Smith also highlights in his study of the dynamics between urbanism and regime, the desire to create such an apparent linkage between the two cities is twofold. First, by reusing and thereby erasing remnants of the former capital and then recreating it in Bangkok, King Rama I was able to create a narrative by which his capital city came to represent the most reliable link to Siam’s ancient past. Second, by creating a continuous link between the two royal cities, King Rama I was able to reduce the reign of his predecessor, King Taksin (r. 1768–1782), in the capital city of Thonburi, to a dynastic interlude.

The spatial depth of the capital city extended beyond the city limits, and beyond the kingdom itself, as the royal-administrative and religious institutions closely intertwined and became standardized. This process depended on the assemblage of important Buddhist icons in Bangkok during the reign of King Rama I, and most specifically on the Emerald Buddha icon (figure 4.2). The Emerald Buddha is considered the most religiously potent and sacred Buddhist image in Thailand and arguably in the whole of mainland Southeast Asia. Today, the icon is enshrined in the Temple of the Emerald Buddha (Wat Phra Kaew), which is located within the grounds of the Grand Palace in Bangkok. Its enshrinement within the palace complex is significant for several reasons, but most important is the sacred geography that is attached to the icon. Prior to its enshrinement in Bangkok, the icon is purported to have been installed in important Buddhist centers in South and Southeast Asia: India, Sri Lanka, Burma, Cambodia, Laos, and several different Thai kingdoms, including Ayutthaya. Its current enshrinement in Bangkok therefore implies the city’s position as a center for Theravada Buddhism and for Buddhist learning.

This chapter thus reduces the complexity of the actual city and focuses on two essential architectural and visual elements that comprised the essence of the political apparatus, which King Rama I employed in the creation of Bangkok: the Grand Palace, as the ruler’s residence and seat of government, and the statue of the Emerald Buddha, as the preeminent symbol of the
Buddhist religion and the most sacred palladium a Buddhist king could possess. Ultimately, this research aims to demonstrate King Rama I’s desire to elevate the status of Bangkok and his own political prestige, and, to accomplish that, his use of the most important royal and religious symbols available to him: the Grand Palace in Ayutthaya and the Emerald Buddha, which had been transferred from Thonburi. By dismantling both from their original sites and reinstituting them in Bangkok, King Rama I made clear his political ambitions and his objective to situate his capital city at the center of Siam and the Theravada Buddhist world.

BEFORE BANGKOK: THE FALL OF AYUTTHAYA AND THE RISE OF THONBURI

The Siamese Kingdom of Ayutthaya was founded by an ethnically Thai/Chinese merchant named U-Thong, who adopted the title of King Ramathibodi (r. 1351–1369) upon his accession to the throne in 1351. The capital city of this kingdom was originally founded at the convergence of three rivers—the Chaopraya, Pasak and Lopburi—where a settlement called Ayutthaya had existed from the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries. The city’s location was
chosen for its importance as a port and because of the fertile land and abundant fishing made available by the three rivers. Moreover, by digging canals that connected to the rivers, urban planners could manipulate the geography of the city, so that by the seventeenth century the capital was a moat-encircled island that measured 15 km in circumference (figure 4.3). This moat provided protection from invasion as well as easy access to local, regional, and international maritime trade. Moreover, Ayutthaya (as it came to be called) is located some 110 km from the Gulf of Siam, which allowed the court to monitor and control shipping as vessels had to go up river, which was an advantage in both trade and warfare.

Ayutthaya remained a powerful force in the Maenam Chaopraya Basin for over four hundred years. In that time it became an important maritime trading center and religious center for Buddhist learning. The kingdom was able to grow and thrive because of astute rulers who were both tactical politicians and strategic military generals. Regionally, rulers had an expansionist policy, using both military power and diplomacy to overtake the Sukhothai Kingdom to the north and the Angkor Empire to the east. By the sixteenth century,
much of modern-day Thailand and parts of Laos, the Malay Peninsula, and Cambodia had become vassals to Ayutthaya. Internationally, Ayutthaya was very open to commercial trade and had relations with India, East Asia (China and Japan), the Middle East (Ottoman Turkey and Safavid Persia), and Europe (Portugal, Spain, Holland, and France). Its pro-trade policy brought great wealth to its kings and its inhabitants. During the reign of King Narai (r. 1658–1688), ambassadors from the French court of King Louis XIV described one of Narai’s public appearances in this way:

He [King Narai] was clothed in a rich cloth of gold set with precious stones. He wore a white cap ending in a point, encompassed with a ring of gold all flowered and set thick with precious stones. The King’s boat was gilt as low as the water, and rowed by six-force waterman [oarsman], who wore upon their heads a kind of toque covered with plates of gold, and their stomachs adorned in the same manner.

For all of its success and wealth, the Ayutthaya Kingdom was politically vulnerable due to the administrative organization of the kingdom itself. Ayutthaya was not a unified state; instead, it consisted of a network of self-governing principalities and tributaries who pledged their allegiance to the king. This type of system, which Charles Higham has termed a mandala system, worked best during times of prosperity and calm. However, it proved to be especially fragile during periods of royal succession. The result often led to local rulers and dignitaries jockeying for power and the fracturing of the king’s network of alliances. By the eighteenth century, Ayutthaya gradually lost control over its provinces, which proved to be an important factor in its final defeat and destruction by the Burmese in April of 1767.

With no king or heir apparent to take over the throne of Ayutthaya, local nobles and military generals positioned themselves to reclaim the kingdom and begin anew. A military general by the name of Taksin restored independence to Siam from the Burmese through a series of tactical alliances and claimed the throne for himself. Within a year of the fall of Ayutthaya, Taksin had reconstituted the territories under the former kingdom and by December of 1768 was the reigning monarch of Siam. He declared his military headquarters, Thonburi, to be the new kingdom of Siam and its capital city.

The decision to relocate the capital to Thonburi rather than to rebuild in Ayutthaya was due to the devastation exacted on the former capital as well as Thonburi’s distance from Ayutthaya, and therefore its perceived safety from future Burmese attacks. Thonburi’s proximity to the open waters also made it more suitable for commerce. The Thonburi Period was short lived; it
began and ended with King Taksin’s reign from 1768 to 1782. The king’s short tenure has traditionally been blamed on his despotic and erratic behavior, in addition to his disrespect for conventionalized Buddhist hierarchy. More recent scholarship has attributed King Taksin’s political fall to his inability to appease military generals, elite nobles, and the Buddhist clergy. Discontent with King Taksin’s rule resulted in a coup d’état that ended with his dethronement and execution. The king was perceived as a continued threat, as he still had powerful allies; it was therefore decided that Taksin must be disposed of. On April 10, 1782, King Taksin’s execution was ordered by his longtime friend and the future king of Siam, General Chao Phraya Chakri (King Rama I). Following the king’s death, Chao Phraya seized the throne and the capital city of Thonburi.

THE FOUNDING OF BANGKOK’S LONG-LASTING POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

Upon assuming the throne, General Chao Phraya Chakri as King Rama I moved the capital to Bangkok, which is situated on the east bank of the Chaopraya River and across from Thonburi. The reasons for moving the capital from the west bank to the east bank are multifold. First, by moving across the river the king could start afresh, as there was more land available for constructing administrative buildings and his royal residence. His predecessor’s palace was, by traditional standards, not fit for a king. Taksin’s modest, timber palace, probably a temporary structure, was located on a narrow plot of land in between two temples (Wat Arun and Wat Tha), which prohibited future expansion. As the king’s residence served as both the symbolic and actual seat of power for the monarch, a lavish and grand palace was needed. Second, it was believed that crossing the river would make Burmese attack that much more difficult, as troops would not only have to navigate the land but would also be forced to cross the Chaopraya before reaching the capital city. Third, the digging of canals along the Chaopraya and Tajin Rivers would fortify the city in the same fashion as the moat-encircled island of Ayutthaya (figure 4.4). The strategic location of Bangkok was already well known during the Ayutthaya Period by locals and foreigners alike. A Dutch trader and head of the Dutch Factory in Ayutthaya named Jeremias Van Vliet described Bangkok in this way in 1638:

Bangkok is a small walled town situated on the river [Chaopraya] about seven [Dutch] miles from the sea and amidst fertile fields. The rivers Maenam
[Chaopraya] and Taatsyn [Tajin] meet at this point. Around the town there are many houses and rich farms. Bangkok is strong by nature and can easily be fortified. In case the little town should be taken, fortified, and kept by a prince, the supply of salt and fruits to the town of Judia [Ayutthaya] would be prevented. Also, all navigation on sea and passage of the Moors from Tannassary [Burma] would be cut off.²⁵

King Rama I was well aware of the “little town’s” potential as a new center of political power, whose economic and political scale went beyond its physical dimensions. While in Western European ideology size and mapping played an important role in the analytical understanding of political authority,²⁶ King Rama I recognized the potential to use his own tectonic authority in creating the experiential, perceptual, and imagined spatial dimensions of the capital,

**Figure 4.4. Map of Kingdom of Siam. (From John M. Echols Collection, Cornell University Library; image in public domain)**
culturally defined, transformed, and standardized, and then located on the
world map. In other words, as Smith has empirically demonstrated in exam-
pies of early complex polities, the primary city was not necessarily related to
its physical size, demographics, or economic network. Instead, what mattered
more in the case of Bangkok was its relative proximity to the previous two cap-
itals, and the re-creation of recognizable urban and sacred forms that would
have invoked in their shape and spatial relations a desired response from its
subjects and competitive neighbors, who would in turn recognize Bangkok as
the new capital. Moreover, like Van Vliet, King Rama I was well aware of the
“little town’s” potential to be formally demarcated and fortified. Canals were
dug in the early years of his reign, connecting them to the Chaopraya and
Tajin Rivers, creating Rattankosin Island. This urban intervention afforded
the king the ability to protect his city but also gave him an additional oppor-
tunity to model Bangkok after Ayutthaya.

Although Ayutthaya had ceased to be the center of Siamese politics for
fifteen years, memories of its glorious past were still very fresh in the minds
of King Rama I and his court. Up to this point, there was no other kingdom
in the Maenam Chaopraya Basin that had as much wealth, prestige, and his-
tory. Thonburi was not only short lived but was also tainted by King Taksin’s
legacy. It therefore made sense for King Rama I to look to Ayutthaya as
a model for the staging of his kingdom and capital city. A member of the
Chakri dynasty, HRH Prince Chula Chakrabongse, states: “As in everything
else, Rama I’s wish was not to create a new type of city, but as far as possible
to restore Ayutthaya. Experts who had known the details of the old capital
were called in, so that all of the traditions of the monasteries and palaces
would be preserved.”

One of the first overtures King Rama I made to “restore” Ayutthaya took
place during his first coronation on April 6th, 1782, with the adoption of the
title King Ramathibodi. Significantly, the name Ramathibodi was the same
title used by the founder of the Ayutthaya Kingdom in the fourteenth century.
Among a myriad of reasons why Rama I chose to adopt the name Ramathibodi,
perhaps the most significant was that it created an ancestral link between him
and the founder of Ayutthaya, albeit by name only, as Rama I could not claim
direct descent from the Ayutthaya royal line.

Like the title of King Ramathibodi, the official title for Bangkok also
recalled the former kingdom and capital city. Prior to its establishment as
the capital city of Siam, Bangkok was an old settlement known as Bang-kok
(“water hamlet of the wild plum tree”). In 1786, King Rama I gave the city a
new name, one befitting its royal status.
Krung Thep Mahanakhon Amon Rattanakosin Mahintharayuththaya Mahadilok Phop Noppharat Ratchathani Burirom Udomratchaniwet Mahasathan Amon Phiman Awatan Sathit Sakkathattiya Witsanukam Prasit,

or

The City of Angels, Great City, the Residence of the Emerald Buddha, the Great city of God Indra, Ayutthaya, the World Endowed with Nine Precious Gems, the Happy City Abounding in Great Royal Palaces which resemble the Heavenly Abode wherein dwell the Reincarnated Gods, A City Given by Indra and built by Vishnukarn.

The title was changed for the king’s second coronation ceremony and blessing for the capital, which coincided with the completion of the entire Grand Palace complex. The year 1786 was also when King Rama I was recognized by the Chinese emperor Qianlong. Chinese acceptance of Siam and particularly of King Rama I as its ruler was of great importance to the king. Not only was China an important regional economic and political power, but by the eighteenth century it had reached its own territorial and political peak under the theological and political ideology of the “Great Unity.” The Great Unity centered on the idea that the emperor embodied the vast territories of China and that the world should be a place in which everyone and everything is in harmony and at peace. This vision of the world relates to the pan-Indian Chakravartin ideal whereby the political power and spiritual influence of the Chakravartin, or Universal World Ruler, extends to the entire known world. The Chakravartin ideal is invoked in the official title for Bangkok.

The official title for Bangkok is also important for several reasons. As previously mentioned, the title invokes the former capital of Ayutthaya, for obvious reasons: legitimacy and antiquity. Emphasis was also placed on important religious and political symbols such as the Emerald Buddha and the “Nine Precious Jewels.” The inclusion of the Emerald Buddha icon in the title is intended to suggest the importance of Bangkok as a center for Buddhism. The mention of the “Nine Precious Jewels” is intended to evoke the Chakravartin. Texts, which include the *Ratanabimbavamsa, Jinakālimālipakaranam, Amarakatabuddharupindāna*, and the *Traiphum Phra Ruang*, make clear that a ruler who is in the possession of these jewels is a Chakravartin. The inclusion of the jewels in the city’s title, therefore, signifies its function as the home of the Chakravartin, while at the same time identifying the King of Siam as a Universal World Ruler.

What this new title suggests is that by 1786, only four years into his reign, King Rama I was no longer satisfied with just restoring Ayutthaya in
Bangkok. Instead, the king wanted to situate his kingdom and capital city in a conceptually larger world, one that included his recognized status by other powerful rulers such as Emperor Qianlong of China. To this end, the king made sure that his residence had all the political and religious trappings of a Chakravartin.

**THE GRAND PALACE COMPLEX OF RAMA I**

Upon accession to the throne, King Rama I quickly undertook the job of constructing his place of residence. Indianized Southeast Asian states such as Angkor, Pagan, Sukhothai, Ayutthaya, Thonburi, and Bangkok believed that the royal seat of power, typically, the king’s residence, was the political and religious center of any kingdom. To this end, it was important for the king to have such an institution in place. When it came time to construct his residence, the king looked to the Grand Palace in Ayutthaya as his model.

Construction of the Grand Palace began on May 6, 1782. The palace is located on the east side of Bangkok along the banks of the Chaopraya River. The location for the palace was chosen to mimic the architectural layout of the Grand Palace complex in Ayutthaya and its particular arrangement within the former capital. Both palace complexes are located along the banks of the Chaopraya River, facing north with the river to the west and a main road to the east. In addition, the city walls of both kings’ capital cities are located along the river and also function as the palace walls. Moreover, the architecture, size, plan and structures within the Grand Palace in Bangkok roughly correspond to those at the Grand Palace in Ayutthaya.

At the time of construction, King Rama I had parceled out about fifty-three acres of land to be used for his new residence and administrative offices, corresponding to the same acreage of the Grand Palace complex in Ayutthaya. And like its Ayutthaya archetype, the Grand Palace in Bangkok is divided into four sections, each representing a different function to its courtly users. The northeastern section of the grounds is filled with the religious buildings and monuments associated with the Temple of the Emerald Buddha. To the south of the temple, the Grand Palace grounds are taken up by the once royally occupied residences of the king and his consorts, referred to as the “inner palace.” To the west of the inner palace is a section referred to as the “inner court.” Here, meeting and ceremonial halls are located; these structures are still used for administrative and royal functions of the court. Directly north of the Temple of the Emerald Buddha is the “outer court,” which was reserved for military and civil administrative offices.
Much of what is known about Ayutthaya-Period art and architecture is based on the visual culture of the Thonburi and early Bangkok Periods, which reflects a direct and continued artistic style from the former capital. While most scholarship attributes the destruction of the former capital city to victorious Burmese troops in 1767, archaeological and historical evidence suggests that much of the former kingdom’s plundering took place during the rebuilding of the Siamese Kingdom under the reign of King Rama I. Construction materials such as bricks were reclaimed to build Bangkok’s city walls and buildings.40 Again, HRH Prince Chula Chakrabongse states: “For reasons of economy and to save unnecessary labor, what was left of the walls and buildings of Ayutthaya were pulled down and the fine old bricks brought down the river for rebuilding.”41

While there is a certain degree of practicality for the reuse of these materials, there must have also been a desire to make a physical link between the once great capital city of Ayutthaya and that of the new capital, Bangkok.42 By physically erasing the royal buildings and structures of Ayutthaya, Rama I could claim that his capital city and royal seat of power was the most reliable and authentic link to Siam’s glorious past. At the same time, by plundering the fallen sites, the king was ensuring that no one else could use them for their own purposes. Moreover, as Maurizio Peleggi has commented, “by articulating spatially the claim to continuity between the Chakri’s city [Bangkok] and Ayutthaya, Taksin’s fifteen year reign was reduced to a dynastic interlude.”43 Indeed, like Ayutthaya, Thonburi’s city walls were destroyed during King Rama I’s reign so that the bricks could be used for new buildings and structures in Bangkok.44 Today, the few remnants of Taksin’s palace include an open air throne-hall, which has become a part of the Royal Thai Navy offices, and a mural of the palace in Wat Apian. Furthermore, in regards to written history, the most complete dynastic chronicles regarding the Ayutthaya Period are dated to the early Bangkok Period.45 It is said that historical records, religious texts, and classical literature of the Ayutthaya Period were mostly lost during the Burmese invasion. The reliability of these later documents is of course to be suspected.

A CASE STUDY: THE ROYAL CHAPELS OF Ayutthaya AND BANGKOK

To compare the Grand Palaces of both Ayutthaya and Bangkok is difficult because what remains in detail of the Grand Palace in Ayutthaya is scant. It was customary in Siam to have residences, even royal ones, built of wood,
whereas religious buildings were constructed of brick. For this reason, the royal chapel at Ayutthaya (Wat Phra Sri Sanpetch), which is built of stone and brick, remains sufficiently intact to compare in some detail with the royal chapel in Bangkok (Temple of the Emerald Buddha). Royal chapels are temples located in residential complexes used primarily by the king and his court. They consist of several buildings and monuments. This discussion focuses on the ordination halls located in both royal chapels.

Buildings and structures at the Temple of the Emerald Buddha, dating to King Rama I’s reign, were modeled after those found in Ayutthaya. It is recorded in the *Dynastic Chronicles of the First Reign* that the king looked to Wat Phra Sri Sanpetch for inspiration. “A royal palace audience hall was constructed within the palace grounds and was, at the king’s personal order, done in the style of the Sanpetch Hall at the old capital of Ayutthaya.”

The ordination hall at the Temple of the Emerald Buddha is the oldest and best-preserved structure at the temple and thus can be used as an example of how Ayutthaya-style architecture was copied and later adapted during the early Bangkok Period (figure 4.5). In examining the ordination hall, one can point out several architectural similarities between it and what remains of the ordination hall at Wat Phra Sri Sanpetch (figure 4.6). First, the shape of the ordination hall in the Temple of the Emerald Buddha is rectangular and is single storied. The extant foundation of the ordination hall at Wat Phra Sri Sanpetch also suggests that it was a rectangular single-storied structure. The shape of both structures was no doubt dictated by their functions, which was to allow large numbers of mostly royal worshippers to make merit in front of the temple’s main icon. Second, the ordination hall in the Temple of the Emerald Buddha rests on a platform with steps similar to its archetype at Wat Phra Sri Sanpetch. Third, both structures have porches and ambulatory paths, which are made by a series of columns that act as the supports for the structures’ roofs.

While the walls and architectural decoration of the ordination hall at Wat Phra Sri Sanpetch are no longer extant, it is possible to imagine that they once resembled those of the ordination hall at the Temple of the Emerald Buddha. The current architectural decorations found on the exterior of the ordination hall date to the reign of King Rama III (Phra Nang Klao; r. 1824–1851). This does not, however, suggest that the motifs deviated from Rama I’s original designs. Prior to the glass and ceramic tile decoupage added during the third reign, the ordination hall was partially covered in red lacquer and gilt motifs similar to those found on parts of the structure today. This motif was invented during the Ayutthaya Period and is called kanok. It is difficult to say with great certainty that the walls of the ordination hall at Wat Phra Sri Sanpetch also had similarly
detailed decorations, painted or otherwise. It is likely that the walls were white-washed, as is typical of most temple structures in Siamese Buddhist architecture. Beyond the *kanok* motif that decorates the exterior walls of the ordination hall other Ayutthaya artistic influences can also be seen, including the three-tiered roof and inlaid mother-of-pearl doors. Both can be clearly linked to the art and architecture of the Ayutthaya Period. Extant pillars and walls at the site of Wat Phra Sri Sanpetch indicate that they once supported the weight of a multitiered roof, as the columns and height of walls are not congruent. The multitiered roof design does not have any real functional value. A single-tiered roof could still easily allow for the construction of covered porticos and porches. Likewise, the height of the interior space would not be compromised by the usage of a single-tiered roof, as the second and third tiers would have been added atop the first roof. The decision to make use of the multitiered roof was no doubt aesthetic, as it emphasizes the verticality of the structure and thus its closeness to the heavens.
The doors of the ordination hall at the Temple of the Emerald Buddha are also reminiscent of Ayutthaya artistic style. They are made of wood and decorated with inlaid mother-of-pearl designs depicting mythical creatures of Himavamsa Forest. While these doors were made during King Rama I’s time, there is evidence to suggest that they were directly modeled after Ayutthaya examples; specifically, two mother-of-pearl inlaid doors are now located on the image halls, Wiharn Yod and Ho Phra Monthien Tham, within the Temple of the Emerald Buddha complex. The doors currently at Wiharn Yod are known to have been made during the reign of King Borommakot (r. 1732–1758) and were taken from Wat Pa Mok. Likewise, the doors at Ho Phra Monthien Tham also date to the reign of King Borommakot and were taken from Wat Boromaputharam. In examining the doors to both Wiharn Yod and Ho Phra Monthien Tham and those from the ordination hall, we see that all three utilize the kanok motif of stylized foliage while incorporating mythical creatures such as dragons and birds. All three examples also include diamond-shaped door handles, which depict a throne enshrining the Phra Ong (character or symbol for the Buddha), flanked by two crowns and held up by a simian figure.

In addition to the architecture and decorations of the ordination hall, eight towers (prang) were also commissioned by King Rama I for the temple...
complex and reflect clear Ayutthaya-Period influence. The *prang-tower*, characterized by its composite *cella-sikhara* form, is a Phi-Mai invention that dates to the twelfth century. Under the Ayutthaya kings, the patron-age of *prang-towers* became well-established by the mid-fifteenth century and a revival of their construction took place during the reign of King Borommakot. While there are few prang-towers on the grounds of Wat Phra Sri Sanpetch today, extant foundations suggest that a number of such structures once existed. It is quite possible that the bricks used to make the *prang-towers* were taken to form new buildings and walls in Bangkok, as the only intact structures at Wat Phra Sri Sanpetch consist of *chedi*. The *chedi* is the Thai equivalent of the Buddhist stupa, and like the stupa, it holds relics of the Buddha or deceased members of the royal family. It is therefore disrespectful to remove such monuments, unlike the *prang-towers*, which function as platforms for icons.

It is clear in examining the founding of Bangkok that King Rama I had every intention of restoring the glories of Ayutthaya in his kingdom. His decision to re-create the palace and royal chapel of Ayutthaya in Bangkok were not the only actions he took toward achieving this goal. He also sought to reinstitute Ayutthaya ecclesiastical life, court ceremonies, and legislation. However, the king was not simply reinstituting such laws and ceremonies at face value. He was, in fact, altering them to fit the ideological and political positions of his court. As David Wyatt observes:

> The court ceremonials were “carried out as [in the time of] King Borommakot,” but with their Buddhist elements and values enhanced and Brahmanical and animistic elements diminished. Similarly, the old Ayutthaya laws were reaffirmed but they were systematically organized along lines of traditional Indian law and purged of anything the king considered not to be “in accordance with justice.”

In adopting the glories of Ayutthaya and its memory as his rallying cry, Rama I justified his policies as king. And by dismantling parts of Ayutthaya’s political seat of power and recreating it in his own kingdom, King Rama I ensured his monopoly on how Ayutthaya would be remembered. With very little left of the royal structures at Ayutthaya and its texts destroyed, who could contest the king and his version of the truth?

While most historians point to the foundation of Bangkok and the Chakri dynasty and its successes as King Rama I’s greatest legacy, he should also be remembered as the king who brought the Emerald Buddha to Siam and enshrined it in Bangkok.
THE EMERALD BUDDHA AND ITS SACRED GEOGRAPHY

The Emerald Buddha is a statuette that portraits the historical Buddha Shakyamuni, clothed in gold and seated under a five-tiered throne; it is some 66 cm (26 inches) tall and is sculpted from an unknown green stone (figure 4.2). Although the icon itself is quite unassuming, its perceived powers are of epic proportions. The Emerald Buddha is the royal and religious palladium of Thailand. As one of the jewels of the Chakravartin, it is also arguably the most sacred Buddhist icon in mainland Southeast Asia.

The Emerald Buddha came to have such significance through a series of textual narratives that described its sacred origins and history. These chronicles, which include the Ratanaśīkasantavamsa, Jinakālimālipakaranam, and Amarakatakatabuddharupindāna, explain that the Emerald Buddha was fashioned from the Chakravartin’s wish-granting jewel so that the image came to embody potent symbols of Buddhism and kingship through its form and medium.

The chronicles explain that the crafting of the icon was intended to preserve the teachings of the Buddha after his parinībīna (final nirvana). With the help of the god Indra and the celestial architect and craftsman Vishnukarn, a jewel belonging to the Universal World Ruler was secured by the monk Nagasena in 44 CE. During this same date, Vishnukarn carved the jewel into the likeness of the Buddha in the Devo heaven (heaven of celestial beings), and proceeded to descend to the ancient Buddhist capital of Pataliputra, India, where the king prepared offerings to the image in the monastery of King Asoka. It is here that the chronicles begin to diverge on matters of the Emerald Buddha’s movements through important South and Southeast Asian cities. While a good part of the chronicles are fictional, accounts of events dating from the fifteenth century onwards are quite precise and parallel events that took place in history, suggesting that the Emerald Buddha was actually crafted in the Kingdom of Lanna (northern Thailand) in the fifteenth century. Moreover, a stylistic analysis of the Emerald Buddha indicates that it is dated to the first half of the fifteenth century.

Furthermore, the chronicles also describe the travels of the Emerald Buddha to important Buddhist centers, not only tracing its movements through time and space, but also creating an elaborate and sacred geography that associates the icon with the making of sacred sites. The Emerald Buddha icon is purported to have been installed in royal temples in important religious and political centers throughout South and Southeast Asia. In actuality, it is the associations between the icon and important Buddhist kingdoms mentioned in the chronicles that magnify the power of the Emerald Buddha. By the late eighteenth century the possession and enshrinement
of the Emerald Buddha came to be associated with political legitimacy and religious supremacy in Siam.

During the reign of King Taksin of Thonburi the Emerald Buddha was enshrined in Siam. However, King Taksin did not capture the icon and physically bring it to Siam on his own. The task went to one of his generals, General Chao Phraya Chakri (later King Rama I). After capturing the Emerald Buddha image, General Chao Phraya Chakri brought it to Thonburi where it was enshrined in the temple of Wat Arun, located next to King Taksin’s palace. Wat Arun was used as Takin’s royal chapel; however, it was not a part of his royal palace complex nor did he construct it. Wat Arun was built prior to Thonburi becoming the capital city of Siam. Although there had been a tradition of constructing royal chapels within the king’s residence, Taksin did not follow suit.64

Unlike Taksin, when it came time to construct his own residence, King Rama I made sure to include a royal chapel in the fashion of Ayutthaya to house the Emerald Buddha icon.65 Building of the Temple of the Emerald Buddha began in 1783 and was completed on April 14, 1784. Its completion was an incredibly important event as it was among the last major construction projects finished inside of the Grand Palace. The installment of the icon visually manifested the beginning of the Bangkok Period in Siam and was celebrated with the second coronation of the king in 1786.

The Emerald Buddha’s movements to and from specific cities were understood as the direct result of political and religious instability. When a decline in practice and or faith of a particular king and his kingdom was noticeable, the icon was transported, either willingly or by force, to a new city. A king was able to maintain political stability through his active worship and sponsorship of the Buddhist faith. In instances where he faltered, political havoc ensued and the icon came into the possession of a more politically righteous and religiously meritorious ruler. This invented sacred geography is intended to impart symbolic meaning to the icon, so that whoever became the keeper of it was able to legitimate himself through its history and his possession of it.

The fact that the Emerald Buddha never actually traveled outside of modern-day Thailand and Laos (even though the chronicles mentioned important centers such as Pataliputra, Anuradhapura, Pagan, and Angkor), and was never enshrined in Ayutthaya (as the chronicles claim) does not matter. By the eighteenth century, the Emerald Buddha had become a symbol of political power and religious fortitude among Southeast Asian kings. It was for this reason that Taksin, who was still reeling from the defeat of Ayutthaya and feeling anxious about his own power, saw it necessary to march into Vientiane
and claim the Emerald Buddha for himself and Thonburi. By assembling the Emerald Buddha and other important Buddhist icons in Thonburi, Taksin was seeking to legitimize his kingdom and his regional authority. Like Taksin, King Rama I also saw it necessary to associate himself with the Emerald Buddha. Upon accession to the throne (1782), King Rama I claimed the image for himself and he constructed a royal chapel for the sacred icon (1783–1784), in addition to invoking it in the formal title for his new kingdom and capital city (1786). The enshrinement of the icon in the Temple of the Emerald Buddha was truly the physical and political capstone that heralded the beginning of the Bangkok Period. The Emerald Buddha’s installation inside of the king’s Grand Palace situated Bangkok at the center of the Buddhist world, as it had become a part of the icon’s sacred geography across the vast Buddhist territories of South and Southeast Asia that expanded beyond the territorial confines of the Siamese kingdom. It also visually manifested the king’s created and perceived political authority in the Southeast Asian region.

CONCLUSION

In less than five years, King Rama I had his predecessor deposed, moved the capital of Siam to a settlement named Bangkok, and proceeded to transform the city into a living monument restoring the glories of Ayutthaya. In this time, he also established himself as a Chakravartin through the possession of the Emerald Buddha and situated Bangkok at the center of the Theravada Buddhist world through its enshrinement in his royal chapel. It would be remiss to suggest that King Rama I’s achievements were unique to his ambitious character. Kings throughout history in Southeast Asia have sought and achieved similar ends for themselves and their kingdoms. What makes Rama I’s legacy unique is that the events of his reign took place during a time when the region was becoming increasingly influenced by Western notions of political authority and legitimacy, which did not include the worship of “pagan idols” and restoring the past. Although Europeans had begun colonizing parts of Southeast Asia as early as the sixteenth century, it was during the last decade of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century that European, and to a lesser extent American, colonization of the region hit its peak. If this was the political milieu of the region at the time, why would King Rama I turn his attention away from this reality and toward traditional modes of political legitimacy?

At the end of the King Rama I’s reign, Siam had under its suzerainty much of modern-day Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, and parts of
northeastern Burma. Siam also kept ties with the Vietnamese through their support of Prince Nguyen, who in 1784 sought asylum in Bangkok during a civil war in his home country. This suggests that at the turn of the century Siam had positioned itself as a “colonial power” in mainland Southeast Asia. Unlike Europeans and Americans who were aliens in a foreign land, Siam understood and knew how to utilize traditional local and regional symbols of power, such as the Emerald Buddha icon. Moreover, King Rama I was well aware of his predecessor’s inability to appease the local power structure. What better way to placate them than to reestablish their status and influence as it actually had been, or had been remembered to be, in the time of Ayutthaya. Instead of introducing new rules of governance and power hierarchies, King Rama I did the opposite; he reinforced old ones. This allowed him to have close and trusted relationships with powerful families and individuals who did much of the hands-on managing of Siam’s tributary states and principalities.

Siam’s refusal to adopt Western modes of political governance during the first reign was due to the fact that the kingdom was quite successful in its role as a regional leader. It was not until the second half of the nineteenth century, under the reigns of King Rama IV (r. 1851–1868) and Rama V (r. 1868–1910), that the court began to embrace Western symbols of power. However, they did so, not as a form of imitation, but rather as a means of demonstrating their rank as the political equals of European and American colonists. Indeed, Siam is the only Southeast Asian nation that was able to maintain its independence during the colonial period.

NOTES


2. The Chaopraya River begins at the confluence of two rivers, the Ping and the Nan, in the northern province of Nakorn Sawan and flows south through the central plains before it joins the Gulf of Siam. The Mekong River runs north to south from the Tibetan Plateau through China, Burma, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam before draining into the South China Sea. The river is located along the eastern border of Thailand and is shared by the borders of Burma, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. While many great kingdoms and capital cities have formed along the Mekong River, including the Southeast Asian cities of Luang Phrabang, Vientiane, and Phnom Penh, it is the Chaopraya River that has engendered two of the most powerful and long-lasting Siamese kingdoms.
3. Prior to 1939, Thailand was referred to as the country of Siam and its peoples as the Siamese. The new name was intended to reflect the perceived ethnic majority living in the country at that time, the Thai. The adoption of the title Thailand was, from the onset, exclusionary, as it did not include ethnic minorities living in the country. Recently, there has been a movement among Thai academics to revert to the old name of Siam, which they contend is non-exclusionary and reflects the ethnic and cultural diversity of the country. For simplicity, I use the terms Siam or Siamese throughout this chapter when referring to events that took place before 1939. I use the terms Thailand and Thai for events or references that postdate 1939 and that refer to the modern geographical body of Thailand.

4. The names of Siamese kingdoms also refer to the names of their capital cities.

5. The current capital city of Thailand is known by many names: Bangkok, Krung Thep, and its official title, Krung Thep Mahanakhon Amon Rattanakosin Mahathat Yuwarat Chaiyachedi Mahasathan Amon Phiman Awatan Sathit Sakkathattiya Witsanukam Prasit.


7. The title of King Rama I is a posthumous designation. During the king’s reign he adopted the title of King Ramathibodi, the same title as that of the founder of the Ayutthaya Kingdom. As the usage of the title King Rama I has become standard, I use this title throughout the chapter.

8. The Chakri dynasty is the current ruling house in Thailand.


10. Maurizio Peleggi and Marc Askew have also discussed King Rama I’s attempts to reduce the Thonburi Period to a dynastic interlude in their texts, Lord of Things: The Fashioning of the Siamese Monarchy’s Modern Image (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2002) and Bangkok: Place, Practice and Representation (London: Routledge, 2002), respectively.

11. Smith, Political Landscape, 232–270, also discusses the intermingling process of standardizing institutions in Urartian polities.

12. A wat in Thailand refers to a place of worship. In the Thai-Buddhist context, it can describe a monastery or a particular building inside of a monastery, especially the main image hall.

13. The Emerald Buddha icon and texts associated with it have only held prominence in Theravada Buddhist–practicing kingdoms.

14. Smith, Political Landscape, 232–270. See also chapter 2 by Kalas, chapter 3 by Bogdanović, and chapters 1 and 6 by Christie in this volume.

15. Chris Baker, ed., Van Vliet’s Siam (Bangkok: Silkworm Books, 2005), 6–7, 110–111. The city had been encircled by a moat before the seventeenth century; however, it was expanded at this time to its greatest surface area.
16. I thank Robert L. Brown for bringing this to my attention and for reading a
draft of this essay. Any mistakes and errors are my own.

Press, 1976), 119. The Sukhothai Kingdom (1238–1438) was just one of a number of pow-
erful kingdoms in the region at this time. The Ayutthaya victory over the Angkorian
Empire was a huge coup, as Angkor had been for a very long time (ninth to fifteenth
centuries) a major political and religious center in the region.

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19. See Charles Higham, *The Archaeology of Mainland Southeast Asia* (Cambridge:

20. Ayutthaya and Burma were in constant conflict from the sixteenth century
onwards with periods of success for each side.

Press, 2003), 124.

22. Such unflattering descriptions of King Taksin are found in the royal chronicles,
which postdate his rule and were written during the early Bangkok Period. Wyatt, *A
Short History of Thailand*, 143.

23. See Wyatt, *A Short History of Thailand*; and Christopher John Baker and Pasuk

24. Klaus Wenk, *The Restoration of Thailand Under Rama I* (Tucson: University of


26. See also chapter 3 by Bogdanović in this volume.


28. The term *Rattanakosin* in Thai is roughly translated into English as “Indra’s
precious jewel.”


30. Ibid., 78. Court astrologers determined all royal and court ceremonies that took
place during the first reign. This practice is still used today by both the court and com-
moners to determine the dates for special occasions such as weddings.

31. Rama I came from an old Ayutthaya noble family.

32. Marc Askew, *Bangkok: Place, Practice and Representation* (London: Routledge,
2002), 15.

33. Ibid.

34. Yuri Pines, *The Everlasting Empire: The Political Culture of Ancient China and Its

35. The Chakravartin is typically associated with seven jewels, which include the
chakra (wheel), queen, chariot, jewel, wealth, horse, and elephant. Less commonly, he
is also associated with two additional jewels: a prime minister and a son. See the Cakkavatti Sutta (Facetana Sutta).

36. The term Indianized is used here to refer to kingdoms that were influenced by Indian ideas of governance as well as Indian religions.

37. Naengnoi Suksri, *Palaces of Bangkok: Royal Residences of the Chakri Dynasty* (Bangkok: Asia Books, 1996), 37. It should be noted that there are some exceptions that distinguish the two Grand Palace complexes. At the Grand Palace in Ayutthaya, the Rear Palace is located within the complex whereas the Rear Palace in Bangkok is located across the Chaopraya River. Similarly, over time the original design of the Grand Palace in Bangkok has changed with the addition and removal of buildings and structures so that it no longer mirrors that of its archetype.

38. The area used for residences was expanded during the reign of King Rama II (Phra Phuttaloetla; r. 1809–1824) by 8 acres to accommodate the growing number of wives, consorts, and children living at the palace. According to custom, all of the king’s consorts and wives with the rare exclusion of queens were forced to live their whole lives at court. If a consort’s husband, the king, should die she remained the property of the court and should continue to reside in the palace compound. This custom died out after the 1932 coup.

39. The Grand Palace no longer serves as the residence of the king and queen of Thailand. Since the 1960s, the Grand Palace complex has been open to the public.


42. See also chapters 2 by Kalas, 3 by Bogdanović, and 7 by Guzmán in this volume.


45. There are seven main versions of the Royal Chronicles of Ayutthaya. Of these seven, only one dates to the Ayutthaya Period, the Luang Prasoet version dated to 1680. All other versions date to the Bangkok Period.

46. Throughout its more than two-hundred-year history, the Temple of the Emerald Buddha has been continuously altered by kings who have added buildings and objects to the temple complex or who have sponsored large-scale renovation projects.


49. Himavamsa is a mythical forest located in the Himalayas just below the heaven of the gods.

50. Although King Rama I commissioned the building of libraries, towers, stupas, image halls, and sitting pavilions for the Temple of the Emerald Buddha, this chapter is primarily interested in the ordination hall and the prang-towers.

51. Phi-Mai was an important vassal city-state of the Khmer Angkorian Empire.

52. Extant examples of Ayutthaya-Period prang-towers can be seen at Wat Chai-wattanaram, built in 1630.

53. Wyatt, A Short History of Thailand, 130. Within this excerpt, Wyatt quotes two Thai texts: Kotmai tra sam duang (Three Seals Laws) and Latthithamnian tangtang (Customs and Practices).

54. The importance and significance of the image to the Thai monarchy and people have prevented scientific examination, which would determine its material composition. However, scholars Reginald Lingat, Robert Le May, Hiram Woodward, and Carol Stratton have narrowed the possibilities to jadeite or nephrite, which are based on available mineral resources in the surrounding northern Thai and Burmese region.

55. While these texts do not represent the entire body of literature associated with the icon, they do represent some of the earliest writings concerning the Emerald Buddha’s origins and mythohistory. The earliest of the three texts is the Ratanabimbavamsa, self-dated to 1429, which is followed by the Jinakālimālipakaranam, dated to 1516. The Amarakatabuddharupindāna is dated roughly to the second half of the sixteenth century.


57. The inclusion of Indra in the chronicles is important because he is considered the king of the gods.

58. Karen Schur Narula, Voyage of the Emerald Buddha (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1994), 7; Camille Notton, trans., The Chronicle of the Emerald Buddha (Bangkok: The Bangkok Times Press, 1931), 16–18. The inclusion of King Asoka in the Emerald Buddha chronicles is significant as he is considered the greatest Buddhist king. His royally sponsored missionaries helped to spread Buddhism beyond the Indian subcontinent and established the faith as a world religion.

59. Generally, the chronicles agree that the image remained in India for over three hundred years until a civil war broke out in Pataliputra, and it was decided that the icon would be safer in Sri Lanka. The image was sent to Anuradhapura in 257 CE and housed in the royal temple of an unnamed king. After two hundred years in Sri Lanka, the image began its journey to Pagan, Burma, in order to be protected by King
Anawartha (r. 1044–1077) but, through a series of mishaps, landed in Angkor, Cambodia. After its arrival in Angkor, dates become vague and inconsistent among the different chronicles and are not mentioned again until the icon’s discovery in Chiang Rai (Lanna) in 1434. During this four-century lapse in dating, the Emerald Buddha traveled to the kingdoms of Ayutthaya and Kampaeng Phet prior to its discovery in Chiang Rai. The chronicles go on to further explain that the image remained in Chiang Rai until 1468, when King Tilok (r. 1442–1487) of Chiang Mai (Lanna) begged for the image to be sent and enshrined in his city. The Emerald Buddha remained in Chiang Mai for eighty years before it was moved to Luang Phrabang in 1548 and later to Vientiane in 1563. The Emerald Buddha remained in Vientiane until 1778, when it was transported to Thonburi and later to Bangkok in 1784.

60. There exists an early Khmer inscription dating to the eleventh century that states that a holy stone was worshipped in Cambodia during the reign of Suryavarman I (r. 1001–1050); however, there is no conclusive evidence at the moment to confirm that the Cambodian holy stone correlates to the Emerald Buddha. Earliest confirmation of the Emerald Buddha’s possession is dated to the rule of King Tilok of Lannathai (r. 1442–1487), who brought it from Chiang Rai to Chiang Mai in 1468. Stylistic characteristics of the image such as its rounded body and fleshy torso, along with its heart-shaped face and pointed earlobes suggest that it is a fifteenth-century object.


62. Ibid.

63. For example, the Emerald Buddha was enshrined in the Lao capitals of Luang Phrabang and Vientiane for over two centuries (1548–1778).

64. During the Sukhothai Period a royal chapel named Wat Phra Sri Mahathat (Temple of the Great Relic) was built on the palace grounds sometime during the fourteenth century. During the Ayutthaya Period two royal chapels were built, one during the early half of the period named Wat Phra Sri Mahathat in 1374 and a second during the reign of King Borommatrailokanath (1448–1488) called Wat Phra Sri Sanpetch.

65. It had been common, since the Sukhothai Period (1238–1438) for kings to include royal chapels within their palace complexes.

66. See also chapter 3 by Bogdanović in this volume for a similar claim of political authority of capital cities through the possession of powerful relics.

67. Portugal captured Malacca in 1511, which was later seized by the Dutch in 1641. Spain took over control of Cebu, Philippines, in 1565 and later Manila in 1571.

68. Wyatt, A Short History of Thailand, 140.