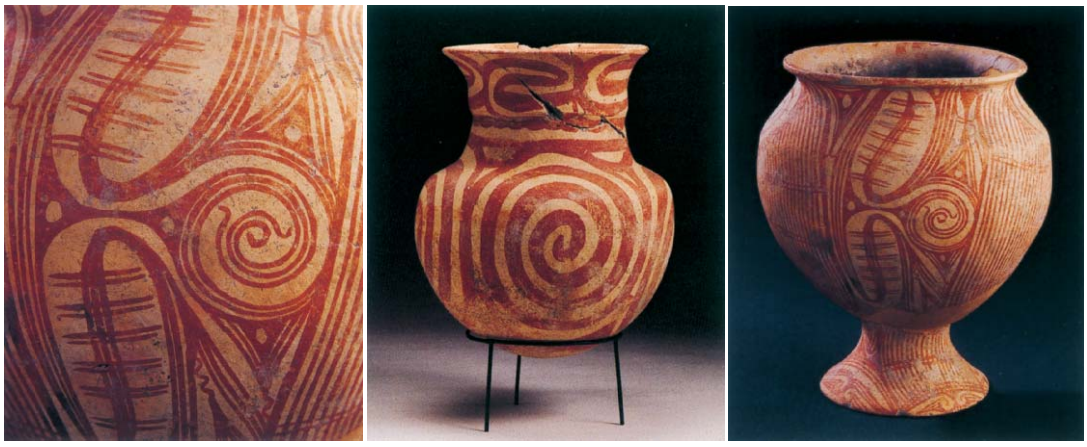
HISTORICAL SETTING

Earliest Inhabitants

The area which is now Thailand has been populated ever since the dawn of civilization. The first humans in this region of Asia lived by hunting wild animals and gathering whatever grew in their natural environment. Later on, men and women learnt to modify nature, growing cereals such as rice, and breeding livestock. Rice growing communities sprang up. Metal casting and pottery making also became highly developed skills as prehistoric settlements prospered. Cast-bronze technology in the northeastern area of Thailand dates from around 2000 B.C., resulting in prehistoric achievements at sites in Thailand just as advanced as at those of modern India and China.

The spectacular finds at Ban Chiang, situated in Thailand's Udon Thani Province, include bronze utensils and ornaments, painted pottery, and bimetallic (bronze and iron) weapons. Ban Chiang was apparently settled as far back as 6,000 years ago, and was continually inhabited for some 4,000 years. It was an agricultural community, with skilled metal workers and potters. Artistically, the glory of Ban Chiang can be found in the large amount of painted pottery; the most graceful shapes and intricate designs appear on pottery dating back to the period from 300 B.C. until 200 A.D.[1]



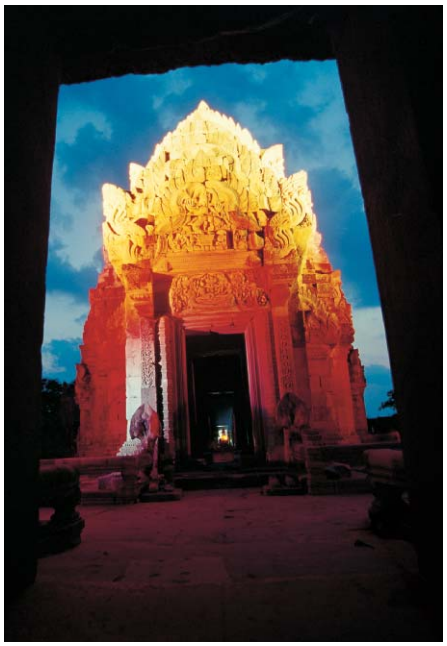
[1] *Henceforth, all historical dates follow the A.D. based chronology of the Western Calendar.*

Mon and Khmer Dominance

From the 7th to the 11th centuries, a large area of what is now central and western Thailand was occupied by a Mon civilization known as Dvaravati. The ethnic group of the Mon, who share the same linguistic lineage as the Khmer, were later to settle in southern Myanmar. Little is known about the political and social "empire" of Dvaravati, but it seems quite likely that there were several Mon states sharing a common culture, rather than a monolithic "empire" with a single capital city. Important ancient Dvaravati sites in Thailand include Nakhon Pathom, Khu Bua, Phong Tuk, and Lawo (Lop Buri). Some superb sculptures, bas-reliefs, and other archaeological remains survive from this obscure period of history.

Dvaravati was an "Indianized" culture, with Theravada Buddhism as the dominant religion. Theravada Buddhism was to remain the major religion in this area for the next millennium, co-existing with animism, Hinduism, and Mahayana Buddhism. Its ideas and philosophy inspired much of the Dvaravati art and sculpture, whose forms were also based on Indian prototypes.

Throughout the 11th-12th centuries, Mon dominance over Central Thailand had been reduced by the power of the ever-expanding Khmer empire to the east. The capital of this empire was the great city of Angkor, and the Khmer rulers were masters of a tightly-organized society with remarkable capacities for territorial and cultural expansion. The Khmer also controlled most of the trade routes in the region of present-day Thailand, Cambodia, the Lao PDR, and Vietnam. Khmer territories stretched well into the area that is present-day Thailand, covering its northeastern region, much of its central region, and reaching as far west as Kanchanaburi Province. The Khmer built stone temples in the northeast, some of which have been restored to their former glory, notably those at Phimai and Phanom Rung. Stone sculptures and lintels depicting Hindu deities, stone Buddha images in the distinctive Khmer style, and bronze statuary, some of great beauty, are other vestiges of Khmer cultural dominance. Politically, however, the Khmers probably did not control the whole of this area directly but exerted power through vassals and governors.



The fertile Chao Phraya River basin had always been an area with an ethnic mix of Mon, Khmer, and Lawa. Towards the end of the 13th century, Khmer power in this area waned and new kingdoms, dominated

by the ethnic group of the Thai emerged. These had been influenced by Khmer rule and culture, but they brought other spectacular legacies, the origins of which are still a matter of historical dispute.

Arrival of the Thai

Based on research done in the southern Chinese provinces of Guangdong, Guangxi, and Yunnan, where the Thai language is still spoken, it is assumed that the Thai migrated southward from these provinces. By the 13th century, the Thai had become a force to be reckoned with in mainland Southeast Asia, and Thai princes ruled over states as far apart as Lan Na in the far north, Suphannaphum (around present-day Suphan Buri) in the central region, and Nakhon Si Thammarat in the south, yet most importantly in the river plains around Sukhothai in the North.

Sukhothai (13th – 15th Centuries)

The state that is still regarded by Thai historical tradition as the "first Thai kingdom" was Sukhothai. There were, in fact, other contemporaneous Thai states such as Lan Na and Phayao, both in present-day northern Thailand, but the Thai historical imagination has been most stirred by Sukhothai. Even today, the evocative ruins of Sukhothai and its twin city of Si Satchanalai conjure up images of material prosperity, artistic greatness, and Buddhist piety. Indeed, Sukhothai is remembered as much for its art and architecture as for its political achievements.

Sukhothai was originally a principality under the sway of the Khmer empire; the oldest monuments in the city were built in the Khmer style, or else show clear Khmer influence. During the first half of the 13th century the Thai rulers of Sukhothai threw off the Khmer yoke and set up an independent Thai kingdom. One of the victorious Thai chieftains became the first king of Sukhothai, with the name of Si Intharathit (Sri Indraditya). Sukhothai's power and influence expanded in all directions through conquest, as the Khmer were driven southwards, by a far-sighted network of marriage alliances with the ruling families of other Thai states, and by the use of a common religion, Theravada Buddhism, to cement relations with other states.

Si Intharathit's son and successor was King Ramkhamhaeng, undoubtedly the most famous and dynamic monarch ever to rule the Sukhothai Kingdom. Much of what we know about Sukhothai in the 13th century derives from a 1292 stone inscription attributed to King Ramkhamhaeng. It is considered a seminal source of Sukhothai history, as well as a masterpiece of Thai literature. It eloquently extols the benevolence of King Ramkhamhaeng's rule, as well as the power and prosperity of Sukhothai. The King was accessible to his people, having had a bell hung in front of the palace gate so that any subject with a grievance could ring it and ask for justice :

"King Ramkhamhaeng, the ruler of the kingdom,
hears the call; he goes and questions the man,
examines the case, and decides it justly for him.
So the people of…Sukhothai praise him."

According to this inscription, the King did not levy road tolls or taxes on merchandise, nor did he tax his subjects' inheritance at all. Such a paternalistic and benevolent style of kingship has caused posterity to regard the Sukhothai Kingdom's heyday as a "golden age" in Thai history.

Even allowing for some hyperbole in King Ramkhamhaeng's inscription, it is probably true that Sukhothai was prosperous and well-governed. Its economy was self-sufficient. The Thai people's basic diet was the same as that

of many other people in Southeast Asia, consisting of rice and fish as staple foods, both of which were plentiful according to the inscription:

"In the time of King Ramkhamhaeng this land of
Sukhothai is thriving. There are fish in the water
and rice in the fields."

This historically first Thai inscription has been recognized by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as a "Memory of the World". The statement in the inscription that "There is always fish in the water and rice in the field" indicates that the kingdom was well endowed with natural resources that sustained its people.

Sukhothai may well have been self-sufficient as far as food was concerned, but its prosperity also depended on commerce. During the Sukhothai period glazed ceramic wares known as "*sangkhalok*" were produced in great quantities at kilns in Sukhothai and Si Satchanalai, and exported regularly to other countries bordering the South China Sea. Specimens were found in Indonesia and the Philippines. Sukhothai also traded with China through the traditional Chinese tributary system: the Thai king was content to send tribute to the Chinese emperor and be classified as a vassal, for permission to sell Thai goods and buy Chinese products, in return.

Although animistic beliefs remained potent in Sukhothai, King Ramkhamhaeng and his successors were all devout Buddhist rulers who made merit on a large scale. The major cities of the Kingdom were, therefore, endowed with monasteries, many of which were splendid examples of Thai Buddhist architecture. Sukhothai adopted the Singhalese School of Theravada Buddhism, beginning with King Ramkhamhaeng's invitation to Singhalese monks to come and purify Buddhism in his Kingdom. This Singhalese influence manifested itself not only in matters of doctrine but also in religious architecture. The bell-shaped stupa, so familiar in Thai Buddhist architecture, was derived from Singhalese models. Sukhothai-style Buddha images are distinctive for their elegance and stylized beauty, and Sukhothai artists introduced the graceful form of the "walking Buddha" to Buddhist sculpture.

Sukhothai's cultural importance in Thai history also derives from the fact that the Thai script evolved into a definite form during King Ramkhamhaeng's time, taking as its models the ancient Mon and Khmer scripts. Indeed, this remarkable king is credited with having invented the Thai script.

King Si Intharathit and King Ramkhamhaeng were both warrior kings

who extended their territories far and wide. Their successors, however, could not maintain such a far-flung empire. Some of these later kings were more remarkable for their religious piety and extensive building activities than for their warlike exploits. An example of this type of Buddhist ruler was King Mahathammaracha Lithai, believed to have been the compiler of the Tribhumikatha, an early Thai book on the Buddhist universe or cosmos. The political decline of Sukhothai was, however, not wholly due to deficiencies in leadership. It resulted rather from the emergence of strong Thai states further south, whose political and economic power began to challenge Sukhothai during the latter half of the 14th century. These southern states, especially Ayutthaya, were able to deny Sukhothai access to the southern region.

The Sukhothai Kingdom did not vanish at once. Its decline occurred from the mid-14th until the 15th century. In 1378, the Ayutthaya King Borommaracha I subdued Sukhothai's frontier city of Chakangrao (present-day Kamphaeng Phet), whereupon Sukhothai became a tributary state of Ayutthaya. Sukhothai attempted to break loose from Ayutthaya but with no real success. In the 15th century it was incorporated into the territory of the Ayutthaya Kingdom. By then, the focus of Thai history and politics had shifted to the central plains of present-day Thailand, where Ayutthaya was establishing itself as a centralized state, its power outstripping not only Sukhothai but also other neighbouring states such as Suphannaphum and Lawo (present-day Lop Buri).

Ayutthaya (1350 – 1767)

For 417 years, the Ayutthaya Kingdom was the dominant power in the fertile Chao Phraya River Basin. Its capital city, after which the kingdom is named, was situated at the confluence of three rivers, the Chao Phraya, the Pa Sak, and the Lop Buri, as well as a canal connecting the Chao Phraya and Lop Buri rivers, thus creating an island which grew into one of Asia's most renowned metropolises, inviting comparison with such great European cities as Paris. The city must indeed have looked majestic, filled as it was with hundreds of monasteries and crisscrossed by canals which served as arteries and thoroughfares.

An ancient community had existed in the Ayutthaya area well before 1350, the year of its official founding by King Ramathibodi I (also known as U Thong). The huge Buddha image at Wat Phanan Choeng, just outside the island city, had been cast over twenty years before King Ramathibodi I moved his residence to the city. The site offered a variety of geographical and economic advantages. The rivers and waterways offered not only easy access to the countryside but also to the Gulf of Thailand, which stimulated maritime trade. The surrounding rice fields were flooded each year during the rainy season, making the city virtually impregnable for several months annually. These fields, of course, served the even more vital function of feeding a relatively large population in the kingdom, as well as yielding a surplus large enough for export to various countries in Asia.

Ramathibodi I, Ayutthaya's first king, was both a warrior and a lawmaker. Some old laws codified in 1805 by the first Bangkok king date from this much earlier reign. King Ramathibodi I and his immediate successors expanded Ayutthaya's territory, especially northward towards Sukhothai and eastward towards the Khmer capital of Angkor. By the 15th century, Ayutthaya had established a firm hegemony over most of the northern and central Thai states, though it failed in attempts to conquer Lan Na. It also captured Angkor on at least one occasion but was unable to hold on to it for long. The Ayutthaya kingdom thus changed during the 15th century from being one of several similar small states in central Thailand into an increasingly centralized kingdom wielding tight control over a core area of territory, as well as having looser authority over a string of tributary states.

The greater size of Ayutthaya's territory, compared with that of Sukhothai, meant that the method of government could not remain the same as during the days of King Ramkhamhaeng. The paternalistic and benevolent Buddhist kingship of Sukhothai would not have worked in Ayutthaya. The rulers of the latter, therefore, created a complex administrative system, beginning in the reign of King Trailok, also known as Boromma-trailokanat (1448-1488), which was to evolve into the modern Thai bureaucracy. It contained a hierarchy of ranked and titled officials, all of whom had varying amounts of "honour marks" (*sakdina*).

Thai society during the Ayutthaya Period also became strictly hierarchical. There were roughly three classes of people, with the king at the very apex of the structure. At the bottom of the social scale, and most numerous, were the commoners (freemen or *phrai*) and the slaves. Above the commoners were the officials or nobles (*khun nang*), while at the top of the scale were the princes (*chao*). The one classless section of Thai society was the Buddhist monkhood, or *sangha*, into which all classes of Thai men could be ordained. The monkhood was the one institution which could weld together all the different social classes, the Buddhist monasteries being the centre of all Thai communities, both urban and rural.

The Ayutthaya kings were not only Buddhist monarchs who ruled according to the *dhamma*; they were also *devaraja*, god-kings whose sacred power was associated with the Hindu deities Indra and Vishnu. To many Western observers, they seemed to be treated as if they were gods. The French Abbé de Choisy, who came to Ayutthaya in 1685, wrote that "the king has absolute power. He is the only god of the Siamese: no one dares to utter his name." Another 17th century writer, the Dutchman van Vliet, remarked that the king of Siam was "honoured and worshipped by his subjects more than a god."

The Ayutthaya period was early Thai history's great era of international trade. The port of Ayutthaya became an entrepôt, an international marketplace where goods from the Far East could be bought or bartered in exchange for merchandise from the Malay-Indonesian archipelago, India, or Persia, not to mention local wares or

produce from Ayutthaya's vast hinterland. The trading world of the Indian Ocean was accessible to Ayutthaya through its possession, for much of its long history, of the seaport of Mergui in the Bay of Bengal, which was linked to the capital by an ancient and frequently used overland trade route.

Throughout its history, Ayutthaya had a thriving commerce in "forest produce," principally sappanwood (*Caesalpinia sappan (Leguminosae)* from which a reddish dye was extracted), eaglewood (an aromatic wood), benzoin ((*Styrax ssp*. with balsamic resin used as frankincense), gum lac (used as wax), and deer hides (much in demand in Japan). Elephant tusks and rhinoceros horns were also highly valued export commodities, though the former was strictly a royal monopoly and the latter relatively rare, especially when compared with deer hides. Ayutthaya also sold provisions such as rice and dried fish to other Southeast Asian states. The range of minerals found in the kingdom was limited. Tin from Phuket ("*Junkceylon*") and Nakhon Si Thammarat ("*Ligor*") was much sought after by both Asian and European traders.

The Chinese, with their large and versatile junks, were the traders who had the most regular and sustained contact with Ayutthaya. In order to conduct a steady and profitable trade with the Ming and Manchu China, from the 14th to the 18th centuries, the Ayutthaya kings entered willingly into a tributary relationship with the Chinese emperors. Muslim merchants came from India and farther west to sell their highly-prized textiles to both Thai and foreign traders. So dominant were Chinese and Muslim merchants in Ayutthaya that an old Thai law dating back to the 15th century divides the Thai king's foreign trade department into two sections, one for each. Chinese, Indians, and later on Japanese and Persians all settled in Ayutthaya, the Thai kings welcoming their presence and granting them complete freedom of worship. Several of these foreigners became important court officials.

Containing merchandise from all corners of Asia, the thriving markets of Ayutthaya attracted traders from Europe. The Portuguese were the first to arrive, in 1511, at the time when Albuquerque was attempting to conquer Melaka (Malacca). They concluded their first treaty with Ayutthaya in 1516, receiving permission to settle in the city and other Thai ports in return for supplying guns and ammunition to the Thai king. Portugal's powerful neighbour Spain was the

next European nation to arrive, toward the end of the 16th century. The early 17th century saw the arrival of two northern European East India Companies, the Dutch (V.O.C.) and the British. The Dutch East India Company played a vital role in Ayutthaya's foreign trade from 1605 until 1765, succeeding in obtaining from Thai monarchs a deer hide export monopoly as well as one on all the tin sold at Nakhon Si Thammarat. The Dutch sold Thai sappanwood and deer hides for good profit in Japan during its exclusion period, from 1635 onward.

The French first arrived in 1662, during the reign of Ayutthaya's most outward-looking and cosmopolitan ruler, King Narai (1656-1688). French missionaries and merchants came to the capital, and during the 1680s splendid embassies were exchanged between King Narai and King Louis XIV. The French tried to convert King Narai to Christianity and also attempted to gain a military foothold in the Thai kingdom when, in 1685, they sent troops to garrison Bangkok and Mergui. When a succession conflict broke out in 1688, an anti-French official seized power, drove out the French troops, and executed King Narai's Greek favourite Constantine Phaulkon, who had been championing the French cause. After 1688, Ayutthaya had less contact with Western nations, but there was no policy of national exclusion. Indeed, there was increased trading contact with China after 1688, and there was continued trade with the Dutch, the Indians, and various other neighbouring countries.

Ayutthaya's relations with its neighbours were not always cordial. Wars were fought against Cambodia, Lan Na, Lan Chang (based in the present-day Lao PDR), Patani and, above all, Burma. Burmese power waxed and waned in cycles according to their administrative efficiency in the control of manpower. Whenever Burma was in an expansionist phase, Ayutthaya suffered. In 1569, King Bayinnaung captured Ayutthaya, thus initiating over a decade's subjection to the Burmese. One of the greatest Thai military leaders, Prince (later King) Naresuan, then emerged to declare Ayutthaya's independence and to defeat the Burmese in several battles and skirmishes, culminating in the victory of Nong Sarai, when he killed the Burmese Crown Prince in combat on elephant back.

During the 18th century, Burma again adopted an expansionist policy. The kings of the Alaungphaya Dynasty were intent on subduing the Ayutthaya Kingdom, then in its cultural and artistic prime. In the 1760s, Burmese armies inflicted severe defeats on the Thai, who had become somewhat complacent after almost one century of peace. In April 1767, after a 15-month seige, Ayutthaya finally succumbed to the Burmese, who sacked and burnt the city, thus putting an end to one of the politically most glorious and culturally influential epochs in Thailand's history.

King Taksin : Warfare and National Revival (1767-1782)

After the shattering defeat and destruction of Ayutthaya, the death or capture of thousands of Thai by the victorious Burmese, and the dispersal of several potential Thai leaders, the situation seemed hopeless. It was a time of darkness for the Thai nation. Members of the old royal family of Ayutthaya had died, escaped, or been captured, and many rival claimants for the throne emerged, based in different areas of the country. But out of this catastrophe emerged yet another saviour of the Thai state: the half-Chinese general Phraya Taksin, former governor of Tak. Within a few years this determined warrior had defeated not only all his rivals but also the Burmese invaders and had set himself up as king.

Since Ayutthaya had been so completely devastated, King Taksin chose to establish his capital at Thon Buri, across the river from present-day Bangkok. Although a small town, Thon Buri was strategically situated near the mouth of the Chao Phraya River and therefore suitable as a seaport. The Thai needed weapons, and one way of acquiring them was through trade. Moreover, foreign trade was also needed to bolster the Thai economy, which had suffered extensively during the war with Burma. Chinese and Chinese-Thai traders helped revive the economy by engaging in maritime trade with neighbouring states, with China, and with some European nations.

King Taksin's prowess as a general and as an inspirational leader defeated all the Burmese attempts to reconquer Siam. The rallying of the Thai nation during a time of crisis was his greatest achievement. However, he was also interested in cultural revival, in literature and the arts. He was deeply religious and studied meditation to an advanced level. The stress and strain of so much fighting took their toll on the King, and following an internal political conflict in 1782 his fellow general, Chao Phraya Chakri, was chosen king. King Taksin's achievements have caused posterity to bestow on him the epithet "the Great."

King Rama I

King Rama II

King Rama III

King Rama IV

King Rama V

King Rama VI

King Rama VII

King Rama VIII

King Rama IX

King Rama I (1782-1809) and the Reconstruction of the Thai State

The succeeding king, Phra Buddha Yot Fa Chulalok, or Rama I, was also a great general. In addition, he was an accomplished statesman, a lawmaker, a poet, and a devout Buddhist. His reign has been called the "reconstruction" of the Thai state and Thai culture, using Ayutthaya as the model, though not slavishly resurrecting all aspects of the old capital. He was the ruler who established Bangkok as the capital and was also the founder of the Royal House of Chakri, of which the present monarch King Bhumibol Adulyadej is the ninth monarch. The significance of his reign in Thai history is therefore manifold.

King Rama I was intent on the firm re-establishment of the Buddhist monkhood, allying religious order and state, and purifying the doctrine. The *Tripitaka*, or Buddhist scriptures, were re-edited in a definitive text by a grand council of learned men convened by the King in 1788-9. This concern with codification and textual accuracy was also apparent in the collating and editing of laws, both old and new, which resulted in one of the major achievements of his reign, the "Three Seals Code" or *Kotmai tra sam duang*. This, too, was the work of a panel of experts assembled by the King.

King Rama I consistently explained all his reforms and actions in a rational manner. This aspect of his reign has been interpreted as a major change in the intellectual outlook of the Thai elite, or a re-orientation of the Thai world view.

The organization of Thai society during the early Bangkok Period was not fundamentally different from that of the late Ayutthaya Period. Emphasis was still placed on manpower and on an extensive system of political and social privileges. The officials' main concern was still to provide the Crown with corvée labour and to provide patronage to the commoners.

The Burmese remained a threat to the Thai kingdom during this reign, launching several attacks on Thai territory. King Rama I was ably assisted by his brother and other generals in defeating the Burmese in 1785 and 1786. King Rama I not only drove out these invading armies but also launched a bold counter-attack in retaliation, invading Tavoy in Lower Burma. During this reign, Chiang Mai was added to the Thai kingdom, and the Malay states of Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan, and Trengganu all sent tribute to the Thai king. The recovery

of the Thai state's place and prestige in the region was one of the major achievements of King Rama I.

His most obvious, long-lasting creation was perhaps the city of Bangkok ("*Rattanakosin*"). Before 1782, it had only been a small trading community. The first Chakri King transformed it into a thriving, cosmopolitan city based on Ayutthaya's example. He had a canal dug to make it an island-city, which encompassed Mon, Lao, Chinese, and Thai communities, similar to Ayutthaya. Several Ayutthaya-style monasteries were also built in and around the city.

King Rama I endeavoured to model his new palace closely on the royal palace at Ayutthaya, and in doing so helped create one of Bangkok's enduring glories, consisting of the Grand Palace and its resplendent royal chapel, the Temple of the Emerald Buddha. He also completely rebuilt an old monastery, Wat Photharam, and renamed it Wat Phra Chetuphon, which became not only an exemplar of classical Thai architecture but also a famous place of learning.

The cosmopolitan outlook of the Thai during the reign of King Rama I is also reflected in the arts of that period. Both painting and literature during the early Bangkok period reflect a keen awareness of other cultures, though traditional Thai forms and conventions were adhered to, especially in art. The King and his court poets composed new versions of the *Ramakien* (the Thai version of the Indian *Ramayana* epic) and the *Inao* (based on the Javanese *Panji* story).

King Rama II and His Sons

Phra Buddha Loet La Naphalai or Rama II, a son of King Rama I, acceded to the throne peacefully, fortunate to have inherited the throne during a time of stability. His reign was especially notable for the heights attained by Thai poetry, particularly in the works of the King himself and of Sunthorn Phu, one of the court poets. King Rama II had other artistic talents as well; he had a hand in the carving of the door-panels of the *viharn* at Wat Suthat, considered to be the supreme masterpiece of Thai woodcarving.

Upon the demise of King Rama II, two princes were in contention for the succession. Prince Chetsadabodin was lesser in rank than Prince Mongkut but was older, had greater experience in government affairs, and relied on a wider power base. In a celebrated example of Thai crisis power management, Prince Mongkut (who had just entered the monkhood) remained a priest for the whole duration of his half-brother's reign (1824-1851). The avoidance of an open struggle worked out well for both the country and for the Royal House of Chakri. While King Nang Klao Chao Yu Hua or Rama III ruled firmly and with wisdom, his half-brother was accumulating experience which was to prove in-

valuable to him during his years as king. The priest-prince Mongkut was able to travel extensively to see for himself how the ordinary Thai lived and to lay the foundations for a reform of the Buddhist clergy. In the late 1830s he set up what was to become the Thammayut Sect (*dhammayutika nikaya*), an order of monks which became stronger under royal patronage. To this day the royal family of Thailand remains closely associated with the Thammayut Order, though other orders also remain strong within the faith.

The Growing Challenge Posed by the West

The major characteristic of Thai history during the 19th and 20th centuries may be summed up by the phrase "the challenge by the West". The reigns of King Rama II and his two sons, Rama III and Rama IV, marked the first stage in the Thai Kingdom's dealings with the West during the era of colonial imperialism.

In the Ayutthaya Period the Thai had more often than not chosen just how they wanted to deal with foreign countries, European states included. By the 19th century this freedom of choice had become more and more constricted. The West had undergone a momentous change during the Industrial Revolution, and western technology as well as mode of economy had begun to outstrip those of Asian and African nations. This fact was not readily apparent to the Asians of the early 19th century, but it became alarmingly obvious as the century wore on and several once-proud kingdoms fell under the sway of Western powers. Once the British had gained victory in Europe in the Napoleonic Wars, they resumed their quest for additional commerce and territory in Asia.

King Rama III may have been conservative in outlook, striving hard to uphold Buddhism, also by having numerous monasteries built or repaired, and refusing to acknowledge the claims of Western powers to increased shares in the Thai trade, but he was above all a prudent ruler. He was justifiably wary of Western ambitions in Southeast Asia, but he was tolerant enough to come to an agreement with the British emissary Burney, as well as to allow Christian missionaries to work in his kingdom.

One of the men intellectually most stimulated by Western missionaries

was Prince Mongkut. The priest-prince had an inquiring mind, a philosophical disposition, and a voracious appetite for knowledge. He learnt Latin from the French Catholic Bishop Jean-Baptiste Pallegoix and English from the American Protestant missionary Jesse Caswell. His intellectual interests were wide-ranging : not only did he study the Buddhist Pali scriptures but also Western astronomy, mathematics, science, geography, and culture. His wide knowledge of the West helped him to deal with Britain, France, and other powers when he reigned as king of Siam (1851-1868).

King Mongkut was the first Chakri King to embark seriously on reforms based on western models. This did not mean any wholesale structural change, since he did not wish to undermine his own status as a traditional and absolute ruler. He concentrated, instead, on the technological and organizational aspects of reform. His reign saw road-building, canal-digging, ship-building, a reorganization of the Thai armed forces, and changes in administration, as well as the minting of coins to meet the demand of a growing monetary economy. He employed Western experts and advisers at the court and in the administration. One of his employees was the English teacher Anna Leonowens, whose books on her time in Siam caused some misrepresentation of King Mongkut's personality and reign. Far from being the "noble savage" figure portrayed in the musical "The King and I," King Mongkut was a scholarly, conscientious, and humane monarch who ruled at a difficult time in Thai history.

The Reign and Reforms of King Chulalongkorn (1868-1910)

The reforms and foreign policy of King Mongkut were carried on by his son and successor, King Chulalongkorn (Rama V), who came to the throne as a frail youth aged 16 years and died one of Siam's most loved and revered monarchs after a remarkable reign of 42 years. Indeed, modern Thailand may be said to be a product of the comprehensive and progressive reforms of his reign, for these touched almost every aspect of Thai life.

King Chulalongkorn faced the Western world with a positive attitude, eager to learn about Western ideas and inventions, working towards Western-style "progress" while at the same time resisting Western rule. He was the first Thai king to travel abroad. He visited Dutch and British colonial territories in Java, Malaya,

Burma, and India, and also made two extended trips to Europe, in the third and fourth decades of his reign. He did not just travel as an observer or visitor but worked hard during his sojourns to further Thai interests. For instance, during his first European sojourn he obtained support from Tsar Nicholas II of Russia and the German Emperor (*Kaiser*) Wilhelm II to put Siam in a stronger international position, no longer dominated by Britain and France.

The King also travelled widely in his own country. He was passionately interested in his subjects' welfare and was intent on the monarchy assuming a more visible role in society. His progressive outlook led him, in what was his first official act, to forbid prostration in the royal presence, considering that the practice was humiliating to his subjects and apt to engender arrogance in the ruler. Influenced by Buddhist morality and Western examples, he gradually abolished both the corvée system and the institution of slavery, a momentous and positive change for Thai society.

During his reign, Siam's communication systems were revolutionized. Post and telegraph services were introduced, and a railway network was built. Such advances enabled the central government to improve its control over outlying provinces. One of the central issues of King Chulalongkorn's reign was the imposition of central authority over the more remote parts of the kingdom. He initiated extensive reforms of the administration, both in Bangkok and in the provinces. Western-style ministries were set up, replacing older, traditional administrative bodies. Old units which were remodelled according to the Western pattern included those of the Interior, Warfare, Foreign Affairs, Finance, Agriculture, the Palace, and Local Administration. Completely new ministries were also created, such as the ministries of Justice, Public Instruction, and Public Works. This new ministerial system of government was inaugurated in 1892.

King Chulalongkorn's contribution to education was also to prove of great significance to modern Thailand. During his reign, "public instruction" became more secular than ever before in Thai history. Secular schools were established in the 1880s designated to produce educated men necessary for the smooth functioning of a centralized administration. One of the pressing issues of the reign was the necessity of proving to the Western colonial powers that Siam had become a "modern" and "progressive" country. The problem, however, was that the King and his advisers had too little time for wholesome implementation.

The King was eager to send Thai students abroad for advanced education, partly because the country needed skills and knowledge from the West, and partly because the Thai students abroad could come into contact with Europe's elite. Moreover, the King also hired several Westerners to act as advisers to the

Thai government in various fields, among them the Belgian Rolin-Jacquemyns (a "General Adviser" whose special knowledge was in jurisprudence) and the British financial advisers H. Rivett- Carnac and W.J.F. Williamson. Such policies were deemed to be essential for Siam's survival as a sovereign state and its progress to modernity.

Thai foreign policy during King Chulalongkorn's reign was a series of delicate balancing acts, playing off one Western power against another, and trying to maintain both sovereignty and territorial integrity. The heartland of Siam had to be preserved at all costs, even to the extent of conceding to Britain and France some peripheral territories whenever the pressure became too intense.

Even Siam's subtle and supple foreign policy did not always suffice to offset the colonial powers' appetite for territory. In 1893, Siam ceded all territories on the east bank of the Mekong River to France, then building up its Indochinese empire. In 1904, it also had to cede some territories on the northwest bank of the Mekong River to France.

The Siamese government wanted to put an end to the clauses concerning extra-territoriality, land taxation, and trade duties in the treaties concluded with Western countries during King Mongkut's reign. In return for the mitigation of treaty disadvantages, several territories had to be ceded. For example, in 1907 the Khmer provinces of Siem Reap, Battambang and Sisophon were ceded to France in return for the French withdrawal from the southeastern region around Chanthaburi and the abandonment of French extraterritorial claims over their "protected persons" (mostly Asians from French colonies or protectorates and, therefore, not properly French at all). In 1909, Siam gave up its claims to the Malay states of Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan, and Trengganu, all of which became British protectorates.

This cession of territory was again agreed to in return for a lessening of certain treaty disadvantages. It was fortunate, indeed, for the kingdom that Britain and France agreed in 1896 to keep Siam as a "buffer state" between British and French territorial possessions in Southeast Asia. King Chulalongkorn kept Siam an independent sovereign state in spite of all these crises, and all the while he strove to uphold Thai cultural, artistic, and religious values. When he died in 1910, a new Siam had come into being.

The Thai kingdom had become a centralized bureaucratic state partly modelled on Western examples. It was also a society without slaves, with a ruling class that was partly westernized in outlook and much more aware of what was going on in Europe and America. Technologically, too, there had been many advances, among them railroads and trams, postal services and telegraph lines.

With so many achievements to the King's credit, and a charisma that was enhanced by his longevity, it was no wonder that the Thai people genuinely grieved his passing. The date of his demise, 23 October, is a national commemoration day in honour of one of Siam's greatest and most beloved monarchs.

Nationalism and Constitution (1910-1932)

King Chulalongkorn's son and successor Vajiravudh (Rama VI) was the first Thai king to have been educated abroad, in England at Harrow School and Oxford University. King Vajiravudh (r.1910-1925) was noted for his accomplishments as a poet, dramatist writing in both English and Thai, and polemicist. He was a convinced nationalist and was the first person to try to instil a western-style nationalistic fervour in his subjects. Like his father he was determined to modernize Siam while still upholding traditional Thai values and royal authority.

King Vajiravudh chose to work on issues and problems which appealed to his personal interests, largely in the literary, educational, and ideological fields. He was also keenly interested in military affairs and formed his own paramilitary organization, the "Wild Tiger Corps", to inculcate national pride.

After 1932 : Democratic Government under the Constitutional Monarchy

Modern Thai government has been demarcated by 24 June 1932, which is recognized as the starting point that ushered in democracy. It is perceived as the opening of a new chapter in Thai politics because of the creation of a constitutional monarchy and the transformation of the political process, characterized by such democratic features as a constitution, political parties, elections, parliament, and a cabinet of politicians.

King Prajadhipok, also known as Rama VII (r. 1925-1935) abdicated, reasoning that he could no longer concur with the People's Party in the constructive way as he desired. His successor, King Ananda, also known as Rama IX (r. 1935-1946), was the ten-year-old son of Prince Mahidol of Songkla, one of King Chulalongkorn's sons. The youth of the King and his absence from the country while pursuing his studies in Switzerland, left the People's Party with a relatively free hand in shaping the destiny of the Kingdom.

During the 1940s, the leading figures of the People's Party dominated Thai politics. Two men in particular stood out : Dr. Pridi Banomyong and a young officer by the name of Luang Pibulsongkram (later Field Marshal Plaek Pibulsongkram). While the country experimented with various forms and degrees of democracy and several constitutions were promulgated, the two groups which held power were alternately the military and the civilian bureaucratic elite. Dr. Pridi Banomyong tried to lay the foundation for a socialistic society with his economic plan of 1933 which, however, was considered too radical. Therein, it was proposed to nationalize all land and labour resources and to have most people working for the state as government employees. These ideas were unacceptable to the conservative elements, both within the People's Party and also in the elite as a whole, which did not desire any sweeping structural change in Thai society. Dr. Pridi was forced into temporary exile, and the National Assembly was prorogued.

Governments of the post-1932 era sought to keep a balance between civilian and military elements so as not to alienate any important group. For

instance, in 1934 the exiled Dr. Pridi Banomyong was brought back into the administration as Interior Minister, largely because the then Prime Minister, General Phraya Phahol Pholphayuhasena, was eager to retain civilian support for his government. Phraya Phahol appointed as well Luang Pibulsongkram to a ministerial post. During the period 1934-38, both Dr. Pridi and Luang Pibulsongkram strove hard to consolidate their political power, the former through the Thai intelligentsia and the latter through influence over the armed forces. When Phraya Phahol resigned in 1938, Luang Pibulsongkram succeeded him as Prime Minister, signifying that the military had gained a decisive advantage in the struggle for dominance in Thai politics.

After 1933, Siam entered a period of military ascendancy. Some officers in the army wanted to see Siam progress into modernity, in terms of politics and government. Following a royalist revolt, army officers decided to involve themselves in politics and by acclamation chose the already prominent Field Marshal Plaek Pibulsongkram as their leader. Hence, it was inevitable that the military became the dominant force.

In 1941, the Pibulsongkram Government acceded to demands of overwhelming Japanese forces to cross over to neighbouring Burma. The policy saved the country from the devastation that would have undoubtedly followed had the government decided to continue with the initial resistance by the air force on the southern shores of Thailand. Dr. Pridi Banomyong and Mom Rachawong Seni Pramoj (later also Prime Minister), however, were sympathetic to the Allies and worked with Thailand's underground resistance movement at home and abroad.

Towards the end of World War II, Field Marshal Pibulsongkram and his government resigned and Mr. Khuang Abhaiwongse, founder of the oldest political party, the Democrat Party, became the Prime Minister in 1944. In the following year, King Anada Mahidol (Rama VIII) returned from Switzerland and Dr. Pridi became Prime Minister in 1946. The unexpected death of the young King generated popular dissatisfaction and once again the tide turned. Dr. Pridi Banomyong was forced into exile and Field Marshal Pibulsongkram again became Prime Minister.

The year 1946 marks the beginning of the present reign with the accession to the throne of His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX).[2]

[2] *See also the chapter entitled "Modern Monarchy" .*