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Seidenfaden Erik, . Kanôk Nakhon, an ancient Mon Settlement in Northeast Siam (Thailand) and its treasures of art. In: Bulletin de l'Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient. Tome 44, 1951. pp. 643-648.

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KANÖK NAKHON
AN ANCIENT MÖN SETTLEMENT
IN NORTHEAST SIAM (THAILAND)
AND ITS TREASURES OF ART

by

Major Erik SEIDENFADEN

Situated in Northeast Siam, in the group of villages, or *tambön*, of Nong Paen, at a distance of about 3 kilometers to the West of the *amphö* or District Office of Kamalasai (formerly in the *changwat* or Province of Kalasindhu, at present Mahāsarakhām), are the remains of an ancient earth walled place called Kanök Nakhon or Müang Fā Dēt Sung Yāng which seems to be of no mean interest, both archaeologically and historically speaking. The following information has been obtained through the kindness of my old friend Mr. Francis Henry Giles, or Phraya Indra Montri Sri Chandra Kumara, late Director-General of the Siamese Revenue Department and for many years the distinguished President of the Siam Society. Mr. Giles, who perhaps possesses an unequalled knowledge of the history and the countries of Siam, the Shan States and Burma, obtained the information given here from one of his former officers, Phra Pahirath Phibun, Revenue officer of the Province of Nakhon Rajasima (*vulgo* Khorat) who carried out his investigations concerning the old town according to Mr. Giles's written instructions. It seems that Phra Phahirath visited Kanök Nakhon some time during the year of 1938. In his report (in Siamese), submitted to Mr. Giles, Phra Phahirath gives some extraordinary measurements for the old place. He thus says that the northern city wall has a *breadth* of five *sen* or 200 metres while the southern city wall has a breadth of no less than forty *sen* or 1.800 metres! As Phra Phahirath does not state the length of these two city walls one must suppose that his writing *kwang* (broad) must be a slip of the pen for *yao* (long). For the eastern and western walls the length is given as 2.400 metres. From the croquis, drawn up according to the corrected dimensions, it will be seen that the contours of the town take on a curious trapezoid appearance. According to Mr. Giles the area of the town should be about 3/4 of a square mile. When speaking of the city moats our informant gives the same extraordinary measurements as given for the northern and southern city walls, writing «broad» when «long» no doubt is meant. The moats are only partly filled with water which in the deepest places does not exceed

two metres. With regard to the city walls Phra Phahirath states that they have a thickness of only one *wak* or 2 metres which probably is a gross understatement. He says furthermore that the height of the walls or ramparts originally was about 10 *sok* or 5 metres but due to age, wear and tear, they now only reach the height of 3 metres, at most. The height is very uneven and in some places nothing is

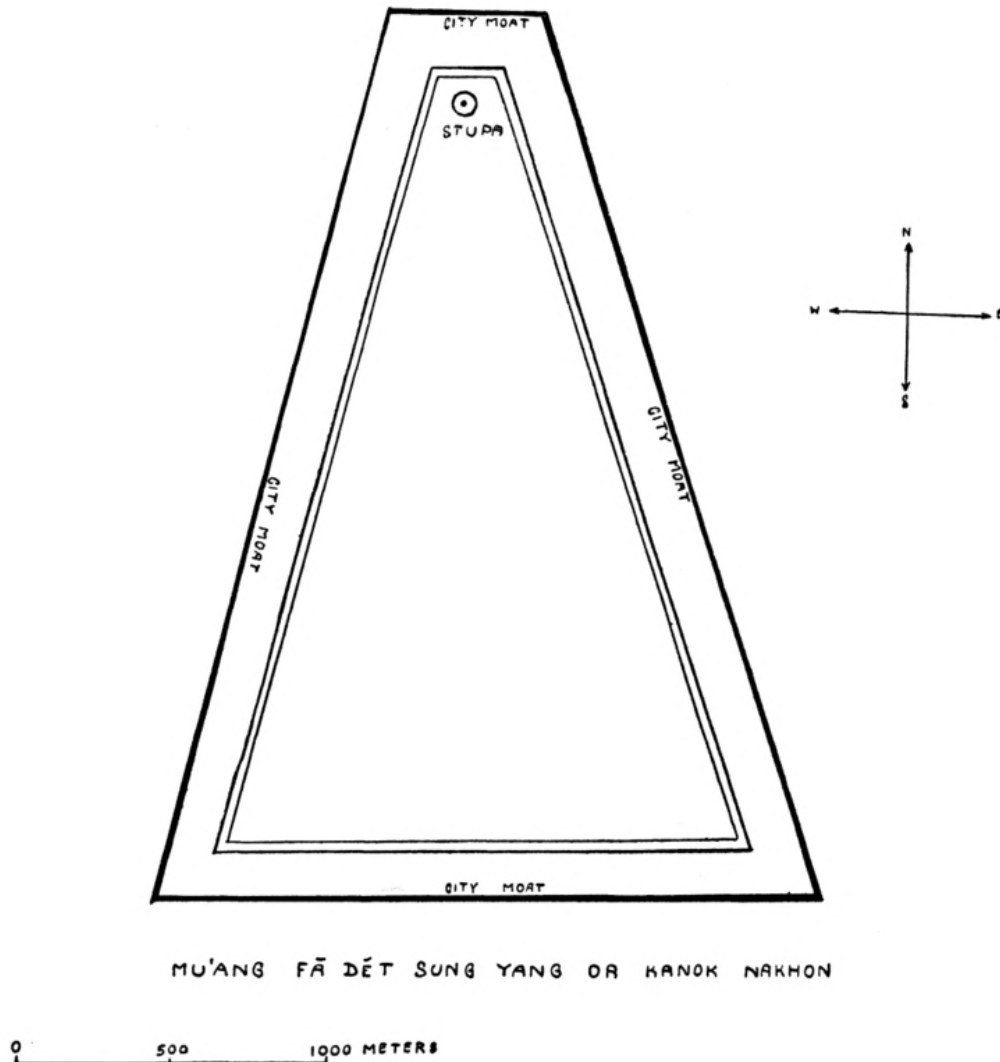


FIG. 13. — Mu'ang Fa Dēt Sung Yang or Kanok Nakhon.

left of the former city walls. Of the city gates no traces are left not even of their former places, not to speak of their appearance. There is, however, a ruined stupa or *phra chedi* standing close to the northern city wall. Its base measures 30 *wak* or 60 metres in circumference while the remains of the stupa itself reach a height of 10 metres. Phra Phahirath does not mention the style of the stupa, it may therefore be of a later origin than the town and the many carved *bai semas*. No other monuments or objects of interest are met with inside the city walls, says Phra Phahirath. The «*bai semas*», i. e. the embrasure stones, are not fixed on the top

of the city walls but are placed in rows in an adjacent field at the rim of the jungle, quite near to the old town site. The inhabitants of Bān Mak Gôm, which lies near by, have collected more than a hundred of these «bai semas» and stuck them in the ground forming an enclosure for the village *wat* or Buddhist temple; some of the «bai semas» have also been put up in front of the *bôt* (*upadu*). This was done either in 1935 or 1936. Referring to the photographs, which he took of some of the carved stones, Phra Phahirath says that he estimates the total number of them at not exceeding 2.000 pieces, and he adds that they are carved with sculptures alike to them seen on his photographs. He says that the sculptures are much worn by age and weather so the sculptures are mostly not very distinct. A few of them seem, however, to represent scenes different from those depicted on the majority of the slabs but then they are also rather unclear due to the ravages of time.

Concerning the history of Kanŏk Nakhon the local inhabitants possess a myth which, in its essentials, may contain a grain of truth. They told Phra Phahirath as follows : Müang Fā Dēt Sung Yāng or Kanŏk Nakhon was founded in the year 1164 B. E., corresponding to 621 A. D., which date, in view of the style of the sculptures, does not seem to be too unreasonable. A certain Chao Fā Ra-ngüm was the founder of the town. He governed the town as an independent ruler owing fealty to nobody but his power was limited to the town itself and a few outposts held for defensive purposes. The old walled city has now been deserted for more than 1.300 years, and it fell already during the life time of Chao Fā Ra-ngüm. The cause for the desertion and depopulation of Kanŏk Nakhon was a quarrel about the beautiful daughter of the prince. Her name was Nang Fā Yāt, «Princess the Dewy Sky», and she was wooed by the *chao* or ruler of Müang Chieng Sôm (the site of this old walled town is in the district of Sahatsakhandh and not very far to the northwest of Kamalasai). The wooing of the Chieng Sôm ruler was objected to by the father of fair Princess Dewy Sky with the fatal result that war broke out between the two princelets who both were killed in the ensuing contest. Since that happened Kanŏk Nakhon has been a deserted town. Chao Fā Ra-ngüm is said to have been a younger brother of the *chao* or prince of Müang Nong Hān (at present an amphō district in the province of Udorn). Due to reciprocal jealousy the elder brother sent Chao Fā Ra-ngüm away, together with a portion of the inhabitants of Müang Nong Hān, with instructions to the latter to found a new town and to fend for himself and his party. Chao Fā Ra-ngüm did so but had not sufficient time to finish building his town before war broke out and the end came. The tale adds that due to this fatality the carving of the «bai semas» *wat* was not completed nor were they put in place on the top of the city walls. Phra Phahirath finishes his narrative by saying that the descendants of the people of those far off times call the old town site Müang Fā Dēt Sung Yāng. So far Phra Phahirath. The present inhabitants of Bān Mak Gôm are, however, not Mŏn but ordinary Laos Wiengchan, exiles of that war which destroyed the capital of the kingdom of the same name in 1827. As regards the myth about the quarrel concerning the fair Princess Dewy Sky I would like to point out its similarity with the tale told about a certain Phraya Nakhon Hŏng of Bān Phon Müang Mathan who was killed in battle with Phraya Kalahom from Thā Rat (Raja) whom he had refused his beautiful daughter in marriage⁽¹⁾. This similarity may be due to a common origin of the two tales

(1) E. Seidenfaden, *Complément à l'inventaire descriptif des monuments du Cambodge*, in *BEFEO*, XXII.

or to the tale having wandered from north to south or vice versa. Such wanderings of myths or fairy tales are of course common in our Eurasian continent, and did not King Suriya of Lanchang wage war with the principality of Chieng Khwāng in the year 1651 «for the sake of the beautiful eyes of a new Helen», the Princess Ken Chan, as Paul Le Boulanger tells us in his *Histoire du Laos français*. The date given by the myth for the foundation of Kanök Nakhon corresponds with the reign of King Içanavarman of Kambodia at which time the part of the formerly mighty Fu-nan, which lay to the north of the Dung Rek range, formed an independant state by the Chinese called Tshen-la of the land but the true name of which probably was Bhavapura⁽¹⁾. Our tale also says that the people of Kanök Nakhon hailed from Müang Nong Hān. There are two places of this name in the province of Udorn. One lies to the northeast of the large inland lake called Nong Hān or Lahān Yai or Kumphavapi, the other, called Müang Nong Hān Kao, is a deserted walled town lying on the eastern shores of the lake. The former place is rather large and fortified with double ramparts and broad water filled moats. It was built during the wars with the Burmese in the 1760es. The ramparts of this fortress were formerly crowned with «bai semas» of sandstone. They have now been removed and used for enclosures round several of the temples in the town. Our emigrants did evidently not come from the present Müang Nong Hān but most probably from the so-called Müang Nong Hān Kao. I have not visited the old Nong Hān town but in 1910, when serving in the circle of Udorn, I was told about its existence. It might be worth the trouble to explore this old site. It may be added that according to our tale Chao Fā Ra-ngüm was a Khôm which may be either Khmer or Môn. However, whether the Kanök Nakhon people came from Müang Nong Hān or from some other place it is clear that the sculptures on the «bai semas» are the handiwork of Môn artists wearing the distinct impression of the Dvaravati school of art.

Professor Cœdès, in a private letter to the writer, recently said «to find the art of Dvaravati so high up in the north is rather unexpected and poses a «political» problem because we find ourselves here in a region which in the VIIIth century should be a part of Tchen-la». About this time too it is reasonable to believe that Dvaravati, this highly civilized Môn realm about whose history we know so little, had regained its independence after for several centuries having been a vassal of imperial Fu-nan which now was quickly disintegrating, after the rebellion of the Khmer princes Bhavavarman and Citrasena, by the the middle of the sixth century.

Phra Phahirath took a number of photographs of the above mentioned sculptures but most of them are too indistinct to allow a satisfactory explanation. Professor Cœdès has kindly lent me his aid in identifying the four sculptures reproduced here for which I beg him to accept my warmest thanks. The Professor says that photograph No. 1 represents the Buddha (standing in a grove), No. 2 represents the Buddha standing between two assistants, and this sculpture is of a typical Môn style influenced by the Gupta art (this motif is met with in many stucco reliefs found in Nakhon Pathom near to the great stupa there). As regards No. 3 this again represents the Buddha but here the style seems to belong to a later period.

About photograph No. 4 Professor Cœdès says : «If it is a newborn child, the person standing to the left, is holding in his arms (and the Professor is not sure on this point) it might represent the prediction of the rishi Asita».

⁽¹⁾ P. Dupont, *La dislocation du Tchen-la et la fondation du Cambodge angkorien*, in *BEFEO*, XLIII.

It is very much to be desired that the Archæological Service of The Fine Arts Department in Bangkok should take the necessary steps to have this ancient site properly and thoroughly explored as soon as possible. An exact plan of the old town should be drawn up and good and clear photographs taken of all the carved slabs. In the case that photographing of the more worn and indistinct sculptures should not be possible an artist familiar with Buddhist iconography (not difficult to find among Siamese artists) might copy them with ink and pencil. Let us hope that this will be carried out in a near future!

Sorgenfri, Denmark, 15th August 1951.

ADDITIONAL NOTE

In my « Complément à l'Inventaire descriptif des Monuments du Cambodge », *BEFEO*, vol. XXII (1923), p. 78, under the head lines of Kamalasai, I mention a place of archæological interest called Bān Müang Sung Yāng, saying that at this village is found a sanctuary of bricks and some stone sculptures. This information was due to hear-say as I, due to my duties as an Assistant Inspector-General of the Gendarmerie, had no time to visit the place myself. When looking on the map attached to my Complément it will be seen that Bān Müang Sung Yāng is identical with Müang Fā Dēt Sung Yāng, or Kanök Nakhon, only the distance of that place from the amphö office in Kamalasai is not 15-16 kilometres but much less. Kanök Nakhon means « the City of the Rice Flower ».

E. S.



2
The Buddha standing between two assistants.



3
The Buddha
(the scene here depicted
is difficult to identify).



1
The Buddha
(standing in a grove).



4
The prediction of Asita.