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The mid south's fathomable past



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The southern region of Thailand on the Malay Peninsula is the smallest of the country's four regions, with 14 per cent of the country's total landmass. The core of the mid south, from where Lion Lawman Khun Phan came and where he felt most at home, comprises three provinces of roughly equal size that lie along the eastern side of the peninsula: Nakhon Si Thammarat, Phatthalung and Songkhla. The neighbouring provinces of Surat Thani and Trang share history as well as geographical, ethnic and social features with the core provinces of the mid south. Compared with Thailand's other regions, in the northeast and the north, which can boast Lanna history, the south of Thailand is not conceived of as a unit in Thai histories. Patani has a history as an autonomous kingdom and Tambralinga-Nakhon Si Thammarat has its history, but there is no regional history of the south.

The Malay Peninsula is an ethnically and religiously complex region where mainland and island Southeast Asia meet to form a distinctive cultural and economic zone. Over the centuries, the peoples on the peninsula in southern Thailand were exposed to Islam and Buddhism, both Mahayana and Sri Lankan, as well as to Hindu-Javanese and Malayan cultural influences (Suthiwong 2008: 334). As a label for the region, the Malay Peninsula is misleading in the sense that the term does not capture the

presence of Chinese who passed through as envoys and traders from early times. Many made the peninsula their home, and Chinese merchant families became prominent in the administration of coastal ports such as Songkhla and Nakhon Si Thammarat as well as Patani, where intermarriage between Chinese and Thai/Siamese formed a local Peranakan Chinese population (Teo 2008: 217–18). Five large Hokkien families in Trang who had kin relations in Penang dominated fishing and tin trading and mining along the west coast as far as Sumatra (Wong 2008: 201–5).

Until the end of the nineteenth century, the Siamese kings were able to rule distant tributary states on the peninsula only indirectly, and interstate relations were conducted through suzerains or overlords. These rulers were proxies whose loyalty to Ayutthaya or Bangkok was contingent on the advantages to be gained by paying tribute to the Siamese ruler. In the late eighteenth century, at the beginning of the Bangkok period, when the new warrior-king Phya Chakri began to reconstitute the Siamese empire and reassert its authority over far-flung provinces and tributary states, the mid south marked the outer limit of Siamese suzerainty. Beyond this limit was a different world, with historical familial, cultural and intellectual ties to Muslim centres in what is now Pakistan, Egypt, Iran and other parts of the Middle East. These links to the Islamic world mattered to some of its Malay-Muslim population as much as ties to the Thai-Buddhist courts in the central plains.

Until the end of the seventeenth century, the centre of the Malay-Muslim world on the peninsula was the sultanate of Patani, a thriving entrepot in the trading networks of the Indonesian Archipelago. It boasted a golden age as one of the region's most prosperous entrepots and centres of Islamic education for Southeast Asian Muslims and rebelled against Siamese suzerainty. Five wars between 1785 and 1838 were needed before Bangkok's armies succeeded in destroying the sultanate (Bradley 2013: 150). Parts of Patani and Songkhla were ceded to Malaya in the 1909 treaty with the United Kingdom—a realignment that exposed the southernmost parts of Thailand to Malay nationalism during the 1930s and 1940s. These were the years when the policeman was most active and the threat of separatism began to haunt the central Thai Government (Porphant 2017: 229–30). From the 1960s to the late 1970s, the mountain range along the Thailand–Malaysia border provided sanctuary for communist insurgents, deepening concern for Thailand's military rulers that the country's territorial integrity might fracture in the southernmost provinces.

Patani people today are proud of their region, deeply religious and mistrustful of outsiders. They refuse to forget the loss of their huge cannon, the *Phya Tani*, which was removed from the province by the central government and relocated to the lawns of the Ministry of Defence in Bangkok to symbolise their subjugation. In response to the repression of Malay identity by the Thai state and the violent insurgency in the south, historical writing on Patani has burgeoned in recent years, making it one of many battlegrounds in the ethnonationalist struggle taking place in resistance to the government's policies. Contemporary Patani identity harks back to historical writing such as the *History of the Malay Kingdom of Patani* by Ibrahim Syukri, which documents and celebrates Patani as an independent entity before the Siamese empire extended its sway southward and Western imperialism arrived in the region (Jory 2013: xix; Mansurnoor 2013).

Environment and economy

Geology, geography and weather conspired to create an environmental niche for the provinces of the mid south. The Phatthalung monastery where the legendary policeman was initiated into the secret lore is built into the base of a limestone hillock that rises modestly from the surrounding plain. Water seeping through the limestone dissolved the rock and hollowed out caves that provided quiet places for meditation and hideaways for outlaws. Perhaps Khao Or was the 'cavern-like temple' just outside Phatthalung town mentioned by the local British bank manager who took up his posting in the early 1930s when the policeman was just beginning to make his reputation (Exell 1963: 137). Nearby, at 177 metres high, is Khao Ok Thalu, the 'mountain with a hole in its shoulder', with nature's hollowed-out space near the summit explained away by a local folktale.

These towering limestone formations extend into Laos, northern Vietnam and southern China, where they are magnets for international tourists (Gobbett and Hutchison 1973: 39; Kiernan 1988; Gupta 2005: 169). In northern Laos, the limestone caves were capacious enough to house the command centre of the Pathet Lao army during the Second Indochina War.



Plate 4 Khao Ok Thalu, Phatthalung

Source: Kasem Jandam.

Formed eons ago when this land was submerged more than once under the sea, these cave complexes in carbonate outcrops intruded by granite are anomalous in the landscape. Across the peninsula to the west, the limestone karsts onshore and offshore in the shallows of the Andaman Sea are even more dramatic. From Satul northward all the way to Surat Thani, the limestone type is the same. Some 15–20 per cent of Thailand rests on a bedrock of limestone of variable purity and age. The theatrical beauty of the karsts became known to the world when Hollywood discovered the unearthly forms. Scenes from the 1974 James Bond film *The Man with the Golden Gun* were shot on islands off Phangnga and Phuket. Tourism development quickly followed, and the west coast—once the homelands of fisher folk and sea gypsies known as *chao le*—lost its innocence. With the exception of resorts on Samui Island and the party islands off Surat Thani, the east coast of the peninsula has been spared most of the gaudy and polluting effects of the international tourism on which Thailand depends for foreign exchange.

Mount Khanun District in the province of Phatthalung lies between Songkhla to the south and Nakhon Si Thammarat to the north. The western border of Nakhon Si Thammarat follows the ridge of a steep north–south–running mountain range that boasts the highest mountain in Thailand’s south, Mount Luang, at 1,780 metres. The mountain range

forms a barrier to the weather systems moving across the peninsula from the west, but rainfall on the eastern side, while less than on the western side, is sufficient to irrigate the plains that extend from the mountains to the Gulf of Thailand. The eastern border of Phatthalung cuts through a string of inland lakes that stretches north from Songkhla town for about 100 kilometres. The water world of the Songkhla lakes that links Nakhon Si Thammarat, Phatthalung and Songkhla once defined the landscape, facilitating economic activity and shaping social life until the national highway system was constructed in the late twentieth century. Southern Thai social scientists and environmental historians who study the mid south provinces as a subregion refer to the waters as 'our lakes' (*thalesap rao*) and have produced a series of illustrated publications and CDs that showcase their work. Canals and river systems gradually silted up with the runoff from the mountains and it was only in the mid-1960s that the infrastructure improved to the point where roads replaced waterways for the transport of agricultural produce and commerce (Chatthip and Phunsak 1997: 45–7, 107).

The Satingpra Peninsula, a finger of land administered by the Songkhla provincial government that separates Phatthalung from the Gulf of Thailand, lies to the east. With access to the Gulf of Thailand confined to rivers and canals through Songkhla territory, the provincial centre of Phatthalung is today truly landlocked—an accident of geography that conceals its history. The southern Thai environmental historian Mana Khunweechuay (2003: 21) has drawn attention to the fact that two centuries ago this terrain was entirely under water, and it was possible to travel by boat from the lake entrance at Songkhla up to Pakphanang on the coast just south of Nakhon Si Thammarat town. Phatthalung at that time was a small port on a bay sheltered from the Gulf of Thailand by Tantalem Island, a landform that appears clearly on John Walker's map drawn from John Crawford's mission to Siam and Cochin China in 1828 (Crawford 1967). Until the late nineteenth century, vessels could pass unimpeded through the bay, which gradually filled as the runoff from the mountains deposited sediment in the lowlands. Forest land on the plains and slopes was cleared for agriculture and, with the construction of roads and rail lines, silting in the bay accelerated. The channel between Tantalem Island and the mainland became shallower and shallower to the point where oceangoing vessels could no longer navigate through the passage and the three 'lakes' gradually took shape. The smallest, Thale Noi, formed at the northern end of the chain, and a canal now connects

Thale Noi to the larger inland lake. The lakes are still very shallow, ranging in depth from 1.5 to 2.5 metres.¹ Salinity in the chain of lakes increases gradually from north to south as freshwater meets seawater entering through Songkhla Harbour. Flora and fauna have adapted to the changing salinity and continue to adapt through the seasons, resulting in immense biodiversity. The Satingpra Peninsula—that ‘strange coastal feature’—is known today in the mid south as Big Island (*ko yai*), bearing witness to its ancient history as a separate landmass (Donner 1978: 417).²

By the end of the nineteenth century, much of the basin at the northern end of the lakes was a mosquito-infested swamp forest (*pa phru*) as the channel silted up. During World War II, a tropical storm destroyed 75 per cent of this forest, which was followed by a drought that left the wetlands vulnerable to fire, which further decimated wildlife habitats. Villagers who had come into possession of firearms after the war hunted in the habitats of the swamp forest and around the lake and lagoon for their livelihood, further reducing wildlife numbers in this ecological niche. What remains of the original habitat is today preserved as wildlife refuges in Phru Khuan Khreng and Phru Khuan Khi Sian (Wiwat 2007: 101–11). In drought conditions, which are common nowadays because of climate change, the refuges are even more vulnerable to fire. In early times fish and water fowl were abundant, as were many species of land animals, including the pygmy elephant. The hunter-gatherers of the forest collected bamboo, resins, rubber sap, honey and rattan, which they bartered with agriculturalists on the plains for rice and salt. The bamboo, therapeutic herbs (*samun phrai*), animal hides and tusk ivory were harvested for trade (Mana 2003: 27–35). In the late seventeenth century, Phatthalung produced low-grade cotton that found its way by sea to Nagasaki along with birds’ nests, tin and sea cucumber.

In the early 1930s, the plentiful wildlife enabled the merchant brothers Albert and Edward Jucker to keep a motley collection of creatures in their family compound. One day a house guest was startled out of his afternoon nap by a young tiger that had broken out of its cage. The Juckers’ family zoo housed the tiger, a black panther, monkeys, porcupines, guinea fowl, an argus pheasant, a cobra and a python—all of local provenance.

1 On the silting up of the bay and the formation of the peninsula, see Reynolds (2009).

2 Donner’s Map 2 of 1897 still shows Satingpra as a landmass distinct from the mainland. Tantalem is a slag byproduct of tin extraction. Munro-Hay (2001: 250–8) observes that Tantalem Island does not appear on sixteenth-century Portuguese maps and leaves its existence in dispute.

The physician in Trang who looked after the American Presbyterian Mission was a keen if rather inept hunter of tigers in his spare time (Exell 1963: 128, 147).

Tin attracted the Dutch East India Company (Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie, or VOC) to the east coast, where it opened a trading post in Nakhon Si Thammarat in 1642, supervised initially by company offices at Malacca, and after 1664 at Ayutthaya. Over the following century, the Dutch company exported tin intermittently from the east coast through Ligor—an old Malay name for Nakhon found on early European maps in garbled form: Lugo, Logor, Loguor, Lomgon, Lomgu and Lomgua (Munro-Hay 2001: 126–8). The Siamese ruler in Ayutthaya, with a wary eye on his commercial interests, sought to monopolise supply and disadvantage the Dutch company, which understandably wanted direct control over what it produced. Many Southeast Asian Buddhist rulers, beneath the pomp and circumstance of their status as universal monarchs, were astute traders. They were merchants who also ruled. The tastes of the Ayutthayan kings for luxury goods such as foreign textiles and rare and unusual objects were financed not by land rents but by trade in forest products, rice, minerals such as tin and hides exported through Ayutthaya from the hinterland. Discrepancies between the Dutch and Siamese-language versions of the treaty between the two parties signed in 1688 expose the conditions faced by Europeans traders in a market in which the Siamese merchant-rulers held the upper hand. The Dutch text stated that the VOC had a monopoly on tin, while the Siamese text stipulated that ‘all the tin belongs to the king and may only be traded by His Majesty’s servants’. Losses in the tin trade, the lack of success in pressing the company’s case at court and political uncertainty in Ayutthaya compelled the VOC to close the Ligor post in 1756 (Brummelhuis 1987: 34–49).

On the west coast the tin seam extended to Malaya, and provinces in the west—Ranong, Phangnga, Phuket and Trang—are better known and studied (Cushman 1991). Phuket Island has a geographical cousin in Penang Island, where tin from the west coast was smelted. The tin industry in Siam, an annex of tin operations in British Malaya, was capital intensive and dominated by foreign corporations. By the 1930s, all ore was processed in the British Malay states (Dixon and Parnwell 1991: 218). Before the Thai Government nationalised the tin industry at the outset of World War II, there were 58 properties belonging to about 45 British and Australian companies. History tends to forget that the region east of the

mountain range in the mid south supplied tin to international markets. After nationalisation, Nakhon Si Thammarat and Songkhla could still boast 10 tin mines; seven of the leases were owned by Australians (Whyte 2010: 113–16). The only other part of the country that was so dominated by foreign capital was the north, where the Borneo Company was able to control teak extraction after it was granted concessions by the Bangkok court.

In the heyday of the international tin trade during the 1920s and 1930s, the financial needs of the foreign miners exporting from the mid south called for the appointment of a bank manager at Tung Song, a railway junction of no great distinction. When the British schoolteacher F.E. Exell arrived in Tung Song in the late 1920s to take up the position, he spent a nervous first night in the shabby railway rest house with the windows and doors firmly bolted. He had been told that Tung Song ‘was full of bad hats’—his quaint term for local miscreants—so he heeded the advice and took precautions (Exell 1963: 113–14).

In those days, the abundance of food and natural resources supported a very small population—a topic that is still discussed by local people. At the time the policeman was active in the mid-1930s, the south was estimated to have only 12.7 per cent of Thailand’s population; the Nakhon provincial circle had almost half the population in the region (Porphant 2017: 231–2).³ Even with the opening of the southern railway line in 1907, the area was wild and underpopulated well into the twentieth century. After World War II, parts of Phatthalung were still known as refuges for bandits, as places where stolen boats and cattle could be stashed and as ideal locations for the production of moonshine (Mana 2003: 25–8, 36). The fragmentary infrastructure and the rugged mountain spine of the peninsula were impediments to local travel and commerce. In the early 1960s, when I lived in Krabi on the west coast, a bus journey to Songkhla through Trang and Phatthalung entailed a hair-raising ride on a poorly maintained road that wound its way over the range and down the rainforest-clad ravines. As the bus reached the highest point of the pass the driver would lift his hands from the wheel and clasp them together in homage to the mountain sprite who dwelt in the shrine we

3 The data and table in Porphant (2017: 231) are slightly confusing. The 1904 statistics in the text for ‘the southern region’ include Kelantan and Terengganu, which became part of British Malaya later in the decade. The census of 1909 in the table shows that the Nakhon Si Thammarat *monthon* still had almost half the population in the south.

were passing. For an instant, the passengers were in mortal danger. If the driver failed to pay homage and continued to grip the wheel, the guardian spirit might avenge the lack of respect at the next hairpin turn. Yet if the driver obeyed the dictates of his faith, he could lose control of the vehicle and the bus with its passengers would end up at the bottom of the ravine. In the many times I tried to witness this act of devotion, it was so quick I usually missed it. The pleated landscape along the route is known locally as ‘the mountains of folded cloth [*phap pha*]’. The first arterial road across the mountains of folded cloth was instrumental in furthering the Trang rubber industry and was built without foreign engineering expertise at the instigation of the *monthon* commissioner of the south, Khaw Simbee (Ajin 2009: 257).

Legacies of an ancient heritage

In the early centuries, the mid south on both the east and the west coasts of the Malay Peninsula was a vital link in the international commerce between China, the Indian Subcontinent and the Western Orient—a watery highway sometimes referred to as the Silk Road of the Sea. Transshipment routes ferried goods across the peninsula, making possible a chain of short-range trading connections that stretched from China to Europe. Recent archaeological excavations by French, Italian and Thai teams have unearthed cosmopolitan and proto-urban complexes on the east coast where products of stone, glass, ceramics and metals were manufactured to serve markets in the South China Sea. The findings at Khao Sam Kaeo north of Surat Thani and other sites on both coasts have pushed back the dates of the portage routes across the peninsula to the fourth and third centuries BCE (Baker and Pasuk 2017: 8–9). Local products also found their way into the trade. The rich resources of the hinterland supplied camphor, rhinoceros horn, aromatic woods and beeswax to the Chinese market.

The Isthmus of Kra is the narrowest land bridge across the Malay Peninsula, so narrow that from time to time plans are floated to dig a canal from one coast to the other to accommodate oceangoing vessels. In the mid-1970s, Edward Teller, ‘father of the H-bomb’, proposed excavating a canal using nuclear explosives that were being heralded as sufficiently ‘clean’ and suitable for peaceful purposes in the not-too-distant future (Kaufman 2013: 224). One might expect that the most natural crossing

for transshipments in the premodern era would be at the isthmus, but the strong winds of southwest monsoons obeyed their own logic and carried ships across the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea to landfall south of the Kra. There the land bridge was wider, the mountains steeper and portage more laborious. These goods as well as Indic artefacts were relayed from one side of the peninsula to the other along the waterways and across the mountains, thus spurring the emergence of entrepots on both coasts. Hindu worship and the Brahmanical practices of seafarers and traders from the Indian Subcontinent may date from as early as the sixth or seventh century (O'Connor 1972: 13–15, 23–7).

Itinerant merchants from Persian and Arab lands and the Indian Subcontinent stayed longer than required by the change in monsoons that would carry them to their next port and left inscriptions, sculptures and shrines. The religious needs of Tamil merchant guilds and early Buddhist ascetics bequeathed traces of their cultures and religions: stone and terracotta objects in the form of Buddhist votive tablets, images of Vishnu and phallic lingas for the worship of Shiva. The environs of Takupa on the west coast are particularly rich with evidence of these sojourners in the form of Tamil inscriptions, Hindu statuary and Chinese porcelains (Pisit 2013: 150–1). Although the temples and shrines that housed images no longer survive, six long-robed mitred Vishnus dating from the sixth to the eighth centuries CE have been traced to provinces in the mid south and are now housed in local museums and in the National Museum in Bangkok (O'Connor 1986a).

In these early centuries, Chinese envoys visited the entrepots on the peninsula, which they regarded as stepping-stones on the trade routes to India and the Middle East. When they returned to the Middle Kingdom to write up their journeys, they identified the entrepots with toponyms. Chinese historical geographies indicate towns or city-states, but these centres can have been little more than small settlements with a market and a religious shrine. As with all early toponyms on the peninsula, the Chinese texts identify placenames on crude maps, while archaeological finds on the peninsula do not connect objects to placenames. These toponyms have a surprisingly long half-life in local memory that reaches back to an ancient past to confect a mythic present. Takkola, a placename of the seventh century located somewhere along the northwest coast, perhaps in the neighbourhood of Trang, is now the name of a restaurant in Krabi that boasts an oversized image of the Jatukham-Ramathep deity.

Peninsular entrepôts that entered the historical record have left backstories of centres that later grew around them. Langkasuka, a toponym known to Chinese envoys from the sixth century CE, flourished long before Islam came to the region and, according to Malay-Muslim historians, laid the groundwork for the international emporium and paramount state that Patani would eventually become. In arguing that Langkasuka held imperial sway over Songkhla, Phatthalung, Kelantan and Trengganu, Malay historians have perforce overlooked its early Hindu-Buddhist character (Walker 2013: 201). Legend and history coningle in these foundation stories based on archaeological and textual evidence, with some legends attributing the foundation of Patani to people from Kedah (Maier 1988: 96). The name Langkasuka occurs in many stories told in the interior of Kedah and Patani about a princess born from a stem of bamboo—a foundation myth that occurs elsewhere on the peninsula, including Phatthalung, where the story of Lady White Blood originated (Gesick 1995: 41, 62, 84). In the eighth and ninth centuries, Langkasuka was strong enough as a trading centre to catch the attention of Srivijaya, the maritime empire that by the seventh century had drawn the international trade away from transpeninsular routes and through the Straits of Malacca. Langkasuka paid tribute to Srivijaya as its dependency (Wade 2013: 61).

Local rulers extended their hegemony by acquiring loyal entourages and building up a fleet to exact tribute and bring to submission rivals who lacked comparable resources and cultural capital. Nakhon Si Thammarat, which evolved in this way, had a history that predated the influx of Tai peoples to the mainland from the eleventh century. Its coastal location gave it advantages in international commerce and, evolving from its predecessor, Tambralinga—a placename known from an inscription in the Tamil region of South India—it became a major trading centre (Brawn 2018: 17–18). Wannasarn Noonsuk, an archaeologist who worked at Walailak University, studied ancient topographies, temple ruins and artefacts with his research students to bring Tambralinga to life and enrich Nakhon's backstory. His excavations include Khao Kha hill, north of Nakhon town, the most important Saivite site in Tambralinga, where a temple complex of nearly 50 shrines stretches along the high ridge. A large linga was chiselled roughly out of the granite and reservoir tanks for rituals were dug into the slopes. Wannasarn thinks that fires were lit on the ridge as a beacon for coastal shipping; other high points along the coast have similar archaeological profiles (Wannasarn 2013a, 2014).

During the first millennium CE, the mid south belonged to trading networks in the archipelago dominated by Srivijaya, the regional maritime power. In their chauvinism, southern historians have gone so far as to say that the region was the birthplace of Srivijaya. Mahayana Buddhist images, for example, can be dated to the Amaravati school of South India in the first millennium CE and include the bejewelled bronze Bodhisattva discovered at Chaiya, now located in the National Museum of Thailand. It is described as Srivijayan because of stylistic similarities with images from Central Java, leading some art historians to propose an Indo-Javanese period for Thai art in the eighth to ninth centuries. A Sanskrit epigraph of 775 CE, once known in Western scholarship as the Ligor inscription, was discovered in Surat Thani Province and refers to a ruler of Srivijaya. A couple of centuries later, Tambralinga was still capable of defending itself in battle. Its vitality as a trading state made it a target of Cola aggression in the eleventh century, according to a Tamil inscription from Tanjore. In 1230 CE, Chandrabhanu, then the ruler of Tambralinga, left an inscription at Chaiya after apparently annexing it (Wolters 1958: 587–8, 597; Piriya 1980: 64). In 1247 and 1270, Chandrabhanu invaded Sri Lanka. Tambralinga was regrouping and consolidating its power just as the emerging Thai kingdom at Sukhothai was beginning to exert itself southward. As it did so, Sukhothai ruler in the thirteenth century, King Ramkhamhaeng, appointed one of Nakhon Si Thammarat's senior monks to be his supreme patriarch. It would not be the last time that a Siamese ruler availed himself of Ligor's religious prestige.

Nakhon Si Thammarat's name is derived from Sridhammasokaraja, Chandrabhanu's honorific title. Embedded in the foundation king's title is a reference to King Ashoka, the Mauryan Indian emperor of the third century BCE, who converted to Buddhism and built 84,000 stupas to house relics of the Buddha. Within walking distance from the pillar shrine in a park on the grounds of an old prison is a modern statue of the ruler erected in 2001.

King Chandrabhanu looks southward over his domain of 12 satellite states, including Kedah, Patani, Kelantan and, at the very tip of the peninsula, Pahang (Sujit 2000: 59). In earlier times, these Malay states paid tribute to Nakhon, Ayutthaya and Bangkok in the form of miniature gold and silver trees. Nakhon's medallion is of geocosmic design, with the Great Relic stupa at Wat Mahathat in the centre surrounded by the 12 signs of the zodiac, each corresponding to one of Nakhon's tributary states.⁴

4 Nakhon's ancient geocosmic political order is explained in *Phot Thude [The Post Today]*, 19 June 2016: B8.

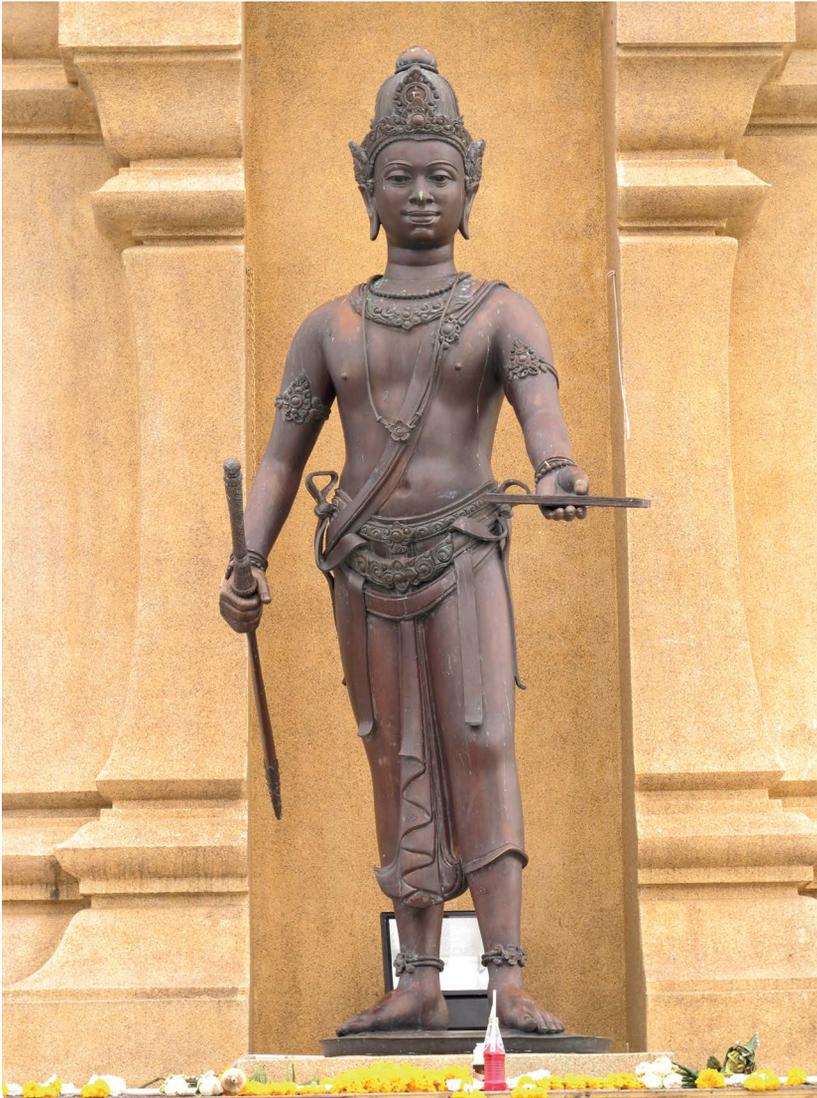


Plate 5 Chandrabhanu, Nakhon Si Thammarat's founding king

Source: Craig Reynolds.

Chandrabhanu's exploits, the Ligor inscription's reference to a ruler of Srivijaya and artistic styles with Javanese elements have led international and local historians to identify the mid south, and especially Nakhon Si Thammarat, as a centre of Srivijaya. Georges Coedès, Prince Damrong Rajanubhab and his son, the art historian and archaeologist Prince Subhadradis Diskul, who followed him in this endeavour, argued for

a strong Srivijaya presence on the Malay Peninsula. In the 1930s, Srivijaya became one of the eight stylistic classifications of Siamese antiquities in a project that told a convincing story of the emerging nation's classical past. In this way, Srivijaya became a centrepiece in the glorification of Nakhon Si Thammarat.

Artistic styles such as 'Srivijayan' cannot be tightly correlated with territorial extent, although Prince Damrong and Coedès made such a correlation by choosing art styles to mesh with the rise and fall of polities and conflated art history with political history (Peleggi 2013: 1539–40). Srivijaya's political control, or even its reach, in its heyday is difficult to define. The religious, art-historical and linguistic evidence that would pinpoint the location and extent of Srivijayan authority across the centuries is sufficiently ambiguous to challenge the idea of centring Srivijaya's empire in the mid south.⁵ The identification of Srivijaya's centre at Palembang in southeastern Sumatra during the seventh century rather than on the Malay Peninsula is supported by textual and archaeological evidence to the satisfaction of many scholars, including O.W. Wolters (2008: Ch. 5), who was persuaded that Srivijaya should be located in the Indonesian Archipelago. Archaeological evidence of economic and religious activity is overwhelming that the material remains near the modern city of Palembang 'can only be reconciled' with the political and economic capital of a pre-fourteenth-century Malay kingdom in the archipelago (Manguin 2014: 114). The main centre of Srivijaya was at Palembang on Sumatra, not in the mid south of the Malay Peninsula.

Provincial pride has, however, continued to push against scholarly rigour and insists on identifying Nakhon Si Thammarat as the centre of Srivijaya. The fact that the 775 CE epigraph that is the primary dated evidence for Srivijayan supremacy in Siam was for many years termed the Ligor inscription has confounded the problem, and the inscription's provenance may not be Nakhon Si Thammarat but Chaiya in Surat Thani to the north.⁶ Police Lieutenant General Sanphet Thammathikun,

5 Examples of scepticism about Srivijayan hegemony abound—for example, in O'Connor (1986: 148)—and Robert Brown (Personal communication, 10 August 2012) notes that the connection of the Srivijaya polity with its art can be associated only vaguely with the geography of the sea trade and specific historical periods.

6 Among the many scholars who attest to Chaiya as the provenance of the Ligor inscription is Hiram Woodward (2003: 82). Wannasarn Noonsuk (Personal communication, 20 February 2017) informs me that the Fine Arts Department continues to give Wat Sema Muang in Nakhon Si Thammarat as the inscription's provenance.

a key figure in the creation of the Jatukham-Ramathep amulet, is one of many who have linked the glories of a legendary Srivijaya—‘the forgotten kingdom’—to Tambralinga and Nakhon Si Thammarat–Ligor (Sanphet 1995; Phirayu 2007: 43–6). During the early years, when the amulet was slow to sell, the spirit of capitalism was nurtured by touting the town’s fabled past. Another southerner, Dhammadasa Phanit, born in Chaiya in 1908 and the brother of Buddhist philosopher Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, also argued for a Srivijayan period in Thai history, as did Preecha Noonsuk, who placed the centre of Srivijaya at Tambralinga–Nakhon Si Thammarat (Preecha 1982; Thammathat 2000).

Kasem Jandam, a poet, short story writer and a scholar of birds’ nests in Southeast Asia, is more cautious. In his school textbook on the province, he acknowledges the claims made for Ligor and its role in Srivijayan history. He knows that the evidence is thin for a kingdom with a continuous unitary centre in the vicinity of Nakhon Si Thammarat. In deference to the chauvinism in the local scholarship, he says only that ‘quite a few historians and archaeologists’ believe that Ligor was a ‘city-state’ (*nakhon rat*) and part of the Srivijayan empire stretching from Surat Thani to Java (Kasem 2008: 12). To put the proud claims of local historians into perspective, the archaeologist and writer Sujit Wongthes believes it is more accurate to think of Srivijayan power as dependent on rulers in several locales who sustained their hegemony by controlling trade. Small principalities—or *mueang* in the Tai sociopolitical vocabulary—shared common cultural features such as devotion to Mahayana Buddhism expressed in an art style that could be termed Srivijayan (Sujit 2000: 45–7).

The protagonists who conjured up the Jatukham-Ramathep amulet in the late 1980s celebrated Nakhon’s putative connections with Srivijaya to promote their new creation, and the amulet’s story thrived in the fertile landscape. Local people living near archaeological sites were aware of what had been excavated in the surrounding rainforests and under their feet, and local children could read about the region’s heritage in schoolbooks. Museums in the mid south, formally administered by the Fine Arts Department and housing Hindu and Buddhist artefacts from the ancient past, are open to the public. Over time, community imagination imbued with Hindu-Buddhist beliefs and practices has mythologised the landscape. A local teacher and historian, Chali Naparasmī, who has circulated dozens of his photocopied studies, is sure that, from a certain angle, the limestone outcrop in Phatthalung sheltering the Khao Or monastery, where the

policeman underwent his initiation, bears the unmistakable profile of a Shiva linga. He assured me that the linga profile was perceptible to an onlooker possessed of the requisite mindfulness.⁷

The legacy of ancient rule within the network of Srivijayan dependencies is still remembered. Brahmanism in the region from early times and contacts with Sinhalese Theravada Buddhism established a pedigree for Nakhon Si Thammarat and empowered its ruling families with a degree of autonomy cherished by city-states in a complex political field of rivalries and shifting loyalties.

Geopolitics

The topography of the Malay Peninsula and its environment made it difficult for the Siamese courts in the central plains to rule their vassals in the northern Malay states. The rugged terrain restricted communications, which were largely seaborne before the early twentieth century, and military planning was hampered by distance. ‘It’s too far away to get a decision’, complained a Bangkok general about a tactical matter that was being referred to Phatthalung (Corfield 1993: 247). At times, Siamese courts could govern the south in name only, leaving the loyalties of Patani and the Malay sultanates to be enforced indirectly, fitfully and unreliably by proxy states. Nakhon Si Thammarat was one such proxy. With its Malay name, Ligor, it enjoyed a measure of independence as an autonomous state with a mind of its own if its ruler was strong. For the Siamese courts in the central plains, managing these loyalties through a proxy state was a tricky business (Kobkua 1988: Ch. 2). The Thai term for autonomous state is *prathetsarat*, which is sometimes translated as dependency, dominion or colony. A literal translation is more telling: lands ruled by a raja. Indeed, the early nineteenth-century British envoy Henry Burney, who negotiated the Anglo-Siamese Treaty of 1826, referred to the Nakhon governor at the time as ‘the Raja of Ligor’ and found that he was an active player in court politics at the royal base in Bangkok. This reputation was not surprising, given the governor’s lineage and the strategic practice of mid south rulers of placing loyalist relatives in the Bangkok court to gather information and forewarn the governor of developments that might have local consequences. A century later, the term ‘raja’ still had currency.

7 Chali Sinlaparasami, Interview with the author, 7 September 2012; and Chali (2007).

After a successful mission in the late 1930s that put a violent separatist in prison, the policeman Khun Phan from Nakhon Si Thammarat was given the Malay sobriquet 'Little Raja' (*rayo kaji*).

During the Ayutthaya period, Phatthalung, Songkhla and Ligor marked the extent of Siamese paramouncy in the south, yet the loyalty of governors sent to Nakhon Si Thammarat from the royal base in the central plains was difficult to maintain, and paramouncy was only intermittent. When there was instability or a weak ruler in the Ayutthayan court, the governor would rebel, as he did in 1629 at a change of reign. The Siamese court appointed the Japanese military commander Yamada to be the new raja of Ligor. He was supposed to use his 'unruly troops' to quell rebellion there, although the real motive was to remove General Yamada from court politics and send him elsewhere (Van Vliet 2005: 295–6, 302–5). In the late seventeenth century, King Narai dispatched a strong nobleman to govern Nakhon, who restored the city-state's suzerainty but then rebelled and refused to acknowledge Narai's successor, Prince Phetracha.

Khun Phan showed a keen interest in these conflicts that demonstrated how Nakhon's loyalty was conditional on its governor's approval of the Siamese king's legitimacy. According to the policeman's version of this history in a cremation biography for a relative, the nobleman sent to govern Nakhon was the son of the Sultan of Kedah. The scale of the fighting in this typewritten document was of epic proportions: the force sent by the Siamese king to quell the rebellion numbered 300 elephants, 100 ships and 5,000 men (Phantharakratchadet n.d.).⁸ These episodic challenges to the Siamese king's authority were rooted in Nakhon's history of independence from the centre and its own network of dependencies. By the eighteenth century, Nakhon was the only proxy in the south capable of exerting any kind of authority over the Malay states (Wyatt 1984: 110, 125; Kasem 2008: 17–19).

When the Siamese kingdom based at Ayutthaya collapsed after the Burmese incursions of 1767, Nakhon subordinated its nearest dependencies and formed a federation, declaring itself untethered from the centre (Anusonsitthikam 1962: 64). King Taksin, the warrior who reassembled much of the Siamese empire and established a new royal base on the western bank of the Chao Phraya River, detained the ruler

8 I am grateful to Kasem Jandam for sharing this rare source with me. The dates in the document are unreliable, but the details, including those for the policeman's family tree, are priceless.

of Ligor in the capital, took one of the ruler's daughters hostage and impregnated her before presenting her to the deputy Nakhon ruler in the expectation that the male offspring would one day become a loyal vassal of the centre (Anusonsithikam 1962: 66–7). The strategy of tethering vassals and dependencies to the centre did not always produce the desired effect. The tether could fray or snap. The offspring sired by Taksin became the powerful Jaophraya Nakhon (Noi), who governed Nakhon with such a firm grip from about 1824 until his death in 1839 that the early Bangkok kings were forced to devise counter-stratagems to check his influence. Towards the end of the first Chakkri reign in 1809, the king moved to circumvent Nakhon Si Thammarat's regional hegemony by placing Songkhla directly under Bangkok's control. Songkhla, not Nakhon, had successfully quelled an uprising in Patani, and the king rewarded its governor with new authority. The two provincial rulers were feuding not only over supervision of the Malay vassal states, but also, closer to home, over the control of people for *corvée* labour. At the expense of Nakhon and Phatthalung, the Songkhla governor was inducing people to settle in Songkhla—an assertion of his authority that created friction between the two governors. The capacity of Songkhla—located at the southern end of the ocean channel where it emptied into the gulf—to tax exports shipped from Nakhon and Phatthalung was another cause of friction.⁹

Yet the first Bangkok king, while needing to divide and rule, could not entirely ignore Nakhon's cultural capital as the sovereign centre. In the destruction of Ayutthaya, Brahmanic lineages in the central plains had been broken and the symbolic expertise for conducting a new coronation was momentarily lost. The ceremony had to be done correctly and authoritatively, because at the time the king, having executed his predecessor, Taksin, had no royal claim, only his reputation for military leadership. Of the two warriors, he was simply the more successful and ruthless leader. For his coronation in 1785, three years after he took the throne, he identified a suitable Brahmanic line in Nakhon and summoned Brahmans from there to officiate. Had he remembered that

9 Details of this adversarial relationship appear in editorial notes to a nineteenth-century document appended to the Nakhon chronicle in *Prachum phongsawadan* [*Collected Chronicles*], part 53 (Bangkok: Khurusapha Edition, 1969), 26–7. On the basis of the prose style and the expertise of the editor, I surmise that Prince Damrong Rajanubhab was the author of these notes and the footnotes to the Nakhon chronicle. The document and its prefatory notes were not published in Anusonsithikam (1962).

Ramkhamheng's supreme patriarch came from Ligor? The Hindu shrine in Nakhon, refurbished but now emptied of its sacred images, is a featured stop on the town's tourist route.

The mid south was invaluable to the royal base for defence of the east and west coasts of its peninsular extremity as well as for enforcing the subordination of the Malay sultanates. Nakhon and its neighbours were no longer vital nodes in trading networks, as had been the case in premodern times, but were now coveted for the rice and soldiers that could be commandeered in regional skirmishes. James Low, an officer of the British East India Company stationed in Penang, reported that Taksin treated Nakhon Si Thammarat, Phatthalung and Songkhla as a regional subset. The three centres (*meuang*)—for it would be many decades before they formally became provinces—could each supply from 3,200 to 3,750 householders for military service (Low 2007: 72).¹⁰ Nakhon had served this purpose by providing manpower for Siamese wars with Burma in the late sixteenth century. Local families might be described as garrisons-in-waiting if the mid south needed to be defended or if troops needed to be levied and dispatched to subdue unrest or stand behind a favoured claimant in the Malay sultanates. Burmese navies were also a threat on the west coast in the late eighteenth century as the resurgent Konbaung dynasty began its aggressive campaigns. By the third Bangkok reign (1824–51), the political field had become even more complex after the British conquered lower Burma in 1826 and secured their colonial presence on the mainland. Suddenly the Siamese court found itself sharing the Malay Peninsula with a European power. By the 1830s, the peninsula had become a pressure point of growing Western imperialism that clashed with Siamese ambitions to reestablish order in the south.

In the third reign, Jaophraya Noi actively pursued his own expansion in the Malay states beyond Kedah (Kobkua 1988: 66–7; Corfield 1993: 16). When he died in 1839, a tremor went through the tiered network of suzerains and vassals that stretched from Bangkok to the mid south and the Malay sultanates. Kedah rebelled and Malays attacked as far north as Trang (Corfield 1993: 37–9). The third Bangkok king (r. 1824–51), now faced with British armies in lower Burma and with Malay unrest, dispatched a military expedition to 'pacify' the Malay states and retether them to Bangkok's suzerainty. His discussions as commander-in-chief have

10 By the time he visited the region, Low reported a total of 9,000 householders, including in nearby Trang—a number somewhat lower than in Taksin's time.

been preserved in a remarkable document that illustrates what the last so-called traditional Siamese monarch knew about the practical science of advantage and the arts of strategy. In the age before typewriters, to say nothing of digital records, court officials were blessed with remarkable memories. Luang Udomsombat, the diarist, took down every detail he overheard at court over five months of deliberations as the kingdom's commander-in-chief demanded answers from his subordinates about enemy strength, whether or not his army had adequate supplies and whether he could rely on the provincial rulers to do his bidding. Some men were expert in administration, but others were lazy, incompetent or corrupt; one of the southern governors smoked opium, while another smuggled it (Reynolds 1997: 267).

With the passing of Jaophraya Noi in 1839, the Bangkok court reasserted itself to govern the mid south directly and, by the end of the nineteenth century, the reform of provincial administration, known as the *thesaphiban* system, soon curtailed the independence of regional rulers such as the Governor of Nakhon Si Thammarat. Revenue and resources that had once flowed to local rulers were gradually redirected to Bangkok, which disbursed moneys according to a national budget. Between 1893 and 1899, when the new system was implemented, Songkhla was designated as the centre of the southern administrative circle of provinces (*monthon*). It was closer to the seven small Malay states in the deep south and could keep a watchful eye on them (Mana 2003: 46).¹¹ The central government not only appointed governors to replace the local rulers who had inherited their positions through their families, but also, as the result of an 1899 edict, appointed the headmen of villages and village clusters. Commune elders had already been given coercive powers by an Act of 1897 (Bunnag 1977: 122–5). The provincial ruling elites resented this imposition of central authority. In any case, the centre often found it difficult to identify reliable personnel, especially at the lower levels of the administrative hierarchy. Appointees from the centre did not always enjoy local support and newly created positions at the village level were sometimes filled by local toughs trusted by villagers even as they engaged in behaviour that came close to banditry in the eyes of neighbours who were its victims. The inhospitable, sparsely populated and remote terrain was itself a force that resisted Bangkok's control. Given the rigours of living in a lightly

11 Appendix III in Bunnag (1977) makes clear that, while the *monthon* was named Nakhon Si Thammarat, the administrative centre was at Songkhla.

governed frontier, with its natural hazards and lawlessness, the local population tended to be independent-minded and to look to each other for assistance rather than to the central government (Mana 2003: 49–50). These conditions could not have been unique to the mid south, but they have received eloquent expression by local scholars with intimate knowledge of the Songkhla lakes environment.

Local officials appointed by Bangkok ruled according to their own lights—a style of government found throughout the kingdom that the reforms of the 1890s took a long time to rectify. In 1894, provincial judges in Phatthalung operated no fewer than six jails, containing 240 men and 60 women. Operating a jail was a status symbol testifying to the social standing of the judges. It was also to their personal advantage. Incarcerated men and women were a source of labour that officials could use as domestic servants or to build public works. Some prisoners were hired out to cultivate paddy (Mana 2003: 132). In the fifth reign, the supply of labour increased with the emancipation of slaves and the release of freemen and women (*phrai*) from corvée duties. Given the paltry salary provided by the central government, local officials seized the opportunity to supplement their salaries by using the perquisites of office—a practice known as ‘living off the fruits of office’ (*kin meuang*).

The Siamese empire in the south lasted from the thirteenth century, when the Kingdom of Sukhothai claimed sovereignty over the entire Malay Peninsula, to the reform period at the end of the nineteenth century. Soon after the Anglo-Siamese Treaty of 1909 created a border between the northernmost sultanates in Malaya and the southernmost Malay vassals in Siam, one of the negotiators of the treaty, the American Jens Westengard, said wistfully that the ‘heroic age’ had ended (Loos 2006: 55–6, 58). In Ayutthaya times, the larger the empire’s territorial reach, the greater was the number of satellite states that chafed under its sway and resisted its demands. Any attempt to expand territory, administer it or demand loyalty to be tendered with tribute increased the risk of rebellion. The Pax Britannica also brought an end to the need to defend the west coast of the peninsula from Burmese predations, and a *Pax Siamensis*—although it was not very peaceful—now settled over Malay principalities such as Patani that Siam had been able to retain under the terms of the treaty. The tiered network of suzerains and vassals—some of which, such as Songkhla and Nakhon Si Thammarat, were proxy suzerains of smaller vassals—was replaced with a centralised national government that arrogated to itself the appointment of provincial governors.

By the time the Lion Lawman came on the scene in the early 1930s, the provincial system known as the *thesaphiban* had been in place for nearly three decades, but the mid south was still a frontier society. As late as the 1950s, settlers were still moving into the region. Government infrastructure remained weak and banditry was endemic. The budgets of provincial administrations were centralised by the national government and proxy suzerains such as Songkhla and Nakhon Si Thammarat no longer controlled their own finances. The policeman's active career from 1930 to the late 1950s coincided with the arrival of a new sovereignty that rested on territorial control rather than on the contingent and intermittently unenforceable sovereignty through the tiered tribute system of proxies, and a new provincial police force was created to replace local village security with an institution whose agents were employees of the sovereign nation-state.

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