

BUDDHISM IN THAI ARCHITECTURE : STUPA

Santi Leksukhum¹

Abstract

Buddhist stupas have existed in Thailand for more than a thousand years. They have evolved their own distinctive styles in each period, and today's style consists of modifying the styles of the past so as to create a new style for today.

History of the Stupa and Its Meaning

When Buddhism first came to this area more than a millennium ago, the land here was ruled by the Dvarati Kingdom. Buddhist temples in the Dvarati period now only exist in foundations; the surviving stupas are also very dilapidated. However, there remain some evidence which have enabled the study of this period.

The word 'stupa' means the place for keeping the Buddha's relics, or it can also mean a sacred site in Buddhism (Brown 1959: 209). Thais, however, are more familiar with the term 'chedi' (chaitya) since it also refers to the teachings of the Buddha. (There is a story in the lives of the Buddha that, after the cremation of Lord Buddha,

Lord Indra went down from heaven and took the tooth relic with him. Indra then placed the relic inside 'Chedi Chulamani', which is located in Tavatimsa Heaven, where Indra resides. Beforehand this Chedi had been the place where the hair of Prince Siddhartha, which the Prince (the future Buddha) cut off when he denounced lay life (Phra Pathomsompothikatha 2519: 143-144, 474).

The stupa where the Buddha's relics are kept are known variously in Thai as 'Phra Borom That', 'Phra Mahathat', 'Phra Sri Mahathat', or 'Phra Sri Ratanamahathat'. In the Sukhothai Inscription, each mention of the word 'chedi' always occurred in the context of the place where the Buddha's relics were kept. Thus there is written in the Inscription: "...[The King] had the Dhatu excavated and performed ritual ceremonies in homage of the relic for six days. Then he put the relic at the center of Sri Satchanalai inside a 'chedi'..." (Sukhothai Inscription 2526: 19). However, Prince Damrong thought that the remains of princes and nobles of the Sukhothai ruling family were also kept inside the stupas (Thiew Muang Phra Ruang 2526: 183). Moreover, in the Ayutthaya period the Luang Prasert Chronicle had it that in B.E. 2035 (ca. 1492 AD), a great stupa was constructed to house the remains of King Boromtrailoknath and his son. These stupas could be the main central stupa and the one to the east of Wat Srisanphet. The idea of placing a king's remains inside the stupa may be derived from the belief in the divinity of kings and the comparison with buddhas or bodhisattvas, who will become buddhas in the future.

¹Professor Silpakorn University
Bangkok, Thailand

The practice of building stupas inside temples have changed throughout the millennia. There are various shapes and sizes of stupas expressing the development through the ages. Thus the word 'chedi' is usually accompanied with qualifying words to show the age or the style, such as 'Lankan chedi' which looks like a bell with a tall sloping cone on top, 'Lotus shaped chedi' whose top looks like a bud of the lotus, or 'Prang', the Khmer style stupa.

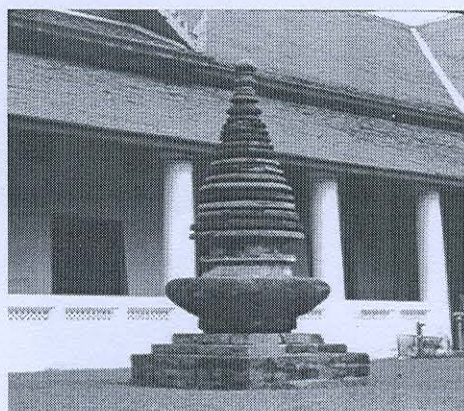
Stupas in the Northeast are called 'that', such as Phra That Phanom. The shape of the stupa is a square, sloping upward, looking like an extended lotus stalk.

Today, stupas are built to house the ashes and remains of one's ancestors. These stupas are small, located inside a temple, and are usually colorful. Normally these stupas are around three meters tall and built with cement. A popular style is that of imitation of famous stupas such as Phra that Phanom or Phra Pathom Chedi. Apart from building stupas to house the remains, nowadays one also finds stupas as decorative props in hotel compounds. This trend just started no more than a decade ago.

Various Schools of Stupa in Thailand

Dvaravati School

Stupas built under the influence of the Dvaravati Period (12th to 16th Buddhist century or 7th to 11th century AD) are very few in number. One can only speculate its actual shape and size from



model stupas¹ and from the bas reliefs of the period, which are at the back of Buddha images.²

Of the large stupas in this period which can be found, only the square foundations now survive. One such foundation is in Ratchaburi, Nakorn Pa-



¹The stone stupas of the Dvaravati Period were found in Nakorn Pathom. Now they are at the National Museum in Bangkok.

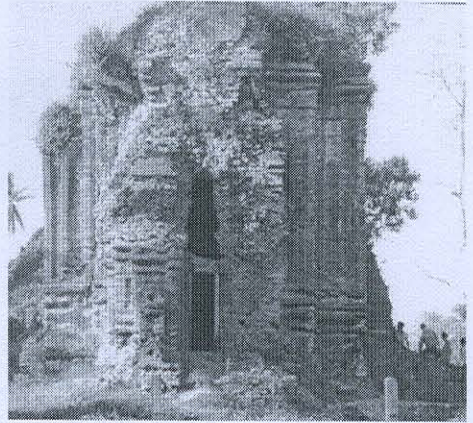
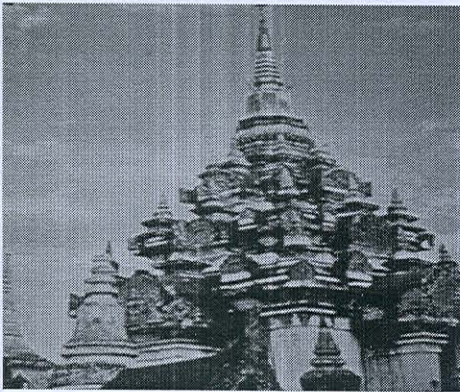
²The image of a stupa, found at the sides of a Buddha image, Dvaravati Period. This image was found in Prachin Buri and is now at the National Museum.

thom, and Sri Thep town in Phetchabun. In the Northeast, it can be found at Muang Fa Dad Song Yang, Kalasin (N. Na Paknam 2539: 41-17).

Contemporary with the Dvaravati was the Pre-Angkor Khmer school of art. Important sites from this period of Khmer art in Thailand and in Cambodia are the Khmer temples, which do not contain stupas in this sense.

Srivijjaya School

In the 13th to 16th Buddhist century, the South of Thailand was ruled by the Srivijjaya Kingdom. The stupa of this period is Phra Borom That in Chaiya, Surat Thani.³ The style of this stupa is connected with that of the Chandi, which is the religion of central Java in Indonesia (Suphatradis 2538:



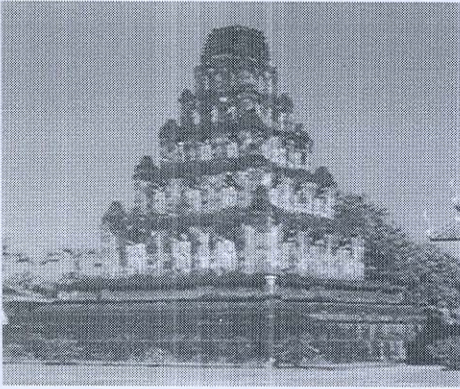
Furthermore, the style of the Cham people, who lived in southern Vietnam at the time, may have an influence on the religious site called “Chedi Wat Kaew” in Chaiya, Surat Thani also (Suphatradis 2538: 15-16). This style is also found in the stone cuttings on the wall,⁴ which is typical of the Kalan style of the Cham school.

Hariphunchai School

The art of Haripunchai was centered in and around Haripunchai, or Lumphun today. This school of art flourishes in the 17th and 18th Buddhist century, and was strongly connected with the great prosperity of the Pagan kingdom in Burma.

³Phra Borom That, Surat Thani, Srivijjaya School, 13th to 16th Buddhist century.

⁴The stupa at Wat Kaew Chaiya, Surat Thani, Srivijjaya School, 13th to 16th Buddhist century.



The familiar style of Haripunchai stupa can be found at the main stupa in Chamdevi Temple, also known as Wat Kukud.⁵ This old temple has a square stupa consisting of many diminishing layers of carved stones, each of which have niches containing Buddha images. Unfortunately the top of the stupa is ruined. It is still an open question as to the source of this interesting stupa.



In the same temple there can be found a smaller stupa octagonal in shape with a cone top.⁶ This stupa may be connected with the stupas in Pagan (Wooward 1975: 141). What is most important is that the Buddha images inside the niches of this smaller stupa is in the same style as those on the square stupa. Thus the two works could be dated from the 18th Buddhist century.

Sukhothai School



Stupas built when Sukhothai was powerful (19th and 20th Buddhist century) are those in the Prasart style which were adapted from the Khmer school,⁷ and

⁵Chedi Kukud, Wat Chamdevi, Lumphun, Haripunchai School, 18th Buddhist century.

⁶Octagonal Stupa, Wat Chamdevi, Haripunchai School, 18th Buddhist century.

⁷Prasart Style Stupa, Wat Phra Sri Mahathat, Sukhothai, Sukhothai School, early 19th Buddhist century.



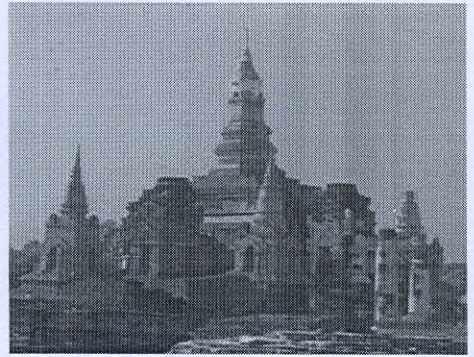
those that are related with the Pagan school in Burma. Lankan style stupas can also be found in the same period, such as the elephant-rounded stupa.⁸



Another style found in the Sukhothai School is one where the craftsmen adapted the style of the Lanna Kingdom, which had been influenced by the Pagan stupas. This particular style is found in the Five Spires Prasart Stupa.⁹

⁸Chedi Chang Lom, Sri Satchanalai, Sukhothai, Sukhothai School, middle 19th Buddhist century.

⁹Five Pinnacles Prasart Stupa, Wat Chedi Jed Taew (Sri Satchanalai), Sukhothai, Sukhothai School, first half of the 19th Buddhist century.



Another type of stupa found in this period is the Lotus Bud Stupa.¹⁰ This distinctive style is so outstanding that the influences of Pagan and Khmer art found in it are often forgotten.

Lanna School



This type of stupas were found during the 19th and the 24th Buddhist century in Chiang Mai, which was the capital of Lanna. This school can be divided into two main groups, which show the clear

¹⁰Main Stupa, Wat Phra Sri Mahathat, Sukhothai, first half of the 19th Buddhist century.

influences of the Pagan art from Burma. One such group is the Prasart Stupa with multiple spires,¹¹ and the single spire, bell shaped stupa.¹²



The multiple spired stupa became adopted in the Sukhothai School, and then had an influence on the art of Ayutthaya also. The tall and thin bell shaped stupa, which is unique to Lanna dated to the 21st Buddhist century, found its way down to Ayutthaya with its form intact. This can be found at Wat Bang Ka Cha,¹³ Wat Ta Khae Rang or Wat Nang Kui, and so on (Santi 2533: 86-92).

¹¹Five Spires Prasart Stupa, Wat Pa Sak, Chiang Rai, Lanna School, mid 19th Buddhist century.

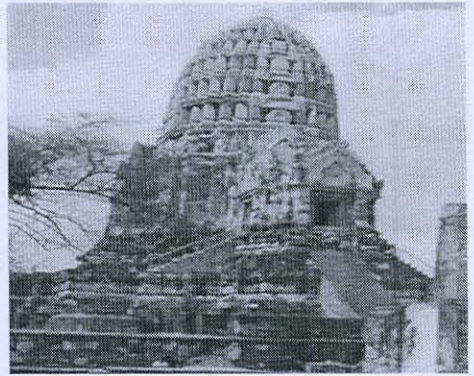
¹²Phra That Haripunchai (Lanna, bell shaped stupa), Lumphun, Lanna School, early 21th Buddhist century.

¹³Lanna, bell shaped stupa, Wat Bang Ka Cha, Ayutthaya Old City, Lanna school, 21th Buddhist Century.



Ayutthaya School

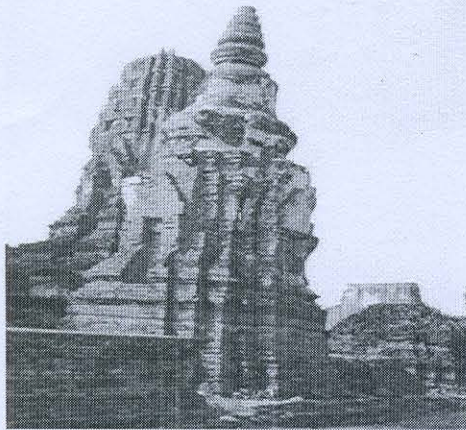
Near the end of the 19th Buddhist century, Ayutthaya carried on the inspiration of Lopburi, an important site for Khmer art, even though at that time the Khmer influence had become very weak. The Prang Stupa (Suphatradis 2538: 31) became the dominant style of¹⁴ stupa and a symbol of Ayutthaya since its inception until its demise in 2310 B.E.¹⁴



¹⁴The Prang Stupa, Wat Ratburana, Ayutthaya, Ayutthaya School, B.E. 1967.



The Octagonal Stupa, which was built before Ayutthaya became capital, was carried on in the Ayutthaya School also (N. Na Paknam 2529: 78).¹⁵



The Spired Prasart Stupa was developed from the stupa of the same style in Sukhothai, which itself was influenced by the Lanna School.¹⁶

¹⁵Octagonal Stupa, Wat Phra Kaew Munag San, Chainath, Pre-Ayutthaya art, 18th or 19th Buddhist century.

¹⁶Spired Prasart Stupa, Wat Mahathat, Ayutthaya, ca. 1967 B.E.



The bell shaped stupa of Ayutthaya¹⁷ was similar to the one in Sri Lanka and the same style of stupa in Sukhothai. The exception was the Lanna Spire Stupa, which underwent more development.



In the 22nd Buddhist century, a new type of stupa was created through adaptation of earlier styles. This was the redentation style of stupas. The corners

¹⁷The bell shaped supas were the main stupas of Wat Phra Sri Sanphet, Ayutthaya, Ayutthaya School, late 21th Buddhist centur

are cut into multiple corners in zigzag forms.¹⁸ This is the style of stupa which is still popular today (Santi 2538: 197-204).

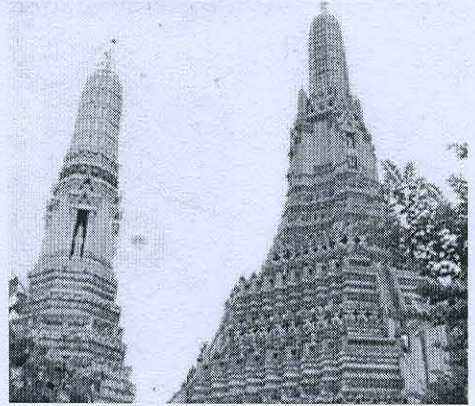


Another type of redentation stupa is one where further decorative elements are added. This is called “Decorative Stupas”¹⁹, and was transmitted to the new capital of Bangkok.

Bangkok (Ratanakosin) School



Since its founding in B.E. 2325, the school of Bangkok was directly influenced by that of Ayutthaya. The most popular form of stupa was the Redentation and Decorative Stupa.²⁰



The prang stupa²¹ was also popular. The bell shaped stupa,²² however, was revived by King Rama IV. This was a conscious return to the past of Sukhothai and Ayutthaya.



¹⁸Redentation Stupa, Wat Suan Luang Sop Sawan, later known as Chedi Sri

¹⁹Decorative Stupa, Wat Chedi Daeng, Ayutthaya, Ayutthaya School, late 23rd Buddhist century.

²⁰Chedi Thong, Wat Phra Sri Ratanasarakaram, Grand Palace, Bangkok, Bangkok School, 24th Buddhist century.

²¹Prang Stupa, Wat Arun Ratchawararam, Bangkok, Bangkok School, B.E. 2367 - 2394.



Starting from the reign of King Rama IV, the building of stupas or chedis was changed due to the influence of the West and modernization. There was a lack of transmission from the past, so a short cut was needed consisting of a conscious return to the past and a mixture of different styles.²³

²²Bell Shape Stupa, Phra Sri Ratanachedi, Wat Phra Sri Ratanasasdam, Grand Palace, Bangkok, Bangkok School. This stupa was built in the reign of King Rama IV, and the style was an imitation of the main stupas at Wat Phra Sri Sanphet in Ayutthaya.

²³Phra That Na Dun, (Phra That Champa Sri), Mahasarakham Province, designed by the Department of Fine Arts, completed in B.E. 2530.

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