

MONASTERY MONUMENT MUSEUM

SITES AND ARTIFACTS
OF THAI CULTURAL MEMORY



MAURIZIO PELEGGI

MONASTERY, MONUMENT, MUSEUM



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Sites and Artifacts of Thai Cultural Memory

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Note on Romanization

Thai personal names are given in the Romanization adopted by the name bearers (when known). Place names and common nouns are Romanized according to the rules of the Royal Institute's General System of Phonetic Transcription but without the use of diacritic marks. Diacritics are also elided in the Romanization of terms from Pali and Sanskrit.

Introduction

LOOKING OUT FROM the tiny Roman attic where most of this book was written, one can see at a short distance a section of the city walls built by Emperor Aurelianus in the third century CE along with the tip of a marble pyramid. Erected in 12 BCE and encased centuries later in the walls, the pyramid is the tomb of Gaius Cestius, a megalomaniac praetor who after a visit to Egypt developed a taste for a pharaoh's hereafter lifestyle. During the Middle Ages, when the topography of imperial Rome was to a considerable extent obliterated and the history of its monuments largely forgotten, Cestius' pyramid was believed to be the tomb of Remus, one of the twins who according to the myth were nurtured by a she-wolf. His brother—and, alas, killer—Romulus, Rome's legendary founder, was correspondingly believed to be buried inside another pyramid that stood on the Tiber's opposite bank and was demolished around 1500 to make room for the new St. Peter's Cathedral. So, as the Eternal City glows in a midsummer sunset, I am reminded of the analogies Sigmund Freud drew between Roman stratigraphy and the structure of the unconscious and between archaeology and psychoanalysis—both seeking to uncover materials that lie hidden underneath the earth's surface and in the recesses of the human psyche, respectively.¹

Let me reassure the reader. This is *not* a book about Roman antiquities, although the inspiration for it came, at least in part, from recent studies on the social life and afterlife of classical monuments.² This is, as the title says, a book about cultural sites and artifacts of Thailand—rock sites, reliquaries, sacred images, temple murals, museums, civic monuments, and secular artworks—as both agents and products of the transmission of religious beliefs, aesthetic principles, political ideologies, and manual and intellectual knowledge throughout the *longue durée* of Thailand's cultural history. By examining the interplay between such cultural sites and artifacts, their popular and scholarly appreciation, and the invocation of a cultural heritage, *Monastery, Monument, Museum* adds to the literature on memory studies that has grown phenomenally since the early 1990s.³

The history of Thailand's art is the other area of scholarship that this book engages with. It does so from a position that, following Tapati Guha-Takurta's critique of colonial and postcolonial histories of Indian art,⁴ seeks to uncover the disciplinary mechanism and broader ideological contexts behind the production of its objects of study. As in India, archaeology and the history of art emerged in Thailand as cognate fields of knowledge at the turn of the twentieth century—a time of rising nationalistic sentiments—though largely at the instigation of Western scholars. And as in India, the art historical periodization established then has come to be regarded as canonical. Yet, unlike recent scholarship on the history of Indian as well as Chinese art,⁵ scholarship on the art of Thailand by both national and foreign scholars is still largely concerned with the dating and stylistic analysis of artifacts⁶ and has shown thus far little interest for the social dimension of their production and reception—questions that are central to the agenda of the (once) “new art history”⁷—and also for the critique of Orientalist knowledge.

For preliminary analyses of devotional artifacts and architecture that take into account the social context of use, one must turn to scholars of Buddhism.⁸ Avoidance of direct colonization meant that in Thailand discontinuity in craftsmanship was not as dramatic as the demise of courtly patronage and the introduction of art training by colonial regimes elsewhere in Asia. Only recently has the history of art in Thailand from the mid-nineteenth century onward been placed in the broader historical context of modern Asian art.⁹ As for contemporary art, it is mostly the reserve of art critics and curators whose jargon-laden writings partake of the professional and commercial dynamics of the international art world. Mindful of the German art historian Aby Warburg's visual approach to cultural history,¹⁰ *Monastery, Monument, Museum* considers cultural sites, artifacts, and institutions of Thailand as both products and vehicles of cultural memory—a concept that is elucidated in the remainder of this introduction.



Theoretical articulation of cultural memory owes mostly to Jan Assmann, a German Egyptologist who has complicated the concept of collective memory formulated in the interwar years by the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs by distinguishing between two types: communicative memory, which is qualified as quotidian, transient, and profane; and cultural memory, which on the contrary is styled as festive, permanent, and transcendent. Structured by a hierarchy of values and reproduced through institutional channels, “cultural memory comprises that body of reusable texts, images, and rituals specific to each society in each epoch, whose ‘cultivation’ serves to stabilize and convey that society's self-image. Upon such

collective knowledge, for the most part—but not exclusively—about the past, each group bases its awareness of unity and particularity.”¹¹

Among the various components of cultural memory, Assmann emphasizes in particular those associated with religion. He also highlights writing as a critical factor of differentiation, for the distinction between communicative and cultural memory, though present in both oral and literate societies, is more marked in the latter, texts being far less fluid cultural objects than are rituals, which are the primary media for the transmission of cultural memory in illiterate societies.¹² Further, in discussing canonization as a special form of writing that combines the normative authority of cultural texts and the literary sanctity of sacred texts, Assmann singles out the Bible and Buddhist canon—the “Three Baskets” (Pali *Tipitaka*; Sanskrit *Tripitaka*)—as the “only two mutually independent canon formations in the history of mankind.”¹³

Despite the major influence that the Buddhist scriptures had in shaping spiritual and cultural worldviews across southern and eastern Asia, the local “cultures of memory” could not but internalize doctrinal principles such as impermanence (P. *anicca*), nonself (P. *anatta*), and renunciation (P. *nekkhamma*)¹⁴ that resisted the celebrative intent of much written and material culture in the ancient West and Near East.¹⁵ In particular in southern Asia, where the production and circulation of written texts was confined to clerical and court elites prior to the introduction in the mid-nineteenth century of printing by Christian missionaries and of modern technologies of recording and archiving information by colonial governments,¹⁶ memory culture differed in important respects from the Near Eastern and Mediterranean civilizations that are the focus of Assmann’s conceptualization. Memory culture may well be universal,¹⁷ but the extent to which it is shaped by local conditions is far from irrelevant. This book’s focus on material culture readdresses Assmann’s textual bias even as it sustains his view of religion as a prominent element of cultural memory.

Assmann’s distinction between a communicative memory that binds a community within the temporal horizon of living generations and a long-term cultural memory that reaches back into past millennia also calls into question the notion of tradition, which shares elements of both types of memory but equals none.¹⁸ Social scientists and historians have in recent years developed an understanding of traditions as purposeful inventions that satisfy contingent needs. Furthermore, as the anthropologist Marco Aime points out, what we call “tradition” is, in fact, often *traditionalism*: the self-conscious representation of a more or less authentic cultural heritage that informs political decisions about the future.¹⁹ Manipulation of the past’s memorial presence, frequently characterized by nostalgic or, conversely, polemical overtones, is typical of “cultural memorization, . . . in which

the past is continuously modified and re-described even as it continues to shape the future.”²⁰

Though far from unique, Thailand is paradigmatic in this regard, as I argued a few years ago in a study that linked the major restorations of monumental sites initiated in the latter half of the 1970s to the crisis of legitimacy that followed the military coup d'état of October 1976. My argument then was that the restoration of the ruins of Sukhothai and Ayutthaya, and even Phimai and Phanom Ruang (remnants of the Khmer empire located today within Thailand's territory), was functional to the political restoration that was pivoted on a prescriptive, homogenizing notion of “Thainess” (*khwampenthai*) articulated by the kingdom's bureaucracy.²¹ The present book was conceived and written as I watched with growing discomfort, and finally exasperation, Thailand's descent into color-coded political tribalism, followed by the shocking return of military rule and the routine intimidation of dissenters. Besides reaffirming the notorious intractability of Thai politics, the events since 2006 have underscored even further how problematic the notion of national heritage (*moradok haeng chat*) is in a country so deeply fractured along geographic, socioeconomic, and even (in the south) religious fault lines. How plausible, then, is it to assume the existence of a shared Thai cultural memory?

To contemplate this question is not to dismiss the genuine and, needless to say, legitimate pride that many people in Thailand take in their cultural heritage but to be wary of its mobilization by the state. Buddhist imagery is exemplary in this regard. The art historian Piriya Krairiksh, who acquired national and international notoriety for his controversial theses, has opined of the relation of Buddhist belief to art making in the early *nineteenth* century, “However hard the early Chakri kings may have tried to revive the religion among the people and in the arts, they could only resurrect its outward appearance.”²² Superficial resurrections of Buddhist art have been recurrent in Thailand during the past two centuries—most recently in the form of neotraditional painting, the popularity of which mirrored the royalist fervor and economic boom of the decade from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, its clichéd imagery appealing especially to the taste of new rich and corporate collectors whose interests were linked to those of the political establishment.²³ Even the self-styled postmodern artworks typically exhibited at venues such as the Bangkok Art and Cultural Center often reveal, behind the trendy veneer, a conservatism that is aesthetic as much as ideological.²⁴ There are exceptions, of course, such as the oeuvre of the late Montien Boonma, most famously his installations *Stupa* (1990) and *Temple of the Mind* (1995), which, though infused with Buddhist spirituality and aesthetics, are thoroughly contemporary—not only formally but also in terms of the sensory and mental experiences they afford viewers.²⁵

In conclusion, I propose to conceptualize cultural memory not as a storeroom or archive of tangible and intangible materials but, rather, as a dual process of recollection and reinscription. Any memorial act—individual as well as collective, concrete as well as symbolic—modifies the preexisting mnemonic landscape either by adding to it or by intentionally altering it. The outcome of this process of cultural layering is akin to a palimpsest or a stratigraphic site, which both are not mere metaphors for cultural memory but material forms of it. Regarding cultural memory as a process rather than an outcome should prevent any static or ahistorical understanding of it and thus avoid the trap of traditionalism masked as tradition. At the same time, we can agree with Assmann that intellectual and material creations that have accumulated over history's *longue durée* are the means whereby a society's self-image is formed and conveyed to outsiders at any given point in time.



Sequenced by and large chronologically along the millennium spanning the eleventh century through to the beginning of the twenty-first, the eight chapters in this book are grouped into three parts that surface distinct themes and analytical concerns: devotional art in part 1, museology and art history in part 2, and political art in part 3. But the chapters can also be read as self-contained essays, each containing extensive notes that serve as bibliographic reviews of the subject at hand.

Part 1, "Sacred Geographies," focuses chronologically on the premodern and early modern eras, when religious credence informed the cultural alteration of landscape and the creation of devotional sites and artifacts. Chapter 1 considers the Buddhist inscription of Thailand's landscape through the installation of mnemonic traces, such as relics and footprints, and the erection of monumental structures, such as temples and reliquaries. Chapter 2 describes the social lives of, and popular beliefs about, Buddha images by retracing their peregrinations through the geocultural space encompassing present-day northern Thailand and Laos. Chapter 3 examines the portrayal, in temple murals and illuminated manuscripts, of Europeans and Middle Easterners as the Other of the Thai, reflecting both the realities of the early modern age's global commercial and diplomatic exchanges and the premodern knowledge of the world drawn from the Buddhist scriptures and cosmology.

Part 2, "Antiquities, Museums, and National History," focuses on the modern era from the 1830s through to the 1970s, which saw the emergence and development of antiquarianism and eventually archaeology, partly as the result of a shift in the elite's worldview and partly as a response to colonial and neocolonial projects of knowledge. Chapter 4 traces the

informal antiquarian pursuits of the royal elite during the latter half of the nineteenth century along with the initial reconnaissance of the kingdom's historic topography by colonial scholar-officials. Chapter 5 carries on by detailing the assemblage of the national museum's collection in the 1920s and examining the concomitant stylistic classification of antiquities that has since become canonical. Chapter 6 discusses the uncertain place in cultural memory of Thailand's prehistory, whose initial investigation in the 1960s and early 1970s was a by-product of Thailand's Cold War political and strategic alliance with, and economic dependence on, the United States.

Part 3, "Discordant Mnemoscapes," discusses civic monuments and artworks that anchor memory of twentieth-century political events and provide stages for their commemorations. Despite political art having no precedent in Thailand before the 1930s, it has since partaken in the articulation of both hegemonic and counterhegemonic projects seeking to shape the nation's political future as well as its social memory. Chapter 7 examines the monuments commissioned by the nationalist leadership that came to power in 1932 as an ambitious but ultimately failed attempt at localizing for propagandistic aims a commemorative imagery modeled on the Western monumental tradition. Finally, chapter 8 looks at public memorials as well as artworks in a variety of media (painting, photography, installation, and video) from the 1990s and the start of the twenty-first century that challenge social amnesia of Thailand's recent history of violence and comment on the country's embattled political present.

PART I

SACRED
GEOGRAPHIES

Chapter 1

Buddhist Landscape and Cultural Memory

FROM SRI LANKA to Japan, the Asian landscape is dotted with footprints of the Buddha. Whether seemingly genuine—at least in devotees' eyes—or manifestly manufactured, these footprints are worshiped sacred relics.¹ In Thailand, there are several holy footprints of Buddha (*phr. phutthabat*; P. *buddhapada*). The one that has long attracted the most intense veneration is the footprint enshrined at Wat Phraphutthabat Ratchawon, in the central province of Saraburi. The *Chronicles of Ayutthaya* narrate that when Thai monks arrived in the island of Lanka to worship the famous Buddha footprint on Mount Sumanakuta (also known as Adam's Peak),² they were asked by their Sinhalese confreres why they had come such a long way when they had a genuine footprint at home. The monks reported the news to King Songtham (r. 1610–1628), who ordered a search for the footprint in the dense forest that covered the Golden Hill (Suwan-nabanphot) west of Saraburi town. The legend credits a hunter for the discovery of the 1.75-meter-long footprint impressed on the rock.³ King Songtham built on the spot a monastery, where the rock was enclosed within a cubical shrine (called *mondop* in Thai).⁴ The present shrine, capped by a tall spire, was however built early in the nineteenth century by the order of the Bangkok king.

By the late seventeenth century, Wat Phraphutthabat was already a popular pilgrimage destination. The annual February visit by the Ayutthaya court was accompanied by a festival that included games, theatrical performances, and fireworks. Owing to royal patronage, the temple acquired great fame and treasures.⁵ Even European travelers reported on the cult of the Saraburi footprint. Simon de la Loubère, the envoy of Louis XIV, discounted it as a recent tradition lacking veracity.⁶ The Dutchman Theodorus

Jacobus van der Heuvel, who visited Wat Phraphutthabat in 1737, recorded in his journal, “As we could not inspect the bottom of the cavity or footprint because of the darkness, the mandarins led us to a table standing against the northern wall, on which lay the cover of this footprint, made of solid gold . . . on the express orders of a king now many years ago, who feared that the figures in the rock might wear out on the account of the frequent touching by the hands of men who came to practice their religion.”⁷

When the Briton Henry Alabaster visited the temple in 1868, the gold plate—engraved with the 108 auspicious motifs on the soles of the Buddha’s feet—reportedly covered the cavity. Alabaster had the plate removed, but all he was able to see impressed on the rock were five marks conjuring toenails; he inquired with a monk, who opportunely explained that the other marks had been erased by a fire.⁸ The veneration of the footprint at the Saraburi shrine continued to attract the curiosity of Westerners into the twentieth century. Ernest Young noted that worshipers, after advancing inside the shrine on their knees holding candles, “crawl up to the depression, prostrate themselves devoutly at its edge, fasten a bit of gold-leaf on the sides of the hole, sprinkle holy water on their heads, and then crawl out again on hands and knees.”⁹ A few years later, P. A. Thompson affirmed, instead, that a wooden case concealed the cavity from view; “unable to see the actual rock, . . . the pilgrim is content to stick a piece of gold leaf on the case, to strew it with flowers, and to place lighted candles beside it.”¹⁰

On my visit to Wat Phraphutthabat in February 2013, a Plexiglas pane lay on top of the cavity. In the narrow gap between the pane and the cavity’s edge, worshipers were slipping banknotes that landed on the gold plate shielding the rock. A cover, even a transparent one, hides as much as it protects. So what do devotees—now and also in the past—*see*, hence *feel* and *remember*,¹¹ at the Wat Phraphutthabat shrine? Regardless of faith, pilgrims can be said to experience holy sites through “a personal and social psychogeography” by virtue of which “emotion materializes as a moving topography,” in the words of Giuliana Bruno.¹² Pilgrims, in other words, recall cognitively as well as emotionally religious figures and events as they move through a landscape that exhibits tangible and intangible manifestations of the sacred.

The concept of “landscape” (the popularity of which rivals memory’s in current academic jargon) frames the environment as the product of cultural practices—from agriculture to architecture—as well as of cultural representations—especially in literature and the visual arts.¹³ Landscape is thus always a cultural artifact.¹⁴ This recognition includes “sacred landscape” with its supernaturally or spiritually charged organic matter (rocks, trees, rivers, caves) as well as man-made structures that combine practical, commemorative, and devotional functions.¹⁵ In Thailand, successive

interventions in the period from the middle of the first millennium CE to the middle of the second produced a stratified sacred landscape, which underneath its ultimate Buddhist imprint still retains, like a palimpsest, the traces of earlier inscriptions.

The Buddhist inscription of Thailand's landscape originated in the second half of the first millennium CE with the Mons, an Austroasiatic-speaking population that had embraced Buddhism as a result of cultural contacts with Lanka. The spirit-worshipping Tai-speaking groups that in the early centuries of the second millennium settled in areas populated by the Mons inherited, with their faith, their sacred landscape, which in some places had already been reinscribed by the Khmers. By the fourteenth century, the political and clerical elites of Thai regional kingdoms (*mueang*) looked at Lanka as the center of a geocultural space that I have termed elsewhere "Theravada ecumene."¹⁶ The spiritual and mnemonic connection to Lanka as the fountainhead of orthodox doctrine was sustained via monastic missions, the import of potent objects such as relics and images, and the duplication of the island's sacred sites—as demonstrated as late as the seventeenth century by the Saraburi footprint. Primarily a means for the accumulation of merit, the topographical and architectural replication of Buddhism's sacred geography was also a practice constitutive of cultural memory.

LOCALIZING BUDDHISM'S LEGENDARY TOPOGRAPHY

Toponyms, footprints, and reliquaries are the most common markers of the Buddhist landscape. Toponyms evoke the Buddha's epiphanies in particular localities. Footprints are traces of these epiphanies etched onto the earth's surface ("footmark" is indeed the prime meaning of the Latin term *vestigium*, whence "vestige"). Reliquaries monumentalize the burial sites of bodily relics of the Buddha. The geographical diffusion, and attendant stylistic adaptations, of the architectural type of the Buddhist reliquary or stupa, which had originated as a memorial mound for Indian royalty, signaled the incorporation of new regions into the Buddhist spiritual realm and concurrently memorialized this incorporation.¹⁷

The idea that spatial structures and images function as catalysts of individual as well as collective recollection lies at the basis of the sociohistorical study of memory that was pioneered by Maurice Halbwachs.¹⁸ It is significant that Halbwachs applied his theory of the social frameworks of memory to the study of what he called the "legendary topography" of the Holy Land. "Sacred places," wrote Halbwachs, "thus commemorate not facts certified by contemporary witnesses but rather beliefs born perhaps not far from those places and strengthened by taking root in this environment.

These beliefs focus most frequently on facts of a supernatural kind, which form the basis of many of the essential dogmas of Christianity.”¹⁹

Buddhism, too, possesses a legendary topography, which is pivoted on the Eight Great Places in the Gangetic plains where the Sakyamuni Buddha lived and proselytized. These eight places include the four localities (Kapilavastu, the Buddha’s birthplace; Sarnath, the place of the first sermon; Bodh Gaya, the place of enlightenment; and Kusinagara, his death place) that were sanctioned as pilgrimage sites by the *Sutra of the Great Departure* (*Mahaparinibbanasutta*) and four more sites (Sravasti, Rajagriha, Sankasya, and Vaishali) where the Buddha allegedly performed miracles. In addition, the Seven Great Stations (*P. satta mahasathan*) commemorate the locations where the Sakyamuni Buddha is said to have rested during the seven weeks he spent in meditation at Bodh Gaya. Buddhism’s legendary topography was represented visually long before its textual canonization. During the aniconic phase of Buddhist art in India, exemplified by the sculptural reliefs of the Bharhut Stupa in Sanchi (third century BCE), the Four Great Places were represented figuratively as, respectively, a footprint (birth), the wheel of dharma (first sermon), a Bodhi tree (enlightenment), and a stupa (nirvana).

Unlike Christianity’s legendary topography, Buddhism’s is not limited to sites where episodes in the Buddha’s biography unfolded but includes localities in Sri Lanka, East Asia, and Southeast Asia that according to local lore he visited during his fabled peregrinations. Regardless of denominational distinctions within Buddhism, natural elements of the landscape that were already prominent in Hinduist cosmogony, such as mountain peaks and rock caves, became especially associated with the Buddha’s sacred biography and were thus favored as devotional sites and for monastic lodging. Some were lavishly adorned with sculptures and paintings illustrating cosmological and soteriological doctrines, the best known examples being the rock-cut temples of Ajanta and Ellora in India and Mogao and Yungang in China.²⁰ Though considerably more modest in scale and in the degree of beautification, the Buddhist appropriation of caves and grottoes is typical of mainland Southeast Asia, too.

Owing to Thailand’s geology, Buddhist caves there are located prevalently in the mountainous north and the rocky Khorat Plateau in the northeast.²¹ One such place in the latter region is the hill site of Phu Phrabat (Udon Thani province), a large portion of which was transformed in 1992 into a historical park. Named after ground depressions produced by natural erosion that conjure the Buddha’s giant footprints, the site is notable for megaliths and rock paintings that would appear to date from prehistoric times. Some rock paintings feature geometric motifs in red ochre similar to the decorations on the Neolithic pottery unearthed in nearby Ban



Figure 1.1 Rock sculpted with bodhisattva figures, Phu Phrabat Historical Park, Udon Thani.

Chiang; others represent human and animal figures and, like rupestrian art generally, may have assisted in apotropaic rituals to favor hunting expeditions or migration journeys. Still visible are massive boundary stones (*bai sema*) that were installed around boulders and rock shelters, presumably to delimit the grounds where cultic objects were worshiped or hermits lodged (plate 1). Later rock carvings of footprints and bodhisattva figures (fig. 1.1) showing modification of the Mon-style long robe into a Khmer-style knee-length loincloth demonstrate continuity in the Buddhist inscription of the Phu Phrabat hill site from protohistoric times through to the periods of Mon and Khmer occupation, spanning the latter half of the first millennium CE and the early centuries of the second.²²

Sacralization of mountain peaks and rock caves is also revealing of how the primeval “spirit of the place” was assimilated to the Buddhist landscape. The French Orientalist Paul Mus speculated in this regard that Southeast Asia’s inhabitants believed not in a “god of locality” (the *genius loci* of pagan credence) but rather that “the locality itself is a god,” its inherent sacrality undergirding specific religious associations.²³ The southern Sathing Phra peninsula (Songkhla province), in the Isthmus of Kra’s eastern littoral, presents a topographical formation occupying an area of roughly one square kilometer with four limestone hills; three of these accommodate,

respectively, a Buddhist monastery, a Saivite cave-pond complex, and a spirit grotto. A crossroad in the trade routes that during the second half of the first millennium CE linked Java and the Malay peninsula to the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean, the isthmian region has yielded over the past century a large number of Hindu artifacts both imported and manufactured locally, such as stone images of Vishnu and Shiva-lingams (phallic pillars symbolizing Shiva's generative power),²⁴ a few remarkable specimens of which can be seen in the national museums of Songkhla and Nakhon Si Thammarat, as well as in Bangkok's. When Lorraine Gesick surveyed the Sathing Phra area in the 1980s, she saw villagers worshipping at the monastery as well as at the grotto and the cave-pond and concluded that the hill complex had long been perceived holistically as a locus of preternatural "power," or *saksit* (contraction of S. *sakdi-sitthi*), which in popular credence animates sacred places and objects (*sing saksit* or *khong saksit*).²⁵

Even in Thailand's northern region, Lanna, where the social construction of landscape traditionally hinged on its close association to legends and beliefs about the Buddha's wandering through the region,²⁶ animism and Brahmanism are still embedded in cultural memory. Topped since the sixteenth century by a monastery where a relic is enshrined, the sacred mountain of Doi Suthep that overlooks Chiangmai is named after Wasuthep (P. Vasudeva), one of five legendary hermits (*rishi*) who were commemorated as clan progenitors by the Mons in northern Thailand.²⁷ According to the British scholar H. G. Quaritch Wales, in the animistic pantheon of the Tai-speaking peoples, "there was only one spirit who was thought worthy of royal patronage, and it was a mountain spirit."²⁸ The cooption of mountain spirits as custodians of Tai valley polities engendered the cult of the "city's guardian spirit" (*phi sua mueang*), which after the embrace of Buddhism was subsumed under the cult of relics (*that*, P. *dathu*).²⁹ This subsumption accorded with the pattern of Buddhism's expansion from the Gangetic region to the rest of the subcontinent. At Ajanta, for example, Buddhist monks accommodated both spatially and ritually the place's mythical dwellers, the chthonian serpents (P. *naga*), which in credence and iconography took on the role of protectors of the Buddha.³⁰ As Mus, again, wrote, "the map of the sacred sites of Buddhism, marked by a multitude of stupas, can be superimposed upon the map of local spirits; each stupa passed under the protection of the local *yaksa* [nature deity dwelling in a tree or mountain]."³¹

The widening of Buddhism's legendary topography to places beyond the Gangetic plains was redoubled by the dissemination throughout Asia of relics of the Sakyamuni Buddha. Veneration of relics—"the cult of traces," as Nancy Falk evocatively dubbed it³²—is a pan-Asian phenomenon that originated immediately after the Sakyamuni Buddha's crema-

tion.³³ The *Sutra of the Great Departure* relates that when a dispute arose between the Malla house and seven other Indian kings over ownership of the Buddha's remains after his cremation, a Brahmin intervened to apportion the relics in eight equal parts. The relics were then enshrined in eight stupas the kings erected in their respective kingdoms; two more stupas were built to enshrine the urn used to measure the relics and the embers of the cremation fire, which had been assigned to the Brahmin and his aide. The Buddhist tradition maintains that the pious Mauryan emperor Asoka (r. 268–232 BCE), after disinterring the relics from the eight stupas, redistributed them in eighty-four thousand reliquaries across his realm. Asoka is also credited with acceding to the Lankan king's request for a share of the relics, thus setting in motion Buddhism's expansion outside India.³⁴ By the fifth century CE, a threefold classification of relics (P. *cetiya*, whence the Central Thai *chedi* for "stupa") was codified as comprising bodily relics, relics by association, and commemorative relics—"reminders" as much as "remainders" of the Buddha and his teachings.³⁵

Overcoming the innate textual bias of Western studies of Buddhism, scholars have of late been paying considerable attention to devotional practices such as relic worship. Echoing Mus, Robert Sharf has proposed that "the mobility of relics . . . facilitated and legitimized the Buddhist appropriation of indigenous religious centers throughout Asia, transforming the landscape into a sacred Buddhist domain."³⁶ Not every place is suitable for the burial of relics, however. In the Theravada ecumene, it is believed that "localities must be 'strong' enough to offer patronage and protection over the Buddha's remains."³⁷ Buddhist lore abounds with episodes of relics signaling approbation, or conversely disapproval, of the chosen burial site through the performance of marvels. Lacking such signals, identification of the appropriate place is entrusted to the intuition of an animal with sacral associations, according to a universal pattern noted by the historian of religions Mircea Eliade.³⁸

One finds in both Lanna Thai and Burmese folklore the tale, derived from the Lankan chronicle *Mahavamsa*, of an elephant that was loaded with a relic and let free to wander in search of an appropriate burial place for it. In the Lanna version of the tale, the pachyderm roamed the hills around Chiangmai and, after climbing to Doi Suthep's summit, cried out and circumambulated it thrice; it then crouched on its knees and exhaled its last breath. The relic was buried in a hole dug in the rock, where Wat Phra That later was built.³⁹ Ever since, reports the reliquary's chronicle, "all the kings who ruled in Chiangmai . . . placed great faith in the Buddha relic . . . [and] continuously made offerings to it."⁴⁰ Thai rulers thus harnessed supernatural protection from two sources: spirits dwelling in the landscape and relics imposing order and meaning onto it. Royal devotion

to, and manipulation of, relics by way of acquisition, transfer, and enshrinement accordingly became a major instrument for the Buddhist inscription of landscape.

THE POWER OF RELICS, RELICS AND POWER

The earliest documentation of the way the Buddhist cult of relics was integrated in the political liturgy of the Thai *mueang* is found in epigraphic records. The Ramkhamhaeng Inscription, conventionally dated to 1292 CE,⁴¹ reports that the eponymous Sukhothai ruler unearthed relics at an unspecified site (possibly a Khmer reliquary in Chaliang, north of Sukhothai). After being exhibited for a month, the relics were reburied under a new stupa, which was however built not in Sukhothai but in Si Satchanalai, the *mueang*'s second city.⁴² Richard O'Connor has proposed that the reburial in Si Satchanalai might owe to King Ramkhamhaeng's apprehension about manipulating relics that had previously lent their protection to a different city. But his tactic of appropriation by spatial deferral might also reflect the division of labor between a *mueang*'s political and ceremonial centers, as shown by the "twin-cities" arrangement typical of the early Thai kingdoms (e.g., Sukhothai–Si Satchanalai and Chiangmai–Lamphun). This diarchy was most likely the result of successive Mon, Khmer, and Thai settlements, which produced hierarchical and functional relationships between already existing towns and newly founded ones. Eventually the central Thais brought together political and ceremonial functions in a single urban center and "ended up with a virtually generic great relic in each major town, not a uniquely named relic that legend wove into the landscape."⁴³

Even today, the presence of a "monastery of the great relic"—Wat Mahathat—marks the built landscape of most cities in Thailand. As the most imposing edifice in fourteenth-century Sukhothai, Wat Mahathat represented the *mueang*'s spiritual and symbolic pivot. A stone inscription discovered in situ in 1877 (presently in the National Library, Bangkok) commemorates its renovation in 1354 and records the marvels performed by two precious relics—the Buddha's hair and neck bone—on the occasion of their installation.⁴⁴ Royal manipulation of relics, as well as images (as detailed in chapter 2), was often mediated by learned monks, who provided access to potent objects and guidance on how to handle them in exchange for support and patronage.⁴⁵ The ceremony at Wat Mahathat, relates the inscription, was officiated by Si Sattha, a monk who had brought back the relics from Lanka, although how he had obtained them is not elucidated.⁴⁶ Theft and forgery of relics were commonplace in medieval Europe,⁴⁷ but since nothing suggests that Si Sattha stole the relics, they must have been duplicates engendered by either magic or, to employ biology's lexicon, par-

thenogenesis. Self-duplication of relics is, indeed, a topos of vernacular Buddhist narratives.

There is of course an implicit irony in the fact that holy relics, whose cultic status assumes their authenticity, possess a truly miraculous ability to multiply. The parallel with medieval Europe is, again, instructive. According to Patrick Geary, “When a relic moved from one community to another, whether by gift, purchase or theft, it was impossible to transfer simultaneously or reliably the function or meaning it enjoyed in its old location. It had to undergo some sort of transformation so that it could acquire status and meaning within its new context.”⁴⁸ In the transfer of the relics (or their duplicates) from Lanka to Sukhothai, their status as potent matter was reaffirmed by their performance of marvels in accordance with what Craig Clunas has termed the “Buddhist aesthetics of light and radiance.”⁴⁹ By emitting brilliant rays and flying around Wat Mahathat’s reliquary before willfully entering it, the relics showed approbation of their new location. As for the acquisition of meaning in the new context, it is the reliquary itself we should look at.

THE STUPA AS MNEMONIC AND DEVOTIONAL ARCHITECTURE

Today the (much reconstructed) centerpiece of the Sukhothai Historical Park, Thailand’s preeminent *lieu de mémoire*, Wat Mahathat was built over a Khmer cosmic temple. Its central, tapering tower (*prang*) symbolized Mount Kailasa, Shiva’s Himalayan abode, and was surrounded by four smaller *prang* at the cardinal points, representing Mount Kailasa’s lesser peaks.⁵⁰ The temple’s axial structure was retained when the Thais turned the temple into a Buddhist monastery at the onset of the fourteenth century. The first renovation of Wat Mahathat occurred just four decades later, in 1345, to mark the culmination of King Loethai’s reign (1298–1346) with the installation of the Lankan relics allegedly delivered by Si Sattha. At that time, the central *prang* of the original Khmer temple was replaced by a Sinhalese-style *chedi* (bell-shaped stupa) standing on a pyramidal platform. The four original axial *prang* were altered by the application of stucco reliefs representing *devata* (Hindu deities that inhabit the physical world). Four additional brick towers (*prasat*) were also erected at the subcardinal points, although their Ayutthayan style indicates further modification at a later stage.

The American art historian and epigraphist A. B. Griswold proposed that Wat Mahathat’s nine towers alluded to Lanka’s nine main reliquaries—the central, Sinhalese-style *chedi* in particular standing for the Anuradhapura stupa, where were enshrined the “original” hair and

neck-bone relics. The stone inscription that commemorates King Loethai's reconfiguration of Wat Mahathat and installation there of a relic emphasized further the Lankan connection by reporting that a group of Sinhalese craftsmen had come with Si Sattha to Sukhothai.⁵¹ This intervention might have thus been aimed at memorializing the replacement in Loethai's reign of Khmer religion—Mahayana Buddhism syncretized with Brahmanism—with a Sinhala Buddhism, or *sasana* ("religion" par excellence). Art historical evidence, however, qualifies this thesis to some extent.

The spire of Wat Mahathat's Sinhalese-style *chedi* is crowned by a finial in the shape of a lotus bud. This was an original invention of the Sukhothai craftsmen that, along with the walking type of the Buddha image, demonstrates the self-confidence they had achieved by the mid-fourteenth century.⁵² Once gilded, as evinced by the mention in the inscription of a *chedi thong*, Wat Mahathat's lotus-bud spire was to Sukhothai what the spire of the local Gothic cathedral was to medieval Chartres or Bourges: a material expression of piety as much as a symbol of civic pride. It is suggestive that, as King Loethai was overseeing the renovation of Wat Mahathat, his son Lithai, the *mueang*'s viceroy stationed in Si Satchanalai, was busy composing the "Sermon on the Three Worlds" (*Traiphumikhatha*), a cosmological treatise that is generally regarded as the masterwork of Thai literature.⁵³ After succeeding Loethai in 1347, Lithai (reigning title Mahathammarat I) turned the lotus-bud finial into a symbol of political and cultural hegemony as he strove to reestablish the network of suzerain principalities that had nearly collapsed during his father's reign. The erection in Si Satchanalai and in the *mueang*'s other cities of lotus-bud *chedi* asserted Sukhothai's centrality in the galactic polity in accordance to the cosmology that Wat Mahathat still expounded under its new function as a Buddhist reliquary.

Lithai, shortly after his accession in 1349 or thereabouts, also dedicated twice-life-size bronze images of Shiva and Vishnu in a Hindu temple that had been erected west of Sukhothai for performing Brahmanic rituals according to Khmer statecraft (after the foundation in 1782 of the Ratanakosin dynasty, several of these Hindu images were removed from Sukhothai and installed in a temple in Bangkok's outskirts).⁵⁴ Concurrently, King Lithai showed his devoutness by installing man-made footprints on hilltops in Sukhothai, Si Satchanalai, Bangphan, and Nakhon Sawan, as documented by an inscription that records a mission sent "to make impressions of the trace of . . . our Lord's Foot which is stamped on top of Mount Sumanakuta, to measure its size, and to bring (the impressions) back to be copied for everyone [to worship]." The spiritual connection to Lanka was further emphasized by assigning the mnemonically resonant toponym of Sumanakuta to a hill site that is now simply called Khao Phrabat Yai (Hill of the Big Footprint).⁵⁵

Although the earliest carved footprints discovered in Thailand were produced by Mons in the last quarter of the first millennium,⁵⁶ the footprint cult in fourteenth-century Sukhothai stressed its Lankan origins. Sukhothai's idealized connection to Sinhala Buddhism and its visual culture was mediated by Martaban (lower Burma), where thrived a community of Sinhalese forest-dwelling monks who eventually gained royal patronage in Sukhothai. The art historian Hiram W. Woodward Jr. has challenged the narrative in King Lithai's inscription by arguing that the iconographic conventions of two extant footprints that can be reasonably considered to be among the four commissioned by Lithai are in fact Burmese, not Sinhalese. Rather than traveling as far as Lanka, the royal mission is thus likely to have stopped at Martaban and copied or obtained there a carved footprint, even though the inscription unsurprisingly cites the most holy site of Mount Sumanakuta as the model.⁵⁷

In an insightful examination of the politics of the Buddhist inscription of landscape in the northern Thai kingdoms, Anne Blackburn draws a parallel between King Lithai and King Tilokarat of Chiangmai (r. 1442–1487), whose commemorative projects buttressed Chiangmai's claims to authority over the whole Lanna region in precarious political circumstances (a fraught dynastic succession, rivalry with Ayutthaya, competition for patronage, and sectarian disputes within the local Sangha) that were analogous to Sukhothai's situation a century earlier.⁵⁸ King Tilokarat's commemorative projects included the construction between 1455 and 1476 of Wat Photharam, the completion of which was marked by the organization in 1477 of a council for the revision of the scriptures, and the architectural and sacral enhancement in the late 1470s of Chiangmai's principal monastery, Wat Chedi Luang. The enlargement of the latter monastery's reliquary, together with the installation there of the renowned Emerald Buddha image as well as a second relic (the foundational relic had been enshrined in 1423), boosted the reputation of Tilokarat as a ruler possessing a great store of charisma (*barami*) and the reputation of Chiangmai as a holy city and a pilgrimage destination for devotees coming from the region encompassing present-day northern Thailand, Laos, and eastern Burma—even though the collapse of the reliquary's spire in 1545 following an earthquake was interpreted parochially as an omen of the imminent Burmese invasion of Chiangmai.⁵⁹

Wat Chedi Luang's foundation in 1391 as a funerary monument to King Kuena (r. 1355/1367–1385) is the subject of a legend that found its way into a major Lanna chronicle composed in 1516, *Sheaf of Garlands of the Epochs of the Conqueror* (*Jinakalamalipakaranam*), reprised three centuries later by the *Chiangmai Chronicle* (1827). The legend recounts that Kuena's restless soul had transmuted into a *yaksa* dwelling in a banyan tree

along the road to Pagan. There the spirit begged traveling merchants to intercede with his son and successor, King Saen Mueangman (r. 1385–1401), to have a mausoleum built in Chiangmai, so that he could be reborn in the higher realm of the gods. Blackburn has astutely read the legend through the lens of history as expressing concerns about the commemoration of the royal dead and the fate of family lineage in the context of Chiangmai's late-fourteenth-century political vulnerability.⁶⁰ But the legend can also be read as an allegory of the Buddhist sacralization of landscape as it highlights the cultural opposition of forest, home to non-domesticated spirits, and city, where temples house the rituals and paraphernalia of *sasana* (hence the request of King Kuenā's spirit). This was a dialectical rather than an ontological opposition, its synthesis being represented by the *mueang*'s guardian spirit mentioned earlier: "in Northern Thai ritual, as the Buddhist city conquers the non-Buddhist jungle, the city incorporates those elements of the non-Buddhist world."⁶¹

In addition to chronicles (*tamnan*) such as the *Sheaf of Garlands*, which were closely modeled on Sinhalese Buddhist histories (P. *vamsa*), a distinctive genre of vernacular literature flourished during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in the culturally homogeneous region spanning northern Thailand and western Laos: the chronicles of reliquaries and cultic images, in which myth, historicity, and cultural memory interface.⁶² These latter *tamnan* too adapted the conventions of Sinhalese *vamsa* "by emphasizing native heroes and a local topography marked by shrines and monasteries closer to home."⁶³ Thai/Lao *tamnan* were thus a product of the localization of what Steven Collins has called (after French medievalist historians) the Pali *imaginaire*—"a discursive, textual world available to the imagination of elites, and gradually others, in the premodern agrarian societies of Southern Asia."⁶⁴

As anticipated by the discussion of stone footprints earlier, this discursive Pali *imaginaire* had a material counterpart whereby revered cultic monuments and artifacts were made available to devotees outside India and Sri Lanka by means of liturgically validated replicas. A well-known case of trans-Asian replication of exemplary Buddhist monuments is the Mahabodhi temple in Bodh Gaya, erected in the fifth or sixth century CE over a preexisting shrine credited to Emperor Asoka and repaired several times since—most radically by British colonial archaeologists in the 1880s.⁶⁵ Edifices modeled directly or indirectly on the Mahabodhi were erected in Burma and northern Thailand and as far as China and Tibet.

Wat Photharam was built in Chiangmai's northwestern outskirts, on a land plot where King Tilokarat had earlier founded a forest monastery and planted a *pipal* or Bodhi tree (*Ficus religiosa*). Ritual planting of *pipal* is a mode of Buddhist inscription of landscape that commemorates the

Buddha's attainment of nirvana by redoubling the tree's universal symbolism of growth and self-regeneration with the specific one of spiritual enlightenment. Each new planting, moreover, replicates the primal memorial act: the transplanting in Anuradharupa of a branch of the Bodh Gaya tree donated by Emperor Asoka to the Lankan king. In a virtuous cycle, a branch of the Anuradharupa Bodhi tree was allegedly retransplanted at Bodh Gaya when this temple underwent devotional revival during the late Pala period.⁶⁶

Like other Lanna monasteries, Wat Photharam is better known by an alternative designation, Wat Chet Yot (Seven Spires Monastery), which refers to the spires rising from the sanctuary's massive platform, symbolizing the Seven Stations in the Buddha's sacred biography (fig. 1.2). The central, pyramidal spire was seemingly modeled on the Mahabodhi, yet scholars disagree on whether inspiration came from the original in Bodh Gaya (of which Wat Photharam reproduced the whole sacred topography), its thirteenth-century replica in Pagan (which lacked the Mahabodhi's subsidiary structures), or rather textual descriptions.⁶⁷ Whatever the case, the final product of any attempt at replication depended on local taste and technical know-how. Wat Photharam / Chet Yot's vaulted corridors and blind vaults (evoking the interior of rock-cave monasteries) were built by employing the



Figure 1.2 Wat Photharam / Chet Yot, Chiangmai, ca. 1475.