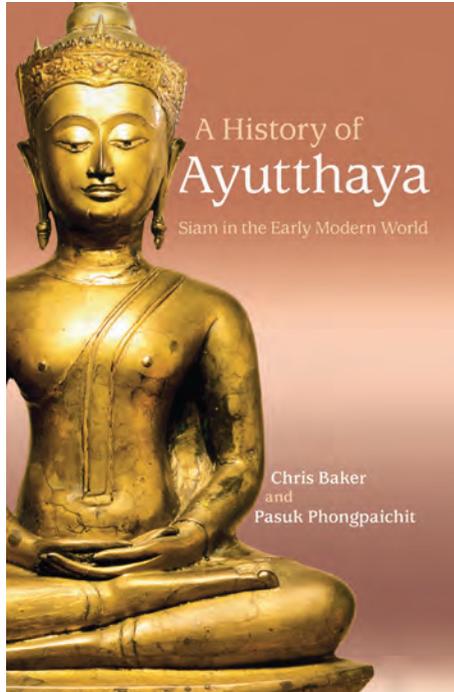


*A History of Ayutthaya: Siam in the Early Modern World* by Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. ISBN: 9781108120197. 1,150 Baht.



This book is introduced as “the first English language study of Ayutthaya’s emergence in the late thirteenth century to the city’s destruction in 1767”. This is an astonishing fact on which, to their credit, the authors do not dwell, exploit or boast, leaving readers to ponder it for themselves and for this reviewer to admire them for their audacious undertaking.

The book, of course, did not emerge out of nowhere. From the very beginning in the “Preface: Ayutthaya in History”, the authors generously acknowledge the work of their predecessors, starting with the second footnote on Page ix citing “Brief notices of the history of Siam,” prepared by King Mongkut for Sir John Bowring in 1855, in Bowring, *The Kingdom and People of Siam*, vol 2, pp. 341–5. That book was published in 1857, 160 years ago.

The authors bring us up to date, from the contributions of King Vajiravudh and Prince Damrong, which were “reflected in the first English–language history of Siam, published by W.A.R. Wood in 1924”. They then make a great leap over the next sixty years of “national history” to the 1980s with the arrival of the monthly journal, *Sinlapa watthanatham* (Art and Culture), which first appeared in November 1979, and the publication in 1984 of Srisakara Vallibhothama’s *Krung si Ayutthaya khong rao* (Our Ayutthaya) by *Sinlapa Watthanatham* and David K. Wyatt’s *Thailand: A Short History* by Yale University Press.

Before the appearance of Sujit Wongthes’ *Sinlapa Watthanatham* and Srisakara’s *Muang Boran* (Ancient City) journal, there was the earlier excitement of the publication of Charnvit Kasetsiri’s *The Rise of Ayudhya* (Oxford University Press, Kuala Lumpur, 1976) and Nidhi Eoseewong’s *Kanmueang thai samai phra narai* (1980). The authors fully acknowledge the pioneering work of Charnvit and Nidhi, as well as those of Sunait Chutintaranond, Dhiravat na Pombejra, and Winai Pongsripian. Foreign scholars also contributed to the advancement of knowledge about Ayutthaya, notably Michael Vickery and Yoneo Ishii.

After placing their book in its historiographical context, the authors proceed with their own exemplary work. They divide the book into seven chapters: “Before Ayutthaya”, “Ayutthaya Rising”, “An Age of Warfare”, “Peace and Commerce”, “An Urban and Commercial Society”, “Ayutthaya Falling”, and “To Bangkok”. The text is interspersed with useful Figures and Tables as well as maps. Figure 6.1 on Page 239 of a street scene depicted in murals of the Vidhura Jātaka at Wat Chong Nonsi, Bangkok, is particularly delightful.

The book ends with an Appendix comparing “the list of Ayutthaya kings in David Wyatt’s *Thailand: A Short History* with the details available from the Luang Prasoet Chronicle, the Van Vliet Chronicle, and *Sangkitiyavamsa*.” The reader is referred to Michael Vickery’s review article: “Jeremias van Vliet Short History,” *JSS*, 64, 2 (1976), 207–36, for both of which this reviewer was responsible, the first as its editor before leaving for a posting to Jakarta and the second for its publication in 1975 in his capacity of Honorary Editor of the *Journal of the Siam Society*, the position held by Chris Baker today. The reader will appreciate from the Appendix and Michael Vickery’s discussion how difficult it is to write a history of Ayutthaya when even the names of the kings vary from one account to another.

The Appendix is followed by a Glossary, Notes on Some Key Sources, References, and the Index. The authors note that, “Many sources on Siam have problems over authenticity and accuracy”, starting their discussion with Sukhothai Inscription 1, the Royal Chronicles of Ayutthaya, the “Testimony” and “Description of Ayutthaya”, the accounts of La Loubère and Nicolas Gervaise, Laws, Literary Works and Murals. This reviewer was Honorary Librarian of the Siam Society when A.B. Griswold and Prasert na Nagara’s “Epigraphic and Historical Studies No.9 : The Inscription of Ramkamhaeng of Sukhothai (1292 A.D.)” came out in *JSS*, 59, 2 (1971), but was happily absent abroad for the entire period of “The Ram Khamhaeng Controversy”. As for Laws, I was the Honorary Editor for Michael Vickery’s “Prolegomena to Methods for Using the Ayutthayan Laws as Historical Source Material,” *JSS*, 72 (1984). The authors know all about the problems regarding the use of laws for Ayutthaya history as they translated and edited *The Palace Law of Ayutthaya and the Thammasat* (Cornell University Press, 2016) before the publication of this book.

The bibliography in the References is comprehensive and up to date. For instance, there is Sunait Chutintaranond (ed.), *Nai yuk awasan krung si mai khoei sueam* [No decline in Ayutthaya’s final period], Bangkok, Sinlapa Watthanatham, 2015. I hope Dhiravat na Pombejra can find a publisher for his paper, “Catching and selling Siamese elephants in seventeenth Century: a preliminary study,” cited as unpublished in 2012 (p. 294) as his article “From Siam to India via Java: Elephants as gifts in pre-modern diplomacy”, published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ Devawongse Institute in 2010, highlights “the use of elephants as gifts in diplomacy by the Siamese Kings of Ayutthaya, especially the sending of elephants from Siam to Java as presents for the Dutch Governors-General resident in Batavia (present-day Jakarta).” The index is also well done. It may be standard practice, but not in Thailand.

By naming their first chapter “Before Ayutthaya”, the authors clearly declare their intention to go back to the very beginning of the “territory known as Siam”, long before “Ayutthaya looms into history” (p. 1). They manage to cover everything from early peoples to Dvaravati, the influence of Angkor, the arrival of the Tai and the emergence of Sukhothai at the end of the 13th century. It is a very useful summary of the latest research with telling details which show that Sukhothai was “a cultural crossroads, absorbing influences from Angkor, Pagan, the Mon country, Lanna, and the peninsula” (p. 42). The tentative conclusion to this chapter sets the stage for the second chapter, “Ayutthaya Rising”.

The authors begin their proper history of Ayutthaya by quoting the opening of the

Luang Prasoet chronicle, “compiled in 1681”, discovered in 1907, 110 years before the publication of this book, and first translated into English by O. Frankfurter and published in the *JSS* in 1909. The text is “fascinating ... for what is missing.” But then as the authors exclaim, “Ayutthaya was a different kind of place.” That is a marvellous remark. From then on, their originality never stops.

Readers will learn that “the great city of Ayutthaya was established” on 4 March 1351, but the “port–city” must have been there long before that in the area the Chinese called Xian from the end of the 13th century. The authors relate Xian to the rest of the Peninsula, Srivijaya and the “early age of commerce in Southeast Asia,” while “Over the next century, Xian / Ayutthaya” became “the Chinese authorities’ favourite trading partner in the southern seas” (p. 52). An early Portuguese visitor, Tomé Pires, noted that it was very cosmopolitan, with settlements of “Arabs, Persians, Bengalees, many Klings [south Indians], Chinese and other nationalities.” (p. 57)

In its rise “From Port City to Territorial Power”, Ayutthaya inevitably interacted with its immediate neighbours, Suphanburi and Lopburi (the Chinese Luo of Xianluo), while the former had close ties to Sukhothai in the north, clearly delineated by Figure 2.1 (p. 61), this would eventually lead to the so–called first Fall of Ayutthaya in 1569 to the “northern nobles ... allied with the Peguan ruler.” (p. 83) This is now the accepted version of what happened, but it has yet to be absorbed by “national history”.

Chapter 2 also has sections on “Ayutthaya, Lanna, and Angkor”, and “The Early Ayutthaya Polity”. On the matter of the “sacking” of Angkor in 1431, which continues to vex Thai–Cambodian relations to this day, an inscription was discovered at Dan Khunthot District, Korat, only ten years ago in 2007. Winai Pongsripian was the first to introduce this important discovery in a publication to celebrate the ninetieth birthday of Dr. Prasert na Nakorn in 2009. The inscription confirms the Luang Prasert Chronicle that an Ayutthaya army did “sack” Angkor in 1431. “King Borommaracha II ... was so pleased with its result that he conferred on its commanding general an elevated title and other honors” (p. 67). The inscription gives the title as Khun Si Chairat Mongkholthep, together with the names of thirteen of his chief officers. It is tremendously exciting to discover these people and to add them to history. Watanyu Fakthong, who wrote up the inscription in Volume 7 of the 100 key documents: essence of Thai history, a project of Winai Pongsripian for the Thailand Research Fund published in 2011, suggests that *Khun Si Chairat Mongkholthep* might have been the *Phraya Thepmongkhon Phrutthamat* referred to in the fragment 222 2/K 104 chronicle, who when he died, “King Borommaracha gave a measure of gold from the Treasury to ornate his funeral urn, then ordered *Khun Sribat* his son from Nakhon Luang to take his inheritance. As for *Khun Prachanon*, his younger brother, he ordered him to serve as Phrutthamat in his stead”. Nakhon Luang is Angkor and Phrutthamat might have been Chief Minister. Watanyu cited the complete fragment published by Winai in 1996, one side of which had been published by Michael Vickery in the *JSS* in 1977. As for the inscription itself, there is a more complete reading by Santi Pakdeekham in 2015 (pp. 306-307). There is still so much to be done if we are to understand the Early Ayutthaya Polity.

Chapter 2 also has sections on “Political Geography”, “The Politics of Merger”, “Merging Languages”, and “Lankan Buddhism”, all of which are fascinating and

insightful. The authors cite another early Portuguese visitor, João de Barros, in the 1550s providing “a description of Siam” as separated into two kingdoms, one belonging to “northern people”, mentioning two specific cities, Sukhothai and Sawankhalok, and the “other, which included Ayutthaya and the gulf coast, ... called “Muantay”, glossed as *reyno de baixo*, the “kingdom below,” hence *mueang tai*, the southern realm. Barros added that the latter was “more correctly speaking” called “Siào” or Xian / Siam, and that the two areas spoke different languages.” (p. 69) This is very enlightening. As for the language of Ayutthaya / Siam, “The first Ayutthaya kings used the title Somdet, adopted from Khmer. Later the favoured form became “Somdet Chao Phraya” in which the three elements come from Khmer, Thai and Mon, respectively.” This is brilliant and applies to Ayutthaya culture in general.

In Chapter 3, “An Age of Warfare”, which takes the reader to the end of the 16th century, the authors show a firm grasp of the strategic situation in Southeast Asia of the time. From “Rising Violence in Cross-Basin Warfare” to the use of “Elephants, Guns, and Mercenaries”, the implications of “War and Society” together with “The Culture of a Warrior Court”, the chapter inevitably ends with King Naresuan. This neatly brings together the earlier strands of interaction, competition and rivalry adumbrated in the previous chapter, “Ayutthaya Rising”. It is heartening that the authors do not shy away from the controversy over the Battle of Nong Sarai of 1593. The famous elephant-back duel between Naresuan and the Burmese *uparaja* ends “In the Burmese Chronicles and several European accounts of the event, however, ...” when “the *uparaja* was killed by a gunshot, either fired by Naresuan, an unidentified soldier, or a Portuguese.” (p. 113) It is certainly not as glamorous as presented in the Thai national history version, but what matters is that the battle was won paving “the way for an age of peace, commerce, and prosperity” for “the next 150 years”. (p. 118)

“Peace and Commerce” and “An Urban and Commercial Society”, the titles of Chapters 4 and 5 respectively, constitute the heart of this book. In the 17th century, Ayutthaya became the entrepot between east and west. “In 1617, the East India Company board believed the city was “as Great a city as London.” In 1685, Véret, the manager of the French company in Ayutthaya, thought it was “a bigger city than Paris”. (p. 182) To this great city, with an estimated population of half a million, (p. 182) came Japanese, “Moors”, Europeans of all sorts, as mercenaries, merchants, missionaries, adventurers, and of course the supreme example of a man on the make, “Constantine Phaulkon, a Greek who had spent much of his life employed on British ships” (p. 161). The story has been told before, but this book tells it better, putting the saga in its context of political and economic history.

On “The Moors” (pp. 125-129), the authors commence by saying that they “had been present since early Ayutthaya ... and that “the Persian Gulf port of Hormuz traded with Ayutthaya in the 1440s.” They then recall the arrival “in the early 1600s of “two Persian brothers”, one of whom “Sheikh Ahmed Qomi, remained in Ayutthaya and became involved with the court.” The addition of “Qomi” to Sheikh Ahmed’s name is a recent fabrication to link him to the city of Qom in Iran. According to Bunnag family history, the brothers came from Guni. This town can still be found in the area of Astarabad, south of the Caspian Sea. I hope the authors will consider dropping the

designation of “Qomi” as the place of origin of Sheikh Ahmed in any future edition.

At the heart of Ayutthaya was the monarchy about which, “In the Indies there is no state that is more monarchical than Siam,” was the conclusion reached by Nicolas Gervaise in 1688. (p. 148) The authors describe the sources of the monarchy’s wealth, which enabled royal patronage of Buddhism and the arts. But the “Hiding of the Royal Body” through the mystification of the monarchy, along with its fraught relationship with the nobility meant that the country which, according to Van Vliet, in the 1530s, “has more than most other countries of everything that the human being needs” (p. 133), was under some stress. “As a consequence of this concentration of power and wealth in the monarchy, the succession became the focus of all political competition, resulting in a series of bloody battles which culled many in the royal line and top nobility” (p. 171) and led finally to Ayutthaya’s defeat and destruction in 1767.

Chapter 6 is an excellent account of “Ayutthaya Falling”. Leading up to the tragedy, there are sections on “Disorder and Revolt” and “Bandits, Crime, and Corruption”. In the Fall itself, readers are not spared the brutal and gory details. By using Burmese and foreign sources, the national history should be rewritten. For instance, in Volume 5 of Winai Pongsripian’s *100 key documents: essence of Thai history*, Dhiravat na Pombejra translated the missive of *Ok Phra Phiphatkosa* to the VOC in 1769, which puts Taksin’s break-out from Ayutthaya before the Fall in a completely different light. It shows that Taksin was acting under royal command. This confirms Burmese accounts that Ayutthaya had put up a spirited defence. It fell to a more powerful adversary, bent on conquest, which won on superior tactics.

The final Chapter takes the readers “To Bangkok” with King Taksin and the rapid revival of Siam. The groundwork has been laid in Chapter 6 with “Economic Expansion and Chinese Settlement” and “Nobility Rising” from the end of the 17th century through to the 18th century. Taksin was a perfect example of assimilation. At least one of the major noble families, which survived the fall of Ayutthaya, was of Chinese descent. (p. 270)

The book ends with King Chulalongkorn’s speech of 1907 to inaugurate the Antiquarian Society. “In the ruins of the Ayutthaya palace”, the King said:

“The idea is not to create a history of Siam quickly ... When there is enough material to print as a book then print it as a contribution to the history of Siam ... The sources should be indicated so others can see them and follow them up. If someone else reinterprets the material or has better sources, the author should not be ashamed, because he studied the material according to the knowledge and opinion of the time. If someone comes up with a better interpretation and more accurate reasoning, we should happily appreciate the major benefit of having a clearer and more reliable history of Siam.” (p. 276)

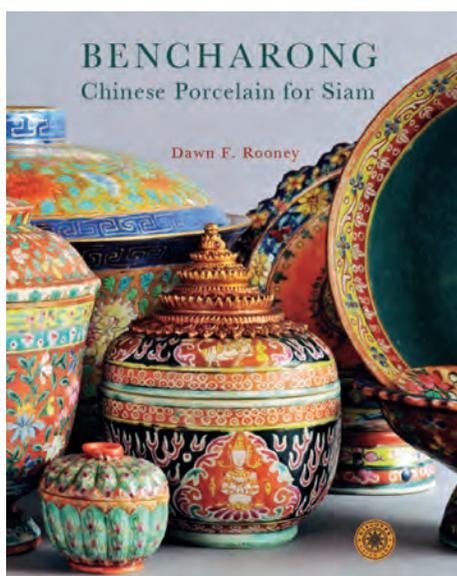
W.A.R. Wood’s *A History of Siam* was published in 1924. David K. Wyatt’s *Thailand: A Short History* came out in 1984. The first edition of Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit’s *A History of Thailand* appeared in 2005. We had to wait for their *History of Ayutthaya* until 2017, 110 years after King Chulalongkorn’s speech in Ayutthaya. It was well worth the wait. The authors have written a book of history at its best. They have

thoroughly mastered the historiography and use it in every chapter together with the latest research to drive the narrative. While the book is driven by analysis, chronology and dynastic history have not been neglected. The book is total history as the authors illuminate their work with literature and lore, religion and prophecy, laws, maps and murals, together with abundant foreign sources, some relatively new. While the role of the monarchy and nobility is fully acknowledged, that of merchants, commoners, free or in servitude, even the mob, is given full coverage. There is a fascinating section on “Family, Gender, and Sexuality” in Chapter 5, with subsections on “Commoners: Female Families and Loose Males” and “Nobles: Male Dominance and Female Submission.”

The book is the work of mature and sophisticated scholars who considerably advance our knowledge and understanding of Thai history, taking us way back before the official founding of Ayutthaya in 1351 and beyond its fall in 1767 to the beginning of Bangkok. The details are meticulous and well chosen. The book is stimulating and fun to read, from beginning to end. The authors write beautifully; even their punctuation should satisfy the author of *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*. This ambitious work is a great achievement. Along with all their other contributions to Thai Studies, especially their wonderful translation, introduction and annotation of *Khun Chang Khun Phaen* and *Yuan Phai*, the authors are owed a debt of profound gratitude and thoroughly deserve the Fukuoka Grand Prize awarded to them last year.

Tej Bunnag

*Bencharong: Chinese Porcelain for Siam* by Dawn F. Rooney. Bangkok: River Books, 2017. ISBN: 9786167339689. 995 Baht.



Dawn Rooney has set out to write a definitive book on Bencharong. There is a crying need for such a volume, although many books have already been written on the subject. For those not familiar with this ceramic ware made in China for the Thai market, thanks to recent publications and increased demand, top quality antique Bencharong has become prohibitively expensive and hard to find in the market. Rooney has been following this scenario over her many years residing in Thailand and her own photographs of Chinese and local ceramics piled up for sale along the riverbanks in Ayutthaya as late as 1973 (20) demonstrate how the market has changed. Surviving Chinese ceramics and shards in the old capital are now conspicuously rare.

The first attempt to systematically shed