

What Happened at Nong Sarai? Comparing Indigenous and European Sources for Late 16th Century Siam¹

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ABSTRACT—The elephant duel in 1593 at Nong Sarai between Naresuan and the Burmese crown prince is one of the most famous incidents in Thai history, often repeated in a standard version. In fact, there are (at least) ten different accounts of the battle that differ widely. Comparing these accounts by Siamese, Burmese, European and Persian authors throws insight both on what may have truly happened at Nong Sarai and on the writing of Thai history.

Scholars who specialise in the early history of Thailand, particularly those interested in the time prior to the 16th century, have to cope both with the dearth of sources and with the fact that this scanty material is written in a wide range of Asian languages and scripts. From the 16th century onwards, however, the situation changes in both respects. First, Portuguese observers add a whole new perspective, soon to be followed by accounts in Persian, French, Italian, Spanish, German and Dutch.

During the 16th and 17th centuries, a variety of foreigners left records of their visits to Siam. Among them were diplomats, adventurers, mercenaries, traders, missionaries, doctors and sailors. Some of them reported from memory long after returning home, others consulted notes written whilst voyaging. Some were only passing through and left merely a fleeting impression, but others who lived and worked for years in Ayutthaya wrote whole monographs. The written accounts range from a trader's simple note on the price of pepper to the speculations of a refined scholar. Moreover, the quality of what was preserved varies greatly. Not everyone who wrote was a careful observer attempting to present us with an honest report of what he had seen.

¹ In a different context I have published on this topic before. See "The battle of Nong Sarai (1593) and the relationship between the largest political units in Mainland Southeast Asia," in *Guerre et paix en Asie du Sud-est*, edited by Nguyen The Anh and Alain Forest (Paris: l'Harmattan, 1998), pp. 39–54. This study represents a thorough revision and a new analysis of the material. I thank both Chris Baker and Stefan Halikowski Smith for constructive criticism of earlier drafts. Sven Trakulhun and Francisco Olavo C. Velho assisted with the reading of Bocarro's text. Errors of judgement that remain are mine.

Therefore, 16th and 17th century reports on Siam need to be assessed as to what kind of access to Siamese culture the author of the account may have enjoyed. Equally important is to decide the author's chief motivation in writing down a statement about the Siamese. Did he intend to impress a superior, to gather information for a select audience, or to provide entertainment for the general public?

When a series of authors repeat the information that Siamese women were notorious for their lax morals, readily offering sexual favours, this information ought to be weighed with care: were the authors in a position to judge sexual licence in general, were they just repeating what was generally believed to be true, or are their statements a reflection of a prostitution racket that had evolved along the trade routes?²

If it is important to assess the prejudices in works by Europeans, the indigenous sources must also be read with caution. In Siam, to take a blatant example, the Royal Chronicles were written, revised and rewritten apparently to fulfil the aims of the central authority. An obvious sign of bias in these annals is that many relatively innocuous ceremonial acts are recounted at length, while distressing or dishonourable occurrences are often glossed over.

The 16th and 17th centuries provide us with several interesting cases where European and indigenous Thai sources report on the same event. In the mid 16th century case of the treacherous woman Si Sudachan,³ her evil deeds are not only mentioned in the Thai annals, but she also features in one of the chapters on Siam written by Mendes Pinto. In this short article I shall limit myself to a different event where we can compare a number of early Southeast Asian written sources with European accounts.

One battle, ten versions

The event I have chosen is the battle of Nong Sarai. Comparing the various European and indigenous sources will not only teach us about a crucial battle between the Siamese and Burmese in the year 1593, an event that determined much of the history of Mainland Southeast Asia, but can also provide a model of how to weigh bias in early modern sources.

All educated Thais will be able to tell what happened at Nong Sarai: this battle allowed Siam to regain its independence after a lengthy period of vassalage to Burma. Over the past hundred years the story of Siam's deliverance from Burmese

² See the discussion in Sven Trakulhun, *Siam und Europa: Das Königreich Ayutthaya in westlichen Berichten 1500-1670* (Hannover: Wehrhahn, 2006), pp. 166–89.

³ The woman, who is known to us only by her title Si Sudachan, was a consort of King Chairacha. When the king died in 1546, his eleven-year old son Yotfa was selected as his successor, and Si Sudachan ruled as regent. Two years later she is said to have killed Yotfa and elevated her paramour Bunsri to the throne. These events triggered a successful coup d'état.

overlordship has been reported in Thai school textbooks, all telling basically the same story which is based on the Royal Chronicles of Ayutthaya. The story is usually told as follows.

The Burmese king had sent an army to repress the Siamese rebellion. Not far from the capital Ayutthaya the armies confronted each other, with hundreds of thousands of men poised for action in two camps. Naresuan, the Siamese prince who led the rebellion, bravely came forward on his war elephant and loudly challenged the Burmese to a duel. His heroic words were transmitted in the annals: “Whatever is Our royal older brother doing standing in the shade of a tree? Come forth and let us fight an elephant duel for the honor of our kingdoms!”⁴

Thus the Thai prince shamed the Burmese crown prince into accepting a challenge. The Thai elephant, being in rut, went berserk and rushed towards the enemy. The Burmese crown prince slashed with his scythe, but Naresuan turned and avoided being hit. Naresuan slashed with his sword, hitting the Burmese prince’s right shoulder, and cutting deeply into his opponent’s chest. At this time, Naresuan’s elephant driver was hit and killed by an enemy bullet. Prince Naresuan’s brother, the future King Ekathotsarot, fought with General Mangcacharo and also won that contest. The Thai army then rushed forward, slashing and stabbing, forced the enemy to retreat in defeat, and pursued them until the Burmese were no longer on Siamese territory.⁵

This bloody end of the Thai subjugation is today told this way so consistently and so often that a different opinion of what happened is automatically suspect from the Thai perspective.

There are, however, some puzzling features in this account. There is the purported issue of a challenge to decide the war by organizing a duel. The duel has a venerable tradition. In Mainland Southeast Asia this procedure was invoked when two major armies of comparable strength faced each other and when initial skirmishes failed to indicate which party was likely to win. In order to avoid an immensely destructive battle, the two opposing parties could negotiate a duel between two eminent figures of equal rank, each mounted on his heavily armed war elephant (along with one or more bodyguard behind the warrior and a mahout in front to guide the animal with a goad). At the agreed moment, these two would rush forward and attempt to disarm, wound, kill or unseat each other. It was understood that the outcome of this minor confrontation would settle the entire battle once and for all. The elephant duel could be regarded as a kind of ordeal, whereby costly large-scale killing and destruction were avoided.

⁴ Richard D. Cushman (tr.), *The Royal Chronicles of Ayutthaya* (Bangkok: The Siam Society, 2000), p. 131.

⁵ The event is celebrated every year on January 18 as Royal Thai Armed Forces Day (วันกองทัพไทย).

The rules of such a traditional elephant duel were quite clear: there are accounts in the annals and in inscriptions going back to the late 13th century. In all such accounts, the side that won the duel won the war. One unusual feature of the account of the 1593 duel at Nong Sarai in the Siamese Royal Chronicles is that *two* pairs of fighting elephants are mentioned, not just Naresuan versus the Burmese crown prince, but also Naresuan's brother against a Burmese general. The whole purpose of a duel is that for the duration of the event all other hostile action is suspended. Moreover, when the Burmese prince was severely wounded, and the Burmese general killed, the duel, as well as the war, had apparently ended in favour of Naresuan, yet the Thai troops that had kept their distance up to this point, suddenly attacked en masse and routed the Burmese, with the Chronicle reporting massive slaughter—the very result that should have been avoided by agreeing to let the duel take place. In addition, the Royal Chronicles relate that after the battle Naresuan accused fifteen of his senior officers of letting him attack the Burmese crown prince alone and wished to punish them severely for waiting to see the outcome of the duel.⁶ This angry reaction indicates that Naresuan found himself abandoned in a foray, and contradicts the very idea that a duel had taken place.

The Royal Chronicles are the source of the standard version of this battle, but they are not the only Siamese account of what happened in 1593. In 1640, a mere 47 years after the battle took place, a Dutch resident of Ayutthaya reproduced a version of Siamese history that was clearly based on indigenous documents, both written and oral.⁷ In this source, the confrontation of the two armies is described rather differently from the Royal Chronicles.

The two armies confronted each other and the Burmese crown prince mounted his much larger elephant. When the two elephants saw each other, the animals were so aroused that they charged as if gone mad. The Thai elephant was frightened by the much larger Burmese one and tried to flee. Naresuan then prayed, shedding tears, begging his elephant to be brave, and sprinkling him with sacralised water. Thereupon, his steed took courage and charged madly towards the Burmese adversary, surprising the elephant of the Burmese crown prince, and hitting his trunk with such force that the Burmese elephant squealed. At this moment, the Thai prince struck the Burmese crown prince on the head with a goad and then stabbed him to death with a lance. The Thai prince's bodyguards also stabbed the Portuguese who sat behind the Burmese crown prince. The Burmese army retreated, pursued by the Thais, and many Burmese were slain and others taken prisoner.⁸

⁶ Cushman, *Royal Chronicles*, pp. 132–3.

⁷ Chris Baker et al., *Van Vliet's Siam* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2005), pp. 186–9.

⁸ Baker et al., *Van Vliet's Siam*, pp. 226–7. Van Vliet also recounted the event in abbreviated form in his *Description of the Kingdom of Siam*: “At last they [the Burmese] appeared before Judia which town they thought to conquer very easily. But the Siamese prince marched with his army against the enemy and met them half a mile above the town near a ruined temple which is still existing. Scarcely had the two armies taken position opposite each other, when the Pegu prince and the

There are interesting differences between this oldest Siamese account and the standard story. In the first place, Naresuan does not utter a challenge and no formal duel is agreed upon. Secondly, Naresuan's brother is not mentioned as playing a role in the confrontation. Thirdly, it is the Portuguese sitting behind the Burmese crown prince who is killed, not the person sitting behind Naresuan.

The second-oldest Siamese narration of the battle can be found in the so-called Luang Prasert Chronicle, a document that was written in 1690 by a high-ranking court astrologer. The author's chief aim was to keep an accurate record of unusual events as will be clear when we read the entry related to the battle.

On the second day of the second waning month of the year 954 Chulasakarat [1593] four time-units of 24 minutes and three units of six minutes after dawn he [Naresuan] rode his chief elephant named Phraya Chayanuphap and went out to fight the [Burmese] crown prince at the district of Nong Sarai. It was not an auspicious time and therefore ... the [Thai] leader was slightly wounded in the right arm. Also when the [Burmese] crown prince came riding forward his hat fell off and he ordered it to be brought up to be worn again. Then the [Burmese] crown prince died in combat on his elephant. The chief [Thai] elephant named Phraya Chayanuphap on which this duel had been fought was renamed Chaophraya Prap Hongsa [His Honourable, Conqueror of Burma].⁹

Astrologers played an important role in calculating the most auspicious times to commence a battle. The exact time when Naresuan's elephant set off, and the fact that the Burmese crown prince's hat fell off and that Naresuan was slightly wounded in his right arm, were the type of knowledge considered vital by members of this profession. Therefore, I tend to attach great weight to these details. It is remarkable that both Van Vliet's Thai sources and the astrologer give a prominent place in the story to the role of Naresuan's elephant and that both conspicuously fail to specify that a formal duel took place.

A fourth Siamese account of the battle between Naresuan and the Burmese crown prince can be found in a document, written in Burmese, and believed to

young Siamese prince (both seated on elephants and dressed in royal garb) lost all self control, left both their armies and attacked each other furiously. The Siamese prince ran his adversary with his lance through the body and took the other's elephant. His slaves, who followed him very closely, killed a Portuguese who sat behind the Pegu prince to guide the elephant. The Pegu soldiers, seeing that their chief had been slain, fled away, but were at once pursued by the Siamese. Many thousands were slaughtered and the rest dispersed, so that only a few of the enemy's army reached Pegu again." Baker et al., *Van Vliet's Siam*, p. 125.

⁹ *Phraratchaphongsawadan Krungsi'ayutthaya chabap Luang Prasert* (Bangkok: Khurusapha, 1963), p. 156. The rank of Chaophraya was usually reserved for the most important ministers of state.

originate from Thai nobles taken to Burma after the fall of Ayutthaya in 1767. It is known as the *Yodaya Yazawin*, and a copy, dated to the year 1845, has been translated into English. The moments leading up to the battle of Nong Sarai are described in some detail. During the first skirmishes, neither party prevailed and therefore the two sides agreed upon an elephant duel between Naresuan and the Burmese crown prince (here called Uparaja). We are told that both their elephants were in musth.¹⁰ Before the duel started a series of propitious omens appeared to Naresuan. What then happened is described as follows:

When Uparaja made to use a *setpali*, Phra Naresuan asked, “We are fighting a fair fight. Is my elder brother trying to gain an undue advantage?” Uparaja then replied, “I just have the *setpali* with me, I do not mean to use it,” and continued the fight.

As the elephant of Phra Naresuan was not equal in strength to that of Uparaja, it fell back again and again in standing up to it. Uparaja reached out and stabbed and slashed with his long-handled sword, but Phra Naresuan was able to sway and evade the strokes. One of the strokes hit his helmet and two finger-breadths of it was cut off.

Then the elephant of Phra Naresuan set its legs against a hillock which had a jujube tree with ripe fruit and fought resolutely. Phra Naresuan’s elephant gored Uparaja’s elephant at the base of its tusk and the elephant fell. Goaded on his elephant at full speed, Phra Naresuan slashed with his long-handled sword and Uparaja died on his elephant. The hillock against which the elephant of Phra Naresuan set its legs is known to this day as Phutsakrathip.

When Uparaja died and his troops fell into disarray, Phra Naresuan ordered, “Because he lost in a cockfight and spoke to shame me in Hanthawaddy we fought this fight as good men do. Do not take any prisoners,” and the troops of Uparaja were allowed to return to Hanthawady.¹¹

This fourth Siamese version tells us that a duel did take place and ends by informing us that, in accordance with the rules of an elephant duel, the Burmese were allowed to retreat unhindered. It also allots a prominent role to the elephants, this time stating that both animals were dangerously excited, and gives a heroic role to Naresuan’s elephant. Other new elements are introduced, such as the slashing of Naresuan’s hat and the inappropriate use of a *setpali* weapon. We do not know what

¹⁰ Musth is a periodic condition of increased reproductive hormone secretion in bull elephants during which they are highly irritable and aggressive.

¹¹ Tun Aung Chain (tr.), *Chronicle of Ayutthaya: A Translation of the Yodaya Yazawin* (Yangon: Myanmar Historical Commission, 2005), pp. 40–1.

a *setpali* was, but the context suggests that it must have been a recently introduced weapon that should play no role in a traditional duel. It does not seem far-fetched that the *setpali* was an indigenous name for a kind of European gun.¹² The mention of a cockfight refers to an earlier episode at the Burmese court when Naresuan was slighted by the Burmese crown prince.¹³

Having established that the four Siamese sources that describe the confrontation of 1593 show considerable differences, we shall now introduce how some representatives of the other side in the conflict, the Burmese, report what took place at Nong Sarai. The Burmese annals by U Kala have a great reputation for reliability and accuracy.¹⁴ According to the *Hmannan Yazawin Dawgyi*, written almost a century after U Kala, but fully relying upon him, the Burmese armies reached the vicinity of Ayutthaya in February 1593.

In this Burmese account of the battle, elephants again play a decisive role. We are told that one of the Burmese generals rode an elephant in musth. This was a dangerous undertaking, for in this excited state the animal will readily attack other males. Therefore, its eyes had to be bandaged, so that he would not see other male elephants. When this general noticed that, during a skirmish, Naresuan's elephant had come dangerously near that of the Burmese crown prince, he quickly removed the eye bandages of his steed. However, instead of attacking the Siamese elephant, his mount went for that of the Burmese crown prince and inflicted a severe wound. Noticing that the Burmese prince's elephant was immobilised Naresuan rushed up and discharged a fire-arm at close range, mortally wounding the Burmese crown prince. The man behind the dying crown prince managed to hold him upright and Naresuan, thinking that the attack had failed, did not press his advantage. The Siamese were then driven back and took shelter in Ayutthaya. The Burmese generals held a meeting and decided to return home, arriving in their own territory in March 1593.¹⁵

The Burmese and Siamese annals thus differ quite dramatically. In the first place the Burmese do not mention a duel at all, attributing the death of their army commander to a series of unfortunate circumstances that began with an unforeseen attack by one of their own elephants. Next, the Burmese chronicles state that Naresuan took advantage of the moment that the crown prince was immobilized and killed him with a shotgun. Finally, they fail to confirm the Thai version that this was

¹² The prefix *set-* might come from Pali *cakka*, here meaning a mechanical device, very possibly a gun. Alternatively the word might be a garbled version of *pistola*.

¹³ A garbled version of the battle can be found in one of the Siamese legendary tales translated by Notton. See Camille Notton (tr.), *Légendes sur le Siam et le Cambodge* (Bangkok: Imprimerie de l'Assomption, 1939), pp. 55–8.

¹⁴ Victor Lieberman, "How Reliable is U Kala's Burmese Chronicle? Some New Comparisons," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 17, 2 (September 1986), pp. 236–55.

¹⁵ *Selected Articles from the Siam Society Journal*, Vol 5, Part 1 (Bangkok: The Siam Society, 1959), pp. 138–9.

followed by a major slaughter, but have the Siamese driven back to their capital city while the Burmese return home of their own free will.

Since the four Thai versions disagree among each other and the Burmese one presents yet another sequence of events, the confrontation of these five indigenous accounts leaves us with a measure of uncertainty as to what actually may have happened at Nong Sarai in February and March 1593.

Fortunately for historians, the battle took place in an era when other historical sources were being compiled. Before reaching a conclusion, we shall note what some European sources reported about the battle.

A very early witness was Jacques de Coutre, who visited Ayutthaya in 1595, but whose travels were first published in 1640 by his son Esteban. De Coutre depicts Naresuan (as Van Vliet did in his version of the Thai Royal Chronicles, mentioned above) as an extremely cruel person, who ordered the death penalty on the slightest provocation:

He was so inhuman that he had one of his brothers fried alive, and he ordered that eight hundred men be burned together on a bonfire because they had not come to the rescue on time when he was at war with Pegu. During that war he defeated Maharraya, the son of the King of Pegu. He came away with a gunshot wound in the arm. Maharraya died in the city of Tavai of a lance stab to the throat.¹⁶

Apart from Jaques de Coutre and Jeremias van Vliet there is another witness who attested to Naresuan's limitless cruelty. In 1603 Pedro Sevil de Guarga reported that one of the Thai king's many horrific crimes was ordering that twenty Portuguese be fried in coconut oil.¹⁷ These three independent accounts could serve as a warning that the passage in the Royal Chronicles which states that Naresuan at the last moment refrained from killing those fifteen officers, who had not come to his rescue (having been persuaded to grant them a last-minute pardon by Buddhist monks), may well be a later addition. It would then represent one of the more blatant instances of "cleaning up history" (Thai: *chamra prawatsat*).

In 1595 de Coutre witnessed the funeral ceremony of the very elephant that saved Siam at Nong Sarai. When he tells us how heartbroken the Siamese king was and how an elaborate state funeral was organised for a mere beast, he probably

¹⁶ "Era tan inhumano que hizo freir a un hermano suyo vivo, y mandó quemar ochocientos hombres juntos a una hogera, porque no habían acudido a tiempo quando él fue a la Guerra del Pegú; en la qual venció a MAHARRAYA, hijo del rey de Pegú, y él salió herido de un escopetaço que le dieron a un brazo, y MAHARRAYA se fue a morir a la ciudad de Tavai de una lançada que le dieron en la guarganta." J. de Coutre, *Andanzas Asiaticas*, edición de Eddy Stols, B. Teensma y J. Verberckmoes (Madrid, Historia 16, 1991), p. 139. I thank Chris Baker for pointing out this source.

¹⁷ As cited in Stefan Halikowski Smith, *Creolization and Diaspora in the Portuguese Indies; The Social World of Ayutthaya, 1640-1720* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011), p. 67.

succeeded in shocking his readers with the details of a heathen ritual.¹⁸ Looking at it from a contemporary Siamese perspective, this was a singular occasion. It confirms that Naresuan must have felt that he owed not only his life but the very defeat of the Burmese in 1593 to that particular creature, to our knowledge the only animal ever to have been awarded the rank of Chaophraya.

In his *Pilgrimage*, which first appeared in 1613, a mere twenty years after the event, Purchas mentions the battle in which the Siamese freed themselves from Burmese vassalage. He tells of the Burmese king waging war with Siam:

He sent his brother the King of Iangoma [Chiang Mai] and his owne Sonne, twice; which did much harme to the Siamites, and received no little themselves; never returning without losse of halfe of their Armie, and of his owne Son, in the last invasion slaine with a shot.¹⁹

Victor Lieberman has discovered that Purchas must have taken the information of the Burmese crown prince's violent death from a letter, dated 1602, that was published by the Jesuit Nicholas Pimenta and attributes the death to a lead bullet.²⁰ Lieberman draws attention to the fact that the Kala Chronicle and Pimenta support each other in describing the cause of the Burmese crown prince's death.

Another Portuguese source that mentions details of the battle was transmitted by Antonio Bocarro, who left Portugal to travel to Goa in 1615. In 1631 he became Chronicler and Keeper of the Archives in Goa. He wrote *Decada 13 da Historia da India*, which mainly covers the years 1613 to 1617, occasionally mentioning events occurring in the late 16th century, such as the battle of Nong Sarai. Bocarro wrote about this battle in lengthy, rather flowery passages that may be paraphrased as follows:²¹

The Siamese king had sent a message to the Burmese prince, suggesting that they hold an elephant duel, so as to prevent a slaughter. Without consulting with his army commanders and advisors he foolishly accepted the challenge, thus missing out on an almost certain victory, not even taking a guard, riding singly on the kingdom's most beautiful elephant,

¹⁸ See Markus Bötterf, *Auf Elefantenrücken durch Siam; Europäische Reiseberichte über das alte Thailand* (Reihe Gelbe Erde 4, Gossenberg: Ostasien Verlag, 2009), pp. 31–3.

¹⁹ Samuel Purchas, *Purchas his Pilgrimages or Relations of the World and the Religions observed in all Ages and Places discovered, from the Creation unto this Present...* (London, Printed by William Stansby for Henry Fetherstone, 1617 (first impression 1613)), Book 5, Ch. 4, p. 567.

²⁰ Victor B. Lieberman, *Burmese Administrative Cycles; Anarchy and Conquest, c. 1580-1760* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 40. Nicholas Pimenta was born in Santarem in 1546. In 1596 he became Visitor to Eastern India and Governor of the Jesuits in the Provinces of Goa and Malabar. He died in Goa in 1614. He published letters of Fathers Jerome Xavier, Gaspar Soares, Franc Fernandez, Melchipor de Fonseca, André Boves, and Etienne de Britto.

²¹ I thank Stefan Halikowski Smith for drawing my attention to this source.

the same elephant on which his father Ximindo Ginico had conquered many kingdoms. Thus he stood near the city Ayutthaya at a distance of a quarter of a mile,²² his army behind him, when his opponent approached with four beautifully adorned elephants, adorned with golden parasols and gem-studded coverings, behind him 500 warriors on elephants, 10,000 young soldiers on horses, and 50,000 foot soldiers. The Burmese should have prevented this duel because their leader was getting himself in mortal danger, and if he had not done this they had been almost certain to win. But these heathens are so in awe of their king that they did not dare to contradict him, fearing his anger....

When the Burmese prince saw the opposing army he disdainfully ordered his people to make way so that he could get at his opponent. At first he could not discern him for all the howdahs looked similar. But fighting he drove them into flight and killed one of the [Siamese] commanders. Then a second enemy rushed at him and was despatched. Only then came the Black Prince [Naresuan] on his elephant, clearly visible to the whole opposing army. Fighting valiantly the Burmese prince wounded his opponent with an axe. When the Siamese leader noticed that he was almost defeated, he called to two Portuguese, who were in his vicinity, that they should fire. A shot was heard from a gun [espingarda] (it is believed that it came from the Portuguese) so that the Burmese crown prince was hurt and sat mortally wounded in his elephant's howdah, where the Siamese prince killed him before riding away on his elephant. Then the Black Prince threw his army against the Burmese soldiers, who had lost their leader and did not know what to do. They were forced back two miles from the walls of the city, and with that the Siamese were satisfied.²³

²² At that time the mile was equivalent to about seven kilometers.

²³ Antonio Bocarro, *Decada 13 da historia da India* (Lisboa: Academia das Sciencias, 1876), pp. 118–120: “E assi mandou um recado ao Uparaja, dizendo-lhe que não era bem matarem elles tanta gente como estavam de uma e outro banda, o que se podia escusar se ambos brigassem mano a mano em cima de seus elephantes. O que o principe de Pegu, sem dar conta aos seus, nem fallar nem tomar conselho com nenhum capitão, acceitou logo, com tão pouca prudencia como quem entregava ao inimigo a victoria que tinha em sues mãos. E assi mandou dizer ao rei de Sião que era muito contente; que elle só no campo o esperava, não querendo levar comsigo nemhun dos seus, nem quem o ajudasse, mais que o seu elephante, em que ia cavalgado, que era o mais formoso que havia em todo o seu imperio, com que seu pae d’este principe, o Ximindo ginico, havia conquistado os mais dos seus reinos.

Posto o principe de Pegu, Uparaja, defronte da cidade de Odia, dis [p. 119] tancia de um quarto de legua, com o seu poderoso exercito nas costas, lhe sahiu o rei de Sião com quatro elephantes, todos com as insignias reaes, sombreiros brancos com suas fulas de oure pelas franjas, os piões de puro ouro, marchetados com pedras de grã valor. Seguiam a estes quatro elephantes quinhentos de guerra, com dez mil homens de cavallo, a cinquenta mil infantes de capaceies e rodellas douradas, todos mui lustrosamente vestidos. Bem puderam os pegus impedir ao seu principe semelhante

A third European source that mentions the battle is an anonymous work in Portuguese, which was first published between 1603 and 1621 and later translated by A. Macgregor.²⁴ The relevant extract is as follows:

The Armies were in sight of each other, and the King of Siam [apparently meaning Naresuan's brother], considering the risk of contending with men favoured by Fortune and mindful of former victories, sought means to avoid a pitched battle. He sent word to the [Burmese] Prince by an envoy, that [the Prince] should agree to the quarrel being decided by single combat between the young and mettlesome Prince himself and an old and feeble king [...]. For a long time they contended with admirable valour, till at length the Prince's strength yielded to the King's skill, and he fell pierced by a dart which put an end to the hopes of that imperial monarchy.²⁵

This Portuguese account tells us of a duel between the old, experienced Siamese king and the young and vigorous Burmese prince. Naresuan's brother figures prominently in the account given in the Royal Chronicles of Ayutthaya, but this is the only source depicting him as the sole opponent of the Burmese crown

prova, d'onde se não podia seguir mais que o risco de sua morte, e por em balanço a victoria, que de outra maneira tinha tão certa; mas como estes negros sejam tão sujeitos e captivos de seu rei que nom ousem de lhe locar nunca em cousa que lhe possa dar desgosto, ninguém se aireveu ao desviar de tão pouco prudente desatio e prova, estando elle nas forças tão aventejado....

O principe de Pegu, Uparaja, em vendo o exercito do inimigo, por desprezo e pouco caso que d'elle fez, mandou apartar os seus, e elle só em cima do seu elephante se foi para outro onde lhe pareceu que vinha o rei de Sião; que como tódes vinham com castellos armades em cima, e gente n'elles de guerre, não se podia differnçar aonde estivesse o rei; por onde se enganou o principe de Pegu, porque não era aquelle o elephante aonde vinha elrei de Sião. Travada a briga e justa de tão poderosas e grandes alimarias, era muito para ver o impeto que se commettiam. [p. 120] E pelejando não menos o principe Uparaja com o contrario o fez fugir, apertando o seu elephante com o outro furiosissamente, de que morreu logo o capitão que vinha no castello. Sahiu-lhe logo outro elephante do mesmo rei de Sião, ao que o Uparaja com o seu fez o mesmo que so primeiro, com o que sahiu o rei preto no seu elephante, tão descoberto que todo o exercito contrario o conheceu, e brigando valerosamente o feriu o contrario com o gancho de cornaca. Vendo-se o rei de Sião quasi vencido gritou a dois portuguezes, que trazia comsigo e tinha perto, que atirassem ao principe de Pegu, porque era tempo; e assi se ouviu logo disparar uma espingarda, que ao parecer d'elles julgaram ser de portuguez, com que o principe Uparaja ficou ferido de morte, e encostado na charola do elephante, onde o acabou de matar o rei de Sião, e cavalgou logo no seu elephante. E com esta grande victoria arremetteu o rei preto com toda a sua gente ao grande exercito de Pegu, pelos vèr irresolutos e pasmados, sem cabeça, morto o principe, e os fez retirar obra de duas leguas dos muros da cidade; com que se satisfez." I thank Sven Trakulhun and especially Francisco Olavo C. Velho for assisting me with the reading of this difficult text.

²⁴ A. Macgregor, "A brief account of the Kingdom of Pegu," *Journal of the Burma Research Society* 2, 2 (Autumn 2004), p. 185.

²⁵ Macgregor, "A brief account," pp. 109–10.

prince. Perhaps this Portuguese account contains the sort of distortions that may be expected when events are passed on by hearsay.

The tenth and last source is a book-length travel account by a Persian diplomat who visited Siam in 1685. This visitor provides us with yet another version of what may have taken place. When assessing the following passage, we should be aware that his informants were Siamese, speaking about matters that had occurred more than ninety years earlier. The Persian passes on the story as a juicy piece of gossip. He was told that Naresuan, when confronting the Burmese army, realized that he faced a desperate situation. He knew:

...the extent of his adversary's strength and had no hope of overcoming him in an even match.... decided to attach a firearm beneath his elephant prod.

When the two combatants were close to one another and the eagle-like prince swooped down to snatch his victim from off the elephant, the governor's son [Naresuan] took aim with his goad and before the [Burmese] prince knew what had happened, he fell.... and was dead.²⁶

This account is remarkable because, although heard in Ayutthaya, it supports the Burmese version and is incompatible with the four Siamese versions; also, the elephant goad, the instrument that featured prominently in Van Vliet's account of 1640, returns here as disguise for a gun.

Evaluation

The four Siamese, one Burmese, four late 16th and early 17th century European accounts and one Persian report all claim to describe what happened in 1593 when the Siamese managed to throw off their status of vassal to the Burmese empire.

The first matter to be discussed is whether or not a formal duel took place. The Siamese Royal Chronicles are unconvincing and internally inconsistent on this point. The Burmese annals state that no such formal confrontation took place. A cool assessment of the political situation at that time throws additional doubt on the likelihood of a duel. The Burmese were not sent to conquer a neighbouring kingdom, but to subdue a rebellious vassal. They had mounted a massive military invasion and must have been fairly certain of their military superiority. At the time of the incident they had only recently arrived in the neighbourhood of the Siamese capital, which was too early for war weariness. Besides, a Burmese agreement to a duel would have been tantamount to acknowledging that the Burmese crown prince and Naresuan were equal in rank, the very matter that the Burmese contested by sending their

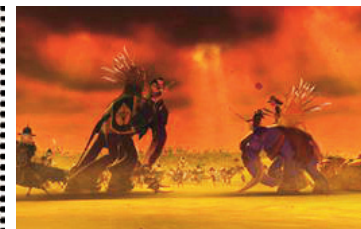
²⁶ John O'Kane (tr.), *The Ship of Sulaiman* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), p. 92.

One battle scene, many versions

The elephant duel at Nong Sarai is perhaps the most often reproduced scene from Siamese history.

King Chulalongkorn commissioned paintings and poems of 92 scenes he selected from the Royal Chronicles. The series, completed in 1887, featured four elephant duels, including Nong Sarai, which was painted by Luang Phisanukam, the title of an official court artist. Recently the Fine Arts Department has published the whole series (*Khlongphap Phrarachaphong-sawadan*, 2007).

The scene, based on this painting, has been reproduced countless times, notably at Wat Suwandaram in Ayutthaya. It also appears on the seal of the province of Suphanburi; in bas relief on a monument to the battle at Don Chedi; in a tableau at the Ancient City; in murals at Wat Nang Phya in Phitsanulok; and in *Kan Kluai*, an animated film of the battle from the elephant's viewpoint. An early 20th century version has been reproduced several times (including in books by Maurice Collis and on Wikipedia), mistitled as a "17th or 18th century painting by a Siamese artist."



From top: original painting; seal of Suphanburi; bas relief, Don Chedi; Wat Suwandaram, Ayutthaya; M. Collis, *British Merchant Adventurers*; postage stamp; animated film, *Kan Kluai*; Wat Nang Phya, Phitsanulok; tableau at the Ancient City; modern rendering.



massive army. From the Burmese perspective, the outcome of such a duel might have jeopardised the costly invasion that had thus far progressed without a hitch. Bocarro's tale of a secret pact between both adversaries that induced the Burmese crown prince to forbid his troops to assist him, to press forward alone, and to battle and kill until he found Naresuan, is obviously a poetic invention.

Therefore, in our view a duel never took place at Nong Sarai. When the decisive incident took place, the war was still in the opening stages when both sides were engaged in forays and skirmishes to test the strength and condition of their adversary.

Almost all versions agree that the crucial incident involved a confrontation between the Burmese crown prince and Naresuan, each mounted on a war elephant. The various descriptions concur that the behaviour of the elephants played a decisive role. Most sources state directly or indirectly that the Burmese crown prince's elephant was more imposing, taller and apparently stronger than that of Naresuan. This should not surprise us, for Siam had been a Burmese vassal for a long time, first when King Chakraphat had to sue for peace in 1548 and later from 1569 onwards. For several decades Siam's best war elephants must have been sent to the Burmese capital as part of a regular tribute. Naresuan must have faced a formidable enemy indeed. If Naresuan's elephant played such a crucial role in the foray, as the different reports suggest, this would help explain Naresuan's grief when the animal died in 1595, and also why it was given a formal state funeral.

If we put aside all references to a duel, the Burmese Annals, the Royal Chronicles of Ayutthaya, the European and the Persian accounts can be combined to construct the following scenario.

In February 1593 a massive Burmese invading force arrived in the lowlands west of Ayutthaya. Naresuan and his brother Ekathotsarot decided to rally a large force under at least fifteen commanders to confront the enemy before they could reach the capital and before they had time to fortify their encampments. Naresuan may have had difficulty controlling his elephant and have strayed too far forward, suddenly arriving dangerously close to the huge war elephant of the Burmese crown prince, who was flanked by other formidable enemy commanders on their elephants. Only Ekathotsarot came to his assistance, engaging one of the enemy's army leaders in battle. At this moment, a Burmese general who saw Naresuan coming too close to the crown prince, uncovered the eyes of his elephant in musth, but this enraged animal attacked and severely wounded the crown prince's mount. Seeing the crown prince's elephant in difficulty, Naresuan quickly took advantage of the situation: he closed in and he (or possibly one of the warriors riding with him, maybe a Portuguese) fired a gun which mortally wounded the crown prince. Realising that they were exposed in a very dangerous situation and that the other Siamese troops had not come forward, both Naresuan and his brother were forced to save themselves. Naresuan's subsequent fury over his army commanders' lack of spirit is recorded in

great detail in the Thai chronicles and by de Coutre, though the two sources disagree on the punishment given.

The death of the heir to the Burmese throne shattered the invaders' spirit and caused them to give up the campaign. There is no agreement on how the retreat took place. The Burmese state they went of their own accord, while the Siamese are divided in their accounts, one stating that they harassed the Burmese all the way and another that they allowed them to retreat in peace. Van Vliet's sources report a massive slaughter, Bocarro that the Siamese just pushed the Burmese back some 50 kilometres.

This reconstruction reconciles most of the stories about what happened at Nong Sarai. It remains to explain how most Siamese sources transformed Naresuan's spectacular foray into a duel. Remember that the Burmese invasion was on a scale that must have seemed devastating to many cautious Siamese statesmen. The very sight of the Burmese army at Nong Sarai, with their incomparable well-trained war elephants and hundreds of thousands of soldiers, would have convinced experienced observers that they would be defeated, humiliated, and punished for the rebellious spirit of Naresuan.

Yet this same Naresuan, because his elephant went out of control, unwittingly caused a chain of events that delivered the country at the moment of its greatest distress. Naresuan's mad rush forward, assisted only by the brave and experienced action of his brother, and its unforeseeable result, was told and retold in the months and years that followed, gradually acquiring several heroic features: the elephant had been afraid and needed to be persuaded (Van Vliet); the Burmese crown prince was by chance spotted quite alone, so there was time to issue a formal challenge and the Burmese crown prince felt so ashamed that he accepted a duelling match (Royal Chronicles); Bocarro blames the Burmese crown prince's character and his followers' slavish acceptance of whatever he decided to do.

We may safely conclude that Naresuan's challenge never took place. The fact that the Burmese leader died of a gunshot has been a troubling element, for it does not fit in with the myth of duelling elephants. Hence, in the Siamese sources the gun was relegated to a side issue, becoming a stray bullet killing a mahout in the Royal Chronicles, or a weapon held by one of the parties and not used in the *Yodaya Yazawin*, or a ruse by a desperate Naresuan in the Persian version. The Burmese and European accounts stayed closer to what actually may have happened at that crucial event.

Naresuan's much repeated challenge to hold a duel, even though it looms large in many Thai history books, should be relegated to a legendary tale. Realistically, the noise of discharging guns, booming war drums, squealing elephants, and shouting men would have prevented the protagonists engaging in a question-and-answer dialogue. At any rate, there would have been nobody present to record their words, and if the circumstances were as summarised above, there was no time or occasion to deliver a challenge or to react upon one.

In Southeast Asian warfare, mounting elephants in the middle of a melee was a hazardous exploit. The introduction of new weaponry had begun to challenge the supreme role of the well-trained war elephant. Finally this event shows not only how lucky Naresuan was to escape from a very dangerous situation, but also how quick he was to take advantage of it.