REVIEWS

Peter Skilling, ed., *Past Lives of the Buddha: Wat Si Chum — Art, Architecture and Inscriptions*. With contributions by Pattaratorn Chirapravati, Pierre Pichard, Prapod Assavirulhakarn, Santi Pakdeekham, and Peter Skilling. Bangkok, River Books, 2008, 296 pp., numerous illustrations. ISBN 978 974 9863 45 9.

Past Lives of the Buddha is a significant publication that both students of Buddhism in general and those with a special interest in the culture of fourteenth-century Sukhothai will find valuable. Engravings depicting Jātaka, the tales of the previous lives of the Buddha, were executed on stone and installed as the ceiling of a staircase-tunnel at Wat Si Chum, and these are the book's core subject. One of the slate slabs has been on view for decades in the National Museum, Bangkok; it has long been admired for the mastery of line it displays and recognized as the fountainhead of all Siamese two-dimensional religious art.

As the editor Peter Skilling remarks, *Past Lives* is the first multi-disciplinary study of any Sukhothai monument. He put together a team that includes an art historian, an architectural analyst and historian, and an epigraphist (the engravings are accompanied by explanatory inscriptions), as well as a formidably learned Buddhologist, this being Skilling himself. To grasp the aims and possibilities of the project is also to recognize that the book delivers less than it promises, primarily because of the absence of a sufficient emphasis on chronological development. The opportunity to look at Wat Si Chum and its engravings in time presented itself, but in this book the chapter on art history contains more a summary of the conclusions of others than a fresh effort to determine the position of the engravings through comparative chronological study. The chapter on architecture does not directly address chronological issues, and the expected epigraphical chart, accompanied by a discussion of what conclusions may be drawn from it, is absent altogether. Nevertheless, the book is and will forever remain an indispensable catalogue of the Wat Si Chum engravings.

Chapter 1, "Illustrating the lives of the Bodhisatta at Wat Si Chum," by Pattaratorn Chirapravati, introduces the subject and describes how the engravings became known to the world at large—primarily as a result of the visit in 1891 of Lucien Fournereau, who had rubbings made that were published in 1908. In fact, considerable use of these rubbings (or ink squeezes, *estampages*) is made in this book because so many of the slabs, which are also illustrated in recent color photographs, have deteriorated in the past one hundred years, their surfaces having flaked off. Dr Pattaratorn describes Sukhothai Inscription number two, found at the entrance of the staircase-tunnel, a long text describing the travels and religious foundations

of a royally-born monk, Si Sattha, the presumed author of the inscription. The text, because of obscurities, lacunae, and lack of clarifying detail has given rise to considerable controversy—much of it to be found in old issues of this journal. What Dr Pattaratorn (and subsequently Peter Skilling) does state is that Inscription II and Wat Si Chum are indissolubly linked and that the inscription has nothing to do with Wat Mahathat at Sukhothai. The inscription's carved stones with 500 Jātaka were never installed there, and, by extension, all the religious foundations described concern other monuments. George Cœdès's assignment of Inscription II to Wat Mahathat and the ingenious theories of A. B. Griswold and Betty Gosling concerning Jātakas and building activities there need not in the future play a part in scholarly discourse. But Dr Pattaratorn refuses to wade into the swamp of Inscription II interpretation. Having made her main point, that the "large and lofty cetiya" surrounded by the 500 Jātaka (2.2.39) is really the "Śrīdhāñakatakā" (2.2.36–37) and that the latter is the great stupa of Amaravati, she stops short of trying to clarify whether the other place-names in the same sentence indicate the monument's location (Cœdès, Griswold) or are sites in an itinerary (Prasert na Nagara, in his *Saraniphon*, 1998, p. 160), or where the "gathering point of all the Lord's relics" in the immediately preceding section (2.2.18–35) was located.

Dr Pattaratorn proposes that the reliefs date from the third quarter of the fourteenth century, her opinion stemming from views previously expressed by others and reinforced, as she sees it, by discussions of the motif of the ecclesiastical fan, the depiction of ascetics, and the design of Chinese-type floral emblems—discussions that are informative and interesting but do not go far to narrow the date or to lock the engravings in a position in a stylistic sequence. She briefly mentions Dr Prasert's epigraphical analysis (as later does Peter Skilling), which pointed out that two features, the spelling of *phrayā* with a ฺ and the use of a little circle for a superscript dot, do not appear in dated inscriptions until those of 1392, but does not explain exactly why she ends up discounting his views.

Pierre Pichard's chapter, "The *Mondop* at Wat Si Chum: New Perspectives," in addition to providing accurate plans and elevations, brings important and provocative observations to the table. The walls of the square *mondop* enclosing the giant seated Buddha are extremely thick, 2.7 m, the corridor they contain, with the structurally integral slabs bearing Jātaka overhead, ranging only 40–43 cm in width. This would not have been the case, nor would the upper parts of the walls, on the inside, have tapered inward, had not a massive brick superstructure originally been planned. He also remarks upon the similarity of the three massive superposed steps abutting the base, which reach a total height of 4 m, to a comparable feature at Chedi Ku Kut, Lamphun. He proposes that the architects planned a fantastic tower nearly 60 m in height; there would have

been four additional stories diminishing in height, each hiding a continuation of the winding hidden staircase and therefore, ultimately, all 547 Jātaka. Pichard's contention that the architects must have planned to build a superstructure is persuasive, but his proposed solution—one that necessarily accommodates ceiling slabs with all 547 Jātaka—is based on assumptions that are not adequately addressed anywhere in the book: namely, that the number of Jātaka planned for the extant staircase, an even one hundred, had no particular significance, and that the engraved slabs on the ceiling, rather than the lost murals on the walls, provided the primary content. Nevertheless, surely Pichard is correct to suggest that there is a relationship between the character of Inscription II and the unique architecture. "To inspire the confidence of his contemporaries, he [Si Sattha, the author of the inscription] may have referred to remote monuments as precedents and models to be emulated, if not surpassed, in their own country."

Pichard suggests that the *mondop* may have been the earliest structure of this type in Sukhothai or Si Satchanalai. He does not tell us whether he thinks the *wihān* facing the *mondop* on the east is contemporary, nor does he acknowledge that Sukhothai image halls were subjected to a typological and chronological analysis by Betty Gosling. Nevertheless, his view of the approximate date is revealed by the speculation that the project could have been cut short by the death of Si Sattha (which might have occurred in 1376).

Chapter 3, "Narrative, art and ideology: *Jātakas* from India to Sukhothai," is a far-ranging study by Peter Skilling, displaying his erudition, his command of many different topics of relevance, and his profound grasp of Buddhist doctrine. He sets the scene in India, describing reliefs at the stupas of Sanchi and Bharhut, the workings of oral transmission, the textual context of Jātakas, and the creation of the Pāli-language Jātaka collection. Then there is an overview of Jātakas in Siam, in both art (from Dvaravati to the twentieth-century Vessantara illustrations of Hem Wechakon) and text (written, recited, translated). An account of the study of Jātakas in the West follows. Wat Si Chum is then described, and there is a fascinating and comprehensive description of the development of knowledge about the monument, as found in the writings of both Thais and Europeans. Skilling does not commit himself when it comes to the dating of the engravings, deferring to the opinion of Dr Pattaratorn expressed in Chapter I. The chapter closes with a caustic survey of some of the statements about the Jātaka engravings to be found in art history books. Skilling believes that "a discourse of influence. . . still dominates Thai art history." He invokes the opinion of the respected art historian Michael Baxandall, who pointed out that the artist is the active party and that *influence* should be replaced by terms such as "draw on, resort to, avail oneself of," or any one of forty-eight others, including *copy*. *Copy* is Skilling's choice (though some of us consider this word more

pernicious than *influence*): "Copying brings merit; copying transmits power and prestige; copying is fundamental to the production of what we classify as 'Buddhist art'." These terminological issues will seem abstract to a number of readers because of the absence of illustrations that would permit an independent judgment about just how much or how little the Jātaka engravings have in common with the art of Sri Lanka.

Despite the range of this chapter, there are several matters that Skilling regrettably must have thought fell outside the limits he had set for himself. One is the question of textual transmission in the two preceding centuries and the relative roles played by Sri Lanka, Thaton, and other places (including Lamphun). Standard accounts depend much on the theories of Gordon H. Luce, who may have read too much into the numbers 547 and 550 (as being the total number of Jātaka) and into differences in the ordering of the last ten Jātaka. Another matter upon which Skilling could surely have cast much light had he chosen to do so is that of the perfections and how the Pāli list of ten perfections became associated with the last ten Jātaka in Siam. Finally, in discussing the ways the tunnel-staircase resembles a relic chamber (the engravings were not intended to be seen, nor the inscriptions read), he fails to describe the ways they differ. There is no evidence the stair was ever sealed off, and, though we know nothing about how often monks or honored lay people ascended, it remained an enterable space in the consciousness of the associated community. Furthermore, the glosses briefly describe the subject matter of the Jātakas in colloquial Thai, binding the engravings to this community, rather than relegating them to a heavenly realm in which only Pāli is spoken.

Chapter 4 is a brief introduction to Part II of the book which (in 153 pages) illustrates all the engravings, translates each of the illustrated Jātaka from the Pāli, provides the text and a translation of each of the inscriptions, and illustrates and comments upon two sites that serve a comparative function, the first being the Ananda temple at Pagan (ca. 1100), where the Jātaka are illustrated by individual glazed terracotta plaques (in photographs by Lilian Handlin), and Wat Khrua Wan, Thonburi (ca. 1850), where the *uposatha* hall bears murals with 538 panels illustrating individual Jātaka. Wat Khrua Wan could well have been an entirely independent creation; the illustrations, that is, were directly based upon a reading of the text. Whether that is the case at Wat Si Chum is unclear; at least some comparable compositional formulae appear also at the Ananda temple, suggesting the possibility of a common model (in the form, say, of a painting on cloth). But this matter is not addressed in the text. At any rate, at Pagan, Jātaka were also illustrated in murals, and surely artists used models there. In this regard, it is strange that the full publication of the murals and glosses at the Wetkyi-in Kubyauk-gyi in *Artibus Asiae* in 1971 should have been neglected.

The Pāli Jātaka is ordered according

to the number of verses in each tale; the first 150 stories have only a single verse, and the prose narrative around the verse is generally brief. This means that Skilling is able to present complete, or nearly complete, translations, far easier to read than the ones published in 1895 (and still in print). Footnotes sometimes draw attention to difficulties in the Pāli text, or to a superior reading to be found in the Siamese or Burmese printed edition. It turns out that some of the identifications in Fournereau's 1906 publication were erroneous and that the errors have persisted in more recent studies. When the totally effaced stones are correctly accounted for, the engravings are found to reflect the Pāli accurately. New photography (credited to Paisarn Piammettawat and Pattana Decha) illuminates the character of the engraved lines brilliantly—though it is also dispiriting, because it shows the extent to which the slabs have deteriorated. (Fournereau's rubbings are also generally reproduced.)

Here is an example of an inscription, that for Jātaka 13: "Kandi jātaka. Phra Bodhisatta was a deity in the forest. Khamrop 13." The inscriptions appear clearly in photographs, and then twice in modern Thai script, first transliterated letter by letter, and second in modern spellings. There are a number of places where more annotation would have been welcome—about the spellings of words, about the accuracy with which they reflect the Pāli text, and about their degree of rarity, but the book provides the materials that make it possible to study such matters in the future. There is a helpful index of the words in the inscriptions (though it has some omissions). As for the missing chart of letters, comparing their form with those in other Sukhothai inscriptions, it may not be here, but one can be found in the 1998 publication by Prasert na Nagara (p. 165). At any rate, it can be said that now anyone who wishes to pursue the study of Wat Si Chum will be able to depend on this meticulous and handsome publication.

Hiram Woodward
