

Dawn F. Rooney, *Ancient Sukhothai, Thailand's Cultural Heritage*. Bangkok, River Books, 2008, 247 pp., paperback, ISBN 978 974 9863 42 8.

Dawn Rooney's new book, *Ancient Sukhothai: Thailand's Cultural Heritage*, does an admirable job in covering both the historical and current setting as well as acting as a guide to the most important sites in Sukhothai's historical parks. It fills a significant need, particularly since Sukhothai was declared a World Heritage Site in 1991. Dawn Rooney has impressive credentials and is thus an appropriate author for a new book on Sukhothai.

The book is divided into two parts: the setting and the sites. Included in the first are chapters on the geography, history, inscriptions, beliefs, festivals, art and architecture, and ceramics. The second part deals with extant monuments within the Sukhothai, Si Satchanalai, and Kamphaeng Phet Historical Parks, Chalieng, and the Bang Kang ceramic archeological site.

Clear and concise maps precede each section, with large maps of the two most important sites, the Sukhothai and Si Satchanalai Historical Parks, on the endpapers, with the inner cities highlighted for handy reference.

This work is neither a scholarly compendium of the Sukhothai kingdom's history and legacy nor an art historian's in-depth analysis of the Sukhothai artistic tradition in sculpture and architecture. It is, however, a very high-class guidebook with the merit

of having much pertinent background information. The Sukhothai sites have here been studied in depth, are presented in an organized manner, and described often quite engagingly. While Rooney's expertise in ceramics is one of the strong points of the book, there are some small flaws in the areas of religion, mythology, and architectural decorations.

The section 'Preserving Sukhothai' (p.10) addresses problems concerning the restoration of a venerable ancient site of 'what, how, and how much'. An early effort was made by the Fine Arts Department in the 1950s and 1960s to make the site accessible to the public as soon as possible. Thus rapid restorations were made in concrete by unskilled workers. Later more sensitive restorations allowed some very beautiful details to be admired in their original form.

The table entitled 'Terms in Guide' (p.11) could have been more helpful as a quick reference if the author had given the foreign term most often used in architecture and sculpture followed by an English equivalent such as '*mudra*: gesture of the hands' with their Pala and Sanskrit transliterations in the glossary.

The problem with any book of this nature that goes beyond the usual guidebook listing of facts, figures, and locations is the lack of cited sources and a reliance on generalities to cover complex topics. Because of the vast amount of important information available, the author has a predicament as to how much to include. Might she have been

better off writing two separate books? One would have been a guidebook with the current site section left intact and the setting section rigorously condensed and reorganized, deleting repetitive photographs and copy, replacing them with cross-references. A second book would cover Sukhothai's history, art, cultural, and religious, with appropriate analysis, comparisons, cited sources, and more nuanced and in-depth analysis. That said, the present volume as it stands fulfills its purpose of describing the cultural settings of the historical parks in the Sukhothai area.

Helpful in the setting section are the many maps, including topography, riverine systems and location of major Sukhothai sites. Rooney also has an outstanding summary of Sukhothai's pre- and protohistory, particularly the first millennium, rightly stressing the necessity of looking outside traditional boundaries.

In the part on inscriptions, Rooney succinctly sums up the history, content, importance, and controversy over the dating and authorship of the Ramkhamhaeng Inscription No. 1. She includes a two-page insert with translation of the monument's four faces.

Despite the book's outstanding features, there are several small omissions and errors. Under 'beliefs', the author makes a pithy summary of the three major belief systems: animism, Brahmanism/Hinduism and Buddhism. However, the historical nuances of Theravada Buddhism (p.31) are difficult to describe in such a summary, as many early splin-

ter schools of 'Hinayana' existed apart from the Theravada. At Sukhothai, the important reforms of Sri Lanka Buddhism *sihalabhikku* sect in the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries are not considered. The reference to Mahayana should have included its many variant forms, such as Vajrayana, Tantric, Zen, etc. The Hindu god Brahma is mislabeled in the photo caption of the Chalieng gate at Wat Phra Si Rattana Mahathat (p.31) and again in the text (p.190). Current research identifies the four heads as those of a Mahayanic deity (probably Vajrasattva).

In her 'Key episodes in the Buddha's life' (pp.32–3), Rooney shows a set of mural paintings from the early Bangkok period with text stating: 'aspects ...that appear in narrative reliefs at Sukhothai [are] highlighted in bold face' without identifying the provenance of the Sukhothai reliefs. Several errors appear in this section: 'The Great Departure' paragraph states that 'guards helped him [the future Buddha] by opening the town gates and carrying the horse's hooves ...' but as shown in one of the paintings (and according to legend) these enablers were actually *thewada* or guardian deities. Also the order of episodes in the life of the Buddha is incorrect: in most Thai depictions of the legend, Indra demonstrates to the Buddha-to-be the middle way (by plucking a three-stringed instrument) before the attack by Mara. While two other paintings in these pages show the Buddha-to-be in the *maravijaya* posture, there is no illustration of this iconic episode.

In the art and architecture section (pp.38–53), the paragraph on ‘influences’ is a summary of a complex and difficult topic. An auxiliary box (p.44) identifies the *stupa*’s main architectural elements and symbolism. The addition of the generally used term of *harmika* when writing of ‘the box above the body’ and ‘throne of the Buddha’ would have helped in understanding Rooney’s subsequent references to ‘a square box-like structure’. The ‘base and multiple tiers’ below the bell would better be described as ‘three rings representing the three spheres of Desire, Form and Non-Form’. The ‘lotus-bud spire’ (in contrast to the lotus-bud tower) is actually ‘the lotus-bud tip or finial’ as the ringed spire itself represents the heavens or the path to nirvana, not nirvana itself.

Rooney identifies four types of Sukhothai *stupa*, including a ‘*stupa* with niches for images’ and mentions a Lanna ‘inspiration’ but without references. There are, indeed, some similarities in form between several Sukhothai *stupa* (the four axial towers at Mahathat, two *stupa* at Wat Chedi Chet Thaeo, Si Satchanalai) and early northern *stupa* in Chiang Saen, such as the superstructure of Wat Pa Sak. While these comparisons are limited to those *stupa* with four small *stupa* (*stupika*) surrounding the bell (also a Srivijaya convention), niches with Buddha images facing the four quarters seem to be a pan-Thai convention.

That ‘a pediment is a triangular form’ (p.48) is not always true at Sukhothai:

sometimes pediments are semi-circular, arched or curvilinear. At Sukhothai they are framed (or double framed) in floral /flame designs terminating in *makara* extruding a three-headed crowned *naga*, or *kinnari* making a *wai*, or a *makara* alone. Not all the descriptions of the arch frames are complete or correct: Rooney often refers to the reptilian creatures as ‘serpents’ (pp.48, 126, 164, 190) while actually they are the mythical *naga* or, more usually, the *makara* extruding the *naga*. The book would have been enhanced by a description and visual identification of the many mythical creatures (*makara*, *naga*, *thephanom*, *thewada*, *singha*, *kala*, etc,) whose energetic, powerful, and protective presence enlivened the architectural decorations.

Under the section ‘Looking at a Sukhothai Buddha image’, (p.50) the author gives an excellent description of what most Thais consider their highest sculptural achievement. In Southeast Asian art the Buddha is conceived as a monk wearing the proscribed three untailored pieces of cloth (*uttarasanga*, *antaravasaka*, *sanghati*) which are not one garment, as is intimated in the text (pp.50, 52, 53). Rooney’s description that the hair curls ‘... suggest he was neither a prince ... nor a monk ...’ is incorrect. After cutting his hair, the future Buddha became a monk and, because his hair curled so tightly, he never had to shave his head again. The three parallel lines at the neck (p.50) do not indicate ‘greatness’ but are traditional Thai symbols of beauty, and the bulges

at the abdomen (p.51) do not indicate a balanced weight (neither fat nor thin) but, according to Griswold, are the result of yogic breathing.

Dawn Rooney is particularly strong on the ceramics of the Sukhothai era and is a renowned authority on the subject. In a comprehensive handling of the material, she covers the sites, the products, techniques, terminology, and kiln types, as well as the seminal research done by Don Heim on the Ban Koi Noi area and by the late Roxanna Brown on findings from contemporary shipwrecks. Two pages of stunning photographs on 'Types of Ceramics' are followed by two pages of 'Architectural Ceramics' now in museums in the Sukhothai area. While the former have detailed captions (body and glaze description, size, date, original and current location), the latter have no size, date, nor original location given. For example, on p.63, what is the size of the fascinating shard (showing part of a face with an *urna* on the forehead) in relation to the guardian demon figure below?

In the section on sites, Rooney's knowledge, studies and dedication are apparent in the abundant details about the most important places. She should be commended for her thorough research as demonstrated here by the inclusion of facts related to height, width, length, distance, as well as dates concerning founding, excavations and restorations.

Each section begins with a double-page photograph, an overall map and a recommended itinerary, including ones

for 'biking, walking, tuk-tuk or motor tour'. Suggestions for the best time of day, where to relax and contemplate Sukhothai, as well as rectangular tab inserts giving location and direction make the guide invaluable. She does an outstanding job in describing the physical architectural elements of each structure from base to tier to spire, followed by decorative details, a technique that encourages the viewer to study the edifice rather than give it a cursory glance.

Wat Mahathat in this section justifiably takes pride of place as Dr Rooney devotes eight pages (pp.74–81) to its description. Missing, however, are photographs of the two extant stucco bas-reliefs on the auxiliary *prang* detailing the birth and death of the Buddha. With their stunning frames of floral/flames surmounted by a *kala* and terminating in *makara* and *kinnari*, they show strong Sri Lankan influences and are of surpassing beauty.

Helpful appendices list the kings of Thailand (those pertaining to Sukhothai history), geographical statistics, travel information, recommended reading, glossary, and an index. While the book contains an excellent recommended reading list, a complete bibliography should include several seminal sources, notably Griswold's, *Towards A History of Sukhodaya Art*, the 'Epigraphical and Historical Studies' of Griswold and Prasert na Nagara in *JSS*, and M.C. Suphadradis Diskul's *Sukhothai Art*.

Overall, the book suffers occasionally from repetitive photographs and

problematic captions. An example is the ceramic architectural finial of the *makara*. In the frontispiece it is labeled as a ‘mythical creature’, on p.62 the same piece is incorrectly labeled as a *naga*, while on p.85 the creature appears with three companions that are incorrectly labeled as ‘serpents, *makara* and lions’ whereas, in fact, the photograph shows no *naga* but three *makara* and one *singha*.

Despite these quibbles, this book is the definitive work to date on Sukhothai: it is a major contribution to the appreciation of Sukhothai period art and architecture within its historical and cultural context. This reviewer would strongly recommend that every Sukhothai-bound individual, whether scholar, ‘Sukhothai lover’, dedicated traveler, or casual tourist, have this guide in hand.

The book begins and ends with two stunning symbolic photographs: the frontispiece captures a classic Sukhothai *stupa* in early morning sunlight while the last photograph features the same *stupa* darkly silhouetted against a twilight sky.

Carol Stratton

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