

FROM THE ARCHIVES

Bruguière's Journey Overland from Penang to Ligor, Thence to Bangkok, 1827

**Letter from Mr Bruguière, Missionary in Siam, to Mr Langlois,
Superior at the Seminary of the Foreign Missions in Paris¹**

**Kennon Breazeale, editor
Michael Smithies, translator**

Bangkok² 20 June 1827 [242]³

Dear Sir and dear Colleague

I have at last arrived at my post. My first intention was to travel by sea, going round the [Malay] peninsula, but our missionaries in Pinang⁴ made so many remarks [243] about the bad faith of the Chinese, the only people who have commercial relations with Siam, that I changed my mind. The captain of a French vessel very politely offered me a passage on his ship, bringing me to Mergui⁵ and travelling from there to Siam;⁶ but on the very eve of our departure the ship owner changed his destination, and sent him to Aceh⁷ on the island of Sumatra. I then decided to follow the route taken by the late Mr Pécot;⁸ I had in any case a great desire to see

¹ Readers are directed to *JSS* 96 (2008) for an introduction to the life of Bishop Bruguière and his extensive letter of 1829 describing Siam. The present letter, of more limited scope, describes his journey from Penang to Bangkok in 1827. Most of the footnotes appearing in this letter of 1827 were written by Kennon Breazeale; Michael Smithies is chiefly responsible for the translation from French. The references are to be found in *JSS* 96 (2008).

² The text here has 'Bang-koc'; elsewhere 'Bang-kok' is also found.

³ The page numbers refer to the pages in the *Annales de la Propagation de la Foi*, 1829, in which the letter first appeared in French.

⁴ The East India Company settlement of Penang/Pinang was founded by Francis Light in 1786.

⁵ Merguy in the text.

⁶ This was the route taken by French missionaries and others in the seventeenth century, when Mergui was Siamese, in order to reach the Siamese capital, then Ayutthaya.

⁷ Achem in the text, on the northernmost tip of Sumatra.

⁸ Another missionary, of whom mention is often made below. Pécot began work at the Penang College of the Siam Mission in November 1821. He travelled overland to Bangkok in 1822, along a route similar to Bruguière's, and returned to Penang shortly before his death in July 1823.

the king of Ligor,⁹ that I would have taken this route right at the beginning, if I had thought it practicable. A Siamese Christian, an ambassador¹⁰ of the king of Siam to the governor-general of Bengal,¹¹ offered me, during his passage through Pinang, to overcome all the difficulties. I set off on the day after Easter,¹² taking with me a Chinese brought up in the college in Pinang, to act as a catechist, and a fervent new convert, also Chinese, who wanted to follow me and give himself over to the work of the missions. We arrived the next day in Kedah,¹³ where I found the aforementioned Siamese ambassador, who came to greet me on shore, and took me to his hotel, that is, a miserable straw-covered hangar. I at once desired to pay a visit to the governor,¹⁴ a son of the king of Ligor, and requested the ambassador to accompany me to act as interpreter; but His Excellency refused, saying that such a step was beneath my dignity, and it was up to the governor to make the first moves. This governor did indeed send me one of his chief officials to present his compliments and request me to go to the fort, which is no more than a walled enclosure and which are placed a few cannons to defend the entrance to the port; its construction has neither symmetry [244] nor regularity. The governor's residence is built in one of the corners. I was introduced into a kind of corridor, which I think served as an audience hall, and where I only saw, by way of furnishing, a few rush mats spread on the floor: two placed separately were cleaner than the others. There I found only ugly and almost naked brutes, wearing a small piece of cloth round their waists; this is the usual attire of both sexes in Siam. On my entering, they all prostrated themselves, and I was shown the mat reserved for me on which I lay stretched out. Soon after the governor appears, a very good-looking young man, very lively, with a proud and steady

⁹ The quasi-hereditary governor of Ligor, the old name for Nakhòn Sithammarat, was not a king, but by many Westerners in the early nineteenth century was considered such. Nòi na Nakhòn, Chao Phraya Nakhòn Sithammarat, was viceregal governor of Nakhòn Sithammarat from 1811 to his death in 1839.

¹⁰ The Siamese Christian who was the 'ambassador' to the governor of Bengal was probably Pasqual Martin, a Luso-Thai who accompanied Henry Burney on the *Guardian* to Bengal in 1826, after the signing of the June 1826 Anglo-Siamese treaty. His mission seems to have been primarily commercial, because the political issues had already been settled in Bangkok. He returned on the *Guardian*, which reached Penang on 16 April 1827.

¹¹ William Pitt Amherst, 1st Earl Amherst, was Governor-General of Fort William in Bengal from 1823 to 1828, based in Calcutta; the title changed in 1833 to Governor-General of India. The Siamese had every reason to maintain good relations with Calcutta after the defeat of their traditional enemy, Burma, in 1826 by the British and the signing of the Treaty of Yandabo.

¹² Monday 16 April 1827.

¹³ QuEDA in the text throughout.

¹⁴ The governor of Kedah and son of the 'king' of Ligor was Phya Aphai Thibet (Saeng na Nakhòn), who was given the title of Phraya Saiburi (meaning governor of Kedah) after the 1821 Siamese intervention and flight of the sultan. Aphai Thibet remained at Kedah until 1828, when he was forced to withdraw to Hat Yai by partisans of the sultan. He was later governor of Pang-nga.

gaze, giving orders with a firm and loud voice, who came to sit down on the mat a short distance from mine. When he approached me, I got up to greet him: this was impolite, and civility requires that I remained seated or prostrate. This incongruity was noticed by the ambassador who immediately came to warn me. Then two small dishes filled with betel and areca nut were brought, one for the prince and one for me. The ambassador was my interpreter. He sat at my feet, but not on my mat. Our discussions were without interest. ‘How old are you?’ ‘When did you become a priest?’ ‘What country do you come from?’ ‘Are elephants, bears, monkeys found in France?’ etc., etc. These were the kinds of questions he asked me. He ended by asking something I hardly expected and which rather surprised me:

‘Do you have a lot of money?’ he enquired.

‘Very little, prince,’ I replied, and this was indeed true. He asked me this last question in order to judge from my reply how the escort he intended to give me should be composed.

‘I do not have at [245] present enough elephants for you both; the ambassador is in a hurry to reach Ligor; you, Father, could you not delay your departure five or six days?’

‘I very much desire to leave with the ambassador,’ I replied, ‘but if that is not possible, I shall wait.’

‘You have nothing to fear,’ he said; ‘I shall provide you with a faithful escort which will take you to Ligor in complete safety.’

The next day the Siamese ambassador wrapped up his parcels, gave me a speech exhorting patience, and outlined the rules of conduct so that I would know how to comport myself with decency and dignity. According to his instructions, I should eat alone, before all the others; my catechist after me, and so on. I was strictly enjoined not to leave my hut, to speak to no one, and to look at no one whomsoever. I was forbidden to go out for a short walk and some fresh air; this would have compromised my dignity. However strict these rules, my catechist found them incomplete, and wanted to add to their severity additional observations. I was not allowed to sit; I should not lie down; this was indecent. I should not use my mat, as this had been used by a servant and was consequently soiled. ‘The attitude you should best maintain,’ he said with a very serious and solemn look, ‘is to remain standing all day, the eyes lowered and immobile.’ All these childish rules will give you an idea of the customs and practices of these people. Everywhere I went I found myself surrounded by a crowd of Malays and Siamese who observed with surprise all my actions and all my movements. Everything about me aroused their curiosity. But nothing exceeded their surprise than [246] seeing me walk or read when walking. They often questioned my Chinese about this: ‘What is the European doing?’ they asked him, ‘going up and down in the same place? What kind of a game was this? Has he lost something?’

Three days after my arrival in Kedah, the governor came to pay me a visit, and announced that the elephants to be provided for me would not be long in coming. In these interviews, I was able to observe some of the practices of these people. An inferior speaking to a superior squats on his heels; if the person he is addressing is of a very high rank, he prostrates himself before him. If he is unable to do this, he does not reply to the most urgent questions before removing the obstacle and prostrating himself. They must always speak with their hands joined in front of their faces. When questioned by a superior, one should never reply in affirmatives to his questions. 'Have you done what I ordered?' 'Did you go to such-and-such a place?' 'Is the work finished?' etc., etc. They reply 'Sir, sir, sir!' When someone is somewhat important, he walks ahead, alone; his officials follow, one carrying a parasol, another his betel box, a third a wick with which to light his cigar. When the superior stops, he remains standing while his suite sits; if he calls someone to come to him, the person must approach on all fours and crawl sideways like a shrimp; if he raised his head to the same height as the superior he would be severely punished. Only the monks¹⁵ are freed from the obligation of paying these external marks of respect to superiors; and I, being a European priest, profited from the same privilege. [247]

I noticed that the prince had added to his dress a pair of sandals, but his brother beside him went barefoot and it was easy to note that his feet had never worn shoes.

During the whole time we were in Kedah, the governor supplied our needs; he even gave us guards and people to serve us. For my part, I tried to make myself useful by visiting the places nearby and beginning my mission. I went to the capital of the kingdom which is but a wretched village with about two hundred dwellings covered with thatch, like those to be seen in the Strait of Sunda,¹⁶ the Malacca peninsula,¹⁷ at Ligor and Siam. These houses are built in a few hours. The vertical stakes are raised on which bamboos are placed horizontally; the whole is covered with a kind of thatch from the mangroves; the enclosure is marked off by wattles made of bamboo and filled with straw, and the house can immediately be occupied. The furnishings correspond to the simplicity of the architecture; they often consist only of one or two rush mats which serve as a table, a chair and a bed.

Kedah is a port but it can only receive small vessels; the French formerly traded with this place. The land is flat, humid and swampy; it produces hardly anything except rice which is the ordinary food of the inhabitants.

¹⁵ *Talapoin* is the term in the letter for Buddhist monks; this term was commonly used, particularly by the French.

¹⁶ Between Java and Sumatra.

¹⁷ Malacca is in fact spelt with one 'c' in the original. The Catholic Church continued to use the term 'the Malacca peninsula' until recent times, vide the Papal Bull of 27 November 1957, *Gravissimum supremi Pontificatus munus*.

The first persons to whom I began to speak about religion were those who were usually with me or who came to visit me. I first of all asked them to let me know some of their religious tenets, which I refuted with some simple reasoning or by familiar comparisons [248] at the level of their limited intelligence;¹⁸ I spoke to them after that about the existence of a single supreme being, his chief perfections, about the creation, etc., etc. I stopped there, without going further according to the impression that these first truths appeared to have on them. In speaking with the Muhammadan Malays, they always returned to the dogma of the unity of God; I could not undeceive them of the opinion they held that the Christians worship several gods: all of them ended by saying that they observed their religion because it was that of their ancestors and that in which they had been raised, so that I could not claim much success in my early preaching. My Chinese catechist made a greater impression than me: he preached, argued, refuted his adversaries; he was listened to attentively. After listening to him, several persons asked him for religious books; others came to see him in the evening to be better instructed; he assured me that several appeared well disposed to embrace the faith if we had stayed longer in Kedah. He was full of zeal and had already converted several Chinese in Pinang. At some distance from Kedah is a colony of Chinese comprising simple people far removed from those who could corrupt them. My catechist greatly desired to go and preach the Gospel to them; but the way there was full of thieves and our imminent departure was also an obstacle.

In this tiny kingdom we were able to discover two Christians to whom we taught the forms of baptism, so that they could administer it [249] to dying children. May the Lord cause to germinate the evangelical seed we cast in passing.

Finally the day came for our departure; five elephants were brought to us for the journey. The height and volume of these animals astonished me. Those to be seen in Europe can scarcely be measured against those found in these lands. These are nine or ten feet high; their tusks are more than three feet long and some twelve inches in circumference. It is hard to understand how an animal so powerful, and so terrible in the middle of its forests, can be tamed to the point of being guided by a child of ten and to obey his voice; it follows the orders of its drover,¹⁹ brings him with its trunk the objects that are wanted; it lays down and gets up at his command; it lowers itself to receive on its back the person who wishes to mount it; there are few obstacles which can impede its advance; it breaks with its trunk the branches of trees which obstruct its progress; sometimes it lowers them and crushes them under its feet. When it has trouble in getting out of the mire, it squats on its broad belly and drags itself over the mud, in this way distributing the weight of its body over a broader base, and so sinks in less; if it encounters swamps or mud-pits it

¹⁸ The condescension of the European is breathtaking.

¹⁹ The correct term is given below.

sounds out the land with its trunk as it moves along to see if there is any danger. It goes into the deepest ravines and climbs, using its trunk as a lever, the steepest mountains. I have never seen one stumble even on the narrowest of paths. It can scarcely cover five quarter leagues²⁰ in an hour. When it is tired it warns its mahout [the name given to its drover]²¹ by beating the earth with its trunk and producing a sound like [250] a horn. It eats at night; it sleeps about an hour, lying on its side or often upright. When it finds clean water, it fills its trunk several times and throws water all over its body to freshen up. When, on crossing a river, it can no longer touch bottom, it swims under water and breathes through the end of its trunk which it raises above the surface and is the only part of its body to be seen. It was on this animal that I travelled from Kedah to Ligor.

Our caravan comprised five travellers, fourteen men to act as an escort, and five elephant drovers, in all twenty-four. Everyone except me was armed, but in a way hardly conducive to inspire fear. Two poor sabres, some billhooks and a few daggers were the arms with which they were to defend us against the two hundred or so brigands infesting the country, and who had recently slit the throats of nine travellers; we found one of these unfortunates hanging on our way. At the sight of this, my guards were so frightened that it was impossible for me to get them to advance until we received reinforcements. This was not the only mishap I experienced. We were hardly fifteen leagues from Kedah than my Chinese convert, as well as the young Siamese Christian the ambassador had left with me to act as interpreter and servant, were overcome with fatigue. I was obliged to share my elephant with them. We mounted and got down from it alternately until our voyage ended. Walking through these uninhabited lands, through which a path has to be hacked, is extremely tiring. We rose at [251] dawn, ate our rice, and set off without stopping anywhere, without drinking or eating, until seven in the evening. For some thirty leagues we passed through marshy plains and rivers. Then one enters an extremely large forest. Only to be seen at intervals are some miserable huts inhabited by half-wild people who live in the middle of this thick jungle and who live by theft and highway robbery. The plants and trees growing here are completely unknown in Europe. By the river banks and marshes is found a tree somewhat similar to our cypress; when the sun is down traces of light come from it rather like electric sparks; this, along with the fireflies in the air, is a charming sight. The vegetation in these forests is very prolific. Most of the fruits found are unhealthy or poisonous; I nearly had an unfortunate experience with them: exhausted by the march, I sat down under a tree whose leaves were like those of an apple tree, and the fruit like a green pomegranate; I wanted to taste it, and already had one of the fruits in my hand to put in my mouth, when I heard a cry in bad Portuguese 'Padre! Naon comè!'

²⁰ A league was approximately 4 km.

²¹ In French the term is *cornac*.

Don't eat it, Father, don't eat it! It is a poisonous fruit and will kill you, or make you mad.' From then on, I was more cautious and when I found fruit, before daring to touch it, I consulted my guides, who nearly always said, 'You cannot eat that.' One also has to be careful about what one drinks. Nearly all the water around is stagnant or muddy, [252] and very unhealthy. When better cannot be obtained, one partially counteracts its deleterious effects by boiling it with some tea.

We slept in the middle of the forest on rush mats spread on the ground. The nights are mild and splendid, especially by moonlight. The silence that reigns in these dense forests that are as old as the world is only interrupted by the lugubrious cry of night birds, or that of wild beasts found in large numbers in the jungle, like elephant, wild buffaloes, rhinoceros, and unicorns.²² The unicorn is different from the rhinoceros in that its horn is placed in the middle of its forehead, in an almost horizontal position; it is a fearsome animal and extraordinarily strong; its cry is somewhat lingering and sonorous, a little resembling that of a big mastiff, but louder. We heard on several occasion the cries of one of these animals; and although it was not far from us, no one was prepared to go and look at it close to. Bears are often met with, but they are smaller than those in our climes. We saw several flocks of gazelles, and even caught two. The boa constrictor is commonly found, as well as many other snakes of all types. The bite of these reptiles is fatal. Panthers, leopards and the royal tiger are not lacking either; the leopard will openly attack men; it is the fiercest and most dangerous of all the quadrupeds; it devours everything it meets, less to satisfy its hunger than from ferocity. Kindnesses irritate it; the sight of the person who feeds it in its cage makes it furious;²³ its eyes wild and partly closed, its movements convulsive and threatening, and surprising agility, set it aside from [253] all other wilds animals: its boldness exceeds its strength; it will attack an elephant and oppose the lion. But the sight of fire in the night halts it; it is said that that the sight of a boa constrictor always makes it flee. We never met with such a dangerous animal; but one night one came to prowl around us and howl. Our elephants immediately warned us by their cries that the enemy was close to; I think that the fires we had lit around our camp, as we usually did, stopped it from coming close to. My men, afraid, came to tell me not to leave my place; I certainly did not think of doing so. Families of monkeys of different kinds are found, perched on the trees, and amuse travellers with the gambolling and grimacing. Lizards of all colours and sizes are found; there are some three feet long. Crocodiles are not rare in the rivers and they travel up to fifty leagues from the rivers' mouths; some are twenty feet long. My poor Chinese convert was almost eaten by one of these when crossing a river. We twice saw a lizard of medium size, with wings which it used like a sail to move more quickly. Yellowish scorpions are also found, eight inches

²² Sic. Perhaps the author had not seen this mythical animal for himself.

²³ Much of this discussion has the ring of hearsay.

long and two thick; their bite is fatal. The marshy places are full of wild ducks of all colours. We found some snails as big as two fists; bees of different kinds, some no bigger than a tiny fly.

Of all the insects pullulating in these lands, none is more commonly found nor so untoward than the ants. [254] There is an infinity of varieties, big and small, black, white, and red; some so small that they can hardly be seen and which, when they are crushed in one's finger, spread a terrible infection. Others move in swarms, go everywhere, in houses, chests, on trees, in vases, on food too. Mosquitoes abound as well, and are not the least importunate.

It would be impossible for a lone traveller not to get lost in these thick forests. One takes reliable guides who walk ahead to hack a path, who cry out from time to time, and give signals to warn those who come after. It is often necessary to use the axe or to start a fire to create a path. The great number of ponds, sloughs and small streams we met with often required those of us who walked to go barefoot, which was not without danger, because of the thorns and venomous insects thereabouts. Providence watched over us, and spared us from any accident although surrounded by so many perils. From ten in the morning to four in the afternoon, the heat was very intense. To shield themselves from the sun's rays, all the natives making the journey cover their heads with a large piece of cloth like a veil. That does not stop the skin on one's face from peeling and flaking off. When crossing sandy areas, the sun's rays, reflected in the sand, are intolerable. The eyes are particularly affected. So many inconveniences made everyone [255] in my party sick, except me. I had to renew some in my escort, and it was the governor of Thalong²⁴ who assisted me over this.

Thalong is a miserable settlement governed by one of the sons of the king of Ligor. I did not want to stop there, but the chief mandarin of the fort requested that I go to see him, so I paid him a visit. After the usual courtesies, he brought me one of his children who was sick, and asked me to cure him. I apologized, saying I was not a doctor. My Chinese catechist was bolder than me. 'I know,' he said, 'a good remedy for the sickness afflicting this child; he should be given,' he added, 'for his dinner two toads chopped up, and I can guarantee he will get better. Your European doctors,' he said, turning to me, 'only know how to purge and bleed the sick; we Chinese know more than them.' Immediately two toads were sought, and the remedy prepared. As we left almost immediately, I do not know the result. I would have liked to have baptized the child, but my Chinese doctor assured me that he was not in danger and would overcome his illness. This visit brought for me a small present of fruit, and some rice, which was beginning to run low.

²⁴ This is not Thalang, the old centre of Phuket, but a contracted form of Patthalung, then subject to Ligor; the governor, another son of the 'king' of Ligor, was Phraya Uthai Tham (Yai na Nakhòn), governor from 1826/7 to 1839/40.

Back in our camp, we loaded up our elephants; but they took two away from us, and the three which remained were not enough for all of us. I went ahead of my men, and, accompanied by two guides, set out for the governor who was six leagues away, in the middle of the forest, busy with building a fort. I explained why I came. He received me very politely and instead of two elephants he gave me three. He had the [256] gentle look and kindness of his father, the king of Ligor. I informed him of my wish to meet and speak with the king. 'My father,' he said, 'had already gone from Ligor; he will be here in three or four days. If you wish to wait for him, you can stay here with us. I shall put you up as best I can. I cannot offer you a guard of honour, though your rank requires it, but we are here in the middle of the forest and I do not even have one for myself.' Embarrassed by this talk of guards of honour, I replied that I was not accustomed to have one and could well do without one; as for his very polite invitation to stay a few days with him in the forest, I told him that in normal circumstances I would have accepted his offer thankfully; but I was in a hurry, and hoped to meet the king on my way, and I requested that he permit me to continue. So I said goodbye to this prince, loaded with presents and polite words, and mounted my elephant. It was seven in the evening; my guide soon got lost and led me into a marsh where we floundered for more than two hours. Finally I arrived at the meeting place at two in the morning, overwhelmed with fatigue, and consumed with hunger. I found all my men asleep. I had much need to do likewise, but the mosquitoes would not allow it.

The next day we received an order to go again before the governor in order to meet the king of Ligor who was about to arrive. So we had to retrace our steps and travel non-stop. It was then that I realized what an elephant was capable of: mine travelled day and night, three times twenty-four hours, during which it only rested five hours. I was distressed to see [257] that this animal's strength and docility were so abused, but I had no authority to protest about it. We finally met the king at four in the morning in the middle of the forest. Three hundred men, as poorly equipped as mine, formed his escort. In front of him at a fixed distance were placed seats on which the prince sat when had got down from his elephant. Some twenty or thirty links, serving as torches, lit his way; one of his officers, carrying a huge parasol, walked on his right. The ruler was mounted on a female elephant, and placed under a kind of dome some four feet high, covered on the outside with white silk, and inside lined with red silk studded with stars.

The prince wore no other clothing than a cloth around the loins, but the drover of his elephant had a superb robe of sky-blue silk and had before him a betel box. The cortege was completed by a great number of elephants transporting his wives, numbering twenty-five, whose dress was the same and very mean. As soon as he saw me, he said 'Here is the *Franguis*,'²⁵ [a term used to designate Europeans]; he

²⁵ He is much more likely to have said 'Farang', the standard term.

immediately stopped and beckoned me to approach. At the same time everyone prostrated themselves, with their face to the ground. I alone remained standing, and after removing my hat, said to him 'Your Majesty, I learnt in Europe of the very gracious welcome which Your Highness graciously accorded to the late Father Pécot, my predecessor. Designated to the same mission as him, and sent to replace him, I have preferred to travel to Siam overland rather than by sea, desiring to have the honour of personally offering to Your Highness the homage of my respect, and to seek the favour of your [258] powerful protection.'

He gave me to understand that he received me with pleasure; scarcely knowing more than a few words of Siamese, I did not understand what he added to that. 'Your Majesty,' I added, 'I am the bearer of a letter addressed to Your Highness by the Siamese ambassador; would Your Highness wish to learn of its contents?'

'Certainly,' he replied, and after reading it, he said, 'That's good; I have seen to everything. You will find a vessel in Ligor which will take you to Bangkok, along with the ambassador; and turning towards his officials, said to them, 'Take the greatest care of the Father, and be sure he lacks nothing, either on the journey or in Ligor.'

Everything had gone well up to this point, but the important matter which brought me to these parts had not yet been broached. To speak of religion in the middle of the jungle, and only in passing did not seem likely to produce much effect. On the other hand, Providence gave the occasion which would perhaps never be repeated. I offered my heart to God, and addressed these words to the king: 'Your Majesty, when Father Pécot passed through Ligor, Your Highness graciously invited him to remain there, and even went so far in goodness to offer to have constructed a church for him, but death did not allow him to profit from this. Here I am ready to obey Your Highness's desires, if you are still so disposed.'

The king appeared embarrassed to reply to me, and after a few moments of silence he changed the conversation to other subjects. 'The matter has failed,' I said to myself, and soon after I sought leave to depart and resume my journey. However, the king's procession did not move on. I saw, by the light of the links, that [259] negotiations were taking place, and some mandarins were called to the prince for him to consult them on the subject of my request. Then a messenger was sent to me on behalf of the monarch to present me with a sort of apology, and to tell me that His Highness hoped I was not displeased with him since he had hesitated to agree to my request; the difficulty lay in that there had never before been a church in Ligor or in the kingdom.²⁶ I made different observations about this, which were conveyed to the king. Finally he caused me to be informed that, as he was a tributary vassal of the king of Siam, he could not grant my request without consulting that king on this matter, but he had to go to Bangkok shortly and would speak of the matter to

²⁶ The territory of Ligor that was under the 'king's' governance.

his superior, and that, if he agreed, there would be no objection on his part. In this way the meeting concluded; he resumed his journey, and I mine. God's ways are unfathomable. The monarch was well disposed, but restrained by fear. Let us pray that that the Being who holds in his hands the hearts of kings makes him favour this; I do not despair, and I have some reason to think that if we are going to have a church in Ligor, the faith will make progress there. When the monarch goes to Bangkok, I shall go and pay him a visit with the bishop.²⁷

The king of Ligor is a ruler who only lacks adherence to the Faith to be perfect. He has a considerate appearance, looks bountiful and gentle. He is affable and popular; he receives foreigners favourably; he causes justice to prevail; he desires workmen to receive their equitable salary and that injustice and fraud be severely punished. He often visits his fiefdom, has forts built, [260] land cleared; his realm is quite large, but underpopulated. He is liked by his subjects, and esteemed by all the foreigners who visit his realm.

At last I reached Ligor; the Siamese ambassador came to greet me at the landing point and led me with much ceremony to the palace prepared for our residence, that is to say, to a cabin covered in straw, where a small nook had been set aside for me which was hermetically enclosed on all sides. I might well have asked to be lodged in a place where I could breathe freely, but no notice would have been taken of my request. A person of distinction like me should not be exposed to observation by the profane. Fortunately I was able to remove a small part of the cloth which served as wall hanging and could finally breathe with the aid of this air-hole.

The ambassador had not had a very good journey. His elephant had thrown him to the ground, and he had a black eye and a bad back as a result of his fall; this, together with almost continual rain for seventeen days, gave him an intermittent fever from which he had scarcely recovered. Throughout the journey, both on land and sea, we were defrayed at the king's expense. Our meals were served at seven in the morning and two in the afternoon on dishes no bigger than the saucer of a coffee cup, placed in a large copper receptacle. Etiquette required that I ate first, alone, seated on the ground, and with nothing to help me but five fingers of one hand. In addition, the Siamese are not fastidious in the choice of their foodstuffs, and, except for substances capable of poisoning them, reject nothing; they eat all kinds of reptiles; if they find a frog, they toss it [261] alive into the cooking pot, without gutting or skinning it. Birds' nests, incubated eggs before the chick has hatched, are for them delicious dishes; they eat silkworms in stews; they make fun of Europeans who deprive themselves of such delicacies. Ordinary people eat in the most disgusting manner, placing, not their fingers, but their very mouths into

²⁷ Mgr Florens, the ageing bishop of Sozopolis.

the communal dish, as dogs do.²⁸ They pull apart the meat with their nails which are like the grip of a vulture; they paint them red, and it is a sign of beauty among them to have very long nails and very black teeth. For a cup they use half an open coconut, and for dishes the bark of the areca palm.

We left Ligor on 20 May; the only thing remarkable about this town is its pagodas, its monks and nuns.²⁹ There is a brick wall surrounding it, with a fairly deep moat. These are the remains of fortifications formerly built by the Dutch; the river, which constitutes the port, is about two fathoms deep, but there is a roadstead. The town is located in a delightful and well-wooded plain; the air is said to be pure and good for foreigners.

Our journey by boat was extremely tiresome. A European boat could easily go from Ligor to Bangkok in three days. We took seventeen,³⁰ even though the crew was twice as numerous as needed. We stopped everywhere; it was as if the vessel was destined to explore all the islands and bays en route. Everything ran counter to our pilots, the wind, the calms, the moon, the tide, the rain, and the currents. There was no hierarchy on board: everyone gave orders, and the result of this confusion was [262] that we always had to drop anchor. This disorder would have been tolerable if it had been possible to be accommodated with some comfort; but the Siamese think about that last. Seven of us were lodged in a kind of oven, where it was almost impossible to remain seated in the highest part; there was no other opening than a hatch through which one could only pass by crouching down on one's stomach; and to add to this pleasurable spot, the kitchen was placed in one of its corners; the fire there throughout the day and part of the night, the smoke which filled the place and found no exit, the lizards and swarms of flies which wanted to undertake the journey as well, the vermin which devoured most of the passengers: all that was a scene from purgatory. Add to that the serious inconvenience of lack of air, the excessive grubbiness of those who claimed the right to enter this ghastly cell, among whom was a leper and three sick persons, and you will have only an imperfect idea of this painful passage: to have a complete idea, you need to have spent a few hours there. As the most important person, I was placed at the end of the hole, next to the kitchen. Alas, worldly honours are often a heavy burden. After some instants I understood all the horrors of my situation; I left fully resolved not to enter except when violently expelled from any other place. This move on my part seriously displeased the Siamese ambassador, who complained about it to my catechist, and entreated him to warn me immediately that by leaving the room in this fashion, and exposing myself to the gaze of everyone, I made myself contemptible,

²⁸ This seems an exaggeration.

²⁹ *Talapoines* in the text, by which is meant Buddhist nuns.

³⁰ This may be a slight exaggeration. If they left Nakhon Sithammarat on 20 May and reached Paknam on 3 June, that accounts for only 15 days of sailing.

[263] and it was shameful for a priest of our holy religion to dishonour himself in the eyes of idolaters. I replied through the same person that life was more precious to me than the vain honour founded on such a pitiful prejudice, and though he often returned to the subject during the journey, I let him hold forth, and stayed in the open air, finding it much less inconvenient to be grilled by the rays of the sun or to receive some drenching from the rain, than to be stifled in a drying cupboard. I only went into it very late at night, when the air was fresher, and even so had to leave two or three times every night in order not to be asphyxiated. My catechist, in order to conform to the instructions of the ambassador, caught a serious fever which he still has; as for me, I am among the few who stayed well.

We arrived at the entrance to the port of Bangkok on Whitsunday.³¹ The next day some Christians came to take me, and I set foot on the land in front of the episcopal palace, that is, in front of the cabin which bears this name. The Bishop of Sozopolis³² seemed to be at the peak of happiness on seeing me; the sight of me recalled to him Mr Pécot whom he greatly regretted, and who had left everywhere he went such a great impression of his zeal and talents: in Macao, in Pinang, in Ligor, and particularly in Siam, where his memory is etched on all hearts. On seeing me the Bangkok neophytes had different sentiments; some could not restrain their tears on thinking of the loss they had suffered in the departure of Mr Pécot; others consoled themselves in the hope that the person who replaced him would have inherited his zeal and his virtues. May God grant that the desire of the latter will be as well founded as the regrets of the former.

[264] As soon as I had arrived I witnessed a very painful spectacle from the point of view of simplicity, but most consoling in regards to faith. I found our poor bishop lodged in a miserable hut covered with straw, raised up in the air by means of four posts. A plank served as his bed, and some wooden seats constituted their entire furnishings of this palace. As for the bishop, he goes barefoot: an old violet cassock, and a kind of oilcloth headpiece which he calls a hat—this is his dress on Sundays and working days. The little assistance he receives from France or elsewhere is given over to his priests, his college, and the poor for whom he is both pastor and father.

Siam is said to be a very fertile land; the bishop calls it the garden of the Indies. Everything is very cheap here. A bull is had for five francs. Instead of copper coins, small shells are used. Since Ayutthaya³³ was sacked by the Burmese in 1767,³⁴

³¹ Sunday 3 June 1827.

³² Mgr Florens, in office 1811–1834.

³³ Juthia in the text.

³⁴ The original here has a footnote with the reference ‘Voyez *Nouvelles Lettres édifiantes*, tom.5, pag. .444 et suivantes.’

Bangkok became the capital of the kingdom.³⁵ The air is healthier at Ayutthaya and the land more fertile. Bangkok consists of two rows of houses placed by the banks of the river. All visits are made over water in boats that are more or less elegant. The land is low, marshy, and entirely flooded for part of the year. The Chinese build here, in Canton and elsewhere as well, floating houses. For that they place in the riverbed several bamboo rafts, which they attach at both ends to two vertically placed stakes, with [265] rope rings. These rings slide up and down the stakes, and the house which is built on the raft rises or falls depending on whether the river rises or falls, never running the risk of being submerged.

The Siamese are generally well-turned; they are of middle height, some are copper-coloured, others lemon yellow. They are said to be gentle, and less inclined to theft than other Asians. They are accused, though, of concealing beneath an artless exterior much deceit and hypocrisy. They are, moreover, like children. Everything catches their attention; the least thing surprises them. The way ones sits, stands, walks, etc. evokes their surprise. They examine your clothes, their shape etc., your shoes, the buttons of your dress; and, the better to observe them, one will take your feet, another your arms; then indiscreet and importunate questions follow. Everything pleases them, everything excites their covetousness, even things the purpose of which they do not know. They sometimes say to me, seeing the cuffs of the sleeves of my shirt, 'You appear to have two shirts; I have none; it seems to me correct that you give me one.' They are very superstitious, and it is not easy to detach them from their superstitions. Parents have the right to sell their children for slaves. What shocks me most in the customs of these people is that they leave their children of both sexes run around entirely naked up to the age of seven or eight. One can find no excuse for this infamous custom. Experience demonstrates, as Mr Dubois³⁶ has shown in his works that this is one of the chief sources of corruption. They are accused of being lazy and indolent. Childish games, war, [266] fishing and boating, these are their chief occupations. The women do the agricultural work.

³⁵ More exactly, in 1782, after a period when Thonburi was the capital.

³⁶ Fr Jean-Antoine Dubois was working at the Pondichery mission from 1792 until his recall in 1819 to Paris, where he worked in the MEP seminary. He certainly must have known Bruguière at the seminary, and almost certainly taught him. The Dubois manuscript on Indian culture was translated into English and first published by Longman in London in 1817, with the title *Description of the Character, Manners, and Customs of the People of India, and of Their Institutions Religious and Civil*. It was published in Paris in French in 1825 and in Spanish in 1829. Dubois wrote: 'In the case of such spoilt children, subjected as they are from their earliest youth to influences which prematurely develop the latent germs of passion and vice, the knowledge of evil always comes before the first dawning of reason... In the instincts which are excited at an early age by the nudity in which they remain till they are seven or eight years old, the licentious conversation that they are always hearing around them, the lewd songs and obscene verses... these are the foundations on which the young children's education is laid...'

I think though that their idle nature less the effect of their temperament, than the impossibility for them of profiting by their industry. A common practice among them, the purpose of which I did not fathom, is to light fires around their houses at nightfall.³⁷ Every time I was lodged somewhere, a few feet above the ground, I always had one of these fires lit immediately beneath me. They have the same predilection for water. A Siamese does not pass the day without washing once or several times. They do this by throwing water several times over their bodies; they claim this practice preserves them from sickness. They use this remedy to cure intermittent fevers. The Siamese have little facial hair, and what they have they remove with tweezers.

The Siamese year is lunar. It is not divided into seasons. The first day of the week, Sunday, is called the day of the sun, etc. They divide the day and night into four equal parts of three hours each. The names of the daytime hours are different from those of the night. They have days of good and bad fortune. They acknowledge a great number of gods. Some of their idols are of colossal size, and gilded. Their temples are built of bricks; in the middle is found a kind of pyramid.³⁸ These are the only buildings in the country with some splendour. Metempsychosis is a fundamental dogma in their belief. The king recognizes as his chief ancestor the white elephant; so an elephant of this colour, said [267] to descend from the first, is splendidly maintained in the court of the monarch and is on equal footing with him.³⁹ He has for his court and to serve him a great number of officials of all ranks. He is fed very delicately, and served on gold plate. People come to him to obtain benefits and favours. The crow also enjoys great respect; something supernatural is seen in it. As a consequence of their belief in metempsychosis the Siamese can kill no animal; they do not even break eggs; if they kill even an insect, even by accident, they will lose all the merit accrued in their life. They can though eat meat when the animal has been killed by someone else. The Chinese living among them perform this service. The punishment set aside in the next life for those who have killed an animal is to be born again in the form of the animal whose life they have ended. They admit to the existence in the afterlife of a paradise or blissful place, and a hell or place of torments. They also believe in the existence of some angels or genii, but their learned men disagree over several points of doctrine. They have much veneration for their monks, the priests of Siam; they live normally in a community, in the pagodas, like monks. They recognize among themselves a kind of hierarchy comprising ministers of different levels, as in the Catholic church with its bishops, priests, deacons, and other lower ministers. They carry in their dress certain

³⁷ The purpose was probably to repel mosquitoes with the smoke from the fire.

³⁸ A stupa.

³⁹ Footnote in the original text: 'See the 10th number of the *Annales*, p.182'.

external signs by which one recognizes them. [268] Each of them carries out the functions assigned to him in the limits of his jurisdiction, and does not go beyond that. They bring up young people who could be termed their seminarians and who subsequently reach sacerdotal functions. They are supposed to live continently, but only while they wear the dress of the monk. They can, when they wish, abandon this profession and return to a secular status. The colour of their robe is a deep yellow; they recite public prayers twice a day, evening and mornings, on getting up and after sunset; their prayers and all their liturgy are written in the Pali⁴⁰ language. This is an ancient dead language which is only understood today by a small number of the most learned among them. It does not appear that they offer sacrifices of victims to their idols; they allow the people to pray to them and to offer them sacrifices; they are all given the name of *god*, and, by reciprocal sacrilege, the pagans in the country designate Catholic priests by the name of *Christian gods*.⁴¹ They are not allowed to eat after midday until five the next morning; but they well know how to compensate for this abstinence during the seven hours they are allowed to eat. Then they overload their stomachs with food; it is not difficult to believe what is told of their voracity. They are served boiled rice by the bushel, and tea in numerous urns; meat, fruits and sweetmeats are added in proportion. A monk may devour everything, and return several times to make a fresh attempt during the morning. This intemperance is less the result of gluttony than the desire to pass for a god. The people judge the quality of the rights of the monks to this sublime [269] title by the quantity of food they devour. They go every day seeking alms and in the evening they have no other occupations than games or sleep. They consecrate holy water to which they attribute miraculous virtues; they sprinkle it over the faithful and spray it over the weapons of the soldiers when they go to war. They are consulted over important matters, and especially over sickness, which they treat with remedies, accompanied by many superstitious ceremonies. Formerly they could not wear silk robes; they could speak to no one outside their monasteries; they had to walk with their eyes lowered so they could not see more than an arm's length in front of them; but the present king⁴² has dispensed with their following these difficult observances. When they disobey their rules, a layman is charged with beating them severely. However, under the mask of piety, these pretended gods conceal many vices; they are often punished for being guilty of the greatest crimes, such as adultery, theft, homicide, etc. They all disagree over points of doctrine and mutually accuse each other of lying and imposture, and their religious quarrels sometimes degenerate into battles.

⁴⁰ In the text, 'Pahly ou Bahly'.

⁴¹ Bruguière seems to have misunderstood the full meaning of the word *phra* in Thai.

⁴² Phra Nangklaor (later known as Rama III) reigned from 1824 to 1851.

There are also communities of women who participate in most of the privileges of the monks. They do not have the title of goddesses; their dress is white, and they shave their heads; they live under the general direction of the monks. This type of life is generally taken up by indigent women, but as they are not bound by any vow, they can renounce the profession of nun and return to secular life whenever they wish.

[270] I can hardly talk to you about our native Christians; having only lived among them a few days, I have not been able to get to know their nature.⁴³ If one were to judge from the external marks of respect they offer their priests, my judgment could only be favourable. We have four main churches.⁴⁴ They have built here a rather pretty chapel, and at present another is being constructed which will be vast and convenient. Religious services are held publicly in this country, and our ceremonies are conducted with a decency and dignity which surprised me. The processions of Corpus Christi were conducted with brilliance and solemnity. The gentiles witnessed this with signs of respect and admiration.

The bishop tells me he wrote to you not long ago; he requests you insistently to send us missionaries; we have the most pressing need of them; have pity on us then. I wish to visit all the Christian outposts in his vicariate, and then to turn my attentions to the infidels. It seems that there is much good that can be done in many places, especially in the direction of Laos. The Christians of Bangkok who have settled here have already baptised a great number of dying children among the pagans. When I do no more than this excellent task, the fruit of my mission will be inestimable. But how can I leave the bishop alone here? I feel that my support for him is necessary for the needs of the college and the Christians, so that I do not dare even to talk to him about my project, being persuaded he will not consent to its fulfilment. Though not yet very old, hard work and privations of all sorts have ruined his health, and he will before long not be fit to do anything.

When I have distributed my boatload of objects of piety, I shall have none remaining; I implore you to send me a good provision of rosaries, medals and engravings of saints—but above all rosaries.

I join you in your prayers and holy sacrifices, and all our dear confrères, etc., etc.

Bruguière, apostolic missionary

⁴³ This argument could also apply to his sweeping and erroneous judgments of Buddhist monks.

⁴⁴ The four churches in Bangkok in 1827 were Santa Cruz, the Church of the Conception, Nossa Senhora do Rosario (Church of Our Lady of the Rosary), and the Church of the Assumption.