

TWO UNPUBLISHED LETTERS OF JEAN BASSET: A YOUNG FRENCH MISSIONARY SENT TO SIAM IN 1685

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ABSTRACT—This notice presents two previously unpublished letters by Jean Basset (1661–1707), a young French Catholic missionary, written during his 1685 journey to Siam, as discussed in the previous issue of this journal. These letters offer valuable insights into Basset’s experiences and mindset as a newly dispatched missionary to Asia. Through his correspondence with his former superior, the letters provide a rare glimpse into the challenges he faced, the practical aspects of his advanced training, his relationship with peers including the Jesuits, and his adaptation to life both during the sea journey and in the new mission land.

KEYWORDS: Ayutthaya Period; Catholic Missions in Siam; French Jesuits; Jean Basset; Missions Étrangères de Paris (MEP)

Introduction

In the previous issue of this journal, I published the travel account to Siam by Jean Basset (1661–1707), a young French missionary of the Missions Étrangères de Paris (MEP), now preserved in the Bibliothèque municipale de Lyon (Pennégès 2024). Thanks to this travelogue, we have a clearer picture of the individuals who composed the first French

embassy to Siam (March–December 1685), adding or confirming several names to the information we already possessed.

The two letters presented here complement that account. They are preserved in Paris at the MEP headquarters, and offer a more personal perspective revealing Basset’s doubts and his admiration for the French Jesuits, of whom he speaks highly and frequently. These letters are addressed to Gabriel de la Roquette, Bishop of Autun (1666–1702), Basset’s superior in France. The first letter was written in Batavia (modern-day

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Jakarta) during a stopover en route to Siam in August 1685, while the second, from Louvo (modern-day Lopburi), was composed in December of that year, shortly after the arrival of the embassy in Siam.

While Basset's travel account offers limited details on individuals, the following letters composed during his oversea journey provide a richer context, making them an invaluable supplement for understanding both the relationships between the Catholic religious figures present in 17th-century Siam and the young missionary's inner world. In addition, it supports the hypothesis presented earlier (Pennégùès 2020; 2024) that Basset's travel account was sent directly to his father. This would explain why the travelogue is currently held in the municipal archives of Lyon rather than in the Paris headquarters of the MEP.

In the following translated letters, I have adjusted the punctuation and paragraph structure to enhance readability. Each letter is accompanied by photographs of the original documents in French. A contextual analysis of the MEP's role and presence in Siam, including their training and interactions with the Jesuits, follows the letters.

LETTER 1: From Jean Basset to Gabriel de la Roquette, Batavia, 24 August 1685²

[folio 101]

Sir,

In order to comply with the orders you gave us to write to you by all available means and with my own desire to give you an account of our journey, I am leaving this letter in Batavia in the hands of a Frenchman with whom I have become well acquainted, who will send it to you at the earliest opportunity.

Our journey was, thank God, a very pleasant one. We arrived at the Cape of Good Hope on 31 May, where we stayed for seven days, and we have been anchored in the roadstead of Batavia since the 18th of this month, planning to depart tomorrow. We encountered no storms or other unfortunate accidents. Mr Manuel and I were in good health for most of the journey, only suffering a little from seasickness, though I fared relatively well. Mr Vachet, however, [folio 102] was not so fortunate. He had several severe attacks of kidney stones, which tormented him greatly.

Nevertheless, this did not prevent him from conducting his regular exercises with us, and he gave us three lectures a week—one on matters of piety and two on cases of conscience, especially those unique to foreign missions. His skill in these matters is truly incredible.

² AMEP, vol. 862, folios 101–104.

Mr Abbé de Choisy lived with us as a fellow missionary. He participated in all our exercises and studies and, to show his generosity, he shared with us all the refreshments and comforts that his position on the ship afforded him.

Our mandarins have been overjoyed since their arrival in Batavia. They eat Indian sweetbreads, betel, and areca, which blackens their teeth. They find faces similar to their own here and a country resembling theirs in every way; they even sleep on carpets, just as at home. All this has revived their spirits and put them in good humor.

But they have not forgotten the excellent treatment they received in France. They mentioned it more than once during the trip and we often reminded them that they were partly indebted to Mr Superior and Mr Director of the Seminary for Foreign Missions.

During the journey, we have been learning Portuguese and Siamese. Although we are far from mastering either of these languages, I hope that a little practice in the countries where they are spoken will improve our proficiency. We have begun testing our Portuguese here, [folio 103] but we find it needs some adjustment, as it is not spoken in the Indies exactly as we have studied it from books. However, once we have spoken it a little more, I trust it will be easy to conform to local usage.

Up to now, we have lived in great harmony with the reverend Jesuit Fathers and we sincerely hope that

nothing will disrupt this in the future. I have often recalled the admirable advice you gave us on this matter and I intend to rely on it throughout my life to prevent any actions that might break the charity in which we must live.

I remember well how much you recommended humility to us as the mother of peace. Should God grant us this peace, I will always consider it a treasure, bestowed upon us through your prayers and guidance. I will be eager to show you how much I am grateful for all your goodness in striving to preserve what is so dear to you.

Mr Abbé de Chélas participated in most of our exercises and appeared to be full of goodwill, though his health seemed quite frail. Villefranche was very ill during the journey, but he is now recovering. I humbly ask, Sir, that you regard me as [folio 104] your child in our Lord, and rest assured that I have come to the Indies with the resolve to obey your commands without question. I hope that you will see in time that I have no greater desire.

I earnestly recommend myself to our Holy Lord through sacrifices and prayers, and with great respect and submission.

Sir,
Your very humble
and obedient servant
J. Basset
At Batavia, this 24 August 1685

G. M. G.

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Monsieur

Pour obeir aux ordres que nous nous ayg donnez de nous emmener toutes les voys qui se presenteroient et pour consentir a ma propre inclination de nous rendre Comte de notre voyage, Je laisferai cette lettre a Batanie entr les mains d'un françois avec qui i'ay fait grande connoissance et qui nous l'envoyera par la premiēre occasion qui s'en presentera.

Notre voyage a esté bien Merci bon heureux. Nous arrivâmes au Cap de Bonne Esperance le 31 May: nous nous y arrêmes Sept jours. et nous sommes monterez a la rade de Batanie depuis le 18 de ce mois pour en partir demain 25. Nous n'avons eu ni tempeste ni autre faschue accident. Mr Manuel et moy nous nous sommes presque toujours bien portez. Nous n'avons été incommodé qu'un peu du mal de Mer. Y'en ai esté quitté a tres bon marche. Mr Tache n'a pas

tout a fait si heureux. Il a eu plusieurs rudes attaques de la Peste
 qui l'ont complètement tourmenté. Cela ne l'a pas empêché de faire
 des exercices réguliers avec nous et de nous faire 3 conférences par
 semaine, une par les matins de prière et deux sur les cas
 de Conscience. Tantôt sur ceux qui sont parvenus aux Missions
 étrangères. Il est inévoquable combien il est habile sur l'assimilation
 de. Mr L'Abbé de Choisil a veillé avec nous en Missionnaire
 et us a fait en dehors nos exercices et de nos études et pour nous
 payer il nous fait un part de tous ses rafraîchissements et des
 Commoditez que lui procurent le rang qu'il tient dans le Basian.
 Nos Mandarins resaillent de joie depuis qu'ils sont à Batavia
 Ils y mangent du Riz des Indes: du Bœuf et de l'arachide
 ce qui rend leur dents si noires. Ils voient des visages faire com
 me les leurs: un drap semblable entouré au leur: Ils couchent
 sur des tapis comme chez eux. Toute cela les fait rire: et les
 fait perdre de leur bonne humeur. Ils n'ont pourtant pas oublié
 les bons traitements qu'on leur a faits en France. Ils nous
 en ont parlé plus d'une fois dans le Voyage. et nous
 leur avons souvent fait remarquer qu'ils en avaient l'obliga-
 tion ^{en partie} à Messieurs le Supérieur et Directeur du Séminaire
 des Missions étrangères.

Nous avons appris dans le Voyage le Portugais et le Per-
 mois. nous sommes bien éloignés de le savoir parfaitement
 si l'une ni l'autre de ces langues. mais j'espere qu'un
 peu d'usage dans le pays on nous le partira nous perfection-
 ner. nous commençons à apprendre ici notre portugais en deux

vous voyons qu'il a besoin d'être un peu réformé: je reçois de l'Asie
peut pas tout à fait dans les Indes: comme nous l'avons emporté dans
les bains: mais il sera aisé de s'y conformer quand nous l'aurons un
peu parle.

Nous avons vécu dans une grande Union avec les PP. Jesuïtes
jusqu'à présent: et nous souhaitons ardemment qu'rien ne l'altère
dans la Siam. J'ai écrit plusieurs fois de rappeler dans mon Esprit
les avis admirables que nous nous avions donné sur le sujet. —

Il y aura tout ma vie secours pour m'empêcher de s'en faire
qui puisse rompre la charme dans laquelle nous avons vécu.
Tu sais combien nous nous aux recommandé l'humilité com-
me le Rien de la grâce. Si Dieu nous donne cette grâce je
la regarderai toujours comme un Trésor qu'il a accordé à nos
desirs et à nos instructions: et je me ferai un plaisir de vous
témoigner combien j'ay de reconnaissance pour toutes nos bonnes
par l'application que j'aurai à considerer ce qui nous est si
cher.

Monsieur l'Abbé Du Chêne a été de la plus grande
nos exercices: Il paroît plus de bonne volonté; mais sa
langue paroît fort forte.

Villefranche a été son incommode durant le voyage: il
le remet à présent.

Je vous Supplie Monsieur de me regarder toujours comme

nostre enfant en Nostre Seigneur et de croire que je viens aux
 Indes avec la resolution d'obeyr auugmentem a nos ordres. Tres prie
 que nous connoistez dans la. Sain que ie n'ay pas de plus
 grand desir. Je me recommande instamment a nos SS Sacrifice
 et priere et suis avec beaucoups de respect et de soumission

Monsieur

11am 24 aout 1685
 Du batiment
 Mr Basset a Mr le Roy

Votre tres humble
 et tres obeyssam
 Ce Barame a 24 aout 1685
 Y Basset

LETTER 2: From Jean Basset to Gabriel de la Roquette, Louvo, 10 December 1685³

[folio 381]

Sir,

I have already had the honor of writing to you through three different channels. However, I believe this will be the first letter you receive, as it will be delivered to you via a shorter and more direct route than the others. It would be unnecessary, Sir, to recount here the details of our voyage or how the Ambassador was received in Siam, as Mr Abbé de Choisy and Mr Vachet will no doubt relay everything in full. They will likely inform you that we lived in perfect harmony with the reverend Jesuit fathers. We preferred to show them the utmost respect in all matters, treating them as our superiors, rather than risk going against the advice you so expressly recommended to us.

During the journey, we occupied ourselves with various activities, which helped to pass the time. Mr Vachet established a set of rules that we followed, regulating our daily exercises. We preached in both Portuguese and French. In addition, Mr Vachet gave us [folio 382] lectures three times a week on topics of piety and on cases of conscience, particularly those that most commonly challenge missionaries. He is highly knowledgeable in these matters. Throughout the journey, I was very open with him and I admired his sincerity and uprightness. He extended countless kindnesses to us.

³ AMEP, vol. 859, folios 381–384.

The honesty and generosity of Mr Abbé de Choisy cannot be praised enough. His remarkable kindness towards Mr Manuel and myself was beyond measure. He fully committed himself to our mission with his benevolent nature. We always found a warm welcome in his quarters, where he offered us everything at his disposal, treating us as if we were masters. We were free to take water from his jar as we pleased and he insisted on sharing his refreshments with us. He wasn't content unless we joined him for breakfast each morning, offering us wine from his Spanish cellar, which seemed more for others than for himself. He actively participated in most of our studies and all of our lectures, living as a true missionary with us. His affable demeanor won the hearts of all.

Mr Abbé de Chélas, who traveled with us and Mr Abbé de Choisy, is returning to France. He did not fail to pursue becoming a missionary. He is certainly a good man with wit and talent, but his constitution is rather delicate and he would struggle to endure the physical demands of the mission, especially given his severe illness related to his veins. To test him, God permitted him to face many hardships during the journey, which he bore with true Christian patience.

[folio 383] Sir, I assure you that I could not be happier than I am in these countries. The life of a missionary does not daunt me and I do not find the seminary's discipline excessively harsh. I feel unworthy to be in such a blessed place, but the gentlemen here are kind enough to tolerate me. I will strive, with the grace of God, to follow their

example. I hope, Sir, that you will see that my sole intention is to obey you and all the superiors of this mission without question and to live in unity with the other missionaries.

I have not yet been assigned any specific duties. Once His Excellency the Ambassador departs, Monseigneur of Metellopolis will have Mr Manuel and me undertake a retreat, perhaps to prepare us for the priesthood.

I am addressing all my letters to you, Sir, and sending them to you unopened, asking you to correct or remove anything you see fit. One letter is addressed to Mr Bourlier, in which I mention some matters of conscience towards the end. I beg you to conceal this part after

reading it. What I write to Mr Tronson about Monsieur du Carpon was at the instruction of M[onseigneu]r de Met[el]lis, without my prior consideration.

I would be greatly obliged if you could promptly send my father the parcel I am enclosing. He will be much happier to read my report before its contents become public.

[folio 384]Finally, I commend myself to your holy prayers and offer my heartfelt thanks for all the kindnesses you have shown me. I also ask your forgiveness for any offenses I may have caused during my time in the seminary for foreign missions. Please believe that I remain, with deep respect and submission.

Sir,

I offer my most humble respects to M[onseigneu]r de Laon,
 Mr Abbé de Brisacien, Mr de Fermand,
 Mr de Tiberge, Mr du Douis, Mr Deffonssi,
 Mr Arnolet, Mr de Palu,
 Sevin, Mr Le Feure, Mr Abbé de Courtelles,
 Mr Abbé de Masferan, and I commend myself to their prayers.

Your very humble and obedient servant

Basset

At Louvo, this 10 December 1685

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Monseigneur

Siam. 10 Dec. 1685
M. Baffit

Si je vous doy en l'honneur de nous envoyer par trois voies differentes. Je crois pourtant que le sera r馮 la premi馮e lettre que vous receuvez parcequ'elle nous sera parue par une voie plus courte et plus droite que les autres. Il servira inutile Mr de nous dire ici ce qui s'est paru dans le Tairfan durant notre voyage et la maniere dont Mr L'Ambarfudur de estre retenu a Siam. Mr — L'Abbé de Chorier et M le Vachet ne manqueront pas de nous raconter toutes choses exactement. Ils nous diront sans doute que nous avons nee avec le Roi^{re} puis le Roi^{re} dans une parfaite union. Nous avons enfin aimé leur ceder en tout le plus honorable et les traiter comme nos supérieurs que de nous laisser a faire la moindre chose contre ce que nous nous avions si expressement recommandé.

Nous nous sommes occupés a plusieurs choses durant le voyage. Ce qui nous empêche de nous ennuyer. Mr Vachet nous avoit marqué un règlement qu'il gardoit avec nous par lequel nos caisses estoient regler. Nous avons vendu principalement le portugais et le stanov. Outre cela Mr Vachet nous faisoit

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3 fois la Semaine des conformes sur des matins de prière et sur les Catechesis que j'embarrassai ordinairement le plus dans les Missions. Il en fut éclairci sur les matins là. J'ai en grande souvenance pour lui durant le voyage j'ai admiré sa droiture de cœur. Il nous a rendu mille bons offices.

Nous ne pensions ainsi nous louer de l'honnêteté de M^r L'Abbé de Choisil nous expliqua jusqu'à ^{ou} le bas de la bonne à l'égard de M^r Manuel ^{et moi} Il nous a obligé selon toute l'étendue de son naturel bienfaisant, et de son inclination pour nos Missions. nous trouvions toujours dans sa chambre une retraite où nous étions à peu châtalement et où il nous mettoit ce qu'il avoit entre les mains pour en déposer comme si nous en eussions été les maîtres. Nous prenions de l'eau dans sa jarre à direction. Il nous a partagé les rafraîchissements avec nous, et il ne fut point content qu'il ne nous eût obligé de venir tous les matins à jeûner avec lui aux dépens d'une bouteille de vin d'Espagne qu'il avoit acheté ce sembla plus cher pour les autres que pour lui. Il nous fut une de la plus grande nos études de toutes nos Conférences n'importe ainsi en quoi Missionnaire nous. Il a gagné le cœur de tout le monde par ses manières obligantes. Monsieur l'abbé du chêne qui étoit venu de ici avec M^r L'Abbé de Choisil s'en retourne en France. Il n'a pas tenu à lui qu'il ne fût Missionnaire. C'est assurément un homme de bien qui a de l'espérance du Salut. Mais il eut d'une complexion tout à fait délicate et il aurait peine à résister aux fatigues de la Mission où qu'il eut extrêmement incommodé de la veine. Ainsi pour l'autre à permis qu'il ait bien en des Croix pendant le voyage. Il les a supportées avec une patience — vraiment chrétienne.

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Je vous prie de faire un voulent avec Gentil qu'on ne peut plus contenter que je le suis dans ce pays. La vie de Missionnaire ne m'effraye point et je ne trouve point norme Seminair d'une austérité insupportable. Je me trouve seulement indigne d'être dans un si bon lieu, mais les Missionnaires ont assez de bonté pour me supposer: et je ferai que je pourrai avec la grace de Dieu pour les inviter. J'espere Monsieur que vous connaissez dans la Suisse que je n'ai d'autre dessein que de vous servir auuglement aux fidèles qui a tous les autres Supérieurs de ces missions et de venir dans un même Espace avec tous les autres Missionnaires. Je ne suis encore déterminé à aucun Emploi. Quand Mgr L'Ambaradour sera parti Mgr de Metellopolis nous fera faire à M^r Manuel et à moi une retraite pour cela et peut-être aussi pour nous disposer à la primitice.

Je vous addressé Monsieur toutes mes lettres et je vous les envoie déclassées, nous suppliez d'y corriger et Supprimer tout ce que vous jugerez à propos. Il y en a une addressed à M^r Bourdieu: on sur la fin je lui parle de quelques affaires de conscience: je vous Supplie de la cacher desque vous l'aurez lue. Ce que je demande à M^r Trouton de M^r Du Caron Cest Mgr de Metz^{thi} qui me l'a ordonné sans que j'y songeasse. Je vous serai bien obligé si vous pourriez envoyer à M^r Manuel sans retardement à Mon pere le papier que je lui envoie. Il aurait une joie beaucoup plus grande de fin ma petite relation auant que le qui y en dedans fût devenue publique.

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Il n'entre que qui a me recommander a nos saintes prières, a nous
 demander de toutes les bonnes que nous avons témoignées a nous
 demander pardon de tous les sujets de mécontentement que si nous ai-
 donné dans le séminaire des Missions étrangères et a nous supplier de
 croire que je suis avec un profond respect et une parfaite soumission

Monsieur

Vous nous le bien que j'as fait ici de mes
 très humbles respects Mgr de Lamo
 M L'Abbé de Bruxelles, M de fermant
 M. Tiburge M Duval M Delfont
 M. Ander M de Zalu, M. Tres obéissante serviteur
 Seign M Le feur M L'Abbé de Couvrelle Baffet
 et M L'Abbé de Margeran en que leme a Lomme le 10 decembre 1685
 recommandé a tous nos prières.

Missions Étrangères de Paris in 17th Century-Siam

Jean Basset's above correspondence takes place against the backdrop of the missionary efforts of the Paris Foreign Missions Society (MEP) with Siam at its core. Although ideologically aligned with the Jesuits, the MEP and the Jesuits were often in competition. The Missions Étrangères dispatched a group of missionaries, including Jean Basset, to spread Christianity in Asia. These foreign missions were largely financed by the French royal authorities, whose support was driven not only by religious motives but also by economic interests, particularly in connection with the newly established French East India Company (*Compagnie française des Indes orientales*).

The establishment of the *Compagnie française des Indes orientales* in 1664, under the influence of Jean-Baptiste Colbert who served as First Minister of State from 1661 until his death in 1683, facilitated the development of significant trade between Asia and France. In parallel, conflicts between Protestants and Catholics, exacerbated by the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, pushed the French crown (Louis XIV, r. 1643–1715) to finance Catholic missions overseas, reinforcing its role as defender of the Faith. As Michel Jacq-Hergoualc'h notes, "France made its presence felt in Siam through the arrival of missionaries directly connected to the proselytizing movement that was revived in the second half of the 17th century under the influence of the king's confessor"

(1993: 41; my translation). These missionaries included both Jesuits and members of the MEP.

The French presence in Siam began primarily through missionaries in the 1660s. By the time of Louis XIV's first embassy in 1685, the MEP were a newly formed order. Inspired by Alexandre de Rhodes' success in Cochinchina during the 1650s, the idea of a society dedicated to foreign missions emerged in 1658 and was firmly established in Paris by 1663. This initiative reflected the desire to break free from the Portuguese monopoly over Catholic missionary efforts. Despite this, the French approach mirrored the Portuguese system, with multiple actors, including members of the *Compagnie des Indes* and missionaries, often serving as intermediaries in trade following a papal dispensation in 1586 (Vu Than 2020: 253).

As Spanish Franciscan missionary Marcelo de Ribadeneira (ca. 1560–1606) pointed out, preachers were to be sent to regions such as Siam and Cambodia, lands previously unknown to him (1601: 109). This was one objective of the embassy dispatched by the Governor-General of the Philippines in 1581. For the Spanish, the goal was to dominate these territories and bring salvation to the inhabitants (Estenssoro Fuchs 2003). This is evident in the French embassy sent to Siam in 1685, where similar strategies were employed, including efforts to convert local rulers (Piemsak 2017: 95).

As with all religious orders, the MEP needed to be closely supervised by the Pope, ensuring it did not fall under the

sway of the French crown (Chappoulie 1943: 67). The organization received significant support from France, including a royal pension and financial contributions from the nobility (Marin 2008: 23). However, this extensive backing alarmed the Papacy, which feared ulterior motives beyond religious zeal as it strove to retain control over missionary efforts and propaganda. The first French representatives in Siam, François Pallu (1626–1684) and Pierre Lambert de la Motte (1624–1679), were appointed bishops and apostolic vicars by Pope Alexander VII (in office, 1655–1667) and were reporting directly to him. This arrangement helped avoid direct conflict with Portugal and Spain, as the Pope needed to carefully manage his appointments amid ongoing wars between France and Spain.

By 1664, Lambert de la Motte chose Siam (Ayutthaya) as the headquarters for the MEP, capitalizing on the kingdom's political stability to establish a seminary where European missionaries could learn the language of their host country (Guennou 1986: 120). These missionaries, driven by a desire to revitalize the mission, sometimes critiqued their predecessors, particularly for the low number of conversions (Wirth 1988: 168). The focus on training native clergy, as advocated by Alexandre de Rhodes (1591–1660), made local language mastery essential. Louis Laneau (1637–1696), bearing the title of Bishop of Metellopolis (in office, 1674–1696), became fluent in Siamese, which brought him close to King Narai's court until 1688. In his travelogue, Basset mentions that Laneau, with the assistance of Bénigne Vachet (1641–1720), was tasked with translating

Louis XIV's letter to the King of Siam.⁴ Mastering the language was an arduous task for Europeans given its unfamiliar alphabet and tonal nature. Laneau, after years of observing local Buddhism, theorized that it would be more effective to Christianize certain Buddhist ceremonies rather than outright ban them, aligning himself with the Jesuit perspective (Alberts 2013: 156). This strategy paralleled the Iberian method of targeting religious elites, such as monks and the king, for conversion.

In the 1670s, these initial exchanges facilitated the establishment of French religious structures in Siam, even as the French crown sought to understand the broader regional dynamics involving its English and Dutch rivals.⁵ Basset's writings reveal a strategic vision, whereby the conversion of the King of Siam would lead to the conversion of his people. As Basset wrote in 1685:

The most gratifying news I can convey to the King [Louis XIV], my sovereign, is that H.M. [i.e., King Narai], having been convinced of the truth, is receiving instruction in the Christian faith. This will inspire his subjects to come to your realms with greater eagerness and confidence and

⁴ BML, MS 817, Jean Basset, *Relation de ce qui s'est passé de plus remarquable dans le voyage de Mr le chevalier de Chaumont, ambassadeur de sa majesté très chrétienne vers le royaume de Siam, de France à Siam et des honneurs qu'on lui a faites à Siam*, Jean Basset, 1685, folio 73. See Pennéguès 2024, Online Appendices: <https://doi.org/10.69486/112.1.2024.8b>.

⁵ ANOM, fonds Colonies 14, C1, dossier 22, *Mémoires de l'évêque d'Héliopolis pour Colbert*, 1673, folios 5–10.

will secure, sire, your eternal happiness in heaven, complementing the prosperity you enjoy on earth (my translation).⁶

The two French embassies sent to Siam, in 1685 and 1687, were accompanied by representatives of the Compagnie française des Indes orientales. The selection of Louis XIV's representatives was significant as it underscored the purpose of these missions. On 16 December 1684, the periodical *La Gazette* announced that Alexandre de Chaumont (1640–1710), a naval officer, would be the first ambassador representing Louis XIV in Siam. Chaumont had a notable background: he had renounced Calvinism at a young age, which made him a particularly fervent Catholic and an apt representative of the Catholic faith in Siam. His zeal was crucial for the mission, given the goal of converting the King of Siam. Additionally, Chaumont's prior experience in New France (in North America) in 1665 made him well-suited for long sea voyages, a valuable asset for this mission.

These embassies are extensively detailed in French historiography, not solely for their grandeur but also for their trade aspects, which have been thoroughly analyzed from a global history perspective. Siam also elicited

considerable hopes and religious interest in France, as reflected in the 1685 testimony of Laneau, the Bishop of Metellopolis:

It would be impossible for the Dutch or anyone else for that matter regardless of any revolution that might occur, to prevent the success of all that we wish to accomplish, both for the true religion and for the French nation (my translation).⁷

These observations underscore France's dual objectives in Siam: the religious mission to convert the Siamese king and the economic interests, as outlined in the instructions given to Chevalier de Chaumont before his departure to Siam in 1685.⁸

New Missionaries and Training

The 17th century was a period of significant renewal in religious and philosophical thought aimed at strengthening Christianity to face emerging challenges. This era was marked by intense debates among Catholics regarding the training of future priests. Innovations introduced by the French Jesuits, despite remaining largely Parisian, played a crucial role in this transformation (Neveu 1994: 334–337). The period also saw extensive reflection on priestly formation, driven

⁶ BML, MS 817, folio 70: "La plus agréable nouvelle que je puisse porter au roy mon maître en celle-là, sire, que v[otre] m[ajesté], persuadée de la vérité, se fait instruire dans la religion chrétienne et qui excitera ses sujets à venir avec plus d'empressement et de confiance dans vos états et enfin ce qui achèvera, sire, de vous combler d'un bonheur éternel dans le ciel, après avoir régné avec autant de prospérité qu'elle fait sur la terre". See: <https://doi.org/10.69486/112.1.2024.8b>.

⁷ ANOM, fonds Colonies 14, C1, dossier 22, *Mémoires de l'évêque d'Héliopolis pour Colbert*, 1673, folio 118: "Il seroit impossible aux hollandois, et à qui que ce fust, quelque révolution qu'il pût arriver, d'empêcher le bon succès de tout ce qu'on voudroit faire, et pour la vraye Religion, et pour la nation françoise".

⁸ ANF, fonds Marine, série B2, dossier 52, folio 47, recto.

by the Reformation and the growth of apostolic orders such as the Jesuits. The distinction between secular and regular clergy began to blur, as catechism and preaching missions gained prominence within these missionary groups (Bonzon 2006: 31).

There was a notable tension between the desire to reform priestly training and traditional methods, with adaptations seen in missionary orders that became central to the French university system (Julia 1988). These seminars aimed to foster the progress of young people, offering more than just theological education; they were also seen as a beacon of hope for the future (Bertrand 2006: 21). Initially developed by Jesuit colleges, this training sought to create a resilient clergy capable of facing challenging missions, either in France amidst rising Protestantism or in foreign lands (Noguès 2024: 94–95).

The MEP, inspired by the Jesuits' success in France and their efforts to re-Christianize the countryside, adopted a similar approach. Pallu requested that the first missionaries sent to Siam be more experienced (Forest 1988: 107), explaining why these missionaries were older and why training in France alone was insufficient. The 1665 Ayutthaya Synod, which set the MEP's strategy, emphasized devotion and an unyielding passion for Christ, reminiscent of the Jesuits' classical formation (Wirth 1988: 168). This synod was organized by priests from the newly established MEP. Concurrently, Jesuit seminars aimed to cultivate the ideal man, a model that greatly influenced the MEP. Note that many early MEP members were trained by Jesuits.

This was the first assignment for several missionaries, including Jean Basset and Étienne Manuel (1662–1693). They were not yet ordained priests when these letters were written.⁹ As young clerics, they still needed to complete their training before being prepared for field preaching. The first embassy to Siam also provided an opportunity to send new missionaries. Basset's letters indicate that his training was part of a collective process, with young recruits training together during their sea journey, including learning Portuguese and preaching, as Abbé de Choisy (1644–1724) describes.¹⁰ This training occurred in the confined space of the ship, guided by experienced missionaries like Bénigne Vachet. The seminary system, which had been developed in France during the early 17th century, aimed to ensure regular training under the guidance of a parish priest (Julia 1988: 141). The MEP replicated this system in Siam, with seminaries becoming prominent from the 1660s (*ibid.*: 144). The second generation of French missionaries in Siam, including Jean Basset, benefited from the combined influence of the Sorbonne and the group-based missionary model.

Evident in Basset's letters and reflecting his concern with moral issues is training that emphasized positive theology—knowledge of faith and its dogmas—and casuistry (Brockliss 1986).

⁹ Both were ordained as priests in Ayutthaya in August 1686.

¹⁰ See Choisy 1687: 100. Portuguese appeared to be a key language in missionary efforts, especially for communicating with other religious figures present in the region, many of whom were of Portuguese descent. Additionally, it served as an important language for conveying religious teachings across Asia at the time.

Basset's self-criticism and internal struggle in his 10 December 1685 letter, seeking approval from former ecclesiastical superiors, might reflect the collective ideal of the perfect parish priest (Bonzon 2006: 37). This ideal, while primarily for clerics with parish responsibilities, likely influenced Basset during his initial training and through his admiration for certain clerics like Choisy and Vachet.

Upon arriving in Siam, some missionaries benefited from the MEP seminary to complete their training. The idea of establishing a seminary in Siam originated from the Ayutthaya Synod of 1664 (Pennéguès 2020: 148). Basset notes that the seminary, created in 1676–1677 with the support of King Narai (r. 1656–1688), was intended as a model for French missionaries coming to Asia. French missionary sources relate that the Siamese king's support was crucial in that, while respecting other religions, he allowed the construction of missionary buildings.¹¹ The seminary aimed to provide rigorous training in penance, fasting, and humility, aligned with the teachings of the Gospel (Wirth 1988: 169). This rigorous training was crucial given the challenges of the local culture.

Basset's letters reflect his admiration for the religious developments in Siam, particularly the emergence of religious structures and the conversion efforts led by the Missions Étrangères and the Jesuits. The MEP were dedicated to training a native clergy, a strategy that

significantly shaped their approach. The goal was to educate local religious leaders, born in Siam or Cochinchina, who could more effectively convert their fellow countrymen than European missionaries.

Basset provided a description of the formation of native clergy in his trave-logue (folio 81) where he recounted a thesis defense by a native clergyman.¹² Choisy also detailed this event, noting that the candidate, a “black face”, demonstrated an impressive command of Latin (1687: 385). During the defense, the young cleric was challenged not only by more experienced religious figures, such as the “Reverend Jesuit Fathers”, but also by clerics who had not yet been ordained, including Jean Basset, who had recently left the Sorbonne.

The thesis defense was a hallmark of European theological scholasticism, an intellectual exercise rooted in the Middle Ages. The speaker, drawing from both personal knowledge and a broad set of readings, was tasked with addressing a question subject to debate. It was fundamentally an exercise in rhetoric, requiring the candidate to demonstrate mastery of the Bible as well as the works of classical Catholic authors, both theologians and philosophers. This illustrates the transplantation of the European scholastic model into the training of local priests.

After their training in Siam, French missionaries were sent to various other mission sites in Asia [TABLE 1]. For Jean Basset, the mission was to China, while many others were sent to rural regions of Siam to preach, following the Lazarist

¹¹ AMEP, vol. 879, anonymous letter, Ayutthaya, December 1685, folios 276–277. The recipient of this letter remains unknown. However, given its focus on Christianity in Siam, it is reasonable to assume that it was written between two missionaries.

¹² See Pennéguès 2024, Online Appendices: <https://doi.org/10.69486/112.1.2024.8b>.

model established in France. The MEP placed a strong emphasis on rigorous training programs in both faith and language, alongside high moral standards. Like the Jesuits, the MEP incorporated non-religious education, including scientific knowledge and medicine, which helped foster closer ties with the King of Siam. This dual training policy ensured that missionaries coming from Europe were well-prepared for their evangelical tasks, while local recruits received an elite religious education modeled on the standards found in Europe.

In the two letters above, Basset reflects on his relationship with the

Jesuits. Unlike his travel account, where he highlights various aspects of their work, these letters focus specifically on the Jesuits' religious role rather than their scientific endeavors. The second letter, dated 10 December 1685, was written during a lunare eclipse observed that same night in Louvo by the Jesuits, an event that greatly impressed King Narai.¹³ Did Basset participate in this nocturnal observation? We cannot be sure from his writings,¹⁴ but what stands out from these letters is Basset's deep admiration for the spiritual dimension of the Jesuits' mission, rather than their mathematical or astronomical expertise.

TABLE 1: MEP Missionaries Sent to Siam

Name	Arrival	Departure	Following Mission
Ignace Ardieux	1681	†1684	N/A
*Jean Basset	1685	1688	Guangdong and Sichuan (China)
Gabriel Bouchard	1666	1670	Cochinchine
Joseph Bugnon	1681	†1681	N/A
Claude Chandebois de Falandin	1673	†1687	N/A
Louis Chevreuil	1672	†1693	N/A
D'Angelo	1682	1688	?
*Charles D'Estrechy	1687	1700	Cochinchine
Jean de Courtelain de Maguelone	1672–1674/1683	1685	Cochinchine
Gabriel De la Vigne	1685	1688	Pondichery
Arthus De Lionne	1681	1689	Guangdong (China)
*Pierre Ferreux	1680	†1698	N/A

*completed training at the MEP seminary in Siam; †died in Siam

¹³ See Tachard 1686: fig. 26. Jesuit Father Thomas had already begun astronomical observations in Siam in the early 1680s (Hennequin 2004). These observations helped determine the longitude of Siam and significantly expanded Western geographic and cartographic knowledge of the region. I thank Nicolas Revire for drawing my attention to these references.

¹⁴ He briefly describes the Jesuits' observations on folio 88 of his travelogue, during a period of exchange with Siamese authorities who were planning to build an observatory in Louvo. See Pennéguès 2024, Online Appendices: <https://doi.org/10.69486/112.1.2024.8b>.

Name	Arrival	Departure	Following Mission
Pierre Forget	1676	1682	Cochinchine
Claude Gayme	1674	1680	Died aboard the Siamese embassy ship en route to France in 1681
Claude Geffrard de Lespinay	1681	†1690	N/A
Jean Genoud	1685	1689	Ava (Burma)
*Nicolas Gervaise	1681	1685	He left the foreign missions and became a canon in France
Jérôme Pierre Grosse	1681	†1683	N/A
Claude Guiart	1666	1671	Cochinchine
Jean Joret	1683	1689	Ava (Burma)
Louis Laneau	1664	†1696	N/A
Pierre Langlois	1670	1680	Cochinchine
Jacques Le Chevallier	1684	†1691	N/A
Annet Le Court de Mondory	1682	†1687	N/A
François Le Roux	1676	†1677	N/A
*Étienne Manuel	1685	†1693	N/A
Bernard Martineau	1679	†1695	N/A
Antoine Monestier	1681	†1690	N/A
François Pallu	1664	†1684	N/A
Étienne Paumard	1676	†1690	N/A
Alexandre Pocquet	1687	1698	Return to France
Charles Thomas	1676	1677	Annam and Cochinchine
Benigne Vachet	1670–1673/1680	1689	Return to France

*completed training at the MEP seminary in Siam; †died in Siam

SOURCES: Compiled from Forest 1998: I, 220 and <https://irfa.paris/>

Relationship with the Jesuits

The relationship between the French Jesuits and members of the Missions Étrangères de Paris in Jean Basset's letters appears to downplay competition between the two missionary orders. Despite the doctrinal fervor fostered at

home at the Sorbonne (Noguès 2024: 83), once in the mission field, the young missionaries attempted to put aside their academic rivalries to work together on a more pressing religious mission: the conversion and salvation of souls. Basset's letters focus less on the missionary policies of the MEP and more

on their shared experiences and the relationships between different missionary orders.

In Siam, Jesuit-trained catechists were already at work; continuing to train and ordain them was essential for the success of the mission (Forest 1998: III, 9). The MEP often worked in tandem with the Jesuits, complementing their religious efforts. As a newer missionary order, the MEP often had to cooperate with the more established Jesuits, who had already institutionalized their missionary strategy since the mid-16th century, with an emphasis on baptisms and conversions (Pavone 2004: 57). Both orders shared a deep aversion to Buddhism, which they encountered in Siam (Van Der Cruyse 1991: 338). While the missionaries claimed to study Buddhism to facilitate conversion, reports from both Jesuits and MEP members reveal a superficial understanding of the religion, even after years in the country (Trakulhun 2006: 160).

Upon their arrival in Siam, the Jesuits quickly built key infrastructure—hospitals, schools, and churches—that became essential to their mission. The MEP followed a similar model, which sometimes led to competition between the religious orders. Conflicts between Dominicans and Jesuits were also common (Pavone 2000), with the former criticizing the latter for engaging in trade and adopting the garb of Buddhist monks to ease relations with locals (Pavone 2004: 96). This practice, however, does not seem to have been emulated by the MEP.

Although the MEP managed to establish a long religious presence in Siam, the Jesuits held a stronger connection to Siamese royal power,

particularly through their alliance with the influential figure of Constantine Phaulkon (1647–1688) at the court of King Narai.¹⁵ This alliance gradually intensified the local rivalry between the two orders. Local tensions had been brewing since the creation of the MEP, as François Pallu, one of its founders, faced resistance from Portuguese Jesuits who refused to recognize the new missionary congregation; their apostolic vicariate was established in 1669. The conflict reached a peak in 1680 when Pope Innocent XI (in office 1676–1689) required all priests to swear an oath to the vicariate (Hutchinson 1947: 55).

Despite these challenges, Basset's letters show little awareness of the broader political struggles between the two orders, particularly in regions like Cochinchina and Macao, where Jesuit interference led to the arrest of missionaries (Guennou 1986: 142–143). Even so, Monseigneur Laneau, a leader of the MEP, could not openly oppose the French Jesuits, who, like them, operated under the protection of Louis XIV (Forest 1998: III, 233). Diplomatic and financial considerations often shaped these religious missions; Basset's letters seem to allude to these “famous instructions”, which perhaps underscored the importance of cooperation with the Jesuits.

Basset's mindset appears to reflect the spirit of Louis XIV's first embassy, where Jesuits and MEP members shared a common goal, in contrast to the more contentious situation in Siam. In Asia, the Jesuits, bolstered by the limited authority of the Pope and the patronage

¹⁵ See Van Der Cruyse 1991 and Strathern 2019: 37.

of Louis XIV, often held the upper hand (Neveu 1994: 263). This complex dynamic was not only shaped by tensions in Europe but also by regional conflicts, especially in China and Macao, where French Jesuits had to navigate a more cooperative relationship with the MEP, unlike their Portuguese counterparts, who were seen as adversaries.

In conclusion, the primary value of these letters lies in the exploration of interactions between the French missionary orders and the mindset of young missionaries like Jean Basset as they embarked on their first mission to Asia. They also shed light on the religious intricacies that shaped relations between the MEP and the Jesuits in the missionary landscape of Siam.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AMEP	Archives des Missions Étrangères de Paris, 28 rue de Babylone, 75007 Paris: https://irfa.paris/archives/ .
ANF	Archives nationales de France, 60 rue des Francs-Bourgeois, 75003 Paris: https://www.archives-nationales.culture.gouv.fr/ .
ANOM	Archives nationales d'Outre-Mer, 29 chemin du moulin Testas, 13182 Aix-en-Provence: https://recherche-anom.culture.gouv.fr/ .
BLM	Bibliothèque municipale de Lyon, 30 boulevard Marius Vivier Merle, 69003 Lyon: https://bm-lyon.fr/collections-anciennes-et-specialisees/ .

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