

The many mysteries of Wat Si Chum

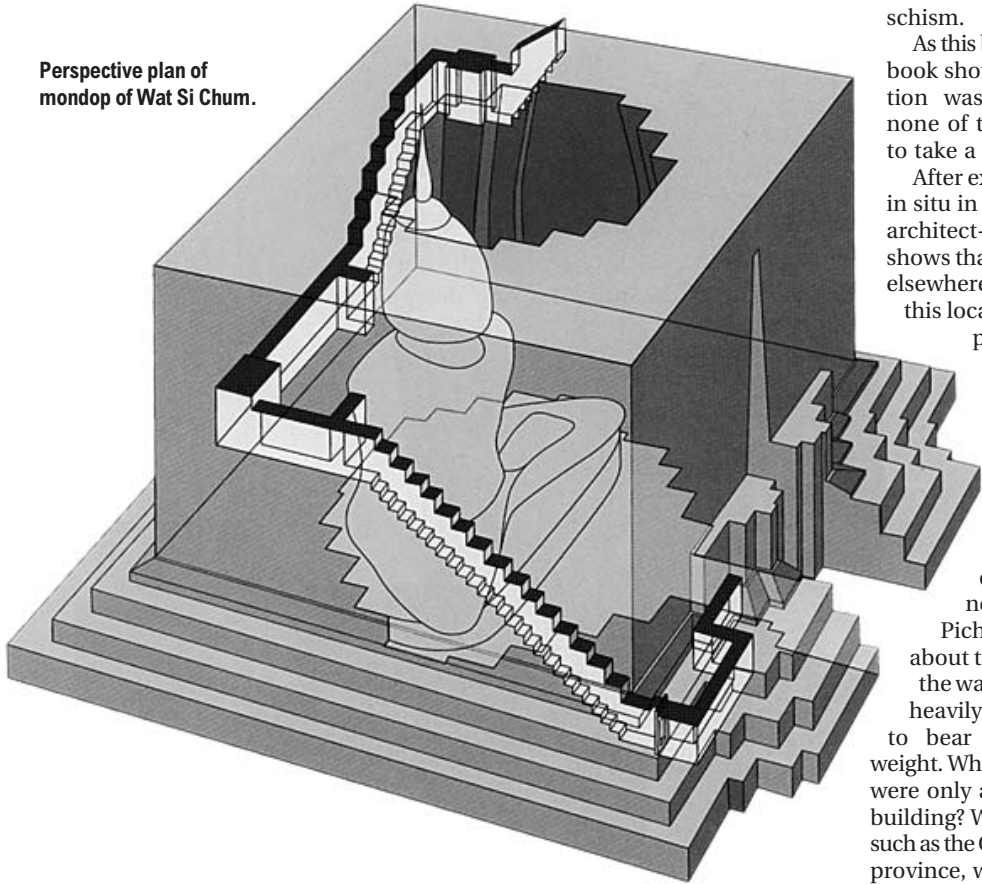
New research on Sukhothai’s most intriguing monument

CHRIS BAKER

Wat Si Chum in Sukhothai is perhaps the most intriguing of old Siam’s monuments. The peekaboo view of the image through the slit entranceway gives the building a secretive air. Louis Fournereau’s photographs from 1891 bathed the ruins in an atmosphere of ancient enchantment. The massive walls hide a narrow twisting staircase roofed with beautiful engravings of Jataka tales. Curiously, there are only 100 Jatakas illustrated, rather than the 500-plus usual for such displays. The roof seems to have totally disappeared. Inscription Two, found inside the temple, is so rich and jumbled that there are at least four interpretations of what it says and means.

This mystery has invited imagination. Most people have imagined the roof was an inverted bowl shape by analogy with similar looking buildings such as Wat Phaya Dam in Si Satchanalai. Eighty years ago, George Coedes proposed that the Jataka engravings had been moved from an original location at Sukhothai’s Wat Mahathat. Griswold and Prasert endorsed this idea on grounds that Jatakas were meant for “edification of the general public”. Betty Gosling ingeniously reconstructed how they might have appeared at Wat Mahathat, and suggested they had been “hidden away” in

Perspective plan of mondop of Wat Si Chum.



Wat Si Chum after a liturgical schism.

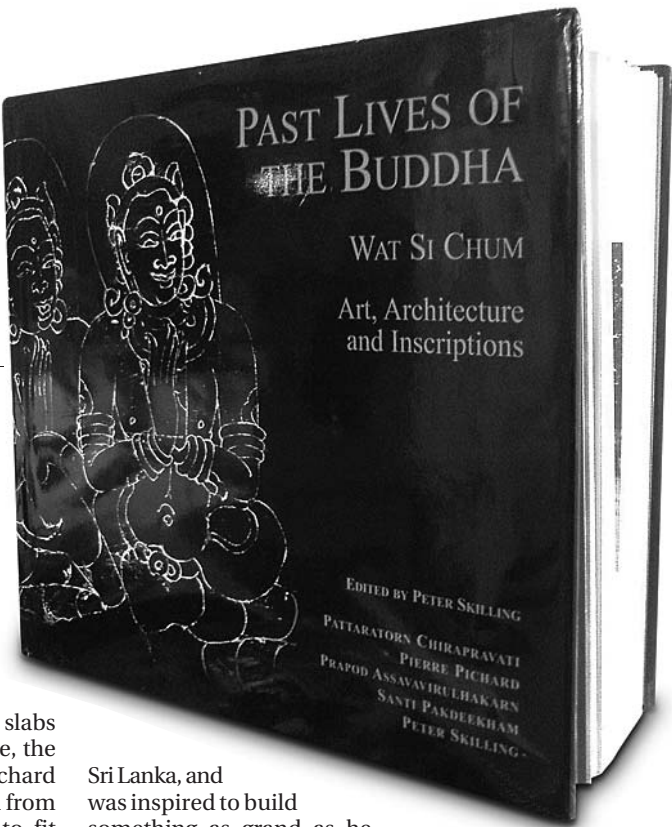
As this beautiful and erudite book shows, all this speculation was possible because none of these scholars went to take a proper look.

After examining the engraved slabs in situ in the concealed staircase, the architect-historian Pierre Pichard shows that they were not moved from elsewhere, but purpose-made to fit this location. ML Pattaratorn Chirapavati adds that there was nothing strange about them being “hidden” in such an apparently obscure place. As with the paintings deep in the sealed crypt of Wat Ratburana in Ayutthaya, they were offerings, created as part of the sacredness of the building, and were never meant to be seen.

Pichard also has a stunning idea about the roof. The giveaway is that the walls are unusually thick and heavily buttressed, as if designed to bear an exceptionally heavy weight. What if the surviving structure were only a fraction of the intended building? What if the original design, such as the Chedi Ku Kut in Lamphun province, was a five-stage tower? The base could stand it. The staircase continuing up another four levels could have accommodated the full 500-plus Jataka tales. Pichard has computer-constructed a possible image of what it might have looked like — a massive tower rising 60m and weighing 7,400 tonnes.

Who had the vision and power to attempt such a project? Mr Pattaratorn argues that there is a lot of circumstantial evidence to associate the great monk Si Sattha with Wat Si Chum. Further, the clue to the building may lie in Inscription Two, which is an account of Si Sattha’s forebears, life, works and travels.

Mr Pattaratorn argues that the Mahathat mentioned in Inscription Two is not in either Sukhothai or Sri Lanka, but is clearly the Sri Dhanyakataka, a massive stupa that once stood near Amaraoti in central India. She speculates that Si Sattha travelled to this site as well as to



PAST LIVES OF THE BUDDHA: Wat Si Chum - Art, Architecture and Inscriptions
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Sri Lanka, and was inspired to build something as grand as he had seen on his travels back in his hometown of Sukhothai. She calculates that Si Sattha must have returned around 1350. By comparing some motifs in the Jataka engravings (fan, ascetics, peonies, etc.) with other, datable depictions, she estimates the engravings were made around 1370.

Peter Skilling traces the depictions of the Jatakas from the earliest Indian reliefs in the 1st century BC, through the first appearances in Siam at Chula Pathon Chedi in the Dvaravati era, up to their modern appearance in comic books. Skilling also provides an exhaustive account of the modern discovery and interpretation of Wat Si Chum.

The second part of the book contains a catalogue of the Jataka slabs compiled by Skilling, Prapod Assavavirulhakarn and Santi Pakdeekham. Each engraving is beautifully photographed, with an additional close-up of the inscription. In most cases, Fournereau’s 1891 rubbing is presented for comparison, showing how much the engravings have deteriorated in the interim. The compilers had the wonderful idea of showing the depictions of the same story at Wat Khrua Wan in Thon Buri, the Ananda Temple in Pagan, and occasionally elsewhere. They also transcribe and translate the inscription, and provide a full English rendering of the Jataka tale. Where the slabs are now totally unreadable, they guess which tales would have been depicted at this location based on the sequence.

Wat Si Chum has not lost its intrigue. This team has cleared up some old mysteries, but then created a new one. Instead of a tale of engravings being chipped off the Wat Mahathat and furtively hidden away, we have a story about the most ambitious construction project in the Chao Phraya basin of its time, and a mystery of why it went unfinished. Probably the project faltered when Si Sattha died at an unknown date after 1376. Pichard surmises that Si Sattha had a “touch of megalomania” and would always have faced opposition to his overblown vision. Mr Pattaratorn wonders if the repeated raiding by Ayutthaya armies frightened away the craftsmen and manpower needed for such a massive project. Possibly the kings and nobles were not at all keen on a building that consumed so much local manpower, and glorified religion more than worldly matters.

This superb study invites us to look at Wat Si Chum in a whole new light. Rather than a rather squat, blocky building, we can now imagine it as one-fifth of a fantastic tower. Rather than wondering why the Jataka slabs were “hidden away”, we can view them as intrinsic to a very ambitious project of religious construction. This revised view of the building raises new questions about Sukhothai’s history. What should we make of the fact that this massive project was sited outside the royal city, among the forest monasteries? Why was it never completed? was it never completed?



The mondop (photo from Fournereau 1908).



Main Buddha image inside the mondop of Wat Si Chum.

Architect and historian Pierre Pichard’s conjecture of the original plan for Wat Si Chum.

In pursuit of happy economics

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with nature. And those therapies are successful. Even prisoners, juvenile delinquents or violent men can be changed if you help them to connect to people with similar situations and to really share and help them to [re]connect with nature.

■ But how do you feel when you go back to Ladakh and see that it, too, changes year after year to be ... er, just like any other place on Earth?

There have been times when it becomes very depressing and upsetting. The worst was in 1989 when Buddhists and Muslims were killing each other. And year after year, the change has been quite difficult. But each year, with the breakdown of communities and ecological conditions, there were more and more Ladakhis who became interested in looking for alternatives, in assisting our work, particularly in the last 10 or so years. This interest has been going on at the same time as the destruction. So that has given me the strength and the hope to continue.

■ It seems young children nowadays have been groomed to think that they have to be No. 1, and the interdependence has been thus cut off ...

Yes, absolutely. Even explicitly. In Ladakh they have now been taught: ‘You’ve got to be more ambitious; you’ve got to literally be more greedy; you’ve got to look up to [be] number one’. These are the terrible values that are being taught in the schools. In many journals, they’ll talk about community identity as tribalism, and they identify

tribalism with friction, with warfare. And the picture is painted that in the past, all of these diverse war-like tribes were fighting each other, and that modernity and homogenising has created peace. Well, let’s look at how peaceful America is — look at the teenagers who go to school and kill each other, look at the violent crimes. You don’t have group violence in the same way, but you have a complete breakdown. A lot of violence.

When you centralise power and you push people into the big cities, and they have to have a job for survival, then the people in power will give jobs to people of their own kind. If they’re Buddhists, then they give the jobs to Buddhists. And if they’re Muslims, then to Muslims. And this leads to ethnic friction and violence.

Centralisation is part of globalisation. Decentralisation is what can allow more people to have jobs, and to have interdependence with different groups.

I think another very major point is that by destroying communities and then creating job scarcity, these are crimes against humanity. However many people we are, there is more work to be done. Unemployment is a modern product of this economy. It never existed for thousands of years in any society. The artificial constriction of job opportunities is a crime against humanity that must be written about, explaining how and why it could happen. With more people, we need more care, because we have more work. First of all, every plant, every fish, every thing that lives right now is threatened, so we need more people caring for everything that’s living. With global warming, we have drought and floods.

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[What I say] might sound utopian, or unrealistic, but the fact is that the unrealistic is to go further and further as we have done up until now.”

HELENA NORBERG-HODGE,
recipient of 1986 alternative
Nobel Prize

We need to protect everything against floods, fire and drought. So that means more people caring for every bit of water, and every little tree, so there’s more work than ever. However many people we are, we need proportionate teachers, nurses, doctors ... there is no limit of work. But through this globalising path we are artificially constricting, and we’re partly doing it through taxes and subsidies. So we must expose them.

■ And there’s also this artificial scarcity of time ...

The scarcity of time is directly linked to the scarcity of jobs. Because we support businesses when they use technology and fossil fuel, they benefit from scientific research, subsidies and



tax breaks. And the more fossil fuel they use, the less they pay. It’s more the small businesses that use very little that will be punished because they pay more. This is crazy.

At the same time, if you employ a person, you pay heavy taxes. This should be shifted toward reducing the taxes on employment and increasing the taxes on technology and fossil fuel. The technology is part of speeding everything up. So the few people who have the jobs now in computers, you have to answer with more posts. Whereas when it was by post, in a day, you might have to answer how many letters. And now with emails, you have to answer much more.

It’s because we’ve chosen subsidising technology and subsidising speed, which is linked to unemployment.

■ What project is your organisation working on right now?

We are working on a film called, “Economics of Happiness”, which should be ready in about two months. I’ve worked on it for more than four years, and I’ve tried to get people from every continent — Africa, South America, North America, Europe, China, India, Thailand — to basically spell out that the globalisation of consumer culture is creating too much unhappiness in the world, and that localising would solve most of these problems. Localising needs to be pursued with an international and collaborative mindset. It’s not about isolation. It’s not about no travel, no trade. We actually need more deep, deep dialogue between the North and the South. And we need it now more than ever before.