

History of the Sukhothai and Ayutthaya Kingdoms

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Thai history is said to have begun in 1238, when the Sukhothai kingdom was established. The Sukhothai kingdom, which contributed major architectural structures, was a loosely organized state in which Buddhism and the government were intertwined. However, the kingdom was short-lived. It fell apart after the death of its most famous ruler, King Ramakhamphaeng. After its fall, the cities of Lopburi and Suphanburi united, creating the Ayutthaya kingdom. This kingdom, which flourished in international trade and diplomatic relations, lasted for over four centuries. Its success can be attributed to the great organizational skills of its leaders as well as the benefits of its geographical location. Unfortunately, these alliances with foreign nations led to conflict within Ayutthaya and an eventual revolt. Less than a century later, Burmese forces invaded and overthrew Ayutthaya's government, thereby ending the great reign of the Ayutthaya kingdom.

In 1238 the Sukhothai kingdom was established as an independent state in the Menam Basin. According to legend, this took place when Thai chieftains overthrew their Khmer overlords in the region of Sukhothai. The new kingdom of Sukhothai encompassed Luang Prabang to the north and the Malay Peninsula to the south, or what is considered to be present day Thailand and lower Burma. The Sukhothai kingdom is regarded as the first independent state of the Thai people. Thai people consider this to be the beginning of their history because most of the earlier historical chronicles were "simply lists of kings or collections of legends, usually undated, [but] in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries they become the annals of states, replete with detailed accounts of religious events and wars, of dynastic conflicts and popular movements." Sukhothai was also the first kingdom to use the Thai language officially, thus adding to Sukhothai's formal contribution to Thai history.

In addition, Sukhothai made lasting historical architectural contributions. At present, many of these contributions are located at the Sukhothai Historic Park, located approximately 200 miles north of present day Bangkok. The "numerous cetiyas or stupas (relic mounds) and viharas (Buddhist monasteries) [found around the historical park] bear testimony to the splendor of classical Sukhothai architecture." The arts also flourished during Ramakhamphaeng's rule in

particular Sukhothai bronze sculpture and ceramics. These commodities became major sources of international trade.

While the arts played an important role in the Sukhothai kingdom, religion was even more crucial to the Sukhothai way of life. Religion and the state in the Sukhothai kingdom were inextricably linked. In fact, "Above all else, Sukhothai was a Buddhist state, lavishly supporting a monastic community newly reinforced by and invigorated by a celebrated patriarch." However this also meant that religious association aside, the Sukhothai government was not highly centralized. The king was so dedicated to Buddhism that he shared his throne weekly with monks who preached the Dhamma of Buddha. Not only was the state officially Buddhist, but religion was also political since political peace and unity were often forged on religious grounds. This intertwining of state and religion proved no problem for the extremely devout Sukhothai people.

Life in the Sukhothai kingdom is perhaps best described by the beloved king Ramakhamphaeng:

There is fish in the water and rice in the fields. The lord of the realm does not levy toll on his subjects for traveling the roads; they lead their cattle to trade or ride their horses to sell; whoever wants to trade in elephants, does so; whoever wants to trade in horses, does so... When he sees someone's rice he does not covet it, when he sees someone's wealth he does not get angry...

This passage shows Sukhothai at its prime in the eyes of their king whom they affectionately called Lord Father. This name was given to king Ramakhamphaeng because of his paternal benevolence. In fact, Sukhothai rulers claimed to be merely the fathers of the Thai people.

In king Ramakhamphaeng's famous 1292 inscription he stated that the city Suphanburi was among the dependencies of Sukhothai. This is significant because by the 13th century Suphanburi had become one of the most powerful cities, a center of military power controlling parts of the Menam Basin and part of the Malay Peninsula. An alliance between Suphanburi and the equally powerful city Lopburi, known as the center of culture and learning, eventually led to the emergence of a new power, Ayutthaya. It is theorized that the Sukhothai kingdom fell shortly after king Ramakhamphaeng's death due to an inability to feed its people from its own agricultural resources.

In 1351 the Ayutthaya kingdom was officially founded. Because of the myths and legends that surround the foundation of the kingdom of Ayutthaya, it has become a subject of controversy for historians. Its Ayutthaya secured the center for rice production near Lopburi, the most fertile and abundant area for rice production in the Menam Basin. With a surplus of rice for export, Ayutthaya was able to become economically self-sufficient which solidified their

political dominance in the region. This ability to provide for the people helped the rulers of Ayutthaya earn the name “devaraja,” the Khmer word for God-King.

Ayutthaya’s economic self-sufficiency led to an accumulation of great wealth. In order to display this, an elaborate system of rivers was lined with luxurious houses and palaces. In fact, “Ayutthaya had reached a level of opulence which not only astounded foreign visitors, but excited the envy of neighbors as well.” These ornate structures demonstrated Ayutthaya’s appreciation for art and architecture. It has been said that, “there is no ancient kingdom that inspires the present-day Thai more than Ayudhya.” Ayutthaya’s artistic influence can be seen all throughout present-day Thailand.

While the Ayutthaya kingdom benefitted from this great wealth, it was not without its faults. The kingdom was wrought with political conflict, frequently stemming from the issue of succession. After the death of its founder Prince Uthong, also known as Ramathibodi, his brother, Borommaracha, and his son, Prince Ramesuan, fought for control of the kingdom. This pattern of problematic succession continued until the very end of the empire. The Sukhothai people were also a source of conflict throughout the Ayutthaya kingdom. Although the Sukhothai kingdom was overthrown and Ayutthaya became the dominant political power in the region, during Borommaracha’s reign as king the Sukhothai people attempted to regain their power. However, this attempt failed and in 1438 the area of Sukhothai was officially incorporated as a province into the Ayutthaya kingdom.

Along with its military prowess, Ayutthaya also benefitted from its leaders’ ability to exert bureaucratic control over their territories in ways their adversaries could not. The strict and regimented organization style of the Ayutthaya rulers (problems of succession aside) can be seen in king Borommatrailokanat’s institution of formal legislation and codes of both civil and criminal law. The goal behind this was “to regulate natural human inequality for the sake of the proper functioning of the social order.” They also had highly differentiated and specialized offices through which power and responsibility were shared. This efficient form of government helped Ayutthaya last as a dominant power for over four centuries.

Another asset to the Ayutthaya kingdom was foreign trade relations. This was facilitated by the kingdom’s proximity to easily accessible water routes that emptied into the Menam Basin. The rivers enriched the soil in the Menam Basin, making it highly fertile and turning the region into a major producer of rice. These rivers were also major communication routes, which allowed for frequent foreign trade and diplomatic relations. Most notably Ayutthaya developed trade relationships with the Dutch and French. Visitors to the kingdom including merchants, missionaries, and diplomats such as France’s King Louis XIV.

Unfortunately, in 1688 there was growing anti-foreign and xenophobic sentiments among many Ayutthaya citizens. A desire to return to Thai roots led to the Ayutthaya Revolt of 1688, which arose out of the death of King Narai. The people were upset over Narai's devotion to foreign individuals and nations at the expense of the Thai people. Narai famously disregarded the advice of Ayutthaya leaders in favor of French officials. This revolt led to oust of most foreign officials and a period in Ayutthaya's history in which the kingdom took a more traditional approach to diplomatic relations.

King Phra Petracha and his descendents took over Ayutthaya rule after the Revolt of 1688. Unfortunately, their era was filled with as many dynastic squabbles and disputes over succession as all of the preceding ruling families in Ayutthaya's history. This family ruled over Ayutthaya until April of 1760, when Burmese forces led by King Alaunghpaya besieged Ayutthaya and nearly conquered the city. This attack was unsuccessful, yet it marked the beginning of the end for the great Ayutthaya kingdom. Six years later in February of 1766 two separate Burmese forces struck again and over a year later on April 7, 1767 Burma breached the walls of Ayutthaya and took over the capital, wreaking devastation in the process. To do this, the Burmese kept the city sealed for months, starving its people into submission while burning and looting in the process. "Palaces, temples, priceless art, treasures, libraries with ancient scrolls and historical records were plundered and later put to the torch" thus limiting modern day knowledge of Thai history and leaving much of the city in ruins. The kingdom of Ayutthaya was officially at an end.

Amazingly enough, only six months after the fall of Ayutthaya a young governor of the Tak region named Taksin begin establishing authority in the region. He soon became a power to be reckoned with. By 1768 Taksin reconstituted all of the former Ayutthaya kingdom's territories and had been crowned monarch. However, Taksin was more skilled as a military man than a leader and was eventually executed. He was promptly replaced with a descendant of an old Ayutthaya noble family named Chakri, who took the name Ramathibodi or King Rama I. Rama, whose first order of business was to move the capital to Bangkok, thus began the kingdom that would rule Thailand up to the present day.

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