The Art of Dissent: The Wall Paintings[1] at Wat Thung Sri Muang in Ubon Ratchathani.[2]

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Abstract

As King Taksin's conquering armies pushed across the Khorat Plateau late in the seventeenth century they swept away more than just the traditional independent kingdoms, the conquest ended forever the old world of the plateau. The ultimate impact of this change was confirmed one hundred years later with the all but complete removal of the old ruling elites and the imposition of direct external political, economic and social control by Bangkok's Ministry of the Interior under Prince Damrong. Force of arms rendered the victors narrative of "the emerging nation" all powerful.

Excluded from political power the traditional leaders were still able to find recognition at the Wat, always the centre of intellectual and social life for the plateau's communities. Beginning from such perspective this paper attempts to historically re-contextualize the wall paintings at Wat Thung Sri Muang in Ubon Ratchathani, a place at the centre of the first wave of this change, in an attempt to adopt the viewpoint of the dispossessed, to rediscover their awareness of their world and look for their attempts to write back against the dominant narrative. Brush strokes that reflected, and still do, the dissenting voice of subalterns reminding us that they have not consented to dominance.

Article

The *wat* is a place of religion, and although the paintings which enliven their walls are celebrated today for their beauty, the initiator's intent was not primarily aesthetic; they were lessons, and, as David Wyatt has noted, they were public lessons.[3] Moreover, in the traditional society on the Khorat Plateau,[4] the *wat* was also the center

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[1] This is a direct naming from the local vernacular, *hoop tam* (wall painting), of the Khorat Plateau, or *pap jitrakam* (wall painting) in central Thai. They are most often referred to as murals in international scholarship, and this paper will follow that convention.

[2] All photographs, maps and schematic drawings are by the author unless otherwise credited.

[3] David K. Wyatt, *Reading Thai Murals* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2004), 1.

[4] I use the term Khorat Plateau throughout this paper rather than an ethnically- or nationally-based description. The plateau is a large topographically-determined box that includes many people. Within it are contained many smaller boxes. The physical space contains and integrates different people within the box in a manner consistent with Georges Condominas' concept of emboxment. George Condominas, *L'espace social à propos de l'Asie du Sud-Est* (Paris: Flammarion, 1980). For its interpretation and extension, see: Richard A. O'Connor, *A Theory of Indigenous Southeast Asian Urbanism* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1983); Richard A. O'Connor, "Agricultural Change and Ethnic Succession in Southeast Asian States: A Case for Regional Anthropology," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 54, no. 4 (1995): 968-996; Richard A. O'Connor, "Place, Power and People: Southeast Asia's Temple Tradition," *Ars Asiatique*, 64 (2009): 116-23.

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of intellectual, social, and civic life and, as such, was uniquely situated in the processes of creation, preservation, and transmission of culture.[5]

The murals were also large scale public art creations, the product of skilled artisans working, in many cases, over long periods of time. With significant costs to be met, another group of people would have had a part in shaping the content of the murals, those with control over individual or community resources needed to fund the creation of public art.

This combination of requirements suggests that murals were usually the products of intellectual, economic, or political elites operating at a level that was reflected in the significance of the location. The murals were created with a clear intent to document the feelings of a group of people – in a specific place, at a specific time – that had the authority and the resources to create public statements for their own time, statements that would last well into the future.

While this can clearly be seen in the great royal centers of coastal trading polities, it is less obvious on the Khorat Plateau, where most murals are usually simply attributed to "the people," folk art grouped under the damming reverence of local wisdom. This was partly David Wyatt's concern when he wrote, "Historians of Thailand regularly have used mural paintings to illustrate their works, to show scenes of everyday life or warfare, and even to illustrate analysis of religious and folk belief"[6] He continues, suggesting that we can actually we move beyond this, "to argue that, in some cases and under some circumstances, temple murals may be used to explore the feelings and sentiments of real people in real historical situations, both generally and quite specifically."[7][8] To make this argument, Wyatt regarded several preconditions as necessary. First, it is essential to situate the murals in a spatial context. Second, we need to know what the murals are about. They are illustrated stories, so it is necessary to place them in a literary context. Third, we need to examine the question of when the murals were painted and see them in the context of a past moment before we can attempt to answer the question of how mural paintings might be used as historical sources.[9]

Taking up Wyatt's challenge to use murals as historical documents, "to explore the feelings and sentiments of real people in real historical situations", this paper focuses on the murals of specific place – Wat Thung Sri Muang in Ubon Ratchathani – and on the lives of several significant members of the local elites who would have been involved in shaping the content of the murals.

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[5] Ishii Yoneo, *Sangha, State, and Society: Thai Buddhism in History*, trans. Peter Hawkes (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1986), 24.

[6] Wyatt, *Temple Murals as an Historical Source*, 1.

[7] Wyatt, *Temple Murals as an Historical Source*, 1.

[8] Associating this paper with David Wyatt's methodology gives rise to some concern. His thinking was first laid out in a small book, *Temple Murals as an Historical Source: The Case of Wat Phumin, Nan* (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press, 1993), written for the Chulalongkon Mahawitthayalai Thai Studies Section. In this book he seems to be searching for a theoretical starting point in his own explorations, and it is the methodology laid out in this book that I have adopted as my starting point. The problem, however, is that his own use of this methodology later resulted in an unfortunately flawed book, *Reading Thai Murals* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1999). Wyatt regarded several preconditions as necessary, including the need to know what the murals are about, but, unfortunately, in this book some of his identifications were simply wrong.

[9] Wyatt, *Temple Murals as an Historical Source*, 2.

I. Establishing the spatial context - time and place: a) dating the murals

Most of the murals at Wat Thung Sri Muang date to the time of the first abbot, Chao Khun Phra Ariyawongsajarn (a.1840s -1881). The construction of what would become the *sim*[10] was begun in the early 1850s, and the murals, by necessity, must have been one of the last projects completed. We also know from studies of other places that it would have taken a long time to create them, usually many years. It is unlikely that the murals were produced after the founder's death in 1881 because we know that the second abbot, Phra Khru Wirotratanobon (a.1881 – 1942) installed the large wooden frame inside the *sim* in an attempt to stabilise the building, a repair that took priority over decoration.

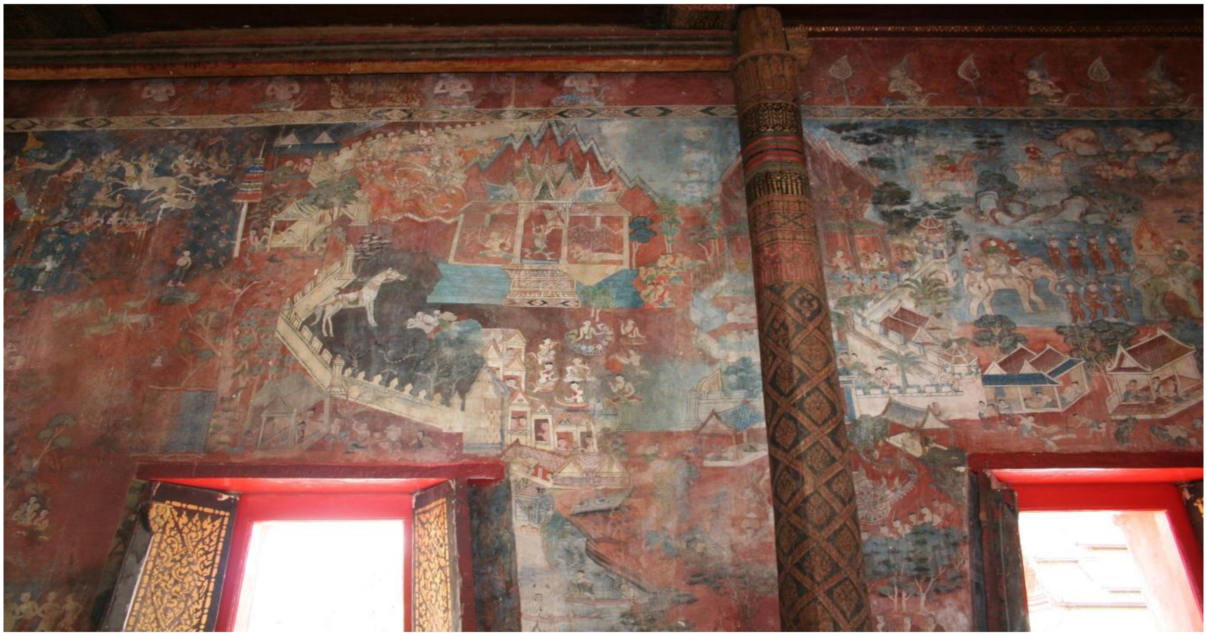

Figure 1: Evidence for dating, the post completely obscures the palace and the central action of the story, the prince leaving the palace.

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[10] The first definitive works on the religious art and architecture of Khorat Plateau were done by Wirot Sisuro and Phairot Samoson. Wirot Sisuro, *Sim Isan = Isan Sim: Northeast Buddhist Holy Temples* (Krung Thep: Munnithi Toyata, 1993); Phairot Samoson, *Chittrakam faphanang Isan E-sarn Mural Paintings* (Khon Kaen: E-sarn Cultural Center, Khon Kaen University,1989). Following their original work this paper also adopts their "fundamental agreement to retain some vernacular architectural vocabulary… to call names by local original words.

On the Khorat Plateau		in Central Thailand
Sim	for	Ubosot (Ordination Hall)
Ho Jak	for	Sala Kan Parian (Congregation Hall)
Ngo	for	Cho fa
Hung Pung	for	Ruang Pung
Si Na	for	Naban or Jua (Pediment)
Ao- kan	for	Aew-kan (base)
Bok-kwam Bok-ngay	for	Bua-kwam Bua-ngay
Bue	for	Lak or Sadu (Pillar)"

Wirot Sisuro, *Isan Sim*: *Northeast Buddhist Holy Temples*, k15.

The mural paintings are not configured around the wooden posts of this frame; rather, they are clumsily obscured in a way no artist would consider reasonable. As well as this we can see that the crossbeams across the top of the frame hides the faces of the *thewada*, and, as these beams are very close to the wall, it would have been too difficult for an artist to paint behind them.

b) the place at that time

The location that would become Ubon Ratchathani enters into the Lao historical narrative around 1710 due to the actions of Phra Khru Luang Phon Samek,[11] the Viang Chan (Vientiane) monk who is credited with establishing the Champasak dynasty and even with founding Phnom Penh.[12] After he had established a Viang Chan prince as the ruler of Champasak, he also dispatched rulers to eight surrounding centers, including the land around the confluence of the Chi and Mun Rivers that would eventually become Ubon Ratchathani. Thus, we can see that it was already a significant place and a shared space because the new rulers retained the name Khlong Chiang, which derived from the language of the Suie people already living there.[13]

We have an outsider's very detailed description of Ubon Ratchathani from1883, at the very moment when rule by the last of the old Lao elite was swept away. Etienne Aymonier writes:

> The city of Oubon, … was built on the northern bank of the Moun, which rose in a gentle slope to form a rather high knoll, clear from the highest rises of the water. This fortunate location, on the deep and tranquil reach that the Moun formed from the confluence of the Si up to Phimoun, had rapidly transformed Oubon into the most important center of the whole of northeast [translator's error] Laos. The city, built in a rectangle and surrounded by an insignificant moat on the three sides... measured about 2,500 meters lengthwise by 500-600 meters in width.
>
> Three longitudinal streets, parallel to the Moun, and a host of small transversal streets divided the city into small quarters, which were

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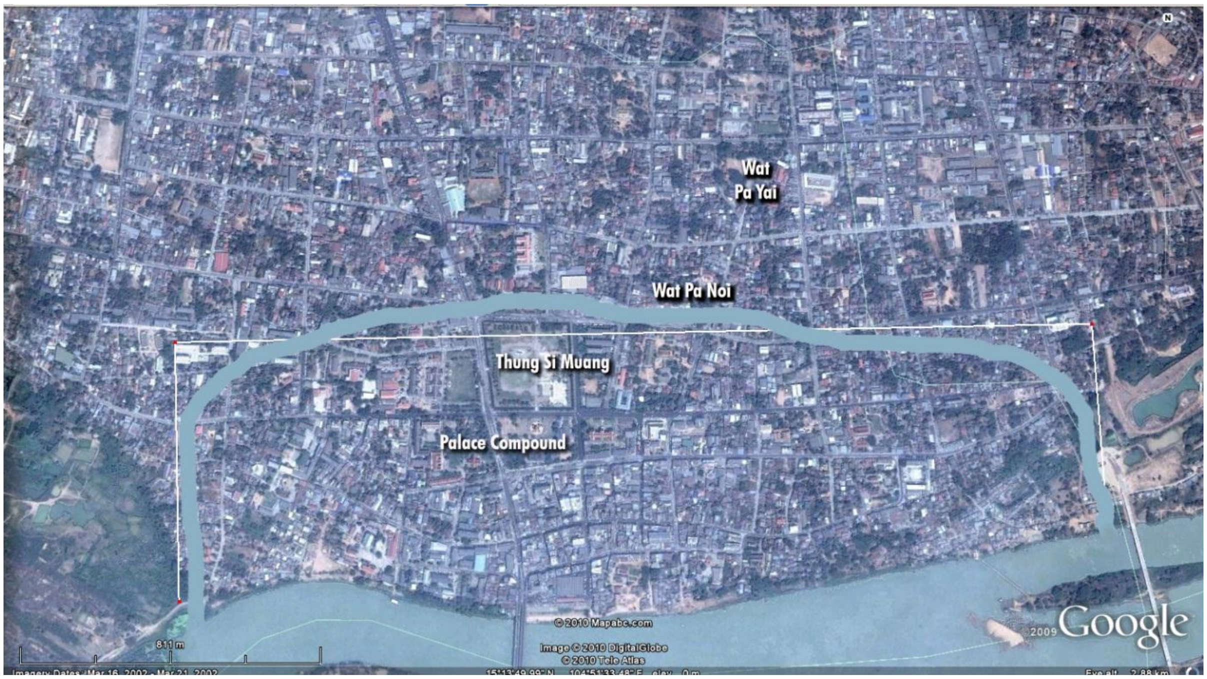
[11] "Phra Khru Nyot Kaeo, (known as Khru Phon Samek.) Abbot of Vat Phon Samek in Viang Chan during the reign of King Surinyavongsa in the late 17th century. When the king died without an heir, Phra Khru gave refuge to Princess Sumangkhala. As the succession struggle intensified, however, he and his followers fled the capital for the south. Sumangkhala was pregnant at the time and in fear of her life. Phra Khru settled first at Nakhon Phanom (where Sumangkhala gave birth to her second son, Nokasat), and then in northern Cambodia, probably in the region of Xiang Taeng (Stung Treng). From there he was invited to settle at Khong by the elderly local ruler, Nang Phan. With the support of the queen's illegitimate daughter, Phra Khru became regent (1708-13). Only when his position was challenged after the death of Nang Phau did Phra Khru present Nokasat to be crowned first king of Champasak, taking the throne name of Soysisamut Phutthangkiin. Phra Khru came to be credited with possessing magical powers. He is revered as instrumental in founding an independent kingdom in southern Laos, free of the suzerainty of Viang Chan." Martin Stuart-Fox, *Historical Dictionary of Laos*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2001), 158.

[12] Phra Thep Rattanamoli and J. B. Pruess, *The That Phanom Chronicle: A Shrine History and its Interpretation* (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program, Dept. Of Asian Studies, Cornell University, 1976), 66-67.

[13] Toem Wiphakpotjanakit, *History of Isaan*, 43.

> further subdivided by walls or by clusters of houses. The *mœuong*, or *khum*, or residence of the *chau*, more or less in the center of the city, was surrounded by a brick wall. Opposite this wall, several Chinese shops had their displays of fabrics, crockery, *dok kham*, and other items. There were 1,000 houses in Oubon and eighteen pagodas, several of which had brick walls coated with lime and roofs covered with planks, which was a luxury in a country where thatch, wood, and bamboo generally constitute all materials used for house construction.[14]



Map 1: Taking the measurements from Etienne Aymonier's 1883 description (shown here as red dots and white lines) and superimposing them on a Google Earth image of Ubon Ratchathani as it is now, we can see an outline of the town then defined by the moat as it was in the late nineteenth century.

Using this report and what we know of the history of Ubon Ratchathani, we can construct several maps to show the town as it would have appeared in the past, and then by contextualising events recorded in its history, chart, to some degree, the progress of the town.

First, Map 2 depicts Ubon Ratchathani circa 1840, as it would have been in the time of the second ruler, Phra Prom Worarat Suriyawong, just prior to the arrival of Chao Khun Phra Ariyawongsajarn the founder of Wat Thung Sri Muang.

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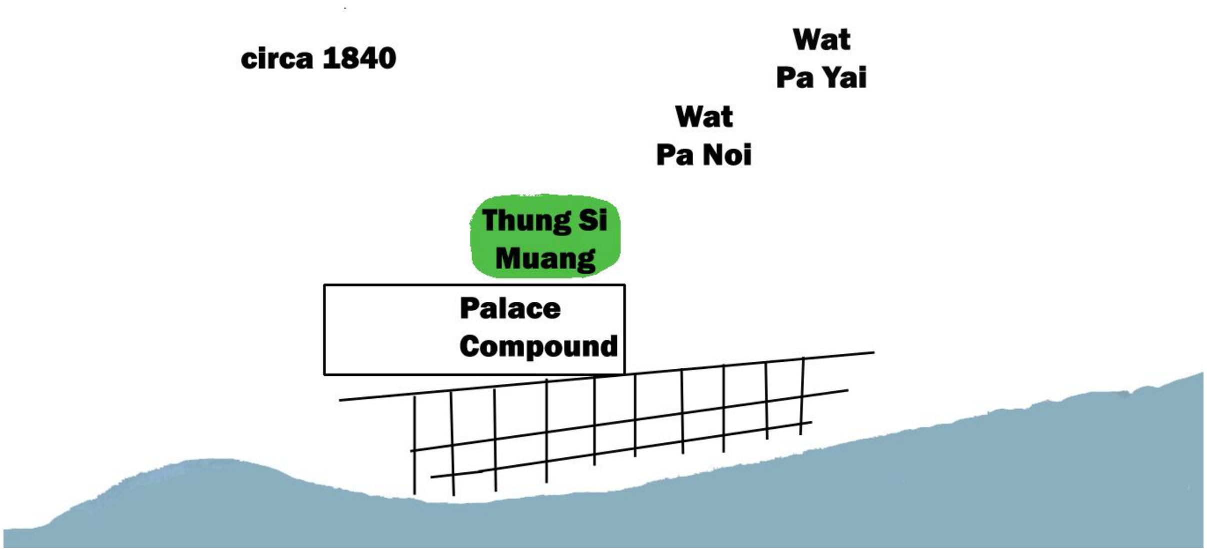
[14] Etienne Aymonier and Walter E. J. Tips, *Isan Travels: Northeast Thailand's Economy in 1883-1884* (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2000), 44.



Map 2: Ubon Ratchathani circa 1840

Maps however show us only part of the picture, for here was a town with a plan and pretensions. Louis de Carné, who visited the town as a member of the Mekong Exploration Commission in 1867, writes:

> "As to the town, it was the largest we had yet met. The streets are broad, and pretty well laid out, parallel or perpendicular to the river. In the more important, there are even wooden pavements, which are of the greatest use to the people when the rains have soaked the thick coat of sand with which the ways are covered."[15]

This confidence seems to be something shared by the people who lived there; Aymonier recounts:

> The girls in Oubon still wore their hair in a bun, like the Laotian girls of the east. The women rubbed themselves with turmeric and applied perfumed wax to their lips. The men, who often tailored their hair with pork fat, more happily adopted Siamese fashion, and they had pretensions in the way of elegance, as a popular saying expressed: 'One sees ant hills in Sisakêt, unfortunates in Mœuong Dêt, and elegant idlers in Mœuong Oubon.'[16]

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[15] Louis de Carné, *Travels on the Mekong: Cambodia, Laos, and Yunnan; The Political and Trade Reports of the Mekong Exploration Commission, June 1866-June 1868* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 1995), 95.

[16] Aymonier and Tips, *Isan Travels*, 45.

II. Establishing the human context - people who could influence the form and content: a) the people who had the authority.

Chao Khun Phra Ariyawongsajarn Yannawimol (Sui Lakham)[17] returned to Ubon late in the third reign of the Chakri dynasty. He had been born in Ampoe Khueang Nai about thirty kilometres northwest of the city along the Chi River. While we know little of his early life, beyond the fact that he went to Bangkok to study at Wat Saket, his age tells us that he must have left Ubon Ratchathani around the time the second of the great Siamese wars devastated the plateau (1828).[18]

Phra Ariyawongsajarn (latter Chao Khun) was fortunate to arrive at Wat Saket at the most exciting time in its history. The *wat* was the place which Rama III (r.1824-1851) had chosen for his most ambitious projects, the enormous undertaking of raising the man made mountain we see there today, the Golden Mount. Rama III would have spent a significant amount of time at Wat Saket because as well as making the mountain he also built the main *wihan* and renovated almost all of the buildings including the *hor trai*, the library.[19]

This library, in which Phra Ariyawongsajarn would have spent a lot of time while he was a student, had been constructed of wood and built over a pond in the time of Rama I.[20] Phra Ariyawongsajarn, a young monk of simple rural origins from one of the furthest regions, now found himself involved with the lives of the greatest men in the land. Yet, he must have been exceptional, for it was at that time that he was commissioned to go back to Ubon Ratchathani as Chao Kana Muang, a position that granted him the power to govern all the monks in the region, a promotion that added the honorific Chao Khun to his title. He brought back to Ubon Ratchathani a copy of Wat Saket's Buddha footprint, and, in so doing, he seems to be seeking to connect the local people who honoured it to the greater world that had recreated him. In all of his work in Ubon Ratchathani, we see that he remained a true and loyal agent of that greater world.

He came to live at Wat Pa Noi,[21] then still a forest *wat* just north of the *thung*, the large grassland at the back of the palace complex.[22] Wat Pa Noi had just been raised from a monastic residence to a full *wat* by Ubon's second ruler, Phra Prom Worarat Suriyawong (r.1795-1840), and it was regarded as his personal *wat*.

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[17] The abbots of Wat Thung Sri Muang for the period of the study: Chao Khun Phra Ariyawongsajarn Yannawimol (Sui Lakham), founder, (mid 1840s – 1881); Phra Khru Wirotratanobon (Bun Nan Taro), (1881 – 1942).

[18] The first invasion by the Siamese was in the reign of King Taksin, who had conquered Viang Chan by 1779. The campaigns to subdue the other kingdoms of the Khorat Plateau were still under way in 1782, led by Chao Phraya Chakri, who came back from this campaign in order to depose King Taksin and assume the throne as the first ruler of the Chakri Dynasty. The second and most devastating war was during the third Bangkok reign, in response to the Chao Anuvong rebellion in 1827.

[19] Phra Debgunabhorn, *Prawat Wat Saket Ratchaworamawihan* [A History of Wat Srakesa Rajavaramahavihara] (Bangkok: Wat Srakesa Rajavaramahavihara, 1991), 11.

[20] Phra Debgunabhorn, *Prawat Wat Saket Ratchaworamahawihan*, 17 and plate 22.

[21] This is now known as Wat Maneewanaram. Yutthanawarakorn Saengaram, "The Local Characteristics of the Mural Painting in the Uposatha Hall of Wat Thung Sri Muang, Ubon Ratchathani Province" (masters thesis, Silpakorn University, 2008), 6.

[22] This is now the large public park called Thung Sri Muang in the center of the town.

Every morning, Phra Ariyawongsajarn would go to the edge of the *thung* to meditate. The temple history tells us that he came to believe that the place where he meditated was good, so he decided to build the Ho Phra Bat to house the footprint of the Buddha that he had brought from Wat Saket.

He was a scholar and meditation master, not a builder; thus, in order to build his *wat,* he recruited another monk, Phra Khru Chang, a skilled builder and artist from Viang Chan, who had come to Wat Pa Noi to study meditation with him.[23] Current scholarship regards what they created as a reflection of the two traditions that these men represented – Siamese and Lao – but, as we shall see, this does not seem to be the case.

Francis Garnier, another member of the Mekong Exploration Commission, who visited Oubon in 1867, commented: "Oubon ….has one or two pagodas built of bricks in the Chinese style..."[24] His comment is perceptive because he is not referring to the design or decoration but, rather, to the method of building's construction, compressive architecture, where the brick walls are load bearing. That this would be cause for comment indicates that locally Chao Khun Phra Ariyawongsajarn must have been seen to be doing something different.

Even today on the Khorat Plateau, a builder approaches the construction of a building by first erecting a post and rail frame, then infilling the walls; this is tensile architecture. Most of the great *sims* of the plateau hide a supporting wooden frame within their masonry. Rama III was a great admirer of all things Chinese, and this passion is reflected in his great building works in Bangkok. However, in order to achieve this, he had to have access to Chinese artisans skilled in this compressive style of construction. Chao Khun Phra Ariyawongsajarn had seen how it was done, but, now back in Ubon, he did not have the advantage of having these skilled craftsmen. Still, in defiance of conventional wisdom and local gossip, he built the *Ho Phra Bat* with 110 centimeter thick load-bearing brick walls, which is, as

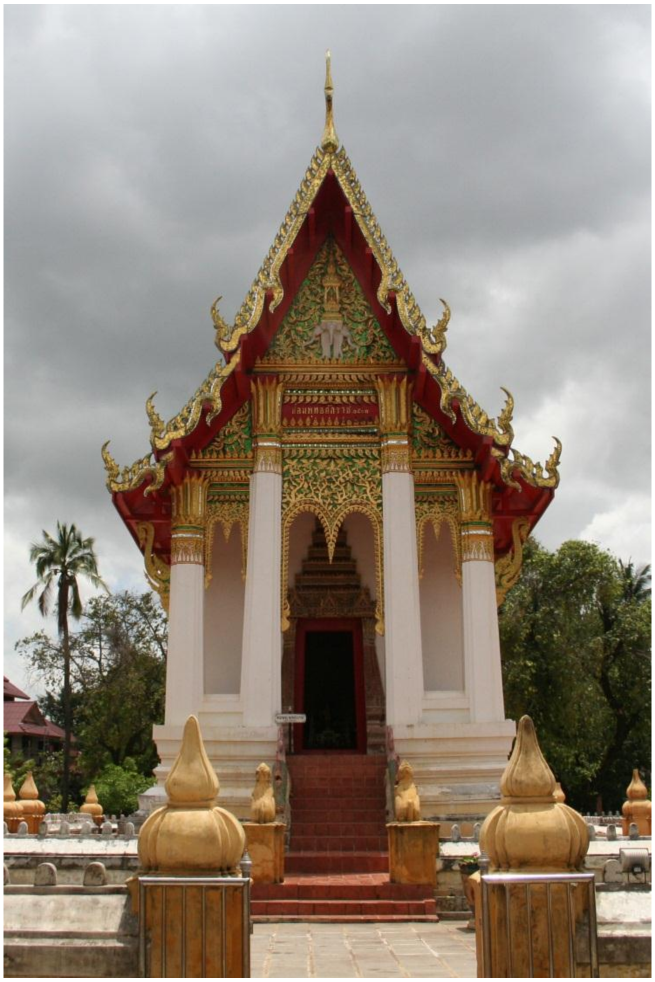

Figure 2: The front view of the sim at Wat Thung Sri Muang.

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[23] Yutthanawarakorn Saengaram, "Local Characteristics of the Mural Painting in the Uposatha Hall," 7.

[24] Francis Garnier, *Travels in Cambodia and Part of Laos* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 1996), 133.

Garnier noted, Chinese style compressive architecture.[25] Such defiance of local wisdom would have been difficult and could only have come from an insistence on the need to demonstrate change and transcend the local.

This wishful description of a partnership between the Siamese and Lao traditions would seem to be more adequately characterized as the collaboration of an instigator and artisan. Even allowing for multiple renovations, the *sim* is in classic Ratanakosin style. The design elements most often referred to as evidence of Lao influence are the decoration and motif within the gable board. Here, Phra Khru Chang is credited with recreating significant elements from the gable board design from Wat Sisaket in Viang Chan. [26]

This can be seen in the shape and forms of the foliage that surround the central image,[27] but at Wat Sisaket the framed image of the deity is sitting alone, holding a sword vertically in his right hand while his left hand is on his chest holding flowers.[28]

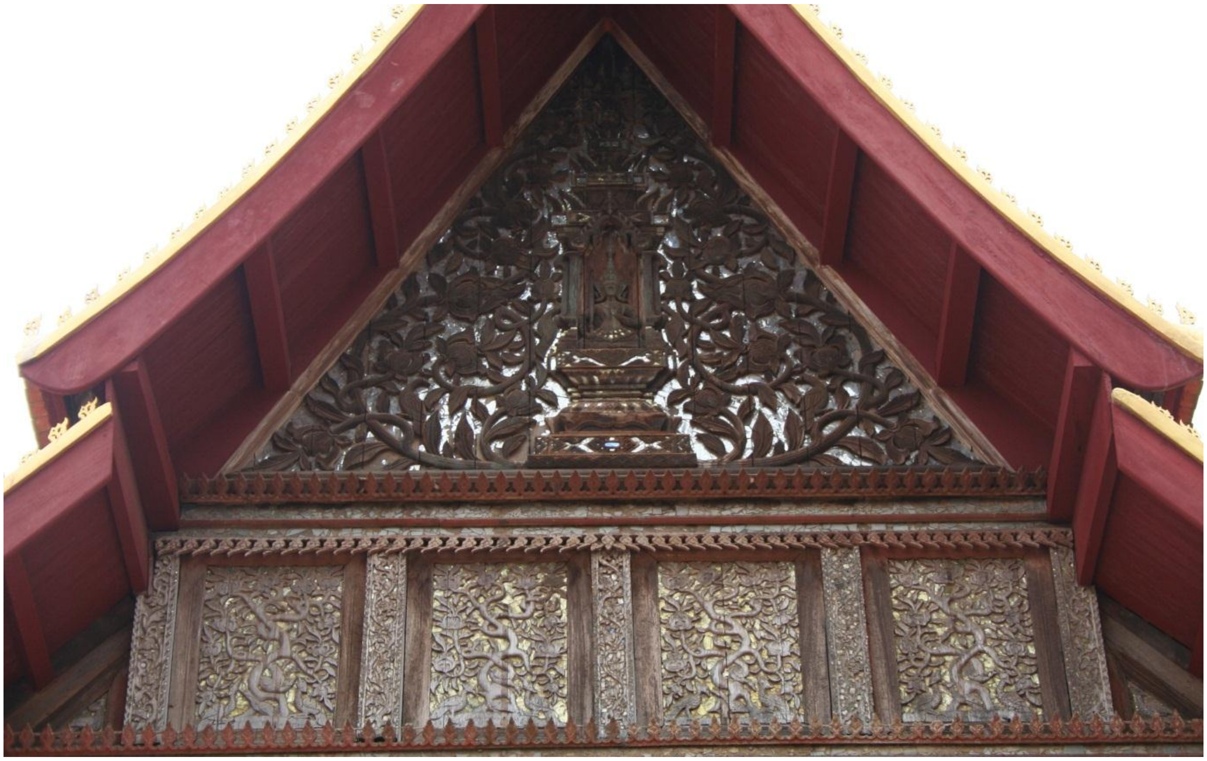

Figure 3: The gable at Wat Sisaket Viang Chan.

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[25] Yutthanawarakorn Saengaram, "Local Characteristics of the Mural Painting in the Uposatha Hall ," 9.

[26] The notion of Lao and Siamese partnership partnership fits very well with the desire of the writers of the Bangkok historical narrative to stress successful integration.This theme is central to Yutthanawarakorn Saengaram's analysis of all of the buildings constructed by Chao Khun Phra Ariyawongsajarn and Phra Khru Chang ,title of the whole inquiry is "local characteristics" Yutthanawarakorn Saengaram, "Local Characteristics of the Mural Painting in the Uposatha Hall."Such an analysis forms the basis of all tourist promotion and innumerable websites dealing with or promoting Ubon Rachatani.

[27] Yutthanawarakorn Saengaram, "Local Characteristics of the Mural Painting in the Uposatha Hall," 125.

[28] Thongmy Duansakda, Vet Masenay, Khamphao Phonekeo, Hoang Vankhoan, eds., *Vat Sisaket in Vietiane: Story, Art, and Architecture Lao Cultural Heritage*, trans. Kiao Kangphachanpheng (Vientiane, 2009), 57.

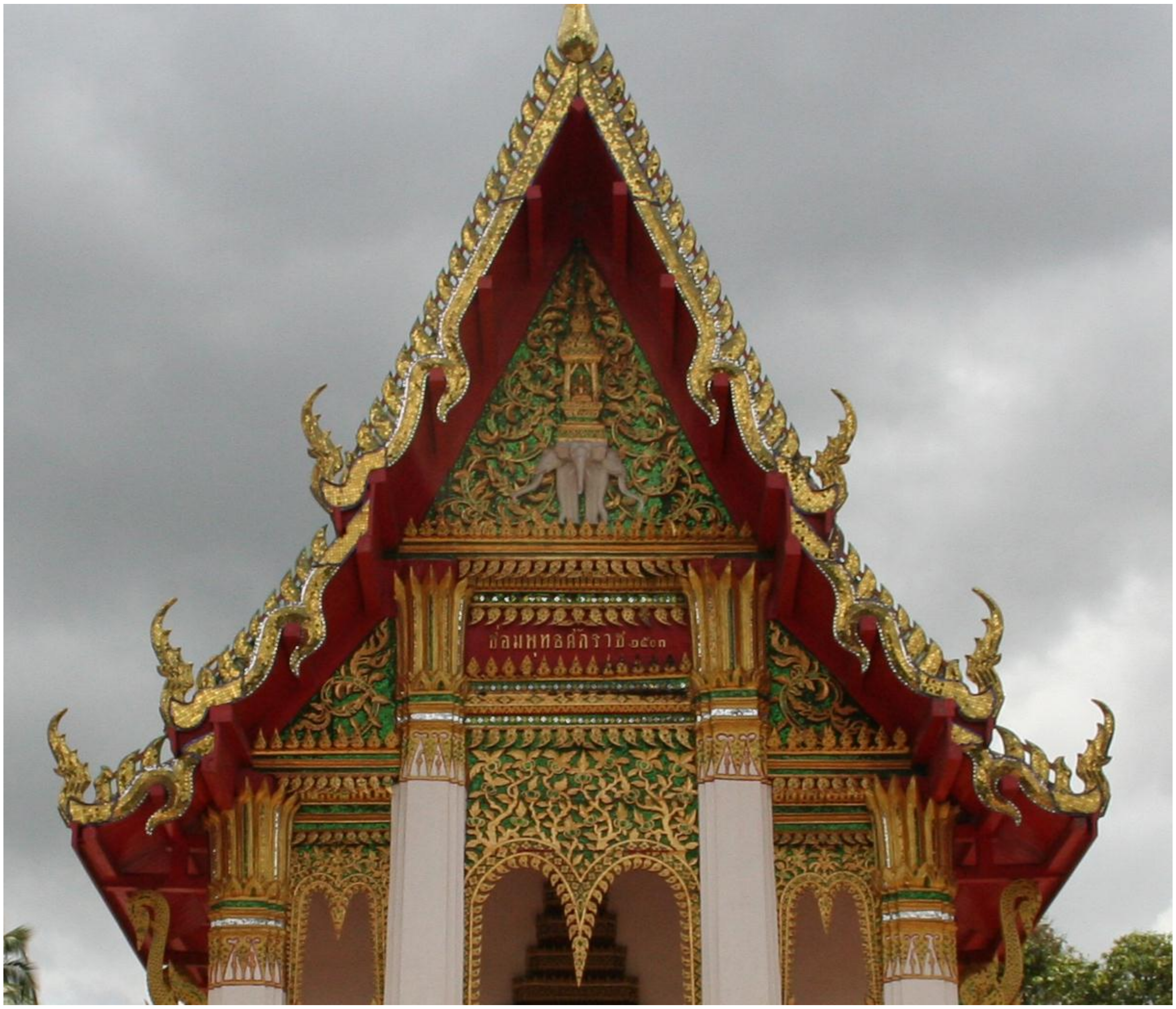

Figure 4: Detail of the gable at Wat Thung Sri Muang.

At Wat Thung Sri Muang the framed deity is a simpler figure; his hands on his knees, and he is riding on a three headed elephant. Clearly, this is Indra (known locally as Sakka) riding on Airavata (known locally as Erawan). This image of Sakka on Erawan is recognised as a significant Lao image, one which Mayoury and Pheuiphanh Ngaosyvathn further associate with Chao Anuvong, whose followers swore by Sakka. What is more, it forms the central decorative element seen on the famous candle bearer that Chao Anuvong placed in Wat Sisaket.[29] However, it was also a very common image in Bangkok; for example, it is the central image of the main *prang* at Wat Arun, which was being finished during the time Chao Khun Phra Ariyawongsajarn was in Bangkok. Sakka is the ruler of Trayastrimsa heaven and was charged with the defence of Buddhism, a responsibility that is extended to, and thus legitimates royal power on this earth.[30]

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[29] Mayoury Ngaosivat and Pheuiphanh Ngaosyvathn, *Chao Anou, (1767-1892), The Lao People, and Southeast Asia* (Vientiane: Lao PDR Printing Agency, 2010), 71.

[30] Ishii Yoneo, *Sangha, State, and Society*, 42-43.

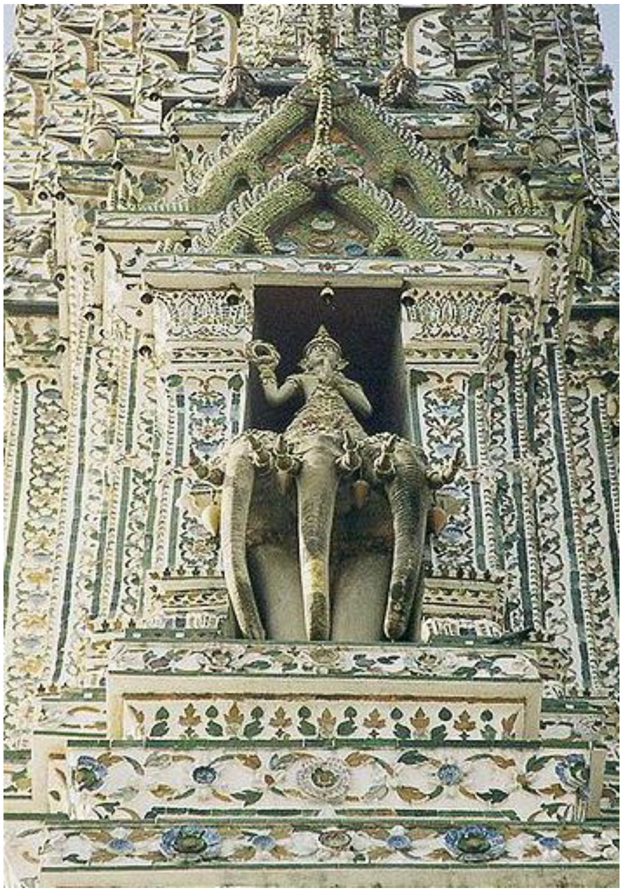

Figure 5: Indra riding Erawan at Wat Arun in Bangkok. Photo: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Bangkok_Wat_Arun_Phra_Prang_Indra_Erawan.jpg *accessed 21/5/2009*.

Running counter to this simple ethnic duality are the equally powerful and specifically Ubon Ratchathani localizing images, the two magnificent crocodile guardians flanking the stairs at the front of the *sim*.

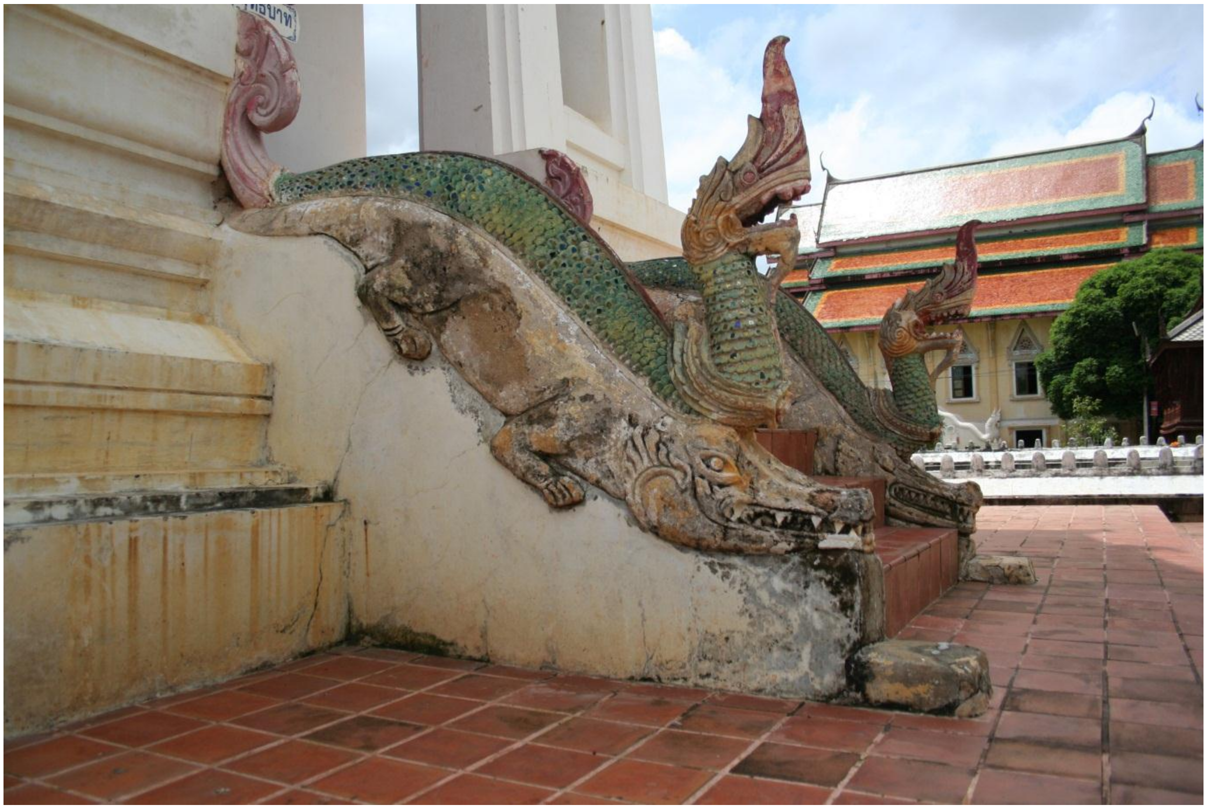

Figure 6: The original crocodile guardians at Wat Thung Sri Muang capped with the more generic naga that were added later.

At that time, the local rivers – the Mun, the Chi, and their minor tributaries, the place where Chao Khun Phra Ariyawongsajarn had grown up – were still teeming with crocodiles, and, indeed, they feature in many local stories, such as *The Biggest Crocodile in the World*.[31] These images were sufficiently contentious that later renovators felt the need to overwrite them with much more generic images of *naga*.

The place where Chao Khun Phra Ariyawongsajarn and Phra Khru Chang chose to build was prone to flooding, so, as they raised the land above the flood level to build the Ho Phra Bat, they created a pond, just to the north, which became known as Nong Mak Saw – named after the big tree that grew near it.[32] They subsequently took advantage of this pond to build one of Ubon's greatest treasures, the Ho Trai Klang Nam, the library in the center of the pond just to the north of the Ho Phra Bat. This library is also described as an integration of Lao, Siamese, and even Burmese motifs, but I believe it was more likely a re-creation of the library from his youth – the library at Wat Saket, as it was before Rama III renovated it and filled in the pond in which it which had stood when Chao Khun Phra Ariyawongsajarn was a student there.[33] This grouping of new buildings became known as Wat Thung Chai Muang signifying it was at the edge of the *thung* but as the city developed the name was changed to Wat Thung Sri Muang, which remains its name today.[34]

In a similar way, as a loyal agent of Bangkok, Chao Khun Phra Ariyawongsajarn founded a language school to teach Siamese and Pali.[35] Local educational practices had always been based in Lao and Khmer scripts, which meant that in many places only the Chao Muang and a few of his officials were capable of reading and writing in Siamese. The school attracted many people from Ubon Ratchathani and from across the greater region, especially the children of the elite who recognised that a knowledge of central Thai, now the language of power, was a necessity. For monks, however, effective Pali skills were regarded by the modernisers a crucial requirement for a proper understanding of Buddhism's intellectual corpus, and a means of moving beyond the local vernacular tradition.

Chao Khun Phra Ariyawongsajarn was a loyal agent for Bangkok, he was virtue of his birth a part of the local world, yet through his education he had become a part of the greater world beyond. He was the type of person who could offer a pluralist solution, one in which the local world could become an active partner in the new Siamese Kingdom. He was also a man with the authority to determine what could be painted on the walls of his temple.

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[31] Kermit Krueger, *The Serpent Prince: Folktales from Northeastern Thailand* (New York: World Publishing Co., 1969), 75-89.

[32] Yutthanawarakorn Saengaram, "Local Characteristics of the Mural Painting in the Uposatha Hall," 7.

[33] Phra Debgunabhorn, *Prawat Wat Saket Ratchaworamahawihan*, 17.

[34] Yutthanawarakorn Saengaram, "Local Characteristics of the Mural Painting in the Uposatha Hall," 7.

[35] Paitoon Mikusol, "Social and Cultural History of Northeastern Thailand from 1868 – 1910: A Case Study of the Huamuang Khamen Padong (Surin, Sangkha and Khukhan)" (PhD diss, University of Washington, Seattle, 1984), 165.

b) the people with the civil power and resources.

Establishing who had the civil power and control of resources to create the murals is a more complicated task. The chronicle story of the ruling elite of Ubon Ratchathani[36] begins with the coming to power of Chao Siribunyasarn (r.1760-1779),[37] the last independent king of Viang Chan. Having supported Siribunyasarn's succession, two brothers – Phra Vorarat and Phra Ta – were offended because they felt that their efforts were not adequately recognised or rewarded, and so, with extraordinary determination, they initiated a series of events that would ultimately provide the justification for the Siamese to overrun and destroy the many smaller kingdoms of the Khorat Plateau.

Offended and in dispute with the king they had previously championed Phra Vorarat and Phra Ta now refused to consent to his authority, and with their supporters, followed the usual practice of withdrawing. Leaving Viang Chan, they first tried to establish an independent kingdom in Nong Bua Lamphu, where, from behind a very secure wall, they were able to hold off the attacking forces of the Viang Chan Kingdom for three years.[38]However, with the threat of Burmese intervention on Siribunyasarn's side and Phra Ta's death in battle, Phra Vorarat realised that their situation was impossible, so he led the people out again, this time down the Mekong to Champasak, where they were afforded the protection of Chao Sayakoummane (1738-1791),[39] the second King of Champasak. This refuge also proved temporary, as after a quarrel with Sayakoummane; the chroniclers imaginatively tell us was about the city walls, Phra Vorarat once again – albeit for the last time – led his people out, retreating to Don Mod Daeng, located on the Mun River between what is now Ubon Ratchathani and Phibun Mangsahan.

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[36] Sources on the story of this conflict come from Wiphakpotjanakit, *History of Isaan*, 29-58; Phra Thep Rattanamoli and Pruess, *The That Phanom Chronicle*, 55-68; Charles Archaimbault, "Le Histoire de Campasak," *Journal Asiatique* 294 (1961): 523-34.

[37] Kings of Viang Chan (chronicled Lao rulers):

Setthathirat II (Sai Ong Ve)	1707-1735	Nephew of Suriyavongsa (Luang Prabang)
Ong Long	1735-1760	Half-brother of Sai Ong Ve
Siribunyasan	1760-1779	Son of Ong Long
Nanthasen	1779-1794	Son of Siribunyasan
Inthavong	1794-1804	Son of Siribunyasan
Anuvong	1804-1828	Son of Siribunyasan

See: Peter Simms and Sanda Simms, *The Kingdoms of Laos: Six Hundred Years of History* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 1999); Souneth Phothisane, *The Nidan Khun Borom: Annotated Translation and Analysis* (University of Queensland, 1996); Martin Stuart-Fox, *Historical Dictionary of Laos*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2001).

[38] The construction of the town and its walls took six years. Toem Wiphakpotjanakit, *History of Isaan*, 49.

[39] Kings of Champasak (chronicled Lao rulers):

Soysisamout	1713-1737	Grandson of Suriyavongsa (Luang Prabang)
Sayakoummane	1738-1791	Son of Soysisamout
Fay Na	1791-1811	Son of Phra Vorarat; not of royal descent
Interregnum	1811-1813	
Phom Manoy	1813-1819	Nephew of Sayakoummane

See: Simms and Simms, *The Kingdoms of Laos;* Souneth Phothisane, *The Nidan Khun Borom*.

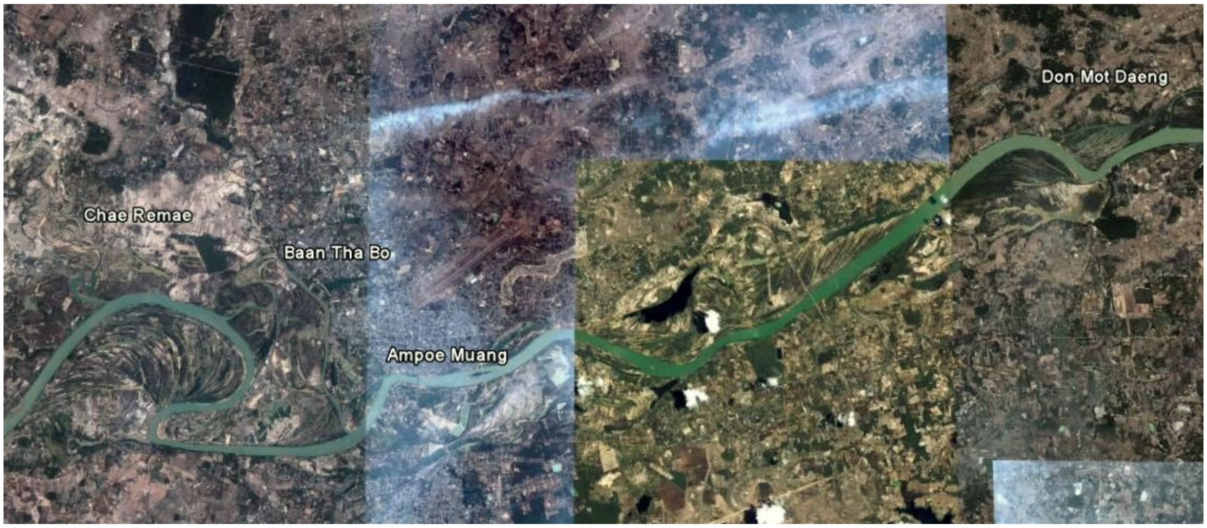

Figure 7: Showing the changing locations of the settlement. First to Don Mot Daeng (far right), and then after the war, moving further across to Chae Ramae (far left). Finally, as the population grew settling on the larger higher ground of what is today Ampoe Muang Ubon Ratchathani (centre). Image Google Earth, notations by the author.

Beyond the chronicler's explanation however we can see other good reasons why Phra Vorarat would have chosen Don Mod Daeng. His people were not farmers; they were entrepreneurs and adventurers and would have been assessing potential opportunities for independent economic survival. Just as their earlier settlement at Nong Bua Lamphu had given them control of a trade route into Viang Chan, Don Mod Daeng also sat on a trading route, in this case from the salt works of the lower Mun and Chi river basins across to Champasak. It probably would have appeared to be a profitable place from which to control passing trade and a relatively safe location as it would not critically threaten Champasak's economic viability. The primacy of this kind of economic reasoning in the selection of this site seems to be confirmed by what happened after the great Siamese invasions their actions initiated were successfully completed.

Having abandoned Champasak's protection, Phra Vorarat and his followers were once again attacked by Siribunyasarn the king of Viang Chan. Phra Vorarat was killed in a subsequent battle, but not before his appeal for vassalage, and thus the protection of King Taksin of the resurgent Thonburi kingdom had been accepted. This right to protection set in motion the Siamese invasion of the whole Khorat Plateau, which swept away all the independent kingdoms, including those of both Siribunyasarn and Sayakoummane, and left their capitals in ruins.

When the war was over, Phra Ta's son, Phra Pathum Worarat Suriyawong (Khamphong) (r. 1786- 1795) [40] claimed from the Siamese victors, as reward for his

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[40] The rulers of Ubon Ratchathani;

Phra Pathum Worarat Suriyawong (usually referred to as Khamphong)	1786- 1795	(son of Phra Ta)
Phra Prom Worarat Suriyawong (usually referred to as Phrom)	1795-1840	(brother of Khamphong)
Phra Prom Worarat Suriyawong (usually referred to as Kuthong)	1840-1863	(son of Phrom)
Chao Phrom Thewanukhro (Nokom) grandson of Chua Anuvong	1863-1886 (recalled to Bangkok 1883 still nominally king till his death 1886)	

active support, the right to settle at Bo Chae Ramae,[41] the salt-producing locality on the Huey Chae Ramae, five kilometres northwest of what would become the town of Ubon Ratchathani. The salt industry in this place was not the same as the small scale-extraction by farmers in the non-rice growing season that was common in many places on the plateau. Rather, it was a permanent industrial facility producing a commercial commodity. Being on the winning side in the war meant that Phra Pathum Worarat Suriyawong and his followers were finally in a position to expect more than to simply extract passing surpluses; now they could take possession of the space and rule. This request, and its acceptance by the Siamese, is what lead the Thai historical narrative to identify Phra Pathum Worarat Suriyawong as the founder of Ubon Ratchathani.

Through the turbulent first half of the nineteenth century the succession went as local tradition would have expected, though now it required Bangkok's approval. Upon Khampong's death, his younger brother, Phra Prom Worarat Suriyawong (Phrom) (r.1795-1840), followed as the second governor, who was then succeeded in turn by his son, Phra Prom Worarat Suriyawong (Kuthong), in 1845, around the time Chao Khun Phra Ariyawongsajarn returned to Ubon.

It was during the reign of the third governor, Kuthong (r.1845-1863), that the power of the Ubon ruling family began to increase. At the beginning of his reign, Kuthong had only the three relatively insignificant satellites of Songkhon, Lamnao, and Senang on the left bank,[42] but years of relatively peaceful progress meant that population pressure pushed the Ubon peasantry out through the lower Mun valley and up the Chi River towards Yasothon. Shortly before Kuthong died, Bangkok approved the creation of three widely separated satellite towns – Phimun, Trakanphutphon, and Mahachanachai – on the right bank of the Mekong. Three of Kuthong's sons were appointed as governors of the new towns as Ubon confirmed its claim to the extensive and rich lands of the entire lower Mun basin.[43]

By the time the third reign of the Chakri dynasty was drawing to a close, the ruling Suriyawong family had expanded their capital city into the significant town the French would later visit and describe so enthusiastically. From their original position at Chae Ramae, Phra Pathum Worarat Suriyawong and his followers developed the center of the town where we find it today, on a knoll above the high water levels. They had reason to feel confident about the future, for, shortly after his coronation in 1852, Rama IV (1851-1868), who had visited Ubon as a monk, presented his good and faithful governor Kuthong with a set of gold regalia – an honor usually reserved for princes.[44]

When we look at the period in which the murals were created, we can see that Ubon and its elite had thrived as active agents of Bangkok; nevertheless, they had a difficult heritage. The blood of so much of the old Lao world was on their hands, and yet, as they were to discover, they remained very much a part of it. Although they

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Phraya Srisinghatep (That) Commissioner in Ubon   Effectively takes control from 1882
See: Fine Arts Department, *Muong Ubon Rachathani*, Bangkok: The Fine Arts Department / Ministry of Education, (1989), 35.

[41] Toem Wiphakpotjanakit, *History of Isaan*, 56.

[42] Kennon Breazeale, "The Integration of the Lao State into the Thai Kingdom" (PhD diss., Oxford University, Oxford, 1975), 80.

[43] Breazeale, "The Integration of the Lao State into the Thai Kingdom," 81.

[44] Breazeale, "The Integration of the Lao State into the Thai Kingdom," 81.

functioned as willing tools of Bangkok, they would never be its children. These were the people who would have had the power to shape and direct the form and content of the murals under consideration here.

Establishing the literary context:

The murals are inside the *sim*, the domain of monks. There is no teaching portico in front with images for public instruction, a typical feature of the *wat* on the plains to the north and south of Viang Chan, nor are there murals on the outside walls, as is common further up along the Chi River. At first glance the murals seem to present an almost complete text book for the practising monk, providing a visual representation of all the stories necessary for the monk to functioning of a local religious system that was generally understood to be Buddhism.[45] Three of the four walls are devoted to episodes from the life of the historical Buddha, with the third carrying a completed rendition of the Vessantara Jataka – the story of the Lord Buddha's penultimate life as Prince Vessantara (known locally and hereafter referred to as Phra Wet). This was an essential text for the working monk, as it was, and still is, the centrepiece of local *wat* life and finance.

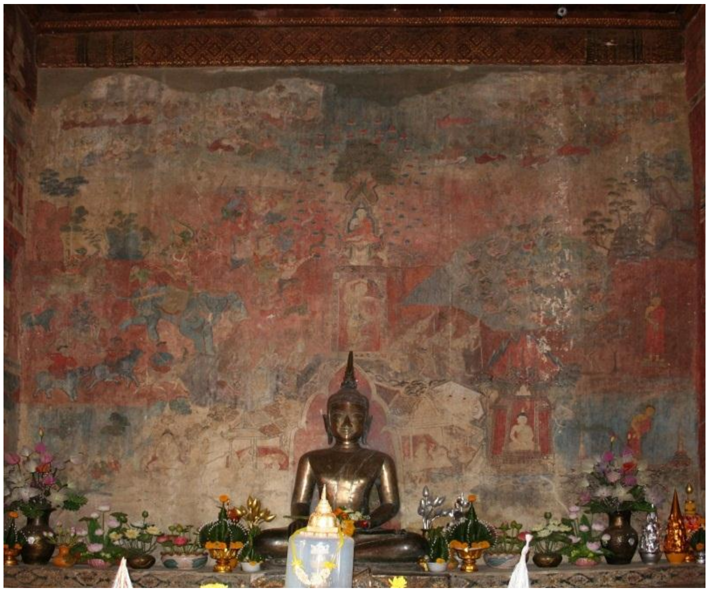

Figure 8: The wall behind the Buddha image, the victory over Mara.

The wall behind the Buddha image carries a complete rendition of his victory over Mara. This is one of the most commonly depicted images in Thai Buddhism, especially in central Thailand. It is similar to the one at Wat Saket, although there it is on the rear wall, facing the Buddha image. The original Wat Saket ordination hall murals were painted in the time of Rama III; thus, they were either completed or in the process of being completed when Chao Khun Phra Ariyawongsajarn was there. The original murals, however, were repainted in the reign of Rama VII, so it is not possible to confidently compare them.[46]

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[45] Following Hayashi Yukio's concept of practical Buddhism, I have tried to see these stories not as part of a world religion but rather as parts of world religious thought that people found useful to employ in a local context. Hayashi Yukio, *Practical Buddhism among the Thai-Lao: Religion in the Making of Region* (Kyoto: Kyoto University Press, 2003). This understanding is also informed by the work of Ian Harris, who draws a distinction between the Buddhism of the literary tradition (usually of the great centers where Pali and Sanskrit were known) and the Buddhism of the cult tradition that unified diverse sources into a practical local religion. Ian Charles Harris, *Cambodian Buddhism: History and Practice (*Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005). We have with Chao Khun Phra Ariyawongsajarn a person who would have known both worlds but who we know felt a need to bring those he was responsible for to a closer understanding of the Buddhist literary tradition that he had become part of at Wat Saket.

The full length of the wall to the right of the Buddha image carries the complete Phra Wet cycle.

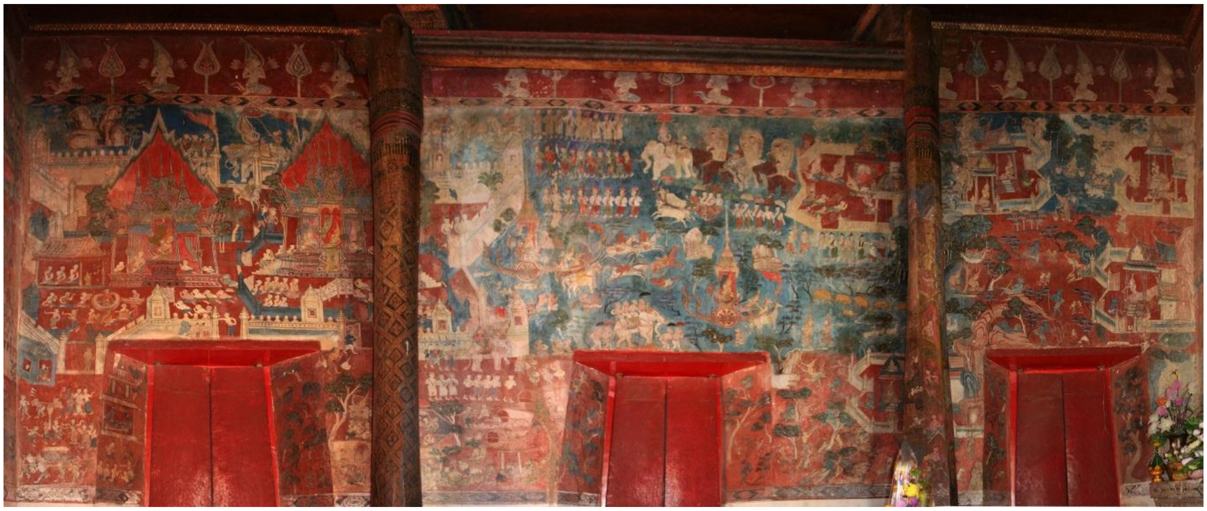
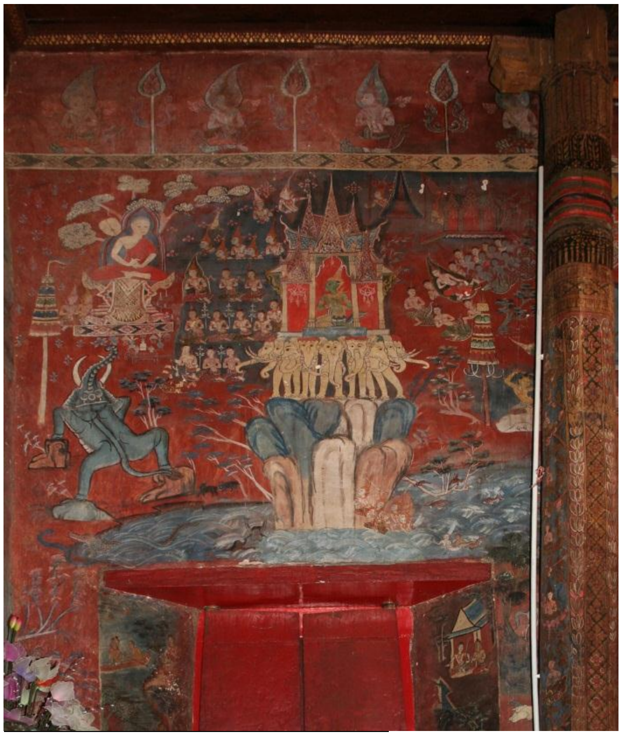


Figure 9: The full wall to the left of the Buddha image, the complete Phra Wet cycle.



To the immediate left of the Buddha image is a scene from of Phra Malai.[47] In this image, the monk is depicted ascending to meet Buddha Metteyya in Trayastrimsa heaven.[48] This particular depiction is different from other mural detailing this story as it has no representation of earth or hell (with its gory images of the punishments of the dammed). Its presence here raises some extremely important questions that go beyond the scope of this paper.

Figure 10: To the right of the Buddha image, Phra Malai.

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[46] Phra Debgunabhorn, *Prawat Wat Saket Ratchaworamahawihan*, 15.

[47] Yutthanawarakorn Saengaram, “Local Characteristics of the Mural Painting in the Uposatha Hall,” 30.

[48] This tells the story of the compassionate monk, Phra Malai, who first visits hell and carries back messages from those who are suffering to their relatives, exhorting them to make merit on their behalf. He then travels up to Trayastrimsa heaven to meet the Buddha to come, Metteyya, and learn the promise of the future. Bonnie Pacala Brereton, *Thai Tellings of Phra Malai: Texts and Rituals Concerning a Popular Buddhist Saint* (Tempe, AZ.: Arizona State University, Program for Southeast Asian Studies, 1995), 7-13.

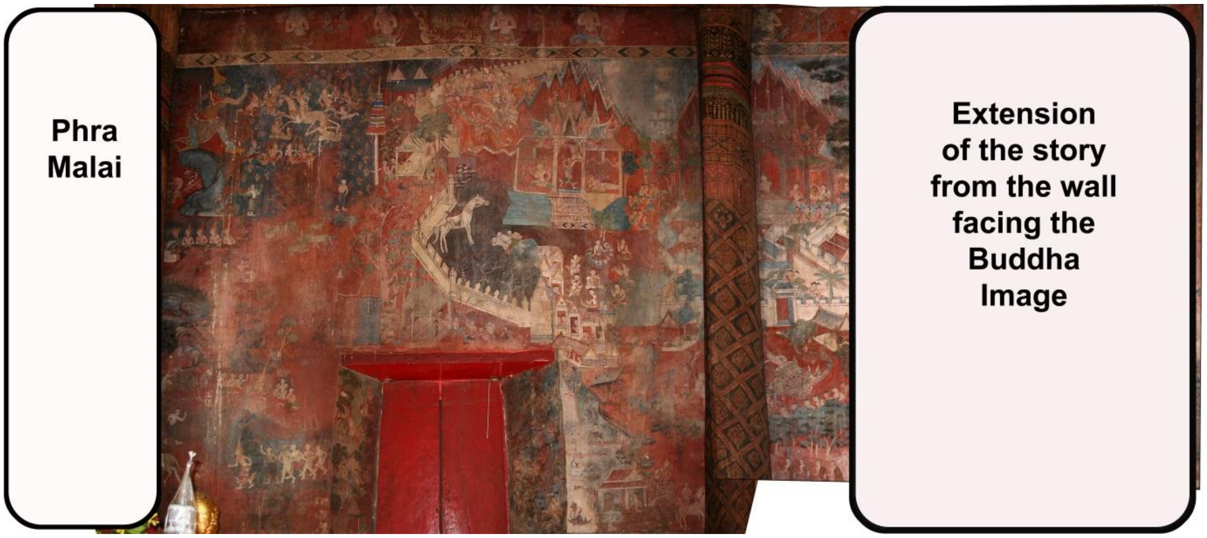
Phra Malai
Extension of the story from the wall facing the Buddha Image

Figure 11: Centre of the wall to the right of the Buddha image, the early life of the Buddha.

The middle of the wall to the right of the Buddha image presents the complete early life of the Buddha, his life as Prince Siddhartha. Here, with these images, the creators have produced an almost perfect mental map of the events of the Buddha early life – a "graphic text book" of sorts.

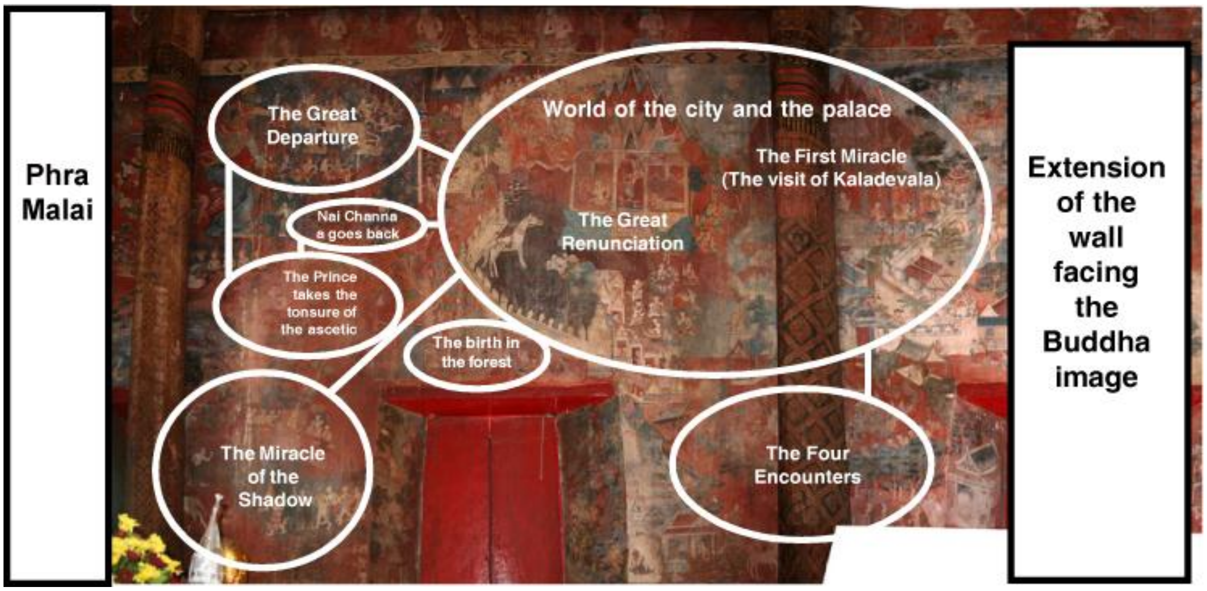
Phra Malai
The Great Departure
Nai Channa a goes back
The Prince takes the tonsure of the ascetic
The Miracle of the Shadow
The birth in the forest
World of the city and the palace
The First Miracle (The visit of Kaladevala)
The Great Renunciation
The Four Encounters
Extension of the wall facing the Buddha image

Figure 12: Schematic overlay for the centre of the wall to the right of the Buddha image, the early life of the Buddha.

At the centre of the image is the world of the city and the palace, with the essential events of the Buddha's life radiating out in smaller cameos. These scenes are set out in a way that would be easy to remember for the local monks and lay people who were likely unable to read Pali and would have known little of the great corpus of Buddhist teaching.[49]

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[49] Ishii Yoneo, *Sangha, State, and Society*, 86.

However, stories are never immutable, and the mural's depiction of the city and the palace is revealing. Even though the narratives are supposed to be set in India, the architecture is inescapably Tai. This is not unusual; religious pictures usually reflect the values and cultural forms of the communities that erect them.[50] But there is more here, for in these murals, the images and cultural values depicted are not actually from the community which created it.

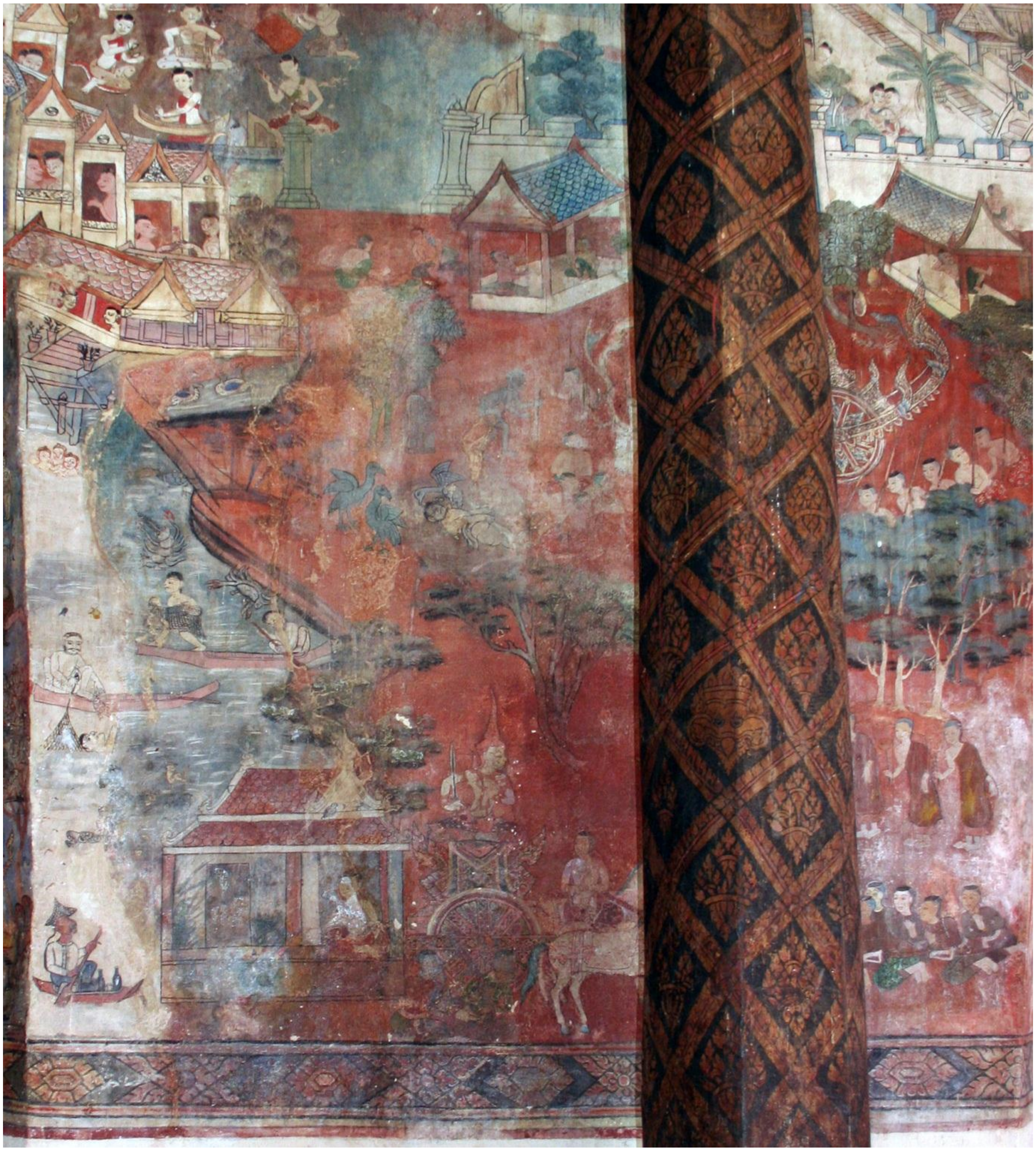

Figure 13: Detail, the setting for the early life of the Buddha.

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[50] Wyatt, *Reading Thai Murals*, 1.

At the gate of the palace in the lowest register, we see Prince Siddhartha setting out on the journey that will evolve into the story of his four famous revelatory encounters. In this depiction, we see life lived at the edge of a waterway. Just outside of the city wall, at the top of this detail, amorous couples are looking out of upper story windows over the ceramic tiled roofs of the single story houses below, built on the ground at the water's edge. At the end of the landing that extends from these houses, three small boys play happily in the water. In the foreground, a Chinese merchant paddles a small boat, selling bottled goods to a woman who looks out across the river from the window of her waterside parlour just as the prince passes by the rear of her house. This is a picture that is instantly recognisable even today – a picture of life on a Bangkok *klong*.

Such riverside scenes were never possible in Ubon; here the people could not live on the river banks and establish their villages on *dons*, small knolls that were safe from the capriciousness of the river. Also in Ubon, the houses would have been constructed from wood and thatch, raised on stilts much like the ones we see in other parts of these murals, in the places depicting the edges of the wild world of the forest. Nevertheless, on the walls of this *sim,* here in Ubon Ratchathani, the place where the life of the Buddha is being lived is unmistakably Bangkok.

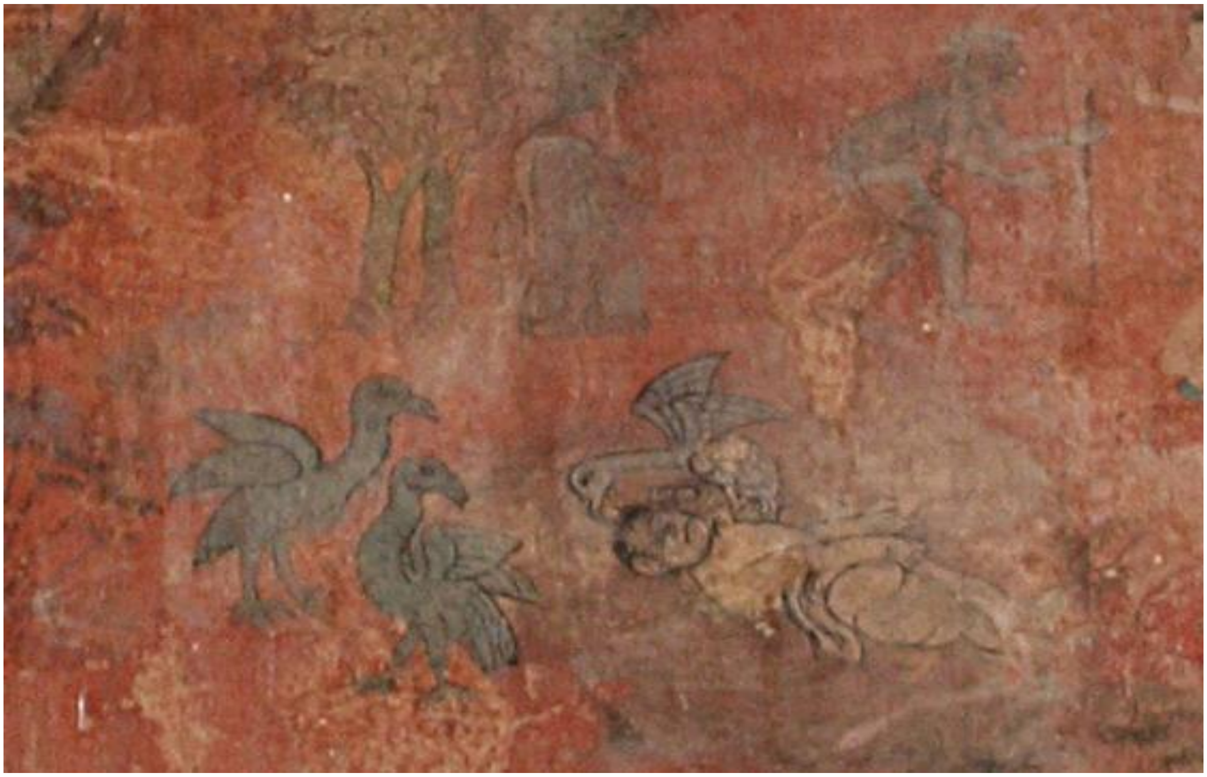

Figure 14: Detail, the dead man.

There is something even more distinctive in locating and personalising these images. When we look at the prince's encounters right at the gates of the city, we see the dead man, depicted as a portly man surrounded by vultures, one of which is pecking at the man's head while others eagerly wait nearby to consume the flesh.

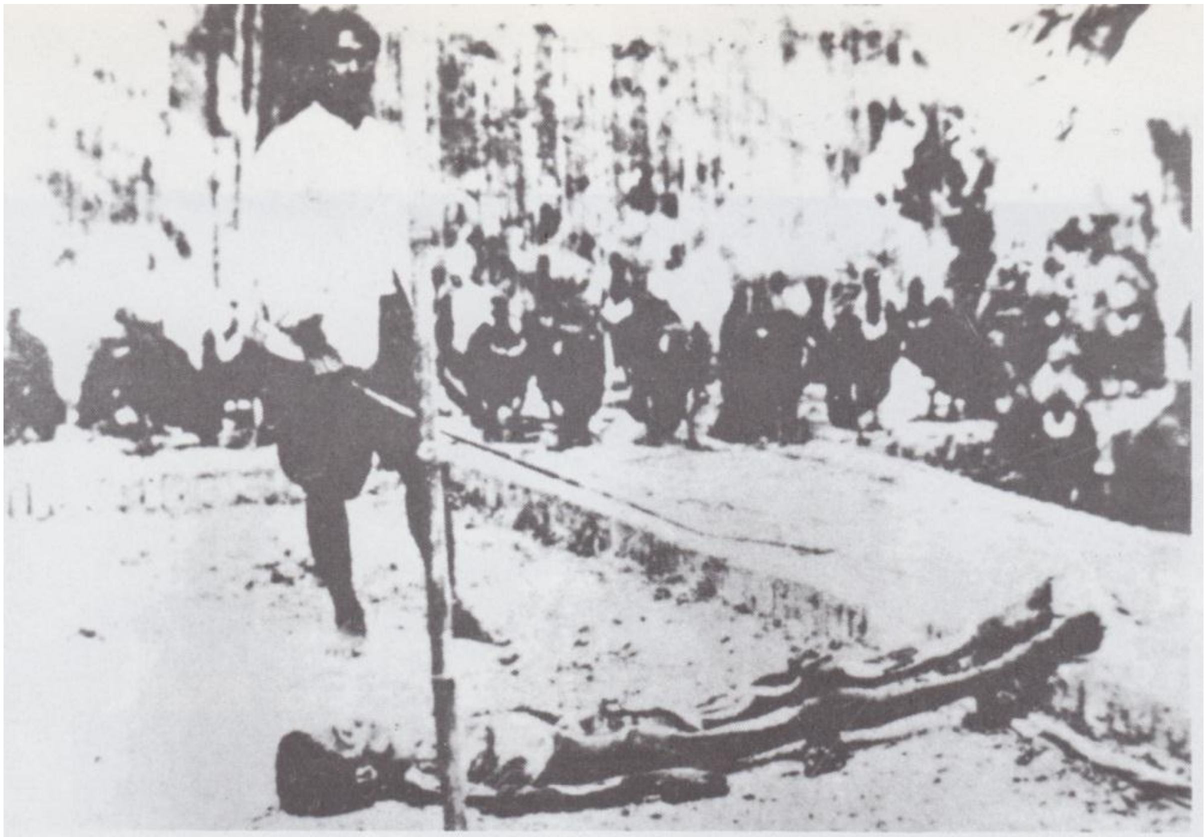

Figure 15: Photograph of a corpse and vultures at Wat Saket. Here the undertaker is using a stick to hold back the vultures. (Phra Debgunabhorn 1991 figure 58.)

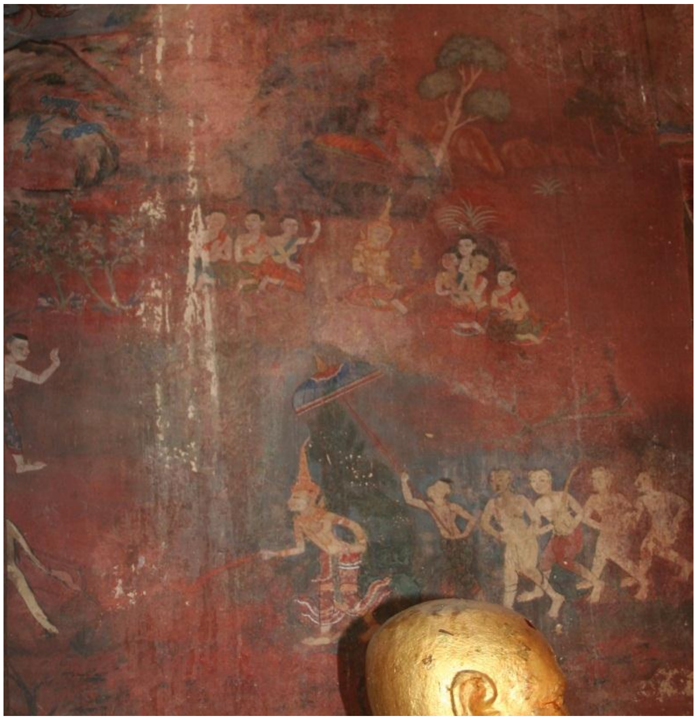

Figure 16: Detail, The miracle of the shadow.

The thing that made Wat Saket notorious in Bangkok and an unlikely pleasure trip destination was its function as the place where excarnation was practised. The trees and the courtyards were black with vultures waiting to feed on the flesh of the deceased devout. This is a scene that the young Phra Ariyawongsajarn would have seen every day of his time at the *wat*.

Similarly, in another scene, painted on the other side of the *sim's* window from the klong scene, the miracle of the shadow is about to happen. Here, at the royal ploughing ceremony, we have a Siamese king and the infant Buddha in the arms of a Siamese queen. The authority of Buddhism and that of the invader are combined in artistic harmony.

The most remarkable achievement among all of the murals at Wat Thung Sri Muang, however, is the enormous scene on the rear wall, so large, in fact, that it could not be contained on the rear wall alone and had to be continued on the final third of the north wall, thereby squeezing the depiction of the life of the Buddha into to the middle section.

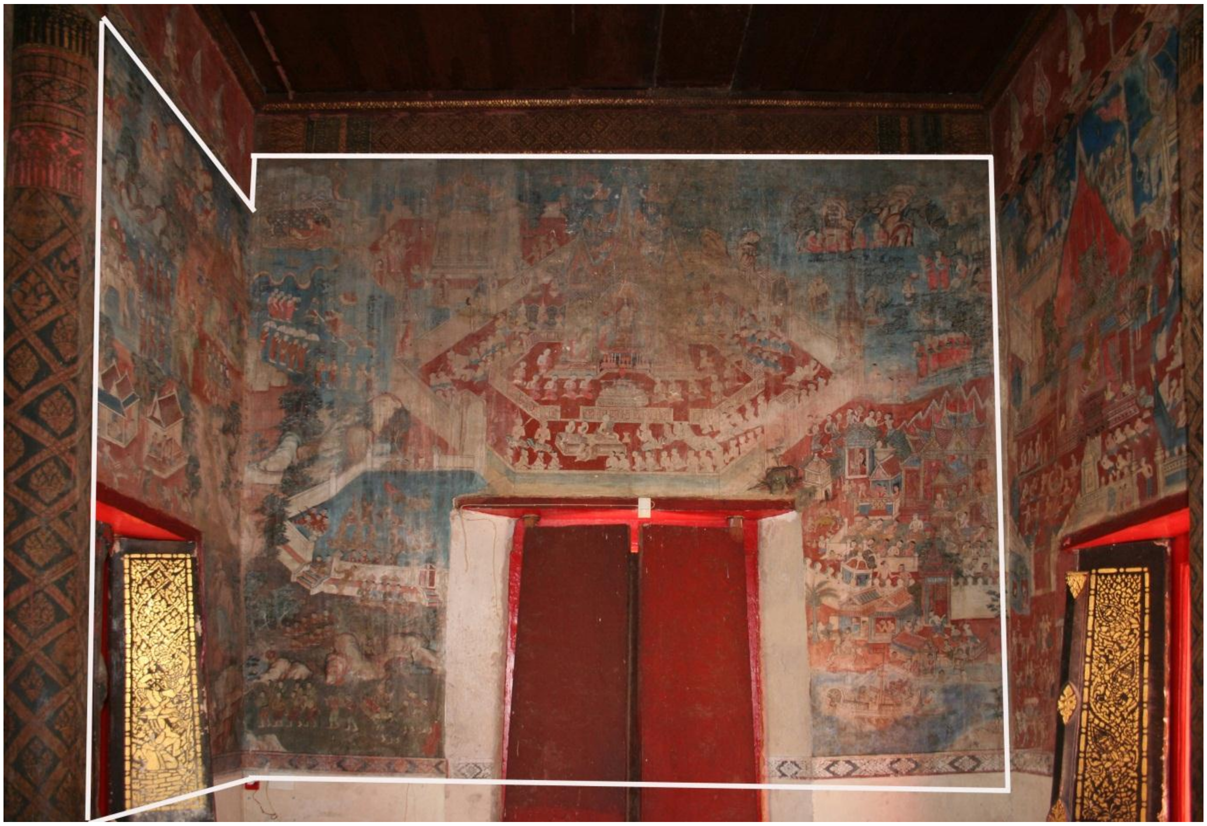

Figure 17: The Battle for the Relics, filling the entire rear wall and one third of the wall to the right of the Buddha image.

This grand scene runs more than 14 linear meters and is nearly a 100 square meters of densely packed images. Known as the War of the Relics, it is a story about which we usually only get a fragment.

Our first glance here is captured by the inescapable central image: the enormous, glowing city with the diamond motif of the *wat* at its heart. Covering most of the rear wall, it is formed, orderly, and concentric, luxuriating in a palette of reds, yellows and gold. It is a place where, even in a time of death and threatening war, pleasure is still glimpsed through every open window. Beyond the city, the colors reverse into the cooler detachment of blues which dissolve into foreboding greens and blacks. Across, on the north wall, the partial order of the straight country road and the lines of the marching armies yield at the bottom, deep in the corner, to a forest where, heavily outlined in black, grotesque misshapen rocks and hills emerge from the tangle of the wild, dark olive green vegetation. This is the wild world, the world of dangerous men, hunters, thieves and wild animals. This is the story of two conflicts between elites – elites both sacred and profane.

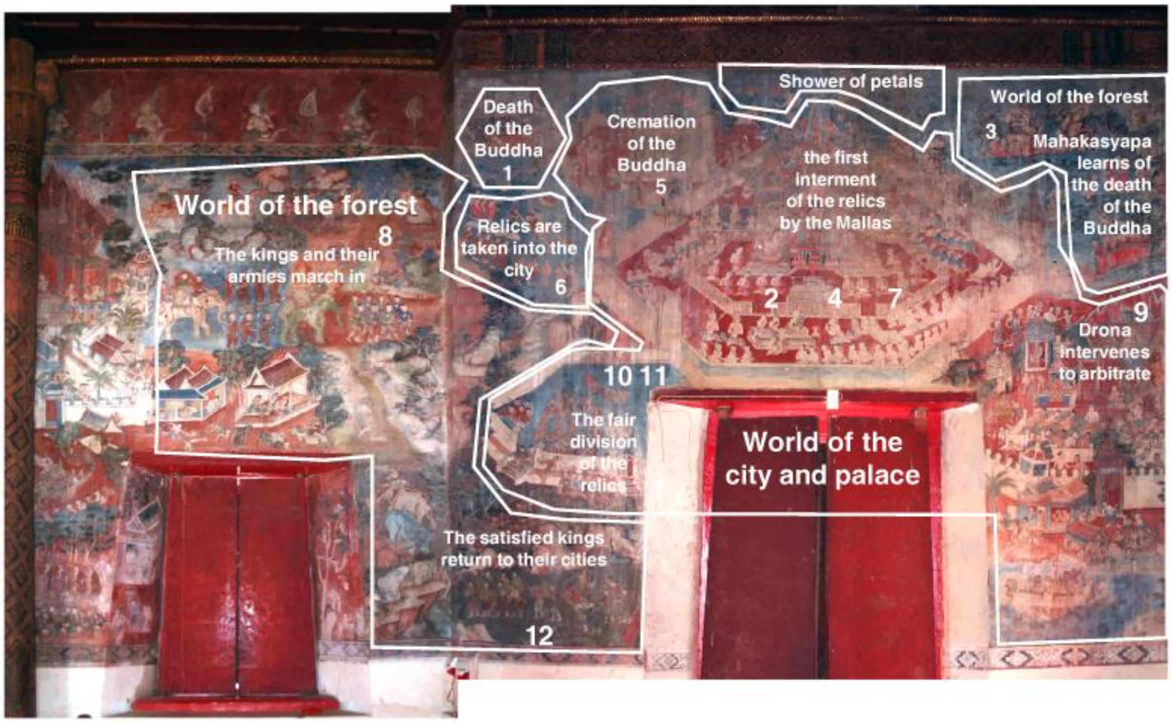
Death of the Buddha 1
Cremation of the Buddha 5
Shower of petals
the first interment of the relics by the Mallas
World of the forest
3
Mahakasyapa learns of the death of the Buddha
World of the forest
8
The kings and their armies march in
Relics are taken into the city
6
2 4 7
9
Drona intervenes to arbitrate
10 11
The fair division of the relics
World of the city and palace
The satisfied kings return to their cities
12

Figure 18: The Battle for the Relics. Images from the rear wall and one third of the wall to the right of the Buddha have been joined and digitally manipulated to create a single flat image of both walls. It has then been overlaid with a schematic diagram of the narrative.

The story, as it is presented on the walls, begins in the top left corner of the rear wall.[51] Here, in what is possibly the smallest tableau of all, the Lord Buddha passes away near the city of Kusinagari in the land of the Mallas (figure 18, frame 1).

Under the supervision of Ananda (usually called Anone by local people), the Mallas bring the Buddha's body, enshrouded in a thousand layers of cloth, to the center of their city and place it in the coffin (figure 18, frame 2). They would have proceeded with the cremation, but they found they were unable to light the cremation pyre. This is explained as the result of the restraining hands of the gods, who do not want the fire to be lit until the coming of Mahakasyapa, another of the Buddha's leading followers who, in a previous life, had promised the Buddha that he would come to pay his respects at his *parinirvana*. A promise made must be honored. Mahakasyapa, who is often characterized as a rival to Ananda, was later to play the presiding role in the first council, effectively making him leader of the majority of the followers.

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[51] In retelling the story I am combining a number of summaries: Yutthanawarakorn Saengaram, "Local Characteristics of the Mural Painting in the Uposatha Hall," 32-35; John Strong, *Relics of the Buddha* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 99-124; Parakrama Pandita, *The History of the Buddha's Relic Shrine: A Translation of the Sinhala Thupavams*, trans. Stephen C. Berkwitz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 112-33.

Mahakasyapa is shown outside the city, in the forest in the upper right corner (figure 18, frame 3), where he hears of the great teacher's death a week after it had happened. He comes quickly, hoping to be able to see the body of the Buddha and to venerate him one last time. Sources vary as to what happens next, but central to the narrative is the tension between Mahakasyapa and Ananda.[52] Mahakasyapa asks Ananda for permission to view the Buddha's body, but Ananda refuses, saying that to do so would be too difficult, for not only is the corpse wrapped in thousands of shrouds, but the iron sarcophagus housing the body is already closed and on top of the pyre. Here the conflict is justly resolved by the miraculous intervention of the Buddha himself. As Mahakasyapa approaches, the feet miraculously escape from the thousand layers of sheathe and emerge from the coffin, enabling him to look upon the body and venerate it for the last time (figure 18, frame 4). Strong comments:

> [T]he miracle of the feet, moving of their own accord after the Buddha's death, is significant because it is the first graphic example of the Buddha's ongoing magical powers.... As such, it foreshadows similar magical movements, ... commonly .. exhibited by the Buddha's relics. In fact, it may he argued that the Buddha's feet here, though attached to his body, are relics, and that Mahakasyapa's action is a precursor to the cult of the Buddha's footprints, which, .. was an important and early form of relic worship in Buddhism. [53]

With the resolution of this conflict it is possible to move to the cremation (figure 20, frame 5), an event that led to the second conflict under consideration here, that between the secular elites – the War of the Relics.

After the embers had cooled, the Mallas collected the Buddha's relics, put them in a golden casket, and placed it on a litter in order to transport it to the center of their city (figure 20, frame 6). There they enshrined the relics in a place that is variously described as a great building, a high tower, or their own assembly hall (figure 18, frame 7). Strong comments in detail on Commenting on the defensive nature of this entombment (especially as it is described in the Pali sources), Strong writes:

> [T]hey were surrounded by "a lattice-work of spears," and encircled by a "wall of bows" ... Later texts were to elaborate on these defenses and specify that the relics were surrounded by concentric circles of elephants (standing so close together that their heads touched), horses (whose necks touched), chariots (whose axle heads touched), soldiers (whose arms touched), and archers (whose bows touched) [54]

The news of the death quickly spread to the other kingdoms, and the reaction was immediate and angry. In the murals, in the upper part of the last section of the north wall, we see the immediate reaction of King Ajatasatru, ruler of Magadha. Initially shocked, he soon recovers and sends a demand that the relics be turned over to him so that they may be interred in a stupa that he will build. Aware words alone will not be enough, he equips a fourfold army and immediately marches on Kusinagari (figure 18, frame 8). However, it is not just King Ajatasatru who objects; six other kings also take up arms or threaten to do so.

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[52] Strong, *Relics of the Buddha*, 113.
[53] Strong, *Relics of the Buddha*, 113.
[54] Strong, *Relics of the Buddha*, 117.

The Mallas resist the demands with an argument that is based on the notion that possession is tantamount to ownership, and they prepare for war. The situation is resolved by the intervention (figure 18, frame 9) and arbitration of the Brahmin Dhumrasagotra (most commonly referred to locally as Donna Bhram, which is often shortened to Donna), who argues for fairness and equality. Successful in persuading the kings of their equal rights, the Brahmin goes about his task in an apparently equitable and satisfactory fashion, dividing the relics of the Buddha into eight equal shares, each one of which will be taken away to be enshrined in a *stupa* in the recipient's home country (figure 18, frame 10). For this service, he asks for and receives the vessel used in the division of the relics, which he will take back to enshrine in a *stupa* he plans to build.

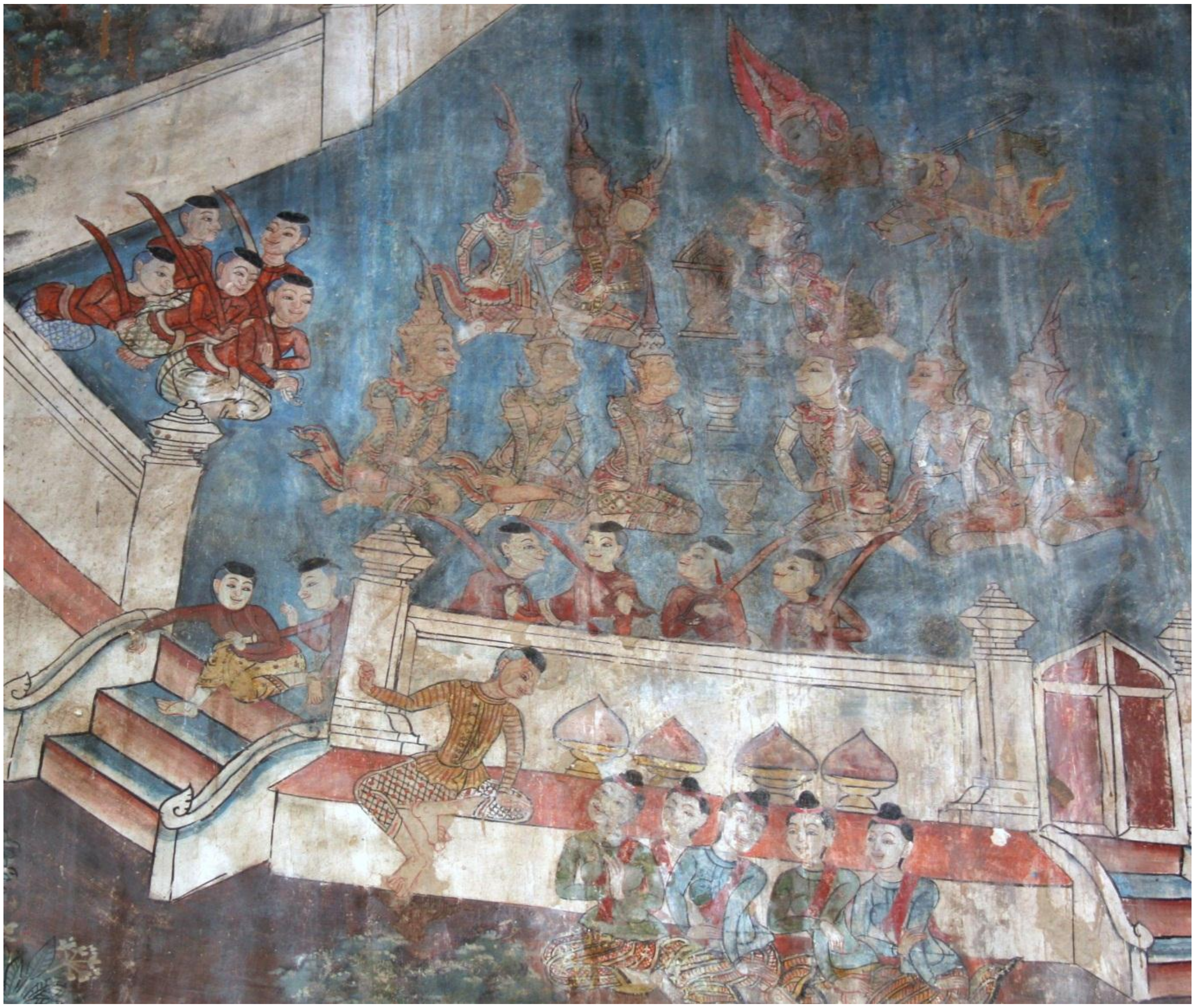

Figure 19: Detail, the Brahmin attempts to steal the eye tooth, but Sakka intervenes.

The rendition here at Wat Thung Sri Muang seems also to carry with it a later addition to the story which discredits the Brahmin, charging that this fair broker was less than fair and honest himself.[55] As he was dividing the relics, some versions add, he took the right eye-tooth of the Buddha and secreted it in his hair where it went unnoticed in the tension of the moment. The action did not go unnoticed in heaven, however, for Sakka descended to earth, stole the tooth from the thief, and took it back to enshrine in Trayastrimsa heaven (figure 18, frame 11). Finally satisfied, the other kings returned to their countries with their share of the relics (figure18, frame 12).

Inescapably, this story is not about the individual pursuit of salvation; rather, it is a message concerning appropriate behavior here in this world, a tale about public morality and civil behavior. When we look at this painting, this story, in this place, previously so dedicated and practical in its teaching we must ask why this story was chosen and why it was afforded such prominence. Clearly, there was a change in the perceived audience and, with it, a different message.

With any story that exists in common knowledge, it is the parts that the teller chooses and how they present it that shapes the meaning.

As has already been suggested, murals are public lessons, and it is fair to say they are looked upon as such. The viewer looks at the mural in order to find the initiators intent. In the preceding case, the lesson certainly involves an assertion that nothing can be owned by mere possession. At the heart of civil behavior there must be fairness and equality; without it there will be discord, chaos and – ultimately – war. Regarding the conflict between Ananda and Mahakasyapa, this assertion is endorsed by none other than the Lord Buddha himself and his “miracle of the feet.”

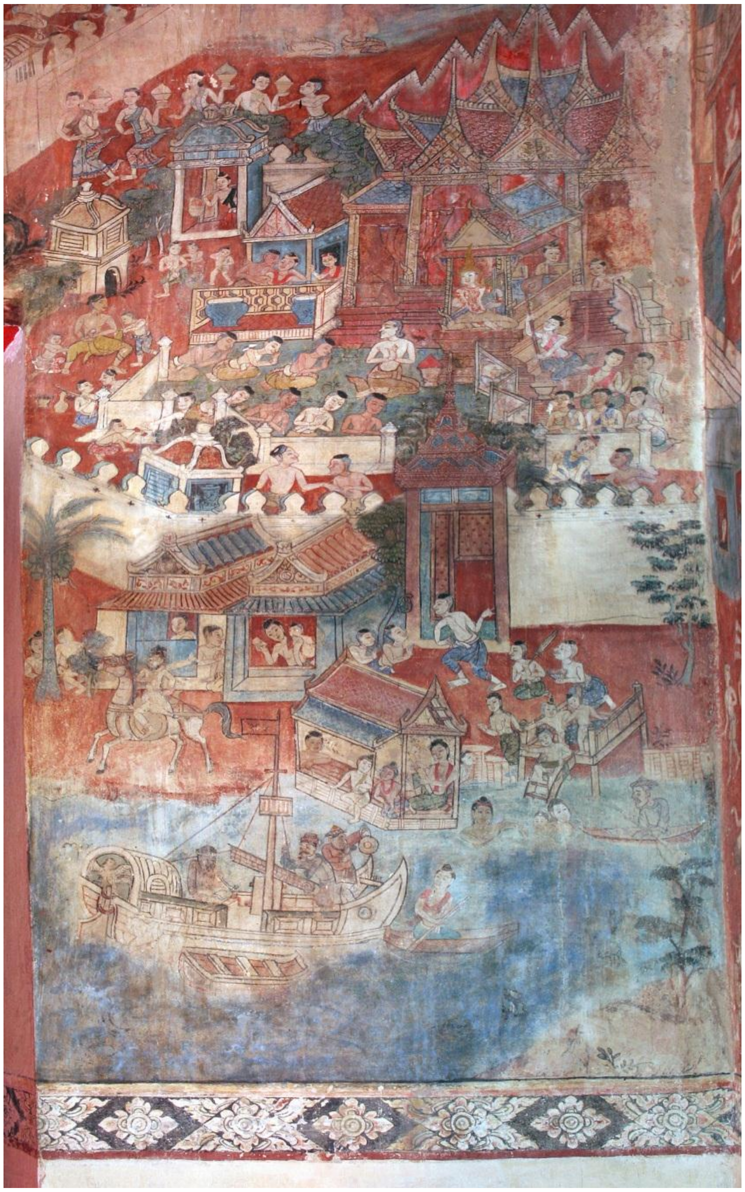
Figure 20: Detail, the Brahmin addressing the king.

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[55] Strong, *The Relics of the Buddha*, 120.

For the rulers, it is the necessary lesson to be learned if they are to avoid the death and destruction that war would visit upon them all. Rulers may have the power to control and possess, but they are still bound by the universal laws. Fairness and equality is a duty even to the highest ranking individual.

Even if the message is open to interpretation, there can be little doubt concerning the intended audience of this lesson. As we look into the palace, we can see the Brahmin addressing the king.

Right in front of the palace gate is a broad river with children playing in the shallows while, just beyond them, a mother bathes her child. In the middle of the river, a Chinese junk announces its departure, and, as a crewman is hauling up a sail, it passes by what was then the most common and distinctive style of Bangkok living – a house built upon pontoons of bundled bamboo, moored to the river bank. A viewer cannot avoid seeing that this town is Bangkok and the king being chastised is the king in Bangkok.

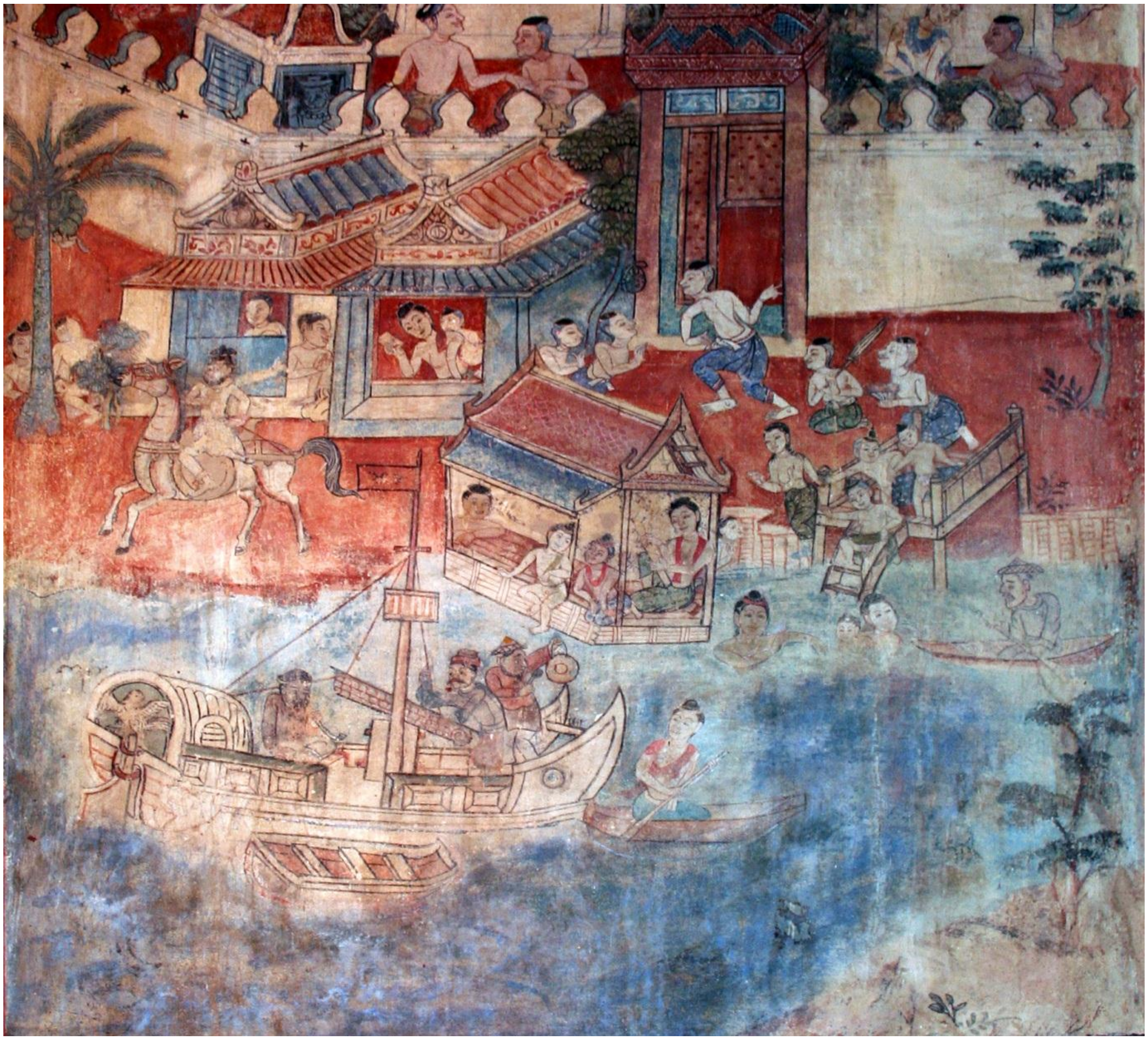
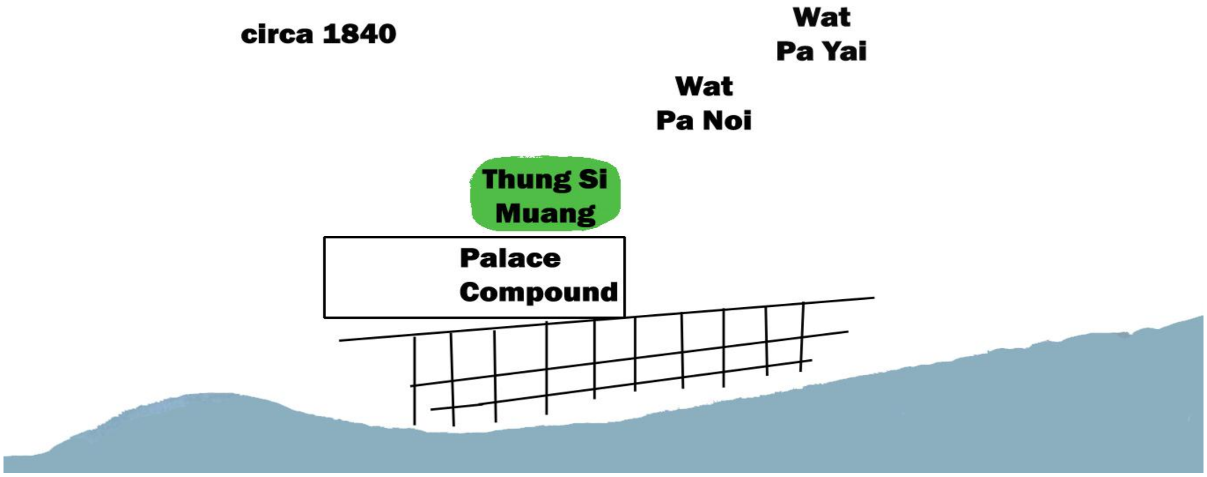


Figure 21: Detail, the water gate of the palace and a junk on the river.

The changing context - Ubon Ratchathani as the murals were being painted:

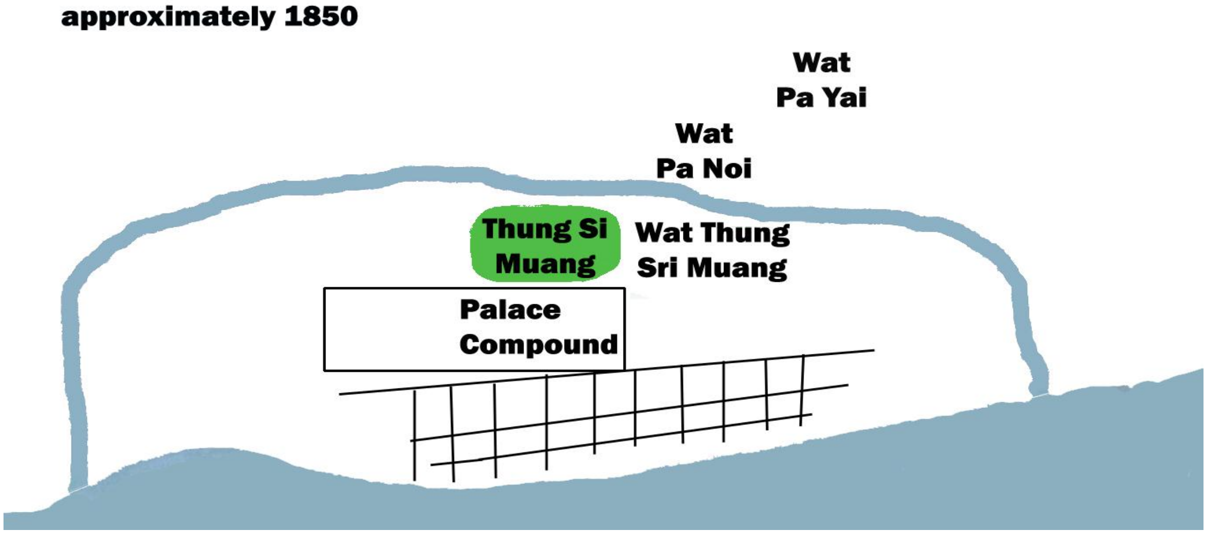
a) Changes to ecclesiastic power

When Chao Khun Phra Ariyawongsajarn arrived back in the place of his birth, he carried with him the royally-granted authority to govern all the monks in the region. At that time, as we have seen, he had come to live at Wat Pa Noi which had only relatively recently been raised to the status of a full *wat*, the personal *wat* of the second ruler, Phra Prom Worarat Suriyawong (r.1795-1840), thereby making it the principal *wat* of the *muang*.


circa 1840
Wat
Pa Yai
Wat
Pa Noi
Thung Si
Muang
Palace
Compound

Map 3: Map of the town circa 1840.

We can assume at that stage that the moat described by Aymonier would have been dug, or was in the process of being dug. The latter is more likely because it is recorded Wat Thung Sri Muang was built just inside it, serving to distinguishing it from Wat Pa Noi and Wat Pa Yai, which were so named because they remained in the forest.

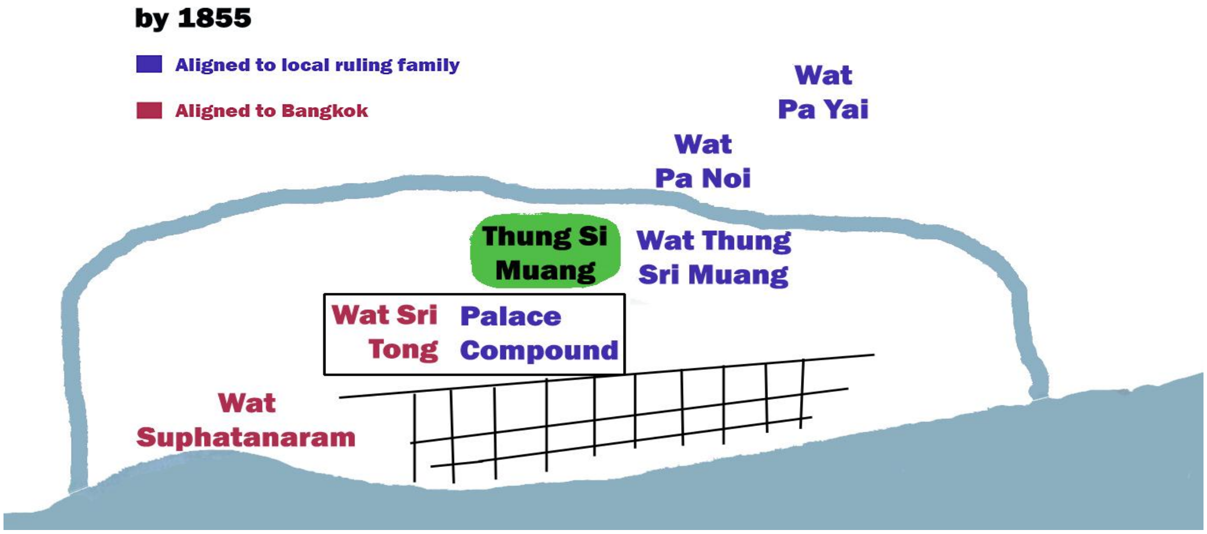

approximately 1850
Wat
Pa Yai
Wat
Pa Noi
Thung Si
Muang
Wat Thung
Sri Muang
Palace
Compound

Map 4: Map of the town showing changes by 1850.

Even before Chao Khun Phra Ariyawongsajarn had begun to build his new *wat*, the world he had come from had changed. On April 2, 1851, Rama III died and was succeeded by the new king, Rama IV (Mongkut).

As a monk, Mongkut had been disdainfully tolerated by his rather devout but orthodox uncle, Rama III. A rationalist and a modernizer, Mongkut was a controversial figure. A reformer who lacked power beyond his immediate circle, he found the only path open to him as a monk was that of separation. Thus, with the assistance of six monks sympathetic to his ideas, he created a new community, the Thammayut. This act, explicitly ridiculed by Rama III and the leaders of the *sangha* on account of its adoption of Mon practice, was all the more confrontational because the required re-ordination implicitly suggested that the old Thai *sangha* was corrupt.[56] The effects of such zealous activity could have easily been absorbed by the inertia of the main body of the sangha if not for the sudden elevation of Mongkut, its founder to the position of supreme secular and ecclesiastical power. This community and its separate hierarchy of governance yielded a legacy of sectarian discord for the next hundred years, because, due to royal favor, the much smaller Thammayut community exercised power and influence well in excess of their numbers.[57]

The succession had an immediate effect in Ubon. Rama IV, in one of his earliest acts as king (1853), financially supported the establishment of a new *wat* in Ubon Ratchathani. This was the first temple of Thammayut on the Khorat Plateau, and its Bangkok monks brought with them the Thammayut's new anti-superstitious, academic-based curriculum. The new *wat* was located inside the town, on the bank of the river – a place the Rama IV remembered from his tour. It was named Wat Suphatanaram in accordance with the king's decree, meaning "temple at an appropriate location, a good harbor." It was, therefore, a royal *wat*, its community of Thammayut monks were not under the local *sangha* authorities, and, perhaps most importantly, the first abbot, Phra Tawatammee (Mao), was a royal relative.



Map 5: Map of the town by 1855 showing rapid change after the accession of Rama IV in 1851 and the arrival of the Thammayut.

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[56] Ishii Yoneo, *Sangha, State, and Society*, 155.
[57] Ishii Yoneo, *Sangha, State, and Society*, 106-7.

The effect on civil power was just as immediate. Kuthong, so recently honoured, suddenly needed to accommodate the new situation.

From within the walls of the palace compound, a plot of twenty five *rai* of the garden grounds belonging to the Uparat was donated for the purpose of building a new *wat*, which would become the principal *wat* of the *muang*. Phra Tawatammee came from Wat Suphatanaram to be the abbot of the new Wat Sri Tong and immediately initiated an energetic building program.[58] From that point, any man wishing to be ordained had to have the permission of the Chao in the palace and the abbot at Wat Si Tong. Ecclesiastic authority and power had been taken from Chao Khun Phra Ariyawongsajarn and given to a Bangkok-born Siamese lord.

b) Changes to civil and political power

For the local people, far worse was to come. Rama IV had awarded Kuthong princely regalia, thereby officially recognizing the place and the person; however, he did not upgrade his rank. On Kuthong's death, for reasons external to the local politics of Ubon, Bangkok decided to pass over his sons and relatives and appoint a Bangkok-educated, Viang Chang prince, Chao Phrom Thewanukhro (Nokom) (r.1863-1886), as the first king of Ubon Ratchathani.[59] It was the first time that Bangkok had arbitrarily asserted its prerogative not to follow local recommendation; in doing so, it abandoned local consent. The decision ended the century-long rise of the loyal and successful ruling Ubon family, and imposed on the town a ruler they bitterly denounced as a foreign prince.[60]

Bangkok may have seen him as a Lao prince ruling a Lao state, but this assumption of common ethnic identity is a centralist imagining, and it highlights the difference between the great trading kingdoms of the coast and the principalities of the Khorat Plateau. [61] These *muang* were territorially defined entities that integrated all who lived in the physical space into a common local identity.[62] The accepted mechanism to express disfavor was to abandon the space, and it was not an unusual event.

This process of defiance and withdrawal, with its implicit territoriality, had been the very mechanism that had brought this family to Ubon. In its creation, the blood of their forbears had been spilt across the breadth of the plateau. However in this place they were no longer a non-consenting minority but, rather, a violated majority withdrawing their consent.

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[58] Phra Kaew Busarakham *Wat Sri Ubon Rattanaram Ubon Ratchathani*. (Wat Sri Ubon Rattanaram Ubon Ratchathani), 2010.

[59] Breazeale, "The Integration of the Lao States into the Thai Kingdon," 81.

[60] Breazeale, "The Integration of the Lao States into the Thai Kingdom," 115.

[61] Rama V justified the Siamese claims to the lands of the Khorat Plateau on ethnic grounds stressing the Lao as a cognate of the Thai race. See Rama V's speeches cited in Breazeale, "The Integration of the Lao States into the Thai Kingdom," 114.

[62] Richard A. O'Connor, review of *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* by Thongchai Winichakul, *The Journal of Asian Studies* 54, no. 4 (1997): 280; Richard A. O'Connor, "Who are the Tai? A Discourse on Place, Activity, and Person" in *Dynamics of Ethnic Cultures across National Boundaries in Southwestern China and Mainland Southeast Asia*, eds. Yukio Hayashi and Yang Guangyuan (Chiang Mai: Lanna Cultural Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University, 2000), 35-50.

Without consent, Chao Phrom was unwelcome. His legitimacy rested entirely on Bangkok's whim, and, because his appointers saw him as one of the others – i.e., a potential rebel – he was also denied military support, which is, perhaps, ironic given it was the capricious exercise of violence that had legitimated Bangkok's own assumption of power.

As the people's refusal to cooperate became an increasingly serious problem, Bangkok's first responses were legalistic, demanding obedience, but even when the *ratchawong* and *ratchabut* – high officials and leading members of the displaced ruling family – were imprisoned in Bangkok, they still refused to order their supporters in Ubon to cooperate. In 1882, when Chao Phrom tried again to exert his authority over the peasants of the old family, he was met with armed resistance.[63]

Bangkok finally decided that Chao Phrom would never be able to govern effectively and recalled him, but in concluding Phrom was unable to rule without local consent implied Bangkok's sovereignty there was also contingent upon that very consent.

This crisis, together with the international situation, set the stage for what Breazeale terms the "occupation stage" in which "[t]he presence of Bangkok officials who were resident (as opposed to 'temporary, special') commissioners was required as a demonstration of Thai control. With the exception of That [Phraya Srisinghatep Commissioner in Ubon], they were not prepared to undertake internal reforms."[64]

The commissioner arrived in Ubon in April 1883, accompanied by twenty four soldiers – in case he encountered any resistance – and within a month the soldiers had become involved in brawls with the local people.[65] This commissioner-ship in Ubon Ratchathani led the way, establishing the process whereby the local elites were eliminated. Power went to a Siamese lord answerable only to Bangkok and whose authority was enforced by Bangkok's professional military capability.

Within a year the commissioner in Ubon introduced commutation tax, the first new tax to be imposed upon the province since 1791, establishing the precedent that the central government could introduce a new tax in the outer provinces. In the following year, 1885, he introduced an import tax on the entire province. He sent 90% of the revenue to Bangkok and retaining only 10% for local administration.[66] Economic control had now also passed into the hands of a Bangkok lord, effectively removing the last remaining lever of regional autonomy.

The changing social space:

What had happened to these people must have seemed inexplicable. Neither the religious nor secular authorities had given Bangkok any reason to doubt their loyalty or efficiency, and yet here, in their own place, both the religious and secular bodies of power found themselves capriciously cast aside for entirely external, non-local reasons.

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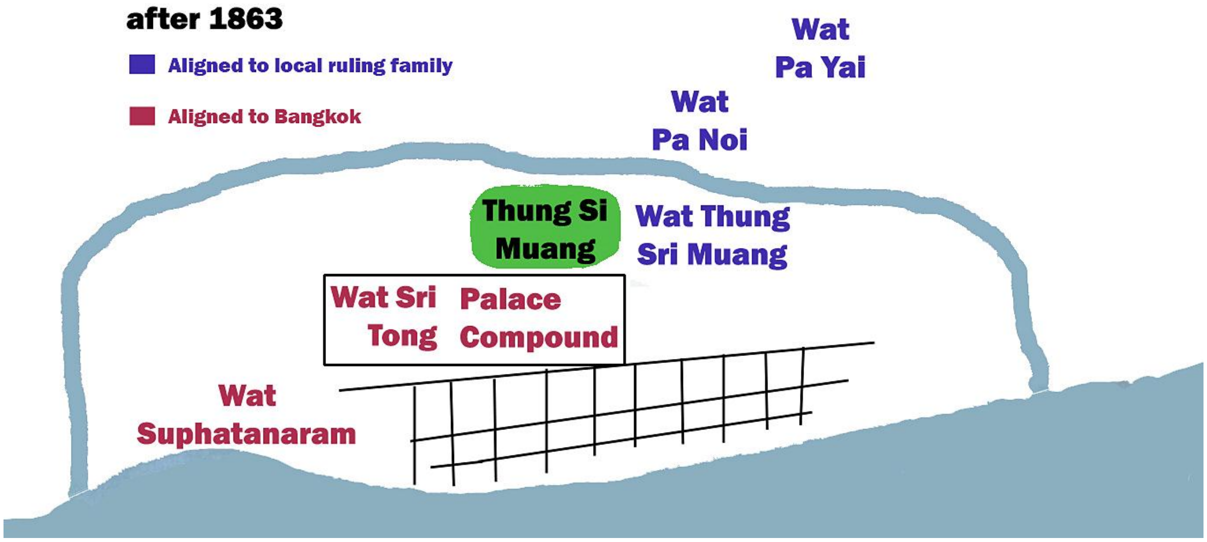
[63] Breazeale, "The Integration of the Lao States into the Thai Kingdom," 116.

[64] Breazeale, "The Integration of the Lao States into the Thai Kingdom," 130.

[65] Breazeale, "The Integration of the Lao States into the Thai Kingdom," 117.

[66] Tej Bunnag, *The Provincial Adminstration of Siam 1892-1915: The Ministry of Interior under Prince Damrong Rajanubhab* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1977), 71.



Map 6: Map of the town at the time of the arrival of Chao Phrom Thewanukhro in 1863.

Looking at a mid-nineteenth century map, we can see that the contestation of power had evolved into a spatial dichotomy. The *wat* to the southwest of the *thung* were aligned with Bangkok, and those to the northeast were aligned with and had always been recognized as those of the Suriyawong family and the local people. With Chao Phrom's appointment control of the palace tipped, uncertainly at first, but then with the commissioner's appointment irreversibly into Bangkok's hands and thus into the orbit of those to the southwest, those initiated by, and answerable to Bangkok.

The changing content:

Though exiled from the palace, the local elite would still find welcome recognition at the *wat*; thus, it is to the walls of these *wat* to the northwest that we must look in order to discover the feelings of these excluded others. It should come as no surprise that they would choose to prominently depict a story such as this, a story of conflicts both sacred and profane; rendering with it a defiant judgment of an unjust ruler and the condemnation of a possessor who imagined himself owner.

Postscript: The conversation.

A statement produces a response, and on other walls nearby we can see a conversation emerging in reaction to the murals at Wat Thung Sri Muang. The first response is that of a gentle critic, working at Wat Na Khwai less than an hour's walk to the north, who seeks only to dissent on locality. The *sim* is very small and was built in 1879 in the Viang Chan style, while Chao Khun Phra Ariyawongsajarn was still alive, and the murals are dated to that similar time by Yutthanawarakorn Saengaram.

The artist is obviously an admirer and student of the Wat Thung Sri Muang murals, for he replicates the composition and the colors. Furthermore, much like the originals, the entire body of work in the *sim* is inflected with themes and stories from the body of thought recognized locally as Buddhism.

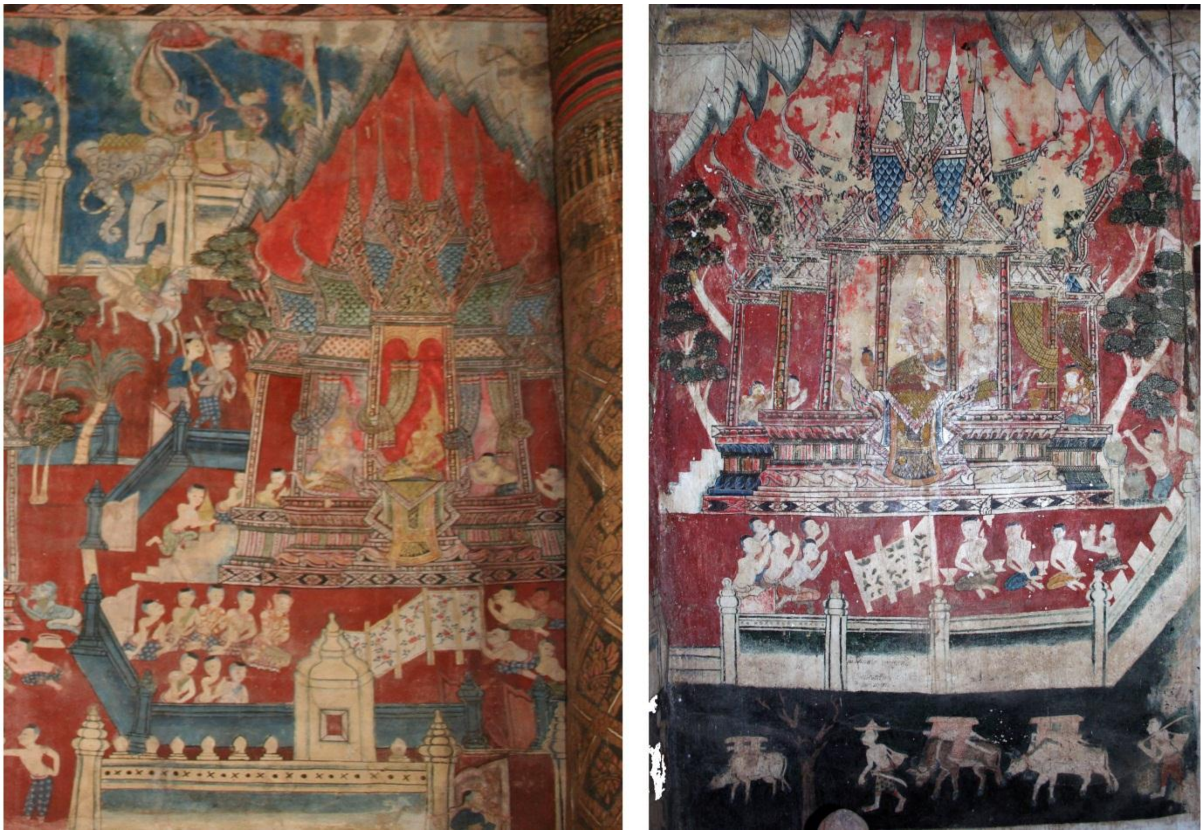


Figure 22: **Left:** Mural from Wat Thung Sri Muang **Right:** Murals from Wat Na Khwai.

Even though it is laterally reversed, there is no mistaking that the painter at Wat Na Khwai has studied and reproduced parts of the original murals; however, in a striking assertion of locality, the artist now depicts the birth in Ubon Ratchathani. As Phra Wet is born at the gate of the palace, a Kula trader has just finished loading the pack saddles on his oxen and is about to set out on the 1000 kilometer trek back to his home in the Shan states of eastern Burma.

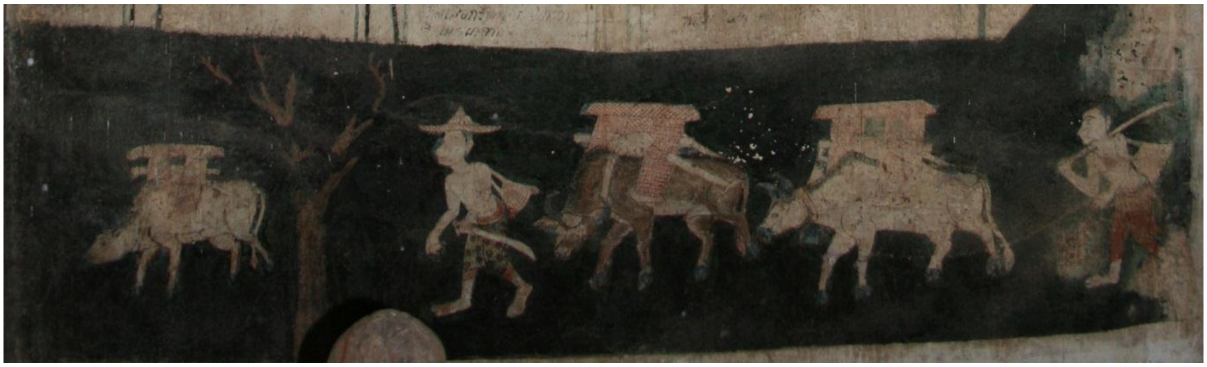


Figure 23: Detail, from the murals at Wat Na Khwai, showing the Kula trader at the gate of the palace.

It is not surprising that this *wat*, located on a grassland north of the town, was the site where the issue of locality was asserted. It would have been a rather wealthy place, and the Kula (referred to as "Burmese peddlers" by the French) were a vital part of that good fortune. The real wealth of Ubon Ratchathani was here on the grasslands (the *thungs*), where buffalo and oxen were raised. In the second half of the nineteenth century, with the opening up of the rice growing lands of the Mekong delta Chao Phraya valley and the central plains of Burma traders from all three of these regions scoured the plateau buying the livestock to provide the draught animals needed for these new rice growing lands. It was not until they established a permanent presence in the town that the Siamese understood this and learnt how to tap into it by changing the structure of taxation.

Following the death of Chao Khun Phra Ariyawongsajarn in 1881, a second voice joins the conversation. This voice will do more than simply assert locality it will contest the very heart of legitimacy. When Phra Khru Wirotratanobon (Bun Nan Taro) became the abbot of Wat Thung Sri Muang in 1881, at the age of 31 he would have had few illusions as to his position. If Phra Ariyawongsajarn's potential held the possibility of pluralist integration, no such path remained open to his successor, for whom circumstances already seemed to have banished impotent localism.

Born in 1850, Phra Khru Wirotratanobon was educated in Ubon Ratchathani, where he studied Thai Noi, Thai Yai, and Khom script. His further education was in painting, construction, carving, and sculpting. He was ordained in 1874 at the age of 24 at Wat Pa Noi.[67] On becoming abbot of Wat Thung Sri Muang, he found himself responsible for the Ho Phra Bat, which, having been built without adequate foundations was now subsiding and cracking. In order to save the building, on the outside, against the back wall he added a meter thick masonry block to stabilize the rear section, while inside the *sim* he wedged in a structural wooden frame in an effort to support the roof and remove the load from the walls – a wooden frame that local voices would have said needed to be there in the first place.

A skilled painter, he brings the only touch of local narrative and landscape to the walls of the *sim*. On the posts of the frame and the surfaces inside a window alcove, the unneeded space at the edge of the Bangkok *klong* scene, he added a fantastically mystical rendition of the iconic Lao story Sin Sai, paean to the ultimate triumph of the excluded and dispossessed.

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[67] Phairot Samoson, *E-sarn mural paintings*, 140; Phra Thep Rattanamoli and Pruess, *The Thai Phanom Chronicle*, 74; Yutthanawarakorn Saengaram, "The Local Characteristics of the Mural Painting in the Uposatha Hall," 8.

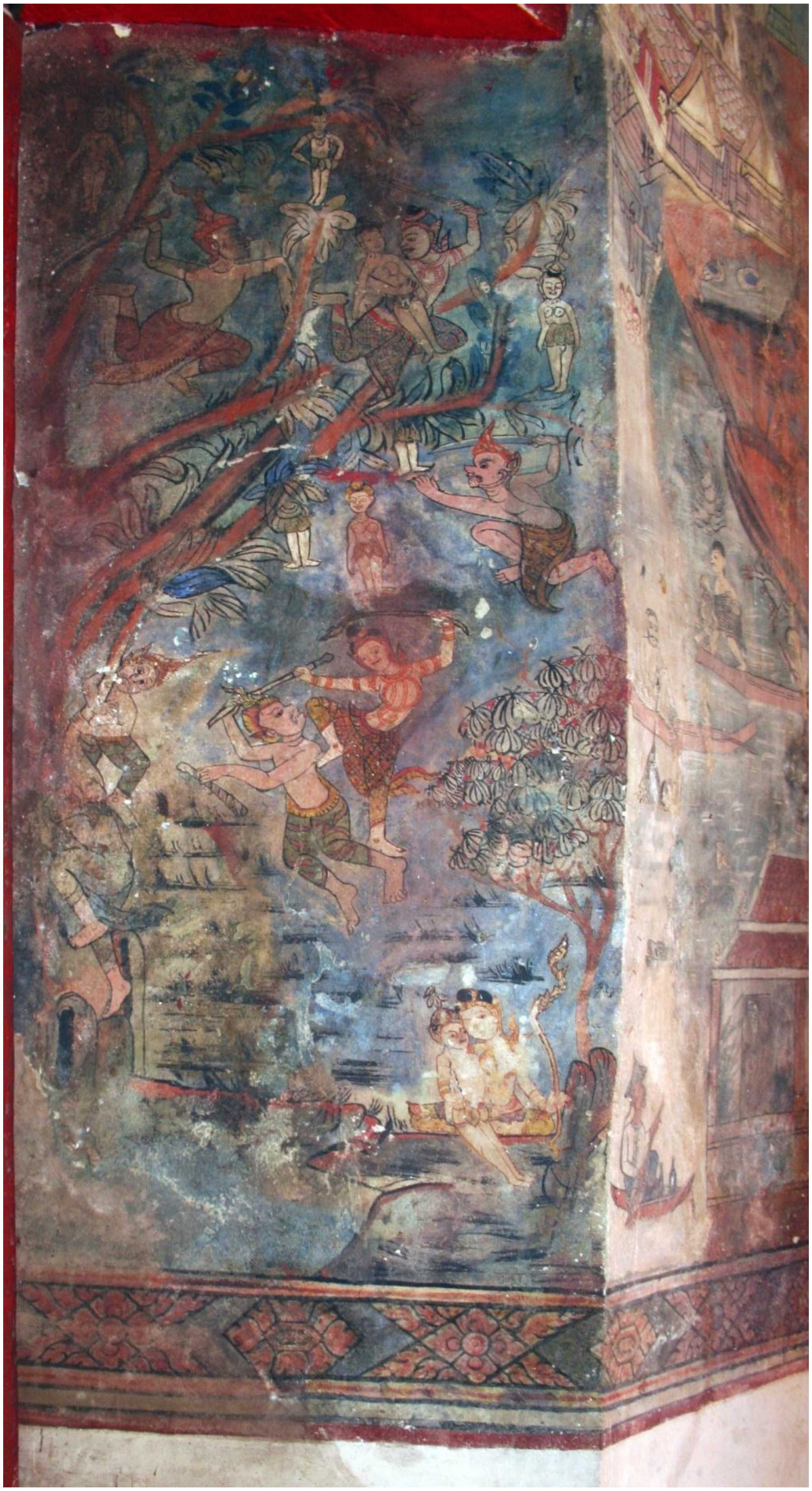

Figure 24: Phra Khru Wirotratanobon's Sin Sai mural in dramatic juxtaposition with the staid scenes of the Bangkok klong (see figure 13).

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