Book Review: 
A History of Ayutthaya: Siam in the Early Modern World

Ryan Holroyd*


Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit have given scholars of early modern Asia an invaluable gift with their publication of A History of Ayutthaya: Siam in the Early Modern World. As the authors’ preface mentions in passing, this book is the first English-language study devoted entirely to all of the four centuries during which Ayutthaya was the dominant centre of the kingdom we retrospectively call ‘Siam.’¹ It is a general history in the best sense, drawing together the threads of economic, cultural, and political history into one tapestry that allows the reader to appreciate the complexity of the transformations Ayutthaya and its neighbours went through from the late fourteenth century until the city’s fall in 1767.

The authors do not restrict themselves to a firm traditional periodisation in the organisation of their chapters, but they do see a clear transition during the reign of King Naresuan (1590 to 1605) that allows them to break the book into two chronological halves. The first half commences with a chapter that introduces the prehistory of Siam and the era during which Sukhothai, an older Siamese city, was the region’s dominant centre (roughly the thirteenth

¹ Postdoc Fellow, Center for Asia-Pacific Area Studies, RCHSS, Academia Sinica.
¹ One arguable exception is Charnvit Kasetsiri and Michael Wright’s Discovering Ayutthaya (2007). This beautifully illustrated book is devoted to the entire Ayutthayan period, but is closer to being a guide book than an independent historical study.
to mid-fifteenth centuries). This chapter draws on inscriptions and recent archaeological studies to argue against a Tai-centric narrative of the region’s early history. The culture that emerged in Sukhothai and the other early Tai city states owed as much to foreign influences as it did to the Tai ethnic group itself. The region was economically entangled with its neighbours, especially southern China, while its major religious traditions, Hinduism and Buddhism, had their origins in South Asia. The authors also point out that the early Tai city states had a spectacular source of artistic and architectural inspiration in the neighbouring Khmer empire.

The book then devotes two chapters to the era from Ayutthaya’s founding to 1605, covering the city’s origins and then its “Age of Warfare” in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. These two chronologically parallel chapters demonstrate that Ayutthaya owed its emergence as the dominant centre in Siam first and foremost to its geography. It lay near the southern coast along the arterial water ways that connected the Gulf of Siam to the country’s hinterland. With a nod to Anthony Reid (who has also written a very favourable review for this book), the authors show that this position allowed the city to take advantage of the rising tide of maritime trade during what Reid has famously termed Southeast Asia’s “age of commerce.” (Reid, 2018) The importance of the commercial flows between the sea and the interior gradually prompted the rulers of Ayutthaya to exert greater control over the major cities to its north. The authors then show how this political expansion of Ayutthaya’s interests into the interior drew it into complicated relationships with what they call the Northern Cities. This new series of entanglements resulted in a period of near-constant warfare through out Siam that was resolved only in the late sixteenth century when one noble family succeeded in establishing a dynasty centred on Ayutthaya but with its origins in the north.

The second half of the book begins with a chapter on “Peace and Commerce” that examines the political and diplomatic history of Ayutthaya during the seventeenth century from Naresuan’s death until the coup of 1688. Following it is a chapter covering the same period that investigates the causes of the social and economic efflorescence of Siam during the seventeenth century. In these two chapters the authors show that despite regular succession struggles,
Siam became a far more stable polity in the seventeenth century. During this time of relative peace, Ayutthaya once again became reoriented towards the sea and the commercial world of Southeast Asia. A complex urban society developed that attracted participants from Europe, China, Persia, and Japan. The authors paint an exquisite portrait of a prosperous and cosmopolitan society, committed to Theravada Buddhism and under the control of powerful merchant-kings.

The penultimate chapter traces the fortunes of the Ban Phlu Luang dynasty (1688 to 1767) and the society that continued to flourish under its rule. Using different types of Thai language sources and art, the authors offer what is likely the most complete and detailed portrait of Siam in the eighteenth century yet written. They reveal that rather than declining, as early histories hostile towards the Ban Phlu Luang kings have claimed, Siam continued to prosper up until its fall. Most of the basic trends that had begun in the seventeenth century continued. The economy became even more closely tied to Qing China’s through maritime trade, and consequently, consumption of Chinese luxury goods by the nobility was increasingly conspicuous. But the one notable change was a relative decline in the power of the royal house, which gradually lost authority to the nobility. As the autocratic power of the kings ebbed, the authority of Buddhist scripture and the reliance on written law codes became increasingly important to the shape of the society’s power structures.

The value of this chapter on the Ban Phlu Luang dynasty cannot be understated. Compared to the seventeenth century, for which we have many foreign descriptions, up until now the eighteenth century before the Bangkok period has been an incredibly shadowy historical space. Aside from Busakorn Lailert’s 1972 doctoral dissertation, which was devoted entirely to an examination of kingship based primarily on the laconic royal chronicles (Busakorn Lailert, 1972), and Bhawan Ruangsilp’s book (Bhawan Ruangsilp, 2007), which focusses on the relationship between the royal court and the Dutch company, every English language study of late Ayutthaya that this reviewer knows of brushes past most of the Ban Phlu Luang period. Even without the rest of the excellent chapters, this introduction to the eighteenth-century Siamese society and culture would make Baker and Pasuk’s study a
ground-breaking work.

The book concludes with a short chapter that serves as an epilogue. It describes the post-Ayutthaya reign of Taksin and the establishment of the new royal capital in Bangkok at the end of the eighteenth century. The authors conclude with the claim that the destruction of Ayutthaya fundamentally changed Siamese society. The new kings of the Chakri dynasty were even more constrained in their power than their Ban Phlu Luang predecessors had been, and this allowed for the development of powerful hereditary fiefdoms controlled by ambitious noble families within the interior of the kingdom and within its government. At the same time, commoners also were less strictly controlled. A new class of farmers intent on profiting from cash crops emerged, who developed Siam’s agricultural economy beyond anything that had existed in the Ayutthayan period.

In the course of this narrative the book makes two major arguments with the potential to significantly disrupt our vision of Siam’s early modern social order. The first is that Siam was chiefly an urban society from the seventeenth century until the rise of the Chakri dynasty, rather than an agricultural one. According to the authors, previous scholarship has assumed that because of the large volumes of rice that Siam is known to have produced in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, there must have been a correspondingly large rural peasant class performing intensive agriculture in the countryside. But they argue that a closer reading of the available sources shows that this assumption is unfounded. They point to the many contemporary descriptions of Siam’s incredible fertility and to law codes that took little interest in land management or land tax. Based on their readings of these sources, they argue that Siam’s population required very little agricultural labour to sustain itself. Most of its people were concentrated in urban centres, and most of its labour devoted to commerce and industry, while agriculture was merely a part time occupation for the majority of Siam’s workforce.

The book’s second major argument is that the fall of Ayutthaya in 1767 was not the culmination of a period of economic or social decline. Counterintuitive

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though it may seem, it was in fact the opposite. The rising prosperity of Siam, driven by the expansion of its commercialisation in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, had enriched the upper stratum of its society. Their wealth allowed them more independence, and made them harder to control for the royal house. At the same time, Ayutthaya’s riches made it increasingly attractive as a prize in the eyes of the neighbouring Burmese. When the Burmese army did invade, the diminished authority of the king made mounting an effective defence that much more difficult. Nonetheless, Ayutthaya managed to hold off the attackers for over a year, so in Baker and Pasuk’s analysis, it was ultimately the determination of the Burmese to plunder the fabulously wealthy city that brought about its downfall.

The book deserves to be celebrated for the range of sources it brings to bear while making these arguments. It builds on several decades’ worth of sustained scholarship on different aspects of Siamese history in both English and Thai, and it also draws upon all the standard foreign sources written primarily by visitors in the seventeenth century. The only major foreign archive that the authors have not used is that of the Dutch Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie, but they do make use of Bhawan Ruangsilp’s study of the Ayutthayan court through the eyes of the Dutch company. However, the book’s greatest innovation is its frequently creative use of Thai-language documents and art. The authors examine legal records, monastic chronicles, poems, novels, and murals to tease out information on early modern society and culture. Their examination of law codes to assess the importance of land use to the economy mentioned above is just one good example of this.

On top of all its other virtues, A History of Ayutthaya: Siam in the Early Modern World is written in clear direct language frequently punctuated by the authors’ dry wit. Their prose is a delight to read and their arguments are a pleasure to contemplate. It will be the starting point and touchstone for new research on early modern Siamese history for years to come.

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3 For a review that examines the art historical aspects of this study, see John Clark (Clark, 2018).
Reference


