

CHAPTER 1

Before Bangkok

THE NAME THAILAND WAS INVENTED in 1939. The country it described, formerly called Siam, had been defined by borders drawn in the 1890s and 1900s. Its capital, Bangkok, had been founded in 1782 in succession to an older city, Ayutthaya, destroyed 15 years earlier. Ayutthaya had been one of the great port cities of Asia, with trading links stretching from Persia to China and a political and economic hinterland focused on the basin of the Chao Phraya river system.

The society of this hinterland had evolved over prior centuries in a pattern that was similar throughout Southeast Asia. The landscape was dominated by tropical and subtropical forest. People clustered in city-states. Society was organized around personal ties of service and protection. An era of warfare from the 13th to the 16th century saw the emergence of a powerful militaristic kingship buttressed by Brahmanical ritual, trading profits, and systems for marshalling forced labour. After 1600, warfare slackened and Siam entered an age of peace and prosperity. Ayutthaya became a major node of Asian trade. The kings invested the profits in a new absolutism. By the 18th century, spreading prosperity resulted in a loosening of social ties and the emergence of an aristocracy. Failure to improve systems of defence laid Ayutthaya open to a devastating Burmese attack in 1767.

PEOPLING THE CHAO PHRAYA BASIN

Mainland Southeast Asia is one of the most fertile and biodiverse areas of the planet. To the north, hill ranges divide the region from China and splay southwards, subdividing the region like the fingers of a hand (Map 1). The plains between these ranges are heated to tropical and subtropical temperatures, while five great rivers carry snowmelt from the



Map 1. Mainland Southeast Asia.

high mountains of inner Asia, and monsoons sweep the region with four to six months of heavy rainfall a year. High temperatures and plentiful moisture create a spectacularly abundant environment. The natural vegetation is thick forest – deciduous in the north, merging into tropical rainforest further south, and dense mangrove along the coast. In the past, many species found this a much better habitat than people did, including elephants, wild cattle, deer, monkeys, tigers, snakes, crocodiles, and a vast range of parasitical insects and micro-organisms.

The human population remained sparse until late in the region's history. There are traces of hunter-gatherers sojourning in mountain caves up to 180 000 years ago, but the traces are few and faint. Settlements increased with the coming of rice agriculture and bronze from around 2000 BCE, and they grew even more with the arrival of iron around 500 BCE.

These metal age settlements were each sited on a raised mound and surrounded by a moat, perhaps for defence, perhaps for water storage. The people grew rice, kept cattle and dogs, continued to hunt and gather in the forests, and traded valuable goods, such as beads and ceremonial drums, over long distances. Archaeologists suspect that new people may have spread through the region in this era, bringing rice agriculture, metalworking, domestic animals, and the languages we now call the Mon-Khmer group. They probably spread along the coasts but also forged inland along the rivers to the upland plains, which were easier to clear and healthier to settle.

From around the last century BCE, these people had trade contacts with India, which eventually brought ideas and technologies from a region where urban centres had already developed. Larger settlements began to appear, especially in the lower Mekong basin and to the west in an area stretching from the lower Chao Phraya basin across the hills on the neck of the peninsula to its western coast. In the 6th century CE, by adapting scripts borrowed from southern India, these two areas began to write the languages of Khmer and Mon, respectively. In the Khmer country, the farmers became expert at trapping and storing water from rainfall, lakes, and rivers to support a dense population. Rulers marshalled this labour – along with Indian ideas about urban living, construction, religion, and statecraft – to create new urban centres, state systems, and monarchies. The magnificent capital at Angkor became a model that was honoured and mimicked by smaller

centres scattered westwards across the Khorat Plateau and the Chao Phraya river system.

This early Mon-Khmer tradition was anchored on the coast and spread inland. A second inflow of people and culture came from the north through the hills.

The group of languages now known as Tai probably originated among peoples who lived south of the Yangzi River before the Han Chinese spread from the north into the area from the 6th century BCE. As the Han armies came to control China's southern coastline in the first few centuries CE, some of these peoples retreated into the high valleys in the hills behind the coast. Then, over many centuries, some moved westwards, spreading Tai language dialects along a 1000-kilometre arc from the Guangxi interior to the Brahmaputra valley. They probably took with them some expertise in growing rice using the water flow from mountain streams. Certainly they chose to settle in the mountain basins where this technique could be put to good use. Their communities became identified with rice growing. They may also have acquired some martial skills from their encounters with the Chinese, because other peoples saw them as fierce warriors. Some of the earlier, mainly Mon-Khmer, inhabitants retreated upwards into the hills. Others coexisted with this farmer-warrior elite, often adopting a Tai language and gradually losing their own separate identity.

The Tai groups generally settled in the broad river basins in the hills. Only around the Mekong River did they move south – along the river itself, but also over low watersheds into the foothills around the upper tributaries of the Chao Phraya river system. Possibly they were pushed southwards by Mongol raids in the late 12th century. Possibly they were pulled by trade or just drifted into a relatively empty area. They paused initially along the line where the hills fall into the plain. Here they could still site their settlements at the foot of a sacred hill and use the waters flowing down for cultivation. Eventually, however, they spread further into the lowland plain. Probably they coexisted with earlier inhabitants, because their different techniques of rice growing dictated a preference for different types of land. The Mon-Khmer trapped rainfall in ponds. The Tai adapted their skill with water flows to use the rivers.

Eventually the Tai language now known as Thai became dominant in the Chao Phraya basin. Yet the language itself suggests that various groups blended into this area's society. Thai has absorbed so many basic

words, grammatical rules, and syntactical principles from Khmer (and possibly from Mon) that it is sharply different from any other language in the Tai family (one linguist dubbed it Khmero-Tai¹). Early European visitors thought many of the people were Mon. Chinese settlers were present by the 13th century. The timings of these people movements and language shifts are unknown.

The first known written use of Thai dates from the 13th century and occurred in the southern fringe of the hills. Further south on the plain, all records were written in Khmer or Indian languages until the 15th century, suggesting these languages still commanded prestige. By the early 16th century, inscriptions, law codes, and literary works were written in Thai.

Even after these inflows, the population of the Chao Phraya basin was still very sparse. When the forest was cleared, the tracts were very fertile. But in their natural state they teemed with predators, including the germs of malaria and other jungle fevers. The long hot season made survival difficult anywhere distant from a permanent water source. Settlements were strung sparsely along the rivers and around the coasts. Most of the region remained as untouched forest until the last century.

This sparseness meant there was always space for newcomers, who continually added to the social complexity over following centuries. The Karen came to occupy the hills marking the western boundary of the Chao Phraya basin, though when they came and from where have been forgotten. Groups of Mon regularly moved eastwards across the same hills seeking refuge from political troubles. Malay seafarers from the archipelago beached on the coasts of the peninsula and settled. Chinese traders merged into the societies of the ports all around the gulf and down the peninsula. The Khorat Plateau began to be populated in the 18th century by Lao and Kui people moving westwards across the Mekong River. Hill dwellers filtered into the highlands, nudged by the southward expansion of the Chinese.

The sparseness of population also underlay slavery, slave raiding, and war. Settlements needed a certain scale to keep the forest and the predators at bay. Leaders needed people as warriors, farmers, artisans, builders, and servants. In early maritime trade, slaves were imported from China and from the Malay archipelago. Wars were often launched to seize people. Victorious armies returned home with piles of loot and strings of prisoners. Artisans were especially prized. Ordinary war

prisoners were used as personal retainers or settled in pioneer colonies to raise food production and increase the numbers available for recruitment. Down to the 19th century, some communities specialized as slave raiders, grabbing people from hill communities or neighbouring states and selling them in the lowland capitals.

MUEANG

Areas of settlement were separated from one another by stretches of mountain, forest, or sea. The basic political unit of the region became the city-state, known in Thai as *mueang*. The model evolved in the mountain basins, where the original *mueang* was often a fortified town, the home of the ruler, or *jao*. Rather than spreading across the landscape, villages stayed clustered around the *mueang* centres for defence against enemies, animals, and diseases.

Some have argued that the sparse population meant land was a freely abundant good and had no value. Not at all. Land of good fertility and good location was highly prized. In the early stages of a *mueang*, the *jao* acted just like a landlord, managing the land and directing cultivation. As the settlement became larger and more complex, the *jao* became more of a ruler. Villages managed the land, holding it communally and redistributing it to match the labour supply and food needs of families. Villagers cooperated, often over a wide area, to build weir-and-channel systems (*muang fai*) which supplied irrigation for rice growing. Hierarchy developed. The original settlers often became an elite that had privileged rights in land in return for the obligation to carry arms when required. Later settlers might have access to land only as dependants of this elite. War captives or purchased slaves might have no access at all. People were obliged to render dues to the *jao*, mostly in kind, and also labour services for such tasks as building and repairing the palace. Kin of the *jao* or other established families who helped to administer the *mueang* were allotted the dues and labour services of particular villages.

The settlements that appeared along the rivers in the lowlands and around the coasts differed only in detail. The favoured site was on a river meander, with a canal cut to complete a moat. Compared with the hill *mueang*, more of the population depended on trade than on agriculture. Rulers might be selected for their wealth and trading skill more than for their lineage or martial prowess.

Few places developed into larger cities over time, probably because sizeable settlements became vulnerable to epidemic diseases or looting raids. In the legendary early history of Sukhothai, the whole population migrates to the Mon country after an epidemic. In that of Hariphunchai (Lamphun), the whole population is carried away by a victorious army. The Mun river valley in the northeast had several hundred settlements before the 13th century but seems to have been virtually depopulated for the following 400 years. The ports along the coastline were always vulnerable to attack by enemies or pirates. In the early part of the city Nakhon Si Thammarat's chronicle, it is repeatedly founded, deserted, and refounded. Songkhla was devastated twice in the 17th century alone. Changes in the landscape could also be disruptive. Satingpra, one of the biggest prehistoric settlements on the peninsula, was abandoned, probably when the coastline shifted. Many town sites in the Chao Phraya basin were abandoned or moved when rivers changed course as the delta developed.

A few places defied this tendency for the population to slip and slide across the landscape. Partly this was due to the quality of their location. The idea of *chaiyaphum* (victorious emplacement) was a specific branch of local science. A site's *chaiyaphum* included defensive features (ease of moating), sacred features (hills, river junctions), water and food supplies, and local climate. Rulers could add to these natural attractions. In Sukhothai's famous (and controversial) Inscription One the ruler advertises his city to prospective settlers by describing his contributions to its *chaiyaphum*: he boasts of his own martial qualities as a protector; guarantees the food supplies ('there are fish in the water and rice in the fields'); promises fair justice, low taxes, and freedom to trade; lists the entertainments and festivals ('whoever wants to make merry, does so; whoever wants to laugh, does so'); and finally catalogues the religious places, emphasizing their number, splendour, and variety.²

RULERS AND STATES

Between the 13th and 15th centuries, there was a revolution in warfare that enabled ambitious rulers to expand their dominions. Part of this revolution was the arrival of firearms – first, cannon from China and Arabia, and later, muskets and better cannon from Portuguese. But the revolution also came from greater use of elephants for transport, foreign

mercenaries, better recruitment techniques, and perhaps simply more people available for recruitment as a result of a benign phase in the climate.

Ambitious rulers first brought groups of adjacent *mueang* together in confederations called *khwaen*. In the hills, these *khwaen* were formed by linking together the *mueang* in successive basins along one river. The ruler often sent his sons or other relatives to rule over the defeated *mueang*. He captured or attracted artisans with the skills to make his own *mueang* more splendid and more famous than the others. He often patronized Buddhism, which enjoyed a surge of urban popularity in this era. Buddhism had originally come to the Chao Phraya basin by the 5th century, but in a package of Indic gods that was probably not clearly defined into separate sects and traditions. In the 13th century, monks brought the Buddhist tradition now known as Theravada from Sri Lanka, and, according to the religious chronicles, it spread like wildfire on a surge of popular enthusiasm. Rulers patronized the construction of splendid temples, venerated monks with a reputation for learning, and collected relics and images of the Buddha, which were seen as concentrations of spiritual power.

These emerging capitals gradually became centres of loosely defined but distinct political zones. On the upper reaches of the Chao Phraya system, the dominant place was Chiang Mai. It was founded officially in 1296, at a site with excellent *chaiyaphum*, by Mangrai, probably a Tai prince with some Mon-Khmer blood, who consolidated a *khwaen* along the Ping River and began to subordinate chiefs along other rivers to the east. At his death, Mangrai metamorphosed into the founder-ancestor spirit of this enlarged *khwaen*, and future rulers were chosen from his sacred lineage for almost the next two centuries. Chiang Mai only truly became the dominant place under his successors, who embellished the city with splendid wats and built a network of marriage alliances with chiefs stretching east to the Nan River and north across the Mekong River. The region became known as Lanna, a million rice fields. Further east, the lineage of Fa Ngum at Luang Prabang developed the state of Lan Chang stretching along the Mekong and its tributaries.

To the south, the Tai states along the lower fringe of the hills developed another confederation. At first the dominant place was Sukhothai, where the lineage of the legendary founder-ancestor Phra Ruang built a resplendent religious capital. Later the focus and the

lineage shifted to Phitsanulok, probably because strategy became a more important element in *chaiyaphum* than sacredness in this warlike era. This area acquired no distinctive name but was dubbed *mueang nuea*, the northern cities, by its neighbours to the south.

Another confederation formed among port towns on the lower reaches of the rivers in the Chao Phraya basin and on the upper coasts of the gulf, especially four towns that had been founded or refounded under Khmer influence around the 11th century: Phetchaburi, Suphanburi, Lopburi, and Ayutthaya. After a struggle between the ruling families of these places, Ayutthaya emerged as the dominant centre in the late 14th century. The Chinese called the city Xian, possibly based on Siam, an old term for the Tai. Arab geographers called it Shahr-i-nao, either the new city or the city of boats. The Portuguese who arrived in the 16th century reported that the country was called Siam.

Each of these centres expanded its influence over neighbouring *mueang*, but in a particular form. The subordinate ruler was usually left in place. He might have to send a daughter or sister to become his overlord's wife, and perhaps a son to serve in his overlord's retinue; these charges served as hostages for the subordinate's continued loyalty. In privileged cases, the overlord might bestow on the subordinate a royal or noble wife who could also serve as an informant. The subordinate would deliver an annual tribute, usually some exotic or rare item. Later this payment was often standardized into ornamental trees made of silver and gold, a Malay practice. In reciprocation, the overlord would give insignia and ritual items, which added to the subordinate ruler's status, and perhaps also useful items, such as weapons and administrative systems. The overlord would guarantee to defend the subordinate *mueang* and its ruler from outside threats, and the subordinate in return would undertake to supply troops whenever the overlord needed to mobilize an army. But, in practice, the fulfilment of these agreements was never certain.

The overriding principle of these political alliances was that the subordinate ruler was not crushed out of existence but was strengthened so he could become a more stable and useful dependant. The subordinate *mueang* was not destroyed but contained within a larger unit and thus added to that larger unit's power and splendour. Rulers boasted not of the extent of their territory but of the number of their dependent rulers.

The French ethnographer Georges Condominas called this ‘emboxment’.³ By this principle, the village was contained within a *mueang*, and the *mueang* within the influence of a superior *mueang*, possibly up through several levels. The terms mandala, segmentary state, and galactic polity have been used for this political form, but emboxment describes the underlying mechanism.

This system probably evolved within the world of the Tai hill states, but it was embellished by features borrowed from the Chinese tributary system in which the coastal states of the region had been involved since the 3rd century CE. The Chinese emperor demanded that ‘barbarian’ states deliver tribute, request confirmation of a new ruler’s succession, and receive instruction about the superiority of Chinese civilization. In return, the emperor conferred regalia and undertook to defend the tributary. In practice, the emperor almost never sent troops to discipline a refractory tributary or defend a beleaguered one. But ‘barbarian’ states complied, because tributary status gave them access to the Chinese market, by far the biggest source of demand for trade goods. On this pattern, some port *mueang* developed tributary relations with emerging centres of power in order to gain access to their growing markets. The rulers of these power centres listed such tributaries in their inscriptions and chronicles to vaunt their far-flung influence.

These webs of military and commercial relations were flexible and fluid. Centres rose and fell. At the margins, *mueang* developed parallel relations with two or more centres of power, and the relative importance of these various ties fluctuated over time.

From the late 14th century, the four emerging confederations in and around the Chao Phraya basin (Lanna, Lan Chang, *mueang nuea*, Siam) began to contest against one another, beginning an era of intermittent warfare. Over the next century, people were submitted to systems of mass conscription, the size of armies escalated, societies became more militarized, and a warrior ethic prevailed. Great armies traversed the landscape, destroying cities, forcibly moving people, devastating crops, and provoking epidemics. Ultimately, these wars were inconclusive. The Ayutthaya forces finally conquered Chiang Mai in the late 15th century, but to no avail. These centres could destroy one another and cart away people, famous Buddha images, and wealth, but over the distances involved they could not embox one another permanently. In the late 16th century, these wars petered out.