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## EARLY PORTUGUESE ACCOUNTS OF THAILAND

by

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The Indochinese Peninsula with its great rivers and chains of rugged mountains running from north to south had been for centuries an effective barrier between the two great nations of antiquity, India and China. The communications and commercial relations of China were therefore carried on with India and thence with Europe by the silk, or land, route north of the Himalayas from Syria to Chinese Turkestan, and by the spice, or sea, route from the Red Sea to the Sea of China which was monopolized up to Malaya by the Chinese and beyond, by the Arabs. Between these two routes lay the great Indochinese Peninsula called Extra-Gangetic India or Further India, including Burma, Malaya, Thailand<sup>1</sup> and Indochina, to which no attention was paid while caravans of commercial travellers, Nestorians, Jews and Christian monks passed along the north, and ships laden with spices and silks sailed in the south traversing the China Sea and the Straits of Malacca. Very little about this Peninsula was therefore known to Europe and even to Arabian and to Chinese writers beyond the coast lines and ports, where the products were assembled for export. At the time when the Portuguese came to the Far East, even the hazy notions contained in Ptolemy's Geography regarding Extra-Gangetic India were forgotten by Europe, for Islam had raised a wall between the East and the West, cutting off the northern silk route and monopolizing the Indian Ocean.

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<sup>1</sup> In this article the name Thailand is used for the present kingdom but the old name of Siam or Kingdom of Siam is used whenever it is necessary to speak of it as distinct, geographically and historically, from the former Kingdom of Chiangmai.

if he applied it to Siam.<sup>24</sup> Nicolo Conti in about 1430 visited Mergui and mentions *Cernoe*, which might refer to Bengal just as much to Siam.<sup>25</sup> But in the sixteenth century we have definite references to Siam as *Sornau* or *Xarnauz*. The *Roteiro* of Gama in 1498, Ledovico di Varthema in 1505, and Giovanni d'Empoli in 1514, have this term of *Sornau* differently spelt but certainly referring to Siam.<sup>26</sup> The author of the Malay history *Sejarah Melayu* definitely says Siam was formerly called *Sher-i-naui*,<sup>27</sup> and Valentyn the Dutch historian relates that about 1340 a powerful prince reigned in the kingdom of Siam, then called *Sjaharnow* or *Sornau*.<sup>28</sup>

How did this name originate? Undoubtedly it was spread by the Arabs, since both Vasco da Gama and Varthema had it on Arab information. Henry Yule in his *Hobson-Jobson* derived it from the Persian *Shar-i-nao*, or New City, as applied to Ayuthia. Really Ayuthia was very old when the name was used; besides it was applied more to the whole country of Siam than to the city. To explain this idea of *New City* fanciful explanations were given by Braddel, who invoked the distinction made by De la Loubère between *Thai Yai* and *Thai Noi*.<sup>29</sup> Yule connected it with Lopburi which he says is a Pali form of *Novapuri* or New City, *Shar-i-nao* being its persian version. Colonel Gerini as usual did not agree with anybody, and formulated a most ingenious explanation, deriving it from *Sand* or *Nong Sand* the old city adjoining Ayuthia, and so called from the marsh round it, *Sand* being the Siamese form of the name for the sola plant.<sup>30</sup>

Amidst this confusion worse confounded, Fernão Mendes Pinto, who was twice in Siam in the middle of sixteenth century and uses both the names Siam and Sornau, points a way to the proper solution of the problem. He speaks for instance of the Emperor of Sornau

<sup>24</sup> *India in the XVth Century*, Hak. Society Ed. by R. H. Major.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 10.

<sup>26</sup> *First Voyage of Vasco da Gama*, Hak. Ed. p. 99; Varthema *Itinerario*, Hak. Ed. p. 212, and Giovanni d'Empoli's letter in *Archivio Storico Italiano*, Appendix 80.

<sup>27</sup> John Leyden's Trans., *Malay Annals*, London 1821, p. 121.

<sup>28</sup> *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indien*, Vol. V, p. 319.

<sup>29</sup> *Journal of the Indian Archipelago*, Vol. V, p. 317.

<sup>30</sup> *Asiatic Quarterly Journal*, Jan. 1902.

who is the King of Siam. He has many such references such as the Sornau King of Siam and Phra Chao Salen, Emperor of all *Sornau*, but never Emperor of Siam.<sup>31</sup> It appears therefore that the *Sornau*, of which the King of Siam styled himself Emperor, is *Suvarṇa* Land or *Suvarṇabhūmi*, the land of gold which was a geographical expression embracing a great part of the Indochinese Peninsula. The Thai word *Suvan* has no close phonetic resemblance to *Sornau* or *Xarnauz*, but there are examples of such strange transcriptions of many other Thai words that it is not difficult to see how *Suvarṇa* was corrupted into *Sornau* or *Xarnauz*, first by the Arabs, and then by the Portuguese and other European writers.<sup>32</sup> We know from the *Annals of Lan-chang* that the King of Lan-chang also called himself Emperor of the Land of Gold, but the founder of Ayuthia who was Prince of Suphan or Uthong (which means *source of gold*) and his successors would naturally call themselves Emperors of *Suvarṇa* Land, whence the name *Sarnau*.

Valuable contemporary descriptions of life in Ayuthia and of some aspects of Siamese history in the middle of sixteenth century are found in Fernão Mendes Pinto's *Peregrinação* and in his letter written from Malacca in 1554 to the Society of Jesus in which he had temporarily entered as a brother.<sup>33</sup> Pinto visited Siam twice, as he himself mentions in his letter, and the information derived from both these visits is utilized in the *Peregrinação*. His style is

<sup>31</sup> Such expression as *Prechau Saleus of Sornau* are also found in Sebastião Manrique's *Itinerario* Hak. Soc. Ed. Vol. I., p. 195, but possibly they may have been taken from Pinto himself. Manrique visited Arukan in 1628-37, but not Siam.

<sup>32</sup> *Sarnau* is not really a direct corruption of the Thai word *Suvan* but of its Indian equivalent *suva* or *sova*, both of which mean gold and are derived from Sanskrit *sucarya*. The Portuguese like the Arabs were more accustomed to the sounds of Indian languages than to the tonal Thai languages. Hence they transcribed Thai names according to their Sanskrit equivalents. *Lugor*, the 16th and 17th century name for Nakhon Sri Thammarat is an interesting example. The Portuguese got the name from Thai *Nakhon* by giving it a Sanskrit turn *nagar*, from Sanskrit, *nagara*. The change of initial *s* into *l* is common in Portuguese transcriptions, such as Liampo for the Chinese port of Ningpo. Apart from this, Nakhon Sri Thammarat was also known as Mu'ang *Lakhon*, from which *Lagar*, *Lugor* could arise.

<sup>33</sup> Christovam Ayres, *Fernão Mendes Pinto, Subsídios etc.* Lisbon Academy publication, 1904, Appendix B.

classic and brilliant, and writing some years after the events he records had taken place, he gives from memory vivid pictures of Siam as of other countries he visited. Many of his descriptions are based on hearsay and hence reflect the popular errors, feelings, beliefs and superstitions. His chronology and the transcription of local names have sometimes undergone frightful distortions and many errors in the *Peregrinação* are attributable to his first editor, F. de Andrade, and to his printers who could scarcely understand the unfamiliar names and facts. There is colouring, but no wilful misrepresentation of facts, in the lurid descriptions of life that can be felt pulsating under the touch of his pen against the background and in the very atmosphere of the places and countries in which he moved and lived. He was not, certainly, a scientific explorer and does not appear to have kept a diary or any notes, but some years after his peregrinations were over, he transferred to his rich canvas the information he had received and the impressions he had absorbed with the instinctive insight of an artist infusing life into the pictures he depicts. Even his mistakes very often prove his veracity. He relates for instance that he found people in Buddhist countries invoking Trinity and saying, *God of truth is three in one*, and he thinks that there may be traces of the gospel in the religion of these people.<sup>34</sup> One would immediately reject this story as an invention, but though Pinto's interpretation is wrong the fact he mentions is true for the people were really invoking the Triple Gems of Buddhism, the triad: the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, or the Buddha, the Law, and the Clergy.

Owing to the many strange facts which Pinto relates, he had been long considered a liar. But justice has been largely done to him, not only by Portuguese writers like Christovam Ayres who exploded many myths, but also by foreign writers who studied the parts of the *Peregrinação* in which they were interested.

<sup>34</sup> Nicolo Conti also remarked during his visit to Burma that the people in their prayers said: *God in Trinity keep us in his Law*, and Sir H. Yule remarks that this which appears like fiction is really an evidence of Conti's veracity. See *Embassy to Ava*, p. 208.

Pinto says in the *Peregrinação* that he noticed this in Lanchang (Calaminham) and in his letter of 1554 he says that he saw a similar fact in Pegu. Fr. G. Schurhammer in his *Fernão Mendes Pinto und seine Peregrinação*, jumps to the conclusion that Pinto betrays or contradicts himself, when it is quite natural that he should make similar observations in two Buddhist countries and might have even done so in a third one such as Siam.



With regard to Siam, Mr. W. A. R. Wood examined the descriptions of Pinto in a paper published in the *Journal of the Siam Society*, Vol. XX, 1926, and came to the conclusion that he was unreliable. Mr. W. A. R. Wood based his remarks, not on the original work in Portuguese, but on Cogan's misleading and unreliable translation in English, and drew his conclusions, after examining the contemporary description of an eye witness, in the light of Luang Prasoet's *Phongsawadan* written more than a hundred years after the events in question had taken place.<sup>85</sup> In this connection it is interesting to quote what a Jesuit Father, P. A. F. Cardim, who was in Ayuthia between 1626 and 1629, says about Pinto's description of Siam in the *Peregrinaçam*: Though the book of *Peregrinaçam* of Pinto is considered to be apocryphal, he is correct in that which he writes about the kingdom of Siam. I say he does not depart from the truth, because a Mandarin who taught me to read and write Siamese told me what the history and records of the country recorded about the coming of the Portuguese to that kingdom and about the heroic deeds in which they helped the king to conquer many kingdoms. He told me especially the story of Ocum Chineat (Pinto: *Ucumchenirát*) telling me that it was true and whoever is interested in it can look it up in Pinto's book.<sup>86</sup>

Some of the facts mentioned by Pinto regarding Siam and commented on unfairly by Mr. W. A. R. Wood require elucidation. Mr. Wood takes Pinto to task on account of the exaggerated number of men composing the armies, which he calls a perversion of truth. The numbers are often exaggerated it is true, but they represent only popular estimates, which were imaginary. Military authorities themselves could not take a proper count, for as the armies marched or sailed along the rivers, hundreds of village men were recruited on the way and swelled the original numbers. This accusation of exaggerating numbers can be equally levelled against subsequent travellers like Caesare Federeci and Ralph Fitch and against the *Phongsawadans* themselves. When Bureng Naung invaded Siam in 1568, Caesare Federeci who was in Burma, relates that the Burmese army consisted of one million four hundred thousand men. The Siamese *Phongsawadan* gives one million men. Mendes Pinto is more

<sup>85</sup> The Chronology of Luang Prasoet's *Phongsawadan* is in general reliable, but it cannot be taken as absolutely correct. Some of the facts can also be demonstrated to be wrong.

<sup>86</sup> *Batalhas da Companhia de Jesus*, 1894, p. 286.

moderate with his eight hundred thousand men. Ralph Fitch gives three hundred thousand men and five thousand elephants.<sup>37</sup> We know that all these are impossible numbers but this is no reason why errors of judgment, be they of Pinto or Fitch or Federeci, should be called "perversions of truth." Mr. Wood remarks that when Pinto says that the cannon of the King of Burma in his war with Siam were dragged by buffaloes and *rhynoceroses* we are almost forced to agree with Congreve<sup>38</sup> who referred to Pinto as the most celebrated liar. Now Pinto never used the word *rhynoceros* but the term *bada* or *abada* which in the sixteenth century had the indefinite meaning of a wild animal or a domesticated animal that goes wild, though some sixteenth century authors like Fr. Gaspar de Cruz used it definitely to mean rhinoceros. The sixteenth century authors like Barbosa, Barros and Correa use the word *ganda* (from Sansk. *ganda*) for rhinoceros. Bluteau, who wrote his dictionary in 1727, followed by the lexicologists Vieira and Lacerda, took *abada* to mean a kind of wild animal and in fact contested the meaning of rhinoceros as applied to *abada*. Hence though some derive the word from the Malay, *budik*, a rhinoceros, others derive it from the Arabic *abadat*, (*ābid*, fem. *ābida*) which means a *brownish animal* (Belot) or a wild animal (Lane) or an animal that goes wild and escapes (Kasimirski).<sup>39</sup> It is only in the 17th century that the word *abada* began definitely to be applied to the rhinoceros and it was thus that Pinto's *abada* was translated by Figuier in his French translation and from this by Cogan into English. Pinto clearly used the word *abada* to denote the yaks in Tartary which were used as beasts of burden and for which there was no term in Portuguese.<sup>40</sup> In the description of other places he uses the word about a dozen times with an indefinite meaning like that of the Arabic *ābida* when he has to mention a large animal whether it be wild like the rhinoceros or used as a beast of burden for which he could not find an exact Portuguese term.

<sup>37</sup> In his *History of Burma*, pp. 333-35, Harvey has an excellent note on these exaggerated estimates.

<sup>38</sup> Congreve's *Love for Love*: "Mendes Pinto is but a type of thee, thou liar of the first magnitude."

<sup>39</sup> Dalgado, *Glossario Luso-Asiatico* s. v. Abada. In *Hobson-Jobson* the meaning and the origin of the word is not so well discussed as in *Glossario*.

<sup>40</sup> Vide a note on the Yaks of Tartary in Yule & Cordier, *Marco Polo*, Vol. I. p. 277.

This article is confined only to sixteenth century Portuguese accounts of Thailand, but even these are by no means exhausted. There are still many reports and documents and also missionary accounts, mostly unpublished, not only of the sixteenth but also of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, lying in the libraries of Portugal, notably in the Torre do Tombo, the National Library of Lisbon, the Library of Ajuda and that of Evora, and their study and examination will provide a rich mine of information for research scholars of Thailand.