



Illustration 1. Siamese War Elephant

Letter from the acting Phrakhang Phya Phiphat Kosa in Siam to the Supreme Government in Batavia, 13 January 1769, and the answer from Batavia, 29 May 1769

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1 Introduction

Dhiravat na Pombejra, “Letter from the acting Phrakhang Phya Phiphat Kosa in Siam to the Supreme Government in Batavia, 13 January 1769”. In: *Harta Karun. Hidden Treasures on Indonesian and Asian-European History from the VOC Archives in Jakarta*, document 28. Jakarta: Arsip Nasional Republik Indonesia, 2016.

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The Siamese letter was written by the Phya Phiphat Kosa, probably the acting *phrakhang* minister at the beginning of King Taksin’s reign. The title *phiphatkosa* usually denotes the deputy Phrakhang. The letter was a direct attempt to entice the VOC to return to Siam and reopen its factory in the kingdom. The Siamese minister tells of the fall of Ayutthaya in 1767, and maintains that the kingdom had, under “Phiatak” (Taksin), been restored to its former flourishing state.

When King Alaungpaya of Burma invaded Siam in 1760 and destroyed some of the suburbs of the city of Ayutthaya, the VOC lodge was partially damaged and looted, and the *resident* Nicolaas Bang fatally injured.¹ It was a traumatic experience the Dutch did not forget quickly, especially when, hardly five years later, the new Burmese king Hsinbyushin sent more armies to invade Siam.

In December 1765 the VOC shut down its *factorijs* in Ayutthaya and left Siam. The final letter written by a VOC resident in Siam, Abraham W-

erndlij’s of 18 November 1765, was full of fear, certainly a marked lack of confidence in the ability of the Siamese court to stem the Burmese attacks.² Werndlij and his colleagues were proven right, as Ayutthaya fell to the Burmese in April 1767: the city was sacked, its palaces and temples pillaged and thousands of its inhabitants taken away to Burma.

Two important points arise from the contents of Phya Phiphat Kosa’s letter: his insistence that “Phiatak” had been *instructed* by the last king of Ayutthaya to leave the city and go to Chanthabun to obtain more help for the defense of the royal city; in other words, he did not flee or desert the king. The second key point is that the people who had fled the ravages of war returned from the forests and “chose” Taksin as their king. The letter is careful to stress King Taksin’s legitimacy as ruler of Siam: even if he had no hereditary claim to the throne, he was entitled to rule on account of the people’s acceptance of his authority at a time when there was no-one else available to be king. The latter point no doubt alludes to the absence or death of members of the old royal family.

The issue of his legitimacy to rule Siam was to dog King Taksin for much of his reign, especially in his attempts to gain formal recognition from China. Indeed, the Qing court only gave formal recognition of Taksin as king of Siam late in his reign, in 1781. The ANRI also has in its collection (as part of the Batavia Castle *Dagregister*) a let-

¹ See Bhawan Ruangsilp, *Dutch East India Company Merchants at the Court of Ayutthaya: Dutch Perceptions of the Thai Kingdom, c.1604-1765*. Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2007, pp.206-208.

² Dhiravatna Pombejra, “Fleeing the ‘Enemy’: The Final Dutch Letter from Ayutthaya, November 1765” in WinaiPongsripian (ed.), *Chatusansaniyachan*. Bangkok: The Historical Commission, Ministry of Culture, 2004, pp.327-345; Bhawan Ruangsilp, *Dutch East India Company Merchants*, pp.212-218.



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Illustration 2. Ruins of Ayutthaya

ter written to the HogeRegering from Chao Si Sang and Chao Chui³, two Siamese royal princes who had survived the Burmese invasion and had sought refuge in Cambodia, further proof that Taksin's right to be legitimate king of Siam was indeed contested by members of the old dynasty, from Prince Thepphiphit (defeated and executed by King Taksin early on, soon after the fall of Ayutthaya) to these two princes, whose ambitions also came to naught.

Chinese traders acted as middlemen in the contacts between Siam and the VOC. The junk of a "TjienHeeng" carried the letter and gifts of the Thonburi court to Batavia. In later letters exchanged between the two parties many more

Chinese skippers' names are mentioned.⁴ The Chinese element in both the economy and the court during King Taksin's reign provides a counterpoint to the king's conscientious attempts to revive the traditional Siamese state, still called "Thawarawadi Si Ayutthaya", at his new royal city of Thonburi, reconstructing its administrative structure, religion and culture.

The Governor-General and Council's reply to the letter of PhiphatKosa was of course courteous, and neatly avoided committing to a VOC return to Siam by alleging that permission to do so had to be sought from the Prince of Orange. But trade with Siam was not by any means ruled out. Indeed trade was carried on between Thonburi/

³ ANRI, VOC, Archives of the Supreme Government, Daily Journals of Batavia Castle, 3574, fs. 305-309. Prince Thepphiphit was a son of King Borommakot and thus half-brother to King Ekathat, the last Ayutthaya king; Prince Si Sang was a grandson of Borommakot; while Prince Chui was a grandson of King Thai Sa. The Dutch had earlier plotted to put Prince Thepphiphit on the throne of Kandy, unsuccessfully.

⁴ See for instance the letters from the Phrakhlang to the Hoge Regering in 1771 and 1772, VOC 3338 (fs.255-261) and VOC 3339 (fs.714-717 verso).



INTRODUCTION

Bangkok and Batavia even beyond the dissolution of the VOC. From the initial demands for flint-lock guns to fight its various enemies the Siamese court began to ask for other goods to be sent from Batavia, such as diamonds.⁵ Siamese sappanwood was usually the merchandise bought in exchange

by the Dutch. The continuation of Dutch-Siamese trade post-1767, although it was carried out through Chinese proxies, was nevertheless the foundation for a revival of formal diplomatic ties between the Bangkok court and the Netherlands in the mid-nineteenth century.

⁵ Leonard Blussé. "Whimsical wishes of Siamese kings: the correspondence of King Taksin and King Rama I of Siam to the High Government of Batavia (1769-1809)", paper presented to the 13th IAHA Conference, Tokyo 1994.



2 Transcription of the Dutch text

INGEKOMEN MISSIVEN ("TRANSLATEN"), 13 JANUARY 1769.

Brief van de Phrakhlang Pia Pipit Kosa¹ aan de Hoge Regering in Batavia, 13 januari 1769.

Aangezien er vanouds en tot op heden tussen het rijk van Siam en de Edelen Compagnie een zeer nauwe en oprechte vriendschap heeft plaatsgehad, hebben Hun Hoog Edelheden eertijds ook hun vertegenwoordigers en andere dienaren naar hier gezonden. Zij hielden hier hun verblijf, en lieten tevens een loge timmeren om daarin alle handelswaren die door compagnoesschepen werden aangebracht, en door de ingezetenen gekocht, te bewaren. De vorige Phrakhlangs zijn niet in gebreke gebleven om jaarlijks de handelswaren aan de residenten te leveren die door de Compagnie werden besteld.

Voorts bericht ik dat terwijl de vijand Phama² tegen Siam in oorlog opkwam, Zijne Hoogheid de Siamse koning een mandarijn met de name Phiatak³ zond naar de negerij Tjinteboen⁴ om daar enige manschappen te vergaderen en ter hulp naar Siam te brengen. Maar dit had geen snelle voortgang, en is het Siamse rijk door gemelde vijand veroverd en zijn de koning met zijn gehele familie en alle mandarijns en onderdanen vermoord of gevlogen. Hierdoor is het land geheel geruïneerd, zodanig dat er zelfs niemand over was die gerechtigd was het te regeren behalve de voormalde Phiatak.

Phiatak is met enige manschappen in de stad (die door de vijanden verbrand en geplunderd, en weer verlaten was) gekomen, waar zich alle de in de bossen gevlochten personen bij hem hebben vervoegd, en hem tot hun heer en gebieder hebben gekozen en erkend. Hierdoor is het land thans weer in zijn vorige, ja in nog florisantere staat dan voorheen. Het wordt nu meer dan voorheen door jonken en andere handeldrijvende bodems bevaren. Daarom verzoek ik of Hun Hoog Edelhedens hier een loge bouwen en daarin een resident en enkele dienaren plaatsen om op de oude voet met elkaar te handelen, met belofte dat al hetgene de Compagnie zou komen te bestellen, ik de Khlang zonder mankeren zal bevelen te bezorgen.

Aangezien alle ammunitie, niets uitgezonderd, door de vijand is weggenomen vind ik mij zeer verlegen om duizend goede snaphanen, stel dat er weer iets diergelyks zou gebeuren. Ik en alle mandarijns verzoeken vriendelijk dat Hun Hoog Edelheden uit hoofde van de vorige gehouden vriendschap bij het herwaardsbestemmen van een schip met handelswaren, gelieven deze mee te sturen en dat voor zodanige prijzen als voorheen.

¹ Phiphat kosa is de titel van de deputy Phrakhlang.

² Phama, Thaise term voor Burma.

³ Phiatak, Phya Tak (Sin) ofwel Taksin.

⁴ Tjinteboen, Chanthabun ofwel Chanthaburi.



TRANSCRIPTION OF THE DUTCH TEXT

Voorts, omdat het Siamse rijk en Nederland zeer oude vrienden zijn, verzoek ik nog indien Hun Hoog Edelheden de goedheid gelieven te hebben, een kopie van deze [brief] aan Zijn Hoogheid de heer Prins van Oranje en Nassau over te zenden en te verzoeken om hier weer een resident te benoemen, teneinde op de oude voet handel te drijven aangezien de vriendschap nog is zoals voorheen. In de hoop dat het ook bestendig zal zijn en Zijn Hoogheid een lang leven mag genieten.

Ten laatste heb ik twee pikul van de beste ivoor bijeen verzameld, bestaande in een pikul van vier een een van vijf slagtanden. Deze heb ik in de handen van de Chinese kapitein TjienHeeng gegeven om die aan te bieden aan Hun Hoog Edelens.

Op vrijdag de 13e van de 3de maand in het Muizejaar 1130⁵.

Antwoord van de Hoge Regering in Batavia aan de Phrakhlang, 29 mei 1769.

MINUTEN VAN UITGAANDE MISSIVEN, 29 MEI 1769.

Met zoveel leedwezen als de Gouverneur-Generaal en de Raden van Indië van tijd tot tijd zijn geïnformeerd geworden over de verwoesting van het Siamse rijk, van de rampen die beide de koninklijke familie en haar onderdanen zijn overkomen door de overmacht van hun vijand Rama⁶, met zoveel genoegen is Uw Excellenties brief van 13 januari 1769 ontvangen. Sedert de verwoesting zijn 's Compagnies resident en dienaren genoodzaakt geweest zich uit Siam te begeven. Met blijdschap is vernomen dat het Siamse rijk door haar vijanden is verlaten, en dat de overgebleven inwoners de Hoog Aanzienlijke Mandarijn Riatak [Phya Tak, Taksin] tot hun vorst hebben gekozen en dat het land daardoor in rust is gebracht in en zijn vorige bloeiende staat. En vooral dat Uwe Excellentie die het zwaarwichtige ambt van Phrakhlang is toevertrouwd, zich genegen toont de vriendschap met de Nederlandse Compagnie onder het drijven van handel op de vorige voet te herstellen.

De Gouverneur-Generaal en de Raden van Indië vergelukken bij dezen Uw Excellentie met de verkregen grote waardigheid van Phrakhlang. Maar hoe bereid de Gouverneur-Generaal en de Raden van Indië ook zijn om een bezending naar Siam te sturen, zij kunnen dit niet zonder de speciale voorkennis van Zijne Doorluchtigste Hoogheid de heer Prins van Oranje en Nassau en haar verdere superieuren in Nederland. Evenmin het timmeren van een loge, het vestigen van een resident en andere dienaren voor het direct sturen van schepen met handelswaar. Maar ondertussen, om blijken te geven dat de oude intelligentie nog plaats vindt, hebben de Gouverneur-Generaal en de Raden van Indië niet alleen Uw Excellenties brief aan gemelde Zijn Doorluchtige Hoogheid de Prins van Oranje en Nassau gezonden, maar ook wel willen besluiten op uw verzoek om duizend goede snaphanen toe te zenden met de vijf terugkerende Chinese schippers. [Deze zullen] met elke schipper eerst honderd stuks [worden verzonnen], of in 't geheel vijfhonderd van de beste muskettiers snaphanen met houten laadstokken voor de altijd betaalde prijs van 2650 rijksdaalders of 2120 Spaanse realen. Wij

⁵ 13 januari 1769.

⁶ Burma.



TRANSCRIPTION OF THE DUTCH TEXT

vragen dat voor de prijs van de snaphanen tijdig geleverd en per diezelfde vaartuigen en schippers sappanhout naar Batavia getransporteerd wordt, voor 1 $\frac{1}{4}$ of één Spaanse real per pikul van 125 ponden. Bij gebrek aan voldoende sappanhout kan ook bijenwas gezonden worden, tegen marktprijs. Dit zal tot een proef strekken om te zien welke voordelen er uit de onderlinge handel te behalen zijn.

Verder bedanken de Gouverneur-Generaal en de Raden van Indië voor het ontvangen geschenk van twee pikul olifantstanden en voegen ten bewijze van haar achting tot een contrageschenk hiernevens: 2 stuks vergulde snaphanen, 1 stuks verguld pistool, en 4 stuks extra fijne *hamans* met gouden hoofden.

Geschreven in het Kasteel Batavia op het eiland Groot Java, 29 mei 1769, de Gouverneur-Generaal van Nederlands Indië.



3 English translation

INCOMING MISSIVES (“TRANSLATIONS”), 13 JANUARY 1769.

Letter from (acting) Phrakhlang Pia Pipit Kosa¹ to the Supreme Government in Batavia, 13 January 1769.

Seeing that of old up to the present day a very close and sincere friendship has existed between the kingdom of Siam and the Honourable Company, formerly Their Honours also sent their representatives and other servants hither. They set up their residences here, and also had a lodge constructed in order to store all the merchandise that was brought by Company ships and was bought by the inhabitants. The former Phrakhlangs did not neglect to deliver annually to the residents the wares that the Company ordered.

Further I report that when the enemy Phama² rose in war against Siam, His Highness the Siamese king sent a mandarin by the name of Phiatak³ to the district of Tjinteboen⁴ in order to gather some men there and bring them to Siam to help. But this did not progress quickly, and the kingdom of Siam was overcome by the said enemy and the king with his whole family and all the mandarins and subjects were murdered or fled. Because of this the land was completely ruined, so much so that there was even no one who was entitled to rule except the above-mentioned Phiatak.

With some men Phiatak entered the city (which had been burnt and plundered by the enemy and then abandoned), where all the persons who had fled into the forests joined him, and chose and acknowledged him as their lord and ruler. With this the land is again in its former state, indeed even more flourishing than before. It is now visited even more than formerly by junks and other trading vessels. Therefore I request Their High Honours to build a lodge here [in Thonburi] and to place a resident and several servants in it, in order to trade on the old basis, with the promise that everything that the Company may come to order I shall command the Khlang’s people to provide without fail.

Seeing that all the ammunition, with no exception, was carried off by the enemy, I find myself very much in need of a thousand good flintlocks, if for example something similar should happen again. I and all the mandarins kindly request Their Honours, because of the friendship formerly enjoyed, to be pleased to send these along when a ship is heading this way with merchandise and for similar prices to before.

Furthermore, because the kingdom of Siam and Holland are very old friends, I also request Their Honours to have the goodness to send a copy of this [letter] to His Highness the Prince of Orange and Nassau, and to ask him to appoint a resident again, in

¹ Phiphatkosa is the title of a deputy phrakhlang.

² Phama, Thai term for Burma, Burmese.

³ Phiatak, Phya Tak (Sin), or Taksin.

⁴ Tjinteboen, Chanthabun or Chanthaburi.



ENGLISH TRANSLATION

order to carry on trade on the old basis, seeing that the friendship is still as it was before, in the hope that it may also be long-lasting and His Highness may enjoy a long life.

Finally, I have gathered two pikuls of the best ivory, consisting of one pikul of four and one pikul of five tusks. These I have entrusted to the Chinese captain TjienHeeng to present to Their Honours.

On Friday the 13th day of the 3rd month in the Year of the Rat 1130⁵.

Answer from the Supreme Government in Batavia to the Phrakhang, 29 May 1769.

MINUTES OF OUTGOING MISSIVES, 29 MAY 1769.

With as much sorrow as the Governor-General and members of the Council of the Indies have been informed from time to time about the devastation of the kingdom of Siam, and of the disasters that have befallen both the royal family and their subjects through the superior strength of their enemy Rama⁶, with the same degree of joy Your Excellency's letter of 13 January 1769 has been received. Since the devastation the Company's resident and servants have been forced to remove themselves from Siam. With gladness we have learnt that the kingdom of Siam has been deserted by its enemies, and that the remaining inhabitants have chosen the High and Distinguished Mandarin Riatak [i.e. PhyaTak] [Taksin] as their ruler, and the land has thereby been restored to peace and its former flourishing condition, and in particular that Your Excellency to whom the weighty office of Phrakhang is entrusted shows himself inclined to restore the friendship with the Dutch Company while carrying on trade on the former basis.

The Governor-General and members of the Council of the Indies hereby congratulate Your Excellency with acquiring the great dignity of Phrakhang. However, no matter how ready the Governor-General and members of the Council of the Indies may be to send a mission to Siam, they cannot do this without the special prior knowledge of His Most Serene Highness the Prince of Orange and Nassau and their other superiors in the Netherlands, let alone constructing a lodge and establishing a resident and other servants for the direct sending of ships with merchandise. But in the meantime, in order to show that the old understandings still apply, the Governor-General and members of the Council of the Indies have not only sent Your Excellency's letter to the said Prince of Orange and Nassau, but have also decided in favour of your request to send a thousand good flintlocks with the five returning Chinese skippers. [These will be sent] first a hundred with each skipper, or in all five hundred of the best musketeers' flintlocks with wooden ramrods, for the price always paid of 2,650 rix-dollars or 2,120 Spanish reals. For the price of the flintlocks we ask that sappanwood may be delivered on time to Batavia and transported with the same ships and skippers, for 1¼ of a Spanish real per pikul of 125 pounds. If there is a shortage of sappan wood, bees' wax can also be sent, for the market price. This will serve as a test to see what advantages can be

⁵ 13 January 1769.

⁶ Burma.



ENGLISH TRANSLATION

gained from the trade between us.

Furthermore the Governor-General and members of the Council of the Indies thank you for the gift received of two pikuls of elephant tusks, and to show their regard include a return-gift with this: two gilded flintlocks, one pair of gilded pistols, and four extra fine *hamans* with golden heads.

Written in Batavia Castle on the island of Great Java, 29 May 1769, [signed] the Governor-General of the Netherlands Indies.



4 Colophon

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5 Folio image

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