

A HISTORY OF AYUTTHAYA. SIAM IN THE EARLY MODERN WORLD. By CHRIS BAKER and PASUK PHONGPAICHT. pp. 325. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2017.

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Ayutthaya was a river-state in the central river plains of the Thai, which was founded (at least according to the official legend) in 1351, and survived four hundred years until its thorough destruction in 1767 at the hands of the militaristic Burmese ruler, Hsinbyushin. Historians speculate whether the polity known to Chinese as Xian from 1282 was Ayutthaya, but at any rate its early name came from Rama's epic, and was designated Ayodha – in the second half of the sixteenth century this name was transformed to Ayutthaya 'the invincible'. Alongside other mainland Southeast Asian polities, Ayutthaya was marked by a far lower density of population than India, China or Java. The reason for this situation seems to have been high mortality, primarily a result of malaria and frequent epidemics. It explains why waves of different population from across the region (Makassar, Cambodia) and further afield (Europe and Japan) were attracted to Ayutthaya, making it such a cosmopolitan place, and when being Thai was not the main emphasis for living in Siam as even King Narai (r.1656–88) made clear in his eulogy (p. 207, fn. 156).

This is an extremely valuable, timely and well written survey history of Ayutthaya. Previously researchers had to fall back on Nicholas Tarling's *The Cambridge History of South-East Asia*, Cambridge U.P. 1999, or W.A.R. Wood's old 1924 imprint *History of Siam*, a tedious blood and guts trip through one reign after another, largely cribbed from a Thai work by Prince Damrong and which came out in at least four separate editions as recently as 1981. More recently we have benefited from Anthony Reid's two-volume *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce* (1988), a Braudellian work as the authors correctly attribute it on the region more fully after work, as well as some accomplished original research by Thai scholars like Dhiravat na Pombejra and Bhawan Ruangsilp from Chulalongkorn University. We can enjoy the elegant prose of the Belgian Francophile Dirk van der Cruysse (*Siam and the West, 1500–1700*, translated from a French 1991 imprint in 2002) and the shorter but punchy source-driven books produced by the tireless Michael Smithies (sadly deceased on 2 January 2019). Other surveys like Derick Garnier's *Ayutthaya. Venice of the East* (2004) is, with its lavish illustrations, somewhat more of a coffee-table accompaniment than a hardcore academic text. Baker, to my knowledge, not a university professor but rather a researcher within the ambit of the Royal Siam Society, has collaborated fruitfully and extensively with Pasuk Phongpaichit to assure a more dedicatedly Thai feel to the work and where foreigners are not presented as the leading light on developments in Thailand. This is very important and a dangerous siren's lure when it comes, for example, to discussing the tumultuous and still contentious National Revolution of 1688 (Baker calls it neutrally a 'succession crisis', p. 170). As Baker and Phongpaichit show, the events of these years were not all about the proto-colonial French takeover bid, but had a lot to do with wider unrest in the countryside (see pages 224–227) and disgruntled *sangha*. On the thorny question of how realistic French hopes that King Narai might convert to Christianity were, Baker suggests that Narai simply 'brushed aside' these calls. One needs to turn to Alan Strathern's major new work on religious and political change in world history to appreciate how the *sangha* were mobilising against any such eventuality, that temple murals such as those at Wat Khongkham were only too quick to depict European troops as a demon army, and harassment of the Christians in the country took on explicitly symbolic dimensions (beatings with symbolic crucifixes). At the same time, this is not an isolationist interpretation of Thai history, for Ayutthaya's constant struggles with its neighbours offer a valuable backdrop to, say, understanding Phra Narai's demise from the early 1680s. There is rather little, however, on important regional centres like Tenasserim and Mergui, which the French wanted to build up into their main presence in the Indian Ocean

given the difficulties of safe harbouring on the Coromandel Coast in Pondicherry. The problem seems to be the sheer inexistence of any research into these two historically mixed Thai/Mon gateways to the Andaman coast since the times of Lt. Col. James Low's 'The History of Tennasserim' published in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* as early as the 1830s, rather than choice of approach. Baker, for example, has himself published on Phuket and more widely co-edited an important book entitled *Recalling Local Pasts. Autonomous History in Southeast Asia* (2002).

The book is well written and integrates detail of the latest research into the general, overarching narrative. Thus we have Geoff Wade's transcriptions of Ming era court records and memorials (*Ming shi lu*) which are useful in helping establish a reliable chronology of Ayutthayan rulers, a record of the 'tribute-trade' that accompanied individual embassies, specific issues like the repatriation of Chinese pirates, and the titles used at court. We also have a whole section drawn from the *Tale of Khun Chang Khun Phaen*, the "only literary work of the era that aims to present a realistic picture of the society", beginning on page 193 and which Baker himself edited back in 2010 (cf. Khunying Gesmanit et al. *Thai Literary Works of the Ayutthaya period*, Bangkok: Thai Team on Anthology of ASEAN Literatures, 1999). The authors taken on Yoneo Ishii's recently published extracts from records of the Japanese junk trade (*Tōsen Fusetsu-gaki*, 1674–1723). The book deals with environmental factors shaping Ayutthaya's rise, the forms of kingship adopted and how Buddhism affected Thai society. The authors draw extensively on chronicles and literary testimony (rather more than material history, the kind of objects one can still see in the southeast Asia collections of the V& A or Royal Museum of Arts and History in Brussels) to illustrate everyday life in Ayutthaya, although figures from murals in different Thai *wats* are incorporated to enliven the text. They conclude with a ruminating thoughtful set of reflections as to how interest in Ayutthaya's history was awakened at the end of the nineteenth century by Phraya Boranratchathanin. At the end of the book there is a list of kings and their estimated dates according to different authorities, a glossary and some notes on key sources,

The book is structured around seven chapters, both thematic and loosely chronological. Thus Chapter 2 is devoted to 'Ayutthaya Rising' and Chapter 6 to 'Ayutthaya Falling', with the final chapter looking forward 'To Bangkok'. The latter sections might have taken more account of the provocative but searching conclusions drawn by Barend Terwiel in 'Who destroyed Ayutthaya?' (*Indian Journal of Tai Studies*, vol. IX, October 2009), which suggested on the basis of two contemporary European reports by J. D. Koenig and M. Corre that the Burmese departure was rapid and that a lot of the destruction was carried out by 'the Siamese, and especially the Chinese, who cannot provide for themselves'. Baker and Pasuk instead reiterate the injunctions of the Burmese generals that their goal was the purposeful destruction of Ayutthaya and the carting off of population back to Ava, but note how little forces came to relieve Ayutthaya from outlying cities, and how many defections there were.

I am curious why the book insists on referring to King Sorasak (r. February 1697 and 1706) by the noble title he held before ascending the throne, and not Sua, as the chronicles themselves prefer. But overall, this is a model of a book that academics trying to fathom the historical complexities of the region now need to see replicated for Burma. Historians like Thant Myint-U otherwise invariably begin their narratives with the British takeover from King Thibaw on 1 January 1886! <s.halikowski-smith@swansea.ac.uk>

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