

ASIA

# AYUTTHAYA

Siam's Last Stand



## Introduction

There are only a handful of countries that have never experienced Western colonization: Saudi Arabia, Iran, China, Afghanistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Ethiopia, and Thailand, home to Ayutthaya. The early seeds of Ayutthaya were sowed when a group of Thai people migrated to what would become their new homeland in the 10th century. Eventually, they founded a kingdom that would grow into a major trading hub in Southeast Asia.

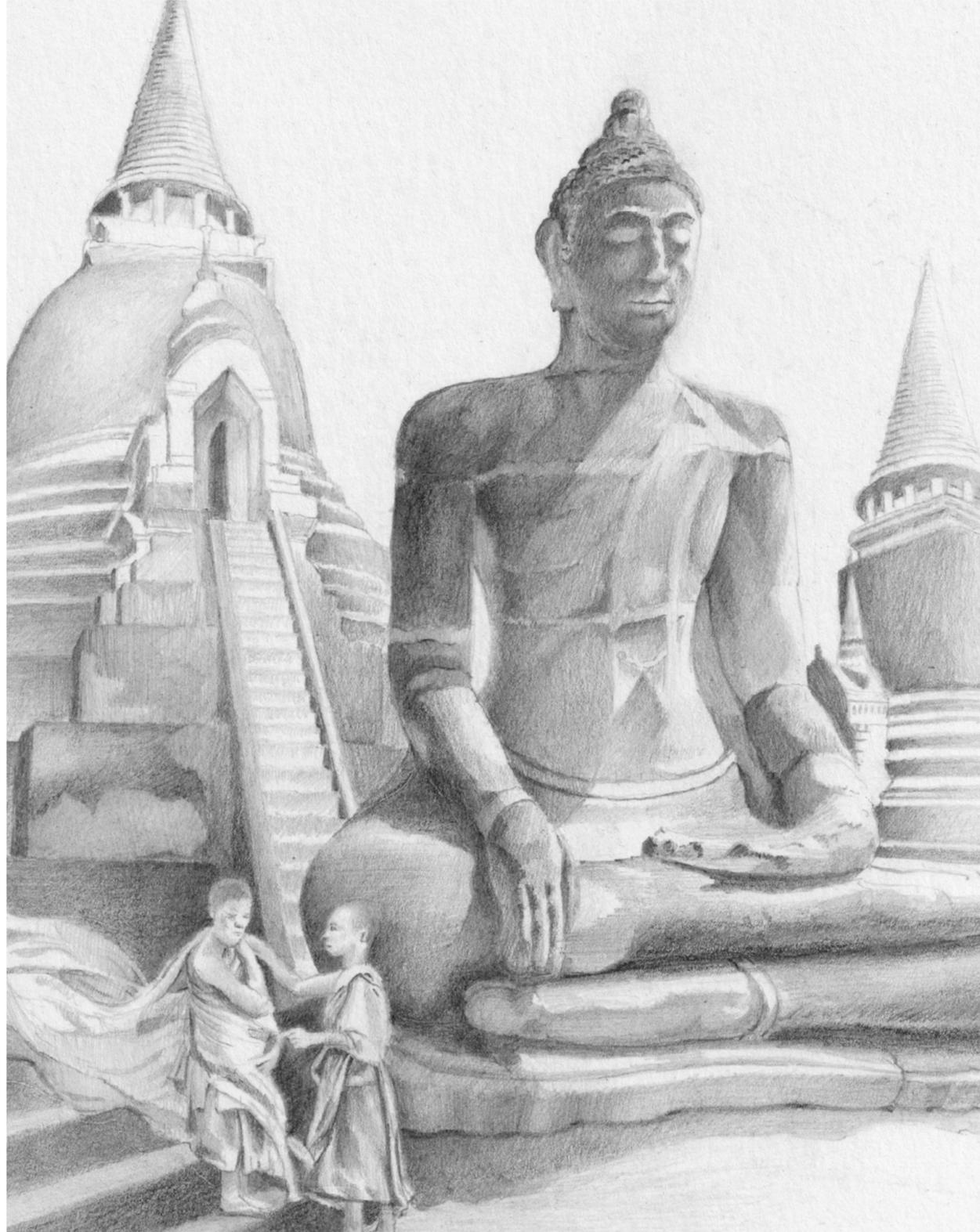
Ayutthaya is the successor of that kingdom, the second of four Thai kingdoms, which reigned from 1350–1767. The region prospered with the rise of the city of Ayutthaya, which began as a city-state—growing until it became a proud kingdom in its own right, learning many lessons in governance, resistance, and trade as it grew.

### **Wat Mahathat Temple**

#### **Unknown Author**

Wat Phra Mahathat Woramahawihan is the main Buddhist temple (wat) of the Nakhon Si Thammarat Province in southern Thailand, a province that came under the influence of the Kingdom of Ayutthaya under the mandala system. The main stupa of the temple, Phra Borommathat Chedi ('great noble relics stupa'), was built by King Sri Dhammasokaraja in the early-13th century CE to establish a symbol for the Theravada Buddhism sect in the province.





1. **Ayutthaya**  
**Nathan Silver**  
**Graphite on Paper**

A pair of monks stand next to a statue of Buddha in a temple.

## Culture

At the height of its prosperity Ayutthaya was cosmopolitan. It depended in large part on its openness to foreigners to sustain commerce and trade, and imported many mercenaries and foreign advisers. For example, Yamada Nagamasa was a Japanese soldier and trader who came to Ayutthaya in about 1612. At the time, Ayutthaya had a “Japanese Village” neighborhood with a few thousand inhabitants, including many Christians fleeing religious persecution in Japan. Nagamasa quickly rose to become the leader of this neighborhood. He later entered into military service to the King of Ayutthaya but would still often return to Japan for trading.

The Thai people of Ayutthaya were Buddhists, and the area’s Buddhist temples had a distinctive architectural style that still draws tourists to the ruins of the ancient city to this day. Though there was religious unity, there were strict social divisions between classes—some of the rules enforcing these divisions were informal, but others were formally codified.

## Economy

Through its contacts with both the West and Japan, Ayutthaya became an immensely successful trading power. In 1511, Portugal was the first Western power to make contact with Ayutthaya, followed by the Dutch, English, Spanish, French, and Japanese in forming trade relations. During this period Ayutthaya had a population of nearly one million people and served as an international trade emporium. The city's hinterland economy revolved around the village communities of the Chao Phraya old delta floodplain, where the ricelands were irrigated by natural and artificial canals. These canals also served also as a transportation network enabling commerce deeper inland where a wilderness of huge monsoon forests with malaria-carrying mosquitoes and wild beasts made travel difficult.

Unlike their neighbors, Ayutthaya was able to resist colonization. The Kingdom sent ambassadors and emissaries abroad, and artfully managed the competing interests of rival European trading companies, maintaining a delicate balance of power. Nonetheless, Ayutthaya would still run into the occasional European attempt to bring it under their control. For example, in 1664 the Dutch used force to extract more favorable trade terms. There was also an extra-territorial jurisdiction clause in which Dutchmen committing a crime in Siam would be punished according to the Netherlands laws. The situation never became as dire and exploitative as was the case in many other similar nations during the colonial period. In fact, Ayutthaya often used its foreign connections to its advantage, negotiating favorable trade terms and alliances.

**Naresuan Life, 1931/32 Common Era**

**Phraya Anusat Chittrakon**

**Mural Painting**

**Wihan of Wat Suwan Dararam, Thailand**

The mural depicts Naresua, the king of Ayutthaya, as he entered the ruined city of Hanthawaddy in the year 2142 of the Buddhist Era.





## Governance

Ayutthaya had a dramatic origin; it was established in 1351 by those fleeing a smallpox outbreak. King Ramathibodi I moved his court from the pox-struck city of Lopburi to an island in the middle of the Chao Phraya River, and thus was Ayutthaya born. Ayutthaya became the dominant city-state in an interconnected regional web of city-states known as a mandala (which is Sanskrit for “circle”), a common political model throughout Southeast Asia during the time.

The relationships between the dominant central city-state and the tributary smaller city-states were reinforced through family ties, with the ruler of the central city-state appointing male relatives to rule the tributaries. Despite the hierarchy, these smaller city-states

still had significant autonomy in domestic affairs. The bulk of the kingdom population worked in the fields, freemen and slaves alike. Freemen were obliged to work for six months each year for the local representatives of the king, paying taxes and levies when required.

Constantine Phaulkon was a Greek adventurer who is said to have washed ashore in Ayutthaya in 1675. Phaulkon cleverly became associated with both the finance minister and the then-King Narai, who eventually gave Phaulkon the position of finance minister after his predecessor’s death. He and the King became close, and Phaulkon effectively became the King’s chief minister, even engineering a relationship with the French to counterbalance the rising Dutch East India Company.

### The Fall of Ayutthaya City

Unknown Artist

National Memorial of Thailand

On April 7, 1767, the Burmese troops, supported by artillery fire, finally breached the walls by sunset and entered the city. The Siamese put up a resistance inside the city, but were eventually overwhelmed. Indiscriminate slaughter followed. Everything in sight was put to the torch; even images of the Buddha were hacked for the gold with which they were coated.

### Governance Changes

The system eventually fell out of fashion, and in 1455 King Trailokanat created a centralized government called the Palatine Law. This law created a system called the Chatusadom, characterized by two prime ministers, one for civil affairs and one for military affairs. The Department of Civil Affairs was divided into four ministries: the Ministry of Police, the Ministry of Palatial Affairs, the Ministry of Treasury and Taxation, and the Ministry of Agriculture. This system would last through two successive kingdoms, until 1892, when the government of Ayutthaya’s successor state would finally reorganize its structure. It was with this firm institutional base that Ayutthaya would open vast trading relations with the West.

The beginning of the end for the Kingdom was the Siamese Revolution of 1688. After the Revolution, Ayutthaya became isolationist, and, with the exception of the Dutch East India Company, trade was halted. This lasted until 1767 when an invasion by a Burmese army reached and sacked Ayutthaya city. The Burmese would leave soon after, but the sacking destroyed the kingdom, and a new one would emerge from Ayutthaya’s ashes, in the form of Bangkok.

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