



in the First Earliest Known Ancient Thai Script through  
Historical Spelling.<sup>1</sup>

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In King Ram Khamhaeng Script which is the first earliest known ancient Thai script written in 1283 A.D., the consonants /<sup>h</sup>khɔ:/ and /<sup>h</sup>khɔ:/ are represented by more than one consonant symbol for each of them:

/<sup>h</sup>khɔ:/ is represented by <๑> and <๓>  
/<sup>h</sup>khɔ:/ is represented by <๗> <๘> and <๙>

Fang Kuei Li suggested in his A Handbook of Comparative Tai (1977 : 23) that in the Thai language original voiced consonants have become devoiced and the distinction between old voiced and voiceless consonants are called the middle (unaspirated) or high (aspirated) consonants and the original voiced consonants, the low consonant. This implies that <๑> and <๓> of the /<sup>h</sup>khɔ:/ are original voiceless consonants; <๗> <๘> and <๙> of the /<sup>h</sup>khɔ:/ are original voiced consonants.

In present Thai pronunciation, besides the difference in tones, all these five consonant symbols are pronounced as a voiceless aspirated velar plosive consonant /k<sup>h</sup>/.

George Coedes and Jean Burnay put forward a hypothesis on the phonetic interpretation of the consonant symbol <๑> <๓> <๗>

and <๓> in their article <๓> et <๓> et leur origine (JSS, 21 (1972 : 199) that in the ancient Thai these four consonant symbols represented four different phonemes.

Suriya Ratakul suggested in her article "Where have and gone?" (Journal of Thammasat University) (1972 : 39) that <๓> and <๓> did not occur in the Asokan Brahmi, the Grantha or the Khmer writing<sup>2</sup>, so if they had not represented different sounds in Thai, King Ram Khamhaeng would not have invented new symbols to represent them in the Thai writing system. And in King Ram Khamhaeng Script, <๒> and <๓> occurred in contrast in a minimal pair.<sup>3</sup> But a minimal pair of <๓> and <๓> was not found since these two symbols were rarely used in the script. In later periods starting from 1341, <๒> and <๓> of /'khɔ:/ occurred in free variation and so did <๓> and <๓> of /'khɔ:/.<sup>4</sup> These four consonant symbols were kept in the Thai writing until 1927, when <๓> and <๓> were completely abolished. Present Thai writing has <๒> to be used as /'khɔ:/, and <๓> and <๓> to be used as /'khɔ:/.

Coedes and Burnay suggested in the same article that <๒> <๓> <๓> and <๓> represented four different phonemes, but they did not make it clear which phonemes <๒> and <๓> represented. But for <๓>, and <๓> they proposed a hypothesis that they were "Spirante gutturante" because R.P. Savina found two words in Thai Nung

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written with <๓> and <๓> which are pronounced as /xla/ and /xva/.<sup>5</sup>

Another hypothesis was proposed by G. André Haudicourt in his article "Les Occlusives Uvulaires en Thai" (Bulletin de la Société de Linguistique de Paris (1952 : 87) that <๓> and <๓> represented uvular plosive consonants, since he found a uvular consonant in White Tai. Ratakul strongly supported Haudicourt's hypothesis in the same article that she would assume <๓> represented a uvular plosive /q<sup>h</sup>/ and <๓> represented /g/ since they almost always occurred with back vowels in early Thai writing. From my own observations, in King Ram Khamhaeng Script where <๒> and <๓> occurred in contrast and that led us to assume that they represented two different phonemes, there were eleven words written with <๓>; six occurred with front vowels, three with back vowels, and two occurred as an initial consonant of a cluster /kw-/ with front vowels. Of <๓>, among four words, one occurred with a front vowel, one with a back vowel, and the other two occurred as an initial consonant of a cluster /kw-/ with front vowels. For the <๒> among ten words four occurred with back vowels, one occurred as an initial consonant of a cluster /kw-/ with a front vowel, and five with front vowels. <๓> among six words, three with back vowels and the other three with front vowels. So it is clearly seen that <๓> and <๓> did not

almost always occur with back vowels and their corresponding <๓> and <๓> also frequently occurred with back vowels, instead of front vowels as expected. I would like to suggest that it is rather dangerous to judge points of articulation of consonants by considering only the phonetic qualities of their accompanying vowels, because velar consonants do not always occur with front vowels and uvular consonants, nor do they always occur with back vowels. In Persian, for example, /kʰ/ occurs with front vowels as in the word /kʰif/ "a hand bag" and also occurs with back vowels as in the word /kʰur/ "to be blind" /gʰ/ also occurs with both front and back vowels, with front vowels as in the word /gʰir/ "tar", with back vowels as in the word /gʰuʳi/ "a tea pot"

The most recent hypothesis on the phonetic interpretation of <๓> <๓> <๓> and <๓> was proposed by Fang Kuei Li (1977) who suggested that in King Ram Khamhaeng Script <๓> represented /kʰ/ and <๓> represented /x/ , agreeing on the whole with Lü and White Tai.<sup>6</sup> For <๓> and <๓>, he suggested that <๓> was a letter corresponding to Indic /g/ to indicate that the voicing was probably maintained at the time of the introduction of the Thai script.<sup>7</sup> of the <๓> he stated that in King Ram Khamhaeng Script, it represented /ɣ/ as appear in Sack.<sup>8</sup> Li's hypothesis supports his theory that in the Thai language original voiced consonants

have become devoiced and the distinction of old voiced and voiceless consonants is utilised to mark the difference in tones, because in recent times we pronounce <၂> and <၃> with an inherent rising tone as /'kʰɔ:/, and pronounced <၇> <၈> with an inherent mid tone as /-kʰɔ:/. I found that Li's phonetic interpretation of these four consonant symbols is convincing since it agrees on the whole with other Thai languages and dialects. For example, <၂> and <၃> are also pronounced as /kʰ/ and /x/ in Lü and White Tai and <၇> is still pronounced as /ɣ/ in Sack and some Pu-i dialects.

All scholars in proto-Tai reached the conclusion that <၂> <၃> <၇> and <၈> represent four different phonemes. But the question of the phonetic interpretation of them is still under debate. Careful investigation on comparative Tai is needed to be done before bringing this matter to a conclusion.

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Notes

<sup>1</sup> The Thai language stated here is spoken in Thailand. It is one of the languages belonging to the most widespread language family in South-East Asia called "The Tai family". These languages are spoken in Thailand, by the Shan of Burma, in the Lao kingdom, and by many isolated groups of the Thai race in China. All these languages share a large number of words and are all the same in being monosyllabic and tonal. The Thai language of Thailand was once called "Siamese". Later we took the name "Thai" instead of "Siamese"; it means "the language of independence". There are five tones in the Thai language: mid /-/, low /\_/, high /^/, falling /`/ and rising /' /.

<sup>2</sup> The Asokan Brahmi, the Grantha, and the Khmer scripts are the source scripts of King Ram Khamhaeng writing. Details can be seen in Danvivathana (1981 : 17-29)

<sup>3</sup> For example, the word /\_kʰap/ "to drive away" was consistently written with <๒> , and the word /\_kʰap/ "to sing" was always written with <๓>.

<sup>4</sup> For example, the word /'kʰun/ "the king" was always written with <๓> in King Ram Khamhaeng Script, but in Si Chum inscription (1341-1361) it was written with either <๒> or <๓>. The word /'kʰam/ "night" was always written with <๓> in early inscriptions but in Phra Sadet inscriptions (1525) was written with <๓>.

5 R.P. Savina, Dictionnaire etymologique francais-ning-chinois,  
Hong Kong, 1924. The two words are /xla/ "left (opposite to  
right)" and /xvam/ "matter"

6 Li Fang Kuei, A Handbook of Comparative Tai (Hawaii : The  
University Press of Hawaii), p. 208.

7 Ibid, p. 198.

8 Ibid, p. 214.



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