The reign of Suri(n)yavongsa

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As mentioned in the introduction to this Volume, throughout Surinyavongsa's reign Lan Xang enjoyed peaceful, if at times strained, relations with its neighbours, and was spared the threat of Burmese invasion. It was a time of prosperity and internal order, after the devastation of the previous years, when the wealth of the Kingdom was poured into Buddhist endowments and embellishment of the capital. Famous for its architecture and its monasteries, Viang Chang gained further renown as a centre of religious learning, attracting monastic scholars from throughout the Tai world, and from as far afield as Cambodia and Burma, as described by Van Wuysthoff.

We know something of the magnificence of Viang Chan, its moated walls, its temples and palaces because from the reign of Surinyavongsa's date the first European accounts of the Kingdom. From descriptions of the Lao capital, we know that the art and architecture of Vientiane drew inspiration particularly from Ayutthaya, but also from northern Thailand, Cambodia and Burma.[1] Sculpture was highly developed. Some consider the mid-seventeenth century to be the high point of Lao art, judged by the number and quality of Buddha images dedicated.[2] Both seated and standing seventeenth-century Buddha images show Siamese stylistic influences yet remain characteristically Lao. One interesting image is the standing form, arms to the side, fingers pointed down, known as "the calling for rain Buddha".[3] Temples were constructed in brick and stucco with elaborately sloping, curved and overlapping roofs of golden tiles. Secular architecture, excluding the royal place was by contrast mostly built of wood on a brick base. Both religious and secular structures were lavishly decorated with coloured tiles, painted stucco, and carved and gilded panels and pillars, the effect of which was greatly to impress the visiting Europeans, as described elsewhere in this Volume.

The fullest account of Lan Xang at this time comes from the Italian Jesuit missionary Giovanni-Maria Leria during his five year-stay in Viang Chan.[4] Leria's description of the king's palace is as follows:

> The royal palace, the structure and symmetry of which are remarkable, can be seen from afar. It is truly vast and so extensive that one would take it for a city, both

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[1] Some idea of what Viang Chan must have been like can be gained from de la Loubère's account of Ayutthaya in the years 1687 and 1688, which is much more complete than anything recorded about Lan Xang. See Simon de la Loubère, *A New Historical Relation of the Kingdom of Siam*, Kuala Lumpur, 1969, 29-33. However, care must be exercised in drawing parallels between Lan Xang and Ayutthaya, especially since by the end of the seventeenth century disparities in wealth, especially from trade, must have been evident.

[2] P.M. Gagneux, *Contribution à la connaissance de la civilization laotienne d'après l'épigraphie du Royaume de Vientiane (XVè-XIXè siècles)*, PhD dissertation, University of Paris, 1976, 28, 65, 71.

[3] Boun Souk, *L'image du Buddha dans l'art lao*, Vientiane, 1971, 18, 24.

[4] His account was published 'second hand' by Giovanni Filippo de Marini in 1660. A French translation, *Relation nouvelle et curieuse du Royaume de Lao*, appeared in *Revue Indochinoises* nos 8-10 (1910): 152-181, 257-271, 358-365. An English translation from the original Latin was published as G. F. de Marini, *A New and Interesting Description of the Lao Kingdom*, transl. Walter E. J. Tips and Claudio Bertuccio and with a long introduction by Luigi Bressan (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 1998).

> from the point of view of its location[and] from the infinite number of people residing in it. The King's quarters, which have a very beautiful and magnificent facade, and which have a great number of beautiful rooms as well as a big hall, are all made of durable wood embellished inside and out with splendid bas-relief[s], gilded so finely that they appear to be covered with gold laminations rather than with leaves of this metal. From there, on entering the wide courtyard, one first observes a group of houses all of brick and roofed with tiles, in which the secondary wives usually reside…"[5]

The houses of the " principal noblemen" too were " quite rich and beautiful, all in exquisitely worked wood" , contrasting strikingly with the houses of the common folk, who were "very badly housed".

Music, dance, theatre and the recitation of epic poetry all flourished in the cosmopolitan Lao capital. Leria tells of "comedians" who "recite verses and … perform pleasant and amusing tricks… some sing, others dance, and still others play various instruments".[6] Van Wuysthoff described how he and his party were entertained by acrobats and (royal) dancers well into the night after the meeting with the King.[7]

Literature too experienced a second golden age, building on the first flourishing in the early sixteenth century. We can be sure that, though dates of composition of most works cannot be determined with any accuracy, new novels in classical form were composed and edited. The names of many of the authors of these great epic poems are not known, except for the *Sang Sin Xay* by Pang Kham, about whom nothing else is known but his name. Literature was still as much oral as written. Religious literature, especially the extra-canonical morality stories based on accounts of the Buddha's previous incarnations and lives of Buddhist saints, continued to provide moral instruction for all who thronged the temples to celebrate the great festivals that marked the Buddhist year.

The refinement and richness of Lao material culture, its gold and silver working, weaving, embroidery and pottery, must also have impressed the European visitors, but Van Wuysthoff was more interested in opportunities for trade than in Lao culture. As also described elsewhere in this Volume, Van Wuysthoff provides a fascinating glimpse of the extent of Laos commerce during the reign of Surinyavongsa. Even so, some of the hearsay information he collected needs to be treated with caution. It seems unlikely, for instance, that salt, prized though it was, was ever worth its actual weight in gold even in the remote region of Attopeu. Trade for Lan Xang was clearly an important source of wealth. Distances were great, however, and travel slow and at times dangerous. Van Wuysthoff reported that the route by oxcart from Vietnam to Lakhon (Thakheak) which must have been via the Mu Gia pass took twenty-two days, a trek Vietnamese merchants made three times a year to buy silks and rhinoceros horns. Chinese merchants came only once every two years, leaving their carts in the north and sailing by boat downstream to Viang Chan, while Yunnanese Muslim traders brought their wares by pack horse into northern Laos. It could take up to five months for heavily loaded carts to cross the Khorat

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[5] De Marini, 9
[6] De Marini, 73.
[7] See xxxx in this Volume.

plateau to Ayutthaya. Pack buffaloes carrying no more than 70 kilogrammes (155 pounds) usually took a shorter, more mountainous route, across passes in the Phetchabun range and down into the Chao Phraya basin, where goods would be transferred to river barges, a trip that took at least two months.

Despite his "meticulous researches", Van Wuysthoff has little to say about finance or taxation, except to estimate revenue collection in gold at around 123 kilogrammes (270 pounds) per annum - most of which, he reported, was donated by the king to the Sangha. Nor does he tell us much about the actual functioning of the economy, or the structure of Lao society. We know, however, that production was not through large-scale irrigation, but on extensive family plots, often individually irrigated, for land was plentiful. Surplus production was extracted through taxation and tribute to pay for the cost of the court and the lifestyle of the aristocracy. Below the free, the exploited Lao peasantry came slaves and the ethnic monitories pejoratively referred to as *kha* (slaves). Indebtedness and capture in war continued to be the principal ways for Lao to fall into slavery. A slave could be freed only by royal amnesty; through payment of his debt by his family; or by being allowed to become a monk. A special category of slaves were those attached to monasteries (*kha okad*), for donation of slaves as well as land or other forms of wealth to the Sangha were meritorious deeds.

Van Wuysthoff does throw interesting light on relations between Lan Xang and neighbouring kingdoms .. It would appear the relations were strained not only with Siam, but also with Cambodia and Vietnam. Lao dissatisfaction with Siam centered on the treatment accorded Lao merchants in Ayutthaya. Not only did the Siamese refuse to permit Lao traders to sell their goods freely, forcing them to sell only to designated court nobles at artificially low prices, but the same officials actively discouraged access to Laos by foreign merchants and missionaries. This may simply have been in order to retain a Siamese monopoly of trade, but it also effectively deprived Lan Xang of the wealth and weapons the Lao might otherwise have obtained from direct trade with either the Dutch or Portuguese. Surinyavongsa seems to have been well aware of the effect of these restrictions and was apparently eager to encourage direct trade with the Dutch.

Relations with Cambodia were also strained over matters of trade. The Cambodians would not allow even southern Lao traders from Champasak further south than Sambor without papers issued by the Lao court officially identifying them as merchants. These could only be obtained from Viang Chan, hundreds of miles upstream. With papers in order, however, they were able to trade freely, without any of the delays encountered at Ayutthaya. Even so, the Lao were sufficiently concerned about relations with Cambodia to request van Wuysthoff to mediate on the king's behalf.

Vietnam was then divided, with the Trinh in the north and the Nguyen in the south both claiming to rule on behalf of the powerless Le emperor. Relations were strained with the Trinh over what appears to have been a border incursion during which Lao villagers were attacked and robbed. Van Wuysthoff reports that Surinyavongsa was so annoyed that he refused to accept the gifts and credentials of an ambassador from Tonkin, and ordered him to leave the country. Subsequently relations improved. The Lao king was presented

with a Trinh princess as a concubine, and an agreement was concluded defining jurisdiction over populations in the border region.

It is significant that the frontiers of Lan Xang, at least as defined by border posts with neighbouring kingdoms, seem to have been clearly marked. Van Wuysthoff described "a wooden notice fixes to a tree on which was carved in Cambodian and in Lao that this was the division between the two kingdoms". With Vietnam and Siam too the frontier points of contact were well recognized. A version of the Lao chronicles dating from 1656 says that throughout the reign of Surinyavongsa, Lan Xang extended "from Li Phi in the south to Pha Dai in the north" and that, facing north, "the left [of the kingdom] came into contact with Ayutthaya at the two Dū trees and the right came into contact with the Kaeo [Vietnamese] at the San Sam Nga [San tree with the large branches] and Nam Ma Sam Khae [three arms of the Ma river]." These limits should not be thought of as defining a territorial state in the modern European sense, nor did Lao people possess even a proto-national awareness. Kingdoms in mainland Southeast Asia took the form of *mandalas*, an Indian term used to describe a polity in which power was concentrated in a capital city and surrounding region, but decreased in more distant parts administered by tributary rulers. When the centre was strong, as Viang Chan was during the reign of Surinyavongsa, central power was acknowledged by tributary rulers; but when the centre was weak, as it was when torn apart by a succession dispute, tributary rulers might transfer their allegiance to a more powerful kingdom. *Mandalas* could therefore expand or contract in size.The location of frontier posts during the reign of Surinyavongsa thus gives some indication of the power of Lan Xang to demand tribute within an area recognized by neighbouring *mandalas*. Even so the frontiers were under pressure, especially in the south where Siamese outpost of Nakhon Raxasima (Khorat) gave Ayutthaya control of the southwestern sector of the Khorat plateau.

Surinyavongsa was an absolute monarch, as remote as he was powerful. Apart from presiding over official functions and festivities, the king apparently secluded himself in his palace, leaving daily affairs in the hands of his nobles. Indeed the picture Leria has left us of the powers of the king reveals the extent to which Lan Xang had adopted the Siamese, and thus ultimately the Khmer, notion of kingship.

> The king has absolute and independent power and does not recognize any person above himself, whether it be in civil or religious matters. All land is his property and he absolutely disposes, as master, of all [t]hat his subjects possess… offices, employment, honors and wealth, depend in an absolute way on the King, who elevates those who please him most to the first offices of the kingdom The same applies to the creation of pensions and the conferment of administrative posts, as he sees fit. Several times during their lives he takes away these posts from them – and always when they die … In order to inspire in his subjects great esteem and veneration for his person, he rarely appears in public and each day he more and more hides from their eyes , preferring to be adored by his people more like a hidden god than as a man of the same species as they are.[8]

[8] De Marini, 19-20, 22.

Surinyavongsa's pretension to rule as a *cakkavattin*, a universal ruler demanding tribute from lesser "kings", and recognizing "none as higher than himself" was not accepted at face value by Leria. He discounted reports that Surinyavongsa received an annual tribute from Vietnam. He also doubted that Lan Xang paid no tribute to Beijing, remarking sarcastically that even the rulers of Tonkin and Siam and others "much richer and more powerful" then the Lao monarch acknowledged the overlordship of the Emperor of China.[9] In actual fact, however, for more than a century, from 1614 to 1728, there is no record of any tribute mission from Lan Xang to China, a period which covers the entire reign of Surinyavongsa.[10]

Though Surinyavongsa enjoyed absolute power he was not a despot, for he ruled in accordance with Buddhist precepts, known collectively as the Nititham. Day-to-day administration of the kingdom was the responsibility of the *uparat*. Below him in the administrative hierarchy according to Leria, came the seven governors of the seven "provinces" into which the kingdom was divided. These resided not at their provincial seats, but at Viang Chan, where they effectively functioned as central government officials leaving the administration of their provinces to their deputies (the *uparat* of each *meuang*).[11] Each governor was responsible for collecting the annual tribute of his *meuang*, and for raising an army of retainers when the king commanded, which he would then personally lead into battle.

Van Wuysthoff who remained less than two months in the Lao capital, tells us that judicial and administrative functions were divided between members of a supreme council (evidently the *Senam Luang*) composed of five members of the royal family who together with ministers not of royal blood (presumably the principal *chau meuang*) were responsible for administration of the kingdom and relations with foreign states. Of the three senior ministers, the most powerful was "Assen", the Phraya Saen Meuang, a man about forty years old, commander-in-chief of the army and governor of the capital and northern provinces. To him, according to Van Wuysthoff, would fall the office of the Regent in the event of the king's death. Since Surinyavongsa had at that time no children by his first queen, Van Wuysthoff believed "Assen" to be his most likely successor. The second most powerful minister, the Phraya Chan, "aged 48 or 50", was the governor of Meuang Lakhon (Sikhottabong), responsible for all of southern Laos. The third minister, the Phraya Meuang Kang, named Lankan, was in charge of relations with foreign envoys. While the first two were equivalent in standing, Lankan ("aged about 36") was, in Van Wuysthoff's view, much less powerful. Another influential official Van Wuysthoff mentioned by name was the royal treasurer, the king's maternal uncle, Komphan, whom he considered to be corrupt.

Both the above accounts confirm what we know of the expanded administrative structure under Surinyavongsa. Below the king, three positions carried the rank of *chau* – the *uparat, raxavong and raxabut.* All other senior officials held the rank of *phraya*. The three chief *sena*, of the Right, Middle and Left, were each assisted by officials

[9] This is confirmed by Vietnamese accounts. Nguyen The Anh, "La frontière sinovietnamienne du XIè au XVIIè siècle", in Lafont, ed. *Les Frontières du Vietnam*, 67.
[10] Shen Xu, *Lao Wo Shi* [History of Laos] Kunming, 1990, 201.
[11] De Marini, 21 ; Lejosne, *Le journal de Voyage*, 73

responsible for defence of the realm (ten), the court secretariat (seven), and administration (ten). Ten Brahmins were employed, mainly in a teaching capacity. Other departments supervised the royal treasury, the royal pages, guards of the palace, and policing the city. There were also separate departments in charge of the royal drum corps, the royal music, for welcoming official guests, and for dealing with royal correspondence.[12] All officials were ranked, not as in the elaborate *sakdina* system in force in Ayutthaya in terms of rights to the produce of precise areas of land, but in terms of the fines payable for serious transgressions. Those of higher rank paid more for committing the same offence. Thus in Lan Xang, court officials or *chau meuang* of the same rank could "eat" the revenue of variable sized *meuang*, whose gift was in the king's hands alone.

Elaborate ceremonial surrounded the court, "the splendor and renown of which is greatly increased by… the almost incredible number of pages" waiting upon the king. All who sought employment or preferment, Leria noted, depended entirely on the king's pleasure. At court all competed for rank and honour, and the wealth and status that came with them. The relative social standing of the Lao aristocracy, according to Leria, was designated by the size and shape of the gold and silver betel nut boxes they carried in ceremonial processions behind the king and *uparat* on their richly caparisoned elephants and the regional governors in their ornamented carrying chairs.[13]

If the inner functioning of the court was something of a mystery, the power and prestige of the Buddhist Sangha was readily apparent to European visitors. Van Wuysthoff had little understanding of or interest in "idolatrous" Buddhism, which is described elsewhere in this Volume. Both Leria and Van Wuysthoff remarked on the lavishness of royal endowments and gifts to monasteries, since apart from their religious significance, these had economic importance. Monastic expenditure employed large numbers of craftsmen and artists, and thereby circulated wealth in much the same way that monasteries did in medieval Europe. What is unclear is whether or not, and if so to what extent, gifts to the Sangha undermined the tax base in Lan Xang, as occurred in Burma.

Father Leria, as might be expected, took a much closer interest in Lao Buddhism. Van Wuysthoff's two assistants who remained a few months longer than their superior recorded not only Leria's arrival in July 1642, but also the conditions laid down for him to "teach": he was to shave his head, dress like the Lao (probably as a monk), learn to read and write Lao, and teach only what was "within the limits of Lao belief".[14] Though the good Father must have been offended by being told to don the yellow robe of a Buddhist monk, he did learn Lao and, despite the polemical tone of his account, developed a good working of knowledge of Buddhist dogma.[15] He understood the structure of Buddhist cosmology, its heavens and hells, its belief that the universe was eternal, not created, and the process of reincarnation. Attempts to refute such beliefs in discussions with the more learned monks got nowhere, and he railed at the "impiety" of

[12] See also Van Krieken-Pieters in this Volume
[13] De Marini, 21-22.
[14] Lejosne, *Le Journal de Voyage*, 111, 113
[15] More than half of Leria's account is devoted to Buddhism and the activities of the monks. De Marini 33-76.

those who refused to accept his "true faith". He professed to be scandalized by the wealth Sangha accumulated (he makes no comparisons with Rome), and was critical of the lax morals of the monks and the fees they demanded for their services. If we can accept de Marini's account as reflecting Leria's sentiments, in the end he came to detest his monastic opponents condemning "these miserable and blind Talapoi [monks]" as Pharisees.

Leria attempted to have the ban on evangelizing reversed by the ingratiating himself with court officials through his technical knowledge, often an effective Jesuit ploy. His plans for locks on the Mekong to improve navigation and facilitate commerce failed, however, to impress Surinyavongsa, who believed it would open Lan Xang to attack by its enemies. Frustrated at every turn, Leria came to be as resentful of the "Mandarins" he encountered as he was of the monks. Yet he was fulsome in his praise for the honesty, simplicity and courteousness of the common people. "Speaking in general…. the Laotians are very docile, very good natured and great lovers of rest and peace….they are very frank and sincere, without deceitfulness, very humble, incorruptibly honest in regard to whatever kind of goods one has entrusted to them."[16] However, Leria thought the Lao lazy, apparently because they were not unduly acquisitive, though he admitted they had more than enough by way of food and other necessities to live comfortably. Nature was abundant, far more so east of the Mekong, according to Leria who must have done some travelling, than on the Khorat plateau. Like Van Wuysthoff, Leria was impressed by the wealth of the country. Not only were there gold and silver, but the quantity and quality of ivory "equals any other place in the world , and perhaps even surpasses it "[17], and he mentioned in addition to the products that interested Van Wuysthoff, cotton, wax, honey and minerals including lead, tin and iron. Leria may not have considered his time in Lan Xang well spent, but for all his prejudice against Buddhism and his animus towards monks and "Mandarins", he has left us the fullest account available of Lan Xang at the time of its greatness.

By all accounts, Surinyavongsa was a just and beneficent ruler who was scrupulous in his enforcement of the law.[18] Internal order was maintained by imposing the death penalty for banditry, theft and adultery. Fines or forced labour (a form of slavery) were more common punishments, however, especially for anyone of rank or status. Those protesting their innocence often had to undergo some test of truth, such as being immersed up to the neck in water (if the river rises, guilt is proved), or being banished to the forest (survival for a period of time proving innocence). The only recorded conflict or rebellion occurred in 1651-1652 when the ruler of Xiang Khuang refused Surinyavongsa the hand of his daughter in marriage. Infuriated, the king dispatched an army which laid waste the Phuan region, carried off some five hundred families for resettlement near the Lao capital, and forced Meuang Phuan to renounce its nominal tributary relationship with (northern) Vietnam.[19]

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[16] De Marini, 11.
[17] De Marini, 6.
[18] Lejosne, *Le Journal de Voyage*, 103; de Marini, 29-30.
[19] Charles Archaimbault, "Les Annales de l'Ancien Royaume de S'ieng Khwang" Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient 53, 2 (1967): 571, note 2.

Despite the order and prosperity of the kingdom, however, life for the common people was far from easy. From the Vat Langxan version of the chronicles of Viang Chan, we learn of a smallpox epidemic in 1683 that took many lives and lasted over a year. Five years later drought struck of such intensity that rice because extremely expensive and starving dogs were so weak they were forced to "rest against fences". Other droughts are recorded and in 1691 there was a severe flood. But if natural disasters were keenly analyzed as portents by the court astrologers, they were part and parcel of everyday existence for the peasantry, for whom war and civil conflict due to the ambitions and cupidity of their masters had similarly severe consequences.

We can gain some insight into the imaginative world of ordinary Lao people from the stories they listened to with such eager attention for hour after hour as the night wore on during some *bun* at the local *vat*. By the time of Surinyavongsa much of the oral folk literature that was the common heritage of the northern Tai world - Yuan, Leu, Lao, Shan – had been given literary form in prose or verse.[20] In the process these stories, copied and recopied by Buddhist monks, were imbued with Buddhist values. Heroes who fought with demons were *bodhisattvas* on the path to Buddhahood, their valiant deeds making spiritual merit. Even those stories which embroidered the historical exploits of kings and warriors, or recounted imaginary episodes in the life of some divine being or royal hero, inculcated Buddhist cautionary morality. Yet the spirit world which played so prominent a part in all these stories was still identifiable Lao, complete with *phi* both malignant and benign.

The most popular classical Lao stories were those Anatole-Roger Peltier has called "novels with an initiatory theme". These tell in stereotypical plots either how a hero-prince learns magical powers which enable him to defeat demons and win princesses, or trace the fortunes of an orphan destined to be kind, thanks to the help of a clever and resourceful wife. In all such stories, the secondary characters are immediately recognizable: the beautiful princess; the hermit who imparts his magical knowledge; the wise interpreter of dreams and omens; the covetous king; and all the supernatural beings from Indra, king of the gods, down to those minor spirits whose intervention ensured the expected outcome that time after time would elicit the approval of the wrapt and attentive audience as the recital came to an end.

To make the recital more immediate for local audience, stories were often set within a recognizable geographical context. In all, according to Peltier's analysis, we find a distinction drawn between the natural world, the forest and jungle that covered most of Lan Xang where powerful demons lurked, and the civilized space of village, monastery, and palace. In the Lao worldview, opposites interpenetrate: illusion and reality, spirits and human beings, jungle and cleared land. For the Lao Lum peasantry, the forest was a fearful place of danger to be avoided. But its demons could be vanquished by those with the requisite merit, and whom divine forces assisted. The supernatural was taken for granted. Miraculous happenings, magical powers, the influence of stars and omens, ghosts and *phi*, were an unquestioned part of everyday life for all Lao. Astrology

[20] A-R Peltier, "Les littératures lao du Lan Na, du Lan Xang, de Keng Tung et des Sip Song Panna" Péninsule no. 21 (1990): 29-44.

determined the auspicious times for all major undertakings, so personal horoscopes had regularly to be consulted. The power of evil spirits could only be guarded against by observing the necessary taboos, performing appropriate ceremonies of propitiation, and following the Buddhist precepts of morality and merit-making, which the stories assiduously promoted.

The interpenetration of the real and supernatural is also evident in Lao beliefs about the personal health and medicine. Sickness was usually ministered to by monks using a wide variety of herbal cures made by grinding and pounding various roots, bark and leaves, or through heat cupping and massage (though not acupuncture). More serious illness and disease were believed to be due to possession of the body by malign spirits. Even those *phi* associated with natural phenomena could afflict human beings whose vital forces (in the form of thirty-two "souls") were depleted. The most feared, however, were the *phi phop* and *phi phai*. While the former sought out human hosts, the latter particularly attacked mothers at childbirth when they were most vulnerable. Exorcism of the malignant *phi* was then essential. This was usually done through a combination of sacrifice (a chicken or pig) at the *ho phi*, the altar of the spirits, located at the edge of the forest beyond the outskirts of the village, along with the incantation of powerful Buddhist *mantras*. Chanting before a magic diagram (*yantra*) was believed to be efficacious, as was circling the patient in a dance to the playing of a *khaen* that could last for two to three hours.

Though the seventeenth century was a time of peace, thanks to Surinyavongsa's unchallenged authority, two developments fatally weakened Lan Xang during his reign. One was due to his own unbending nature, while the other was beyond his control. When his only son, Chau Raxabut, was found guilty of adultery with the wife of a palace servant, Surinyavongsa refused, despite pleas by court officials, to make an exception, and ordered his execution. As a result, when the stern old king died he left no legitimate heir of legal age and the kingdom was once again plunged into a crisis of succession.

The development which Surinyavongsa was powerless to prevent was the adverse balance of advantage developing between Lan Xang, the only remaining independent inland *mandala*, and its coastal neighbours. As the seventeenth century drew to a close, trade to and from Viang Chan continued to be limited and costly. Lao exports were effectively confined to relatively light and valuable products, such as gold, *benzoin, sticklac*, musk, ivory, rhinoceros horns, rare skins and embroidered silks. Little trade in bulk produce, such as rice or timber, was possible. Even what trade there was could too easily be blocked, and its value siphoned off at the point of export. The Lao trade was valuable for Siam, but its benefits for Lan Xang were never commensurate with its real export value.

As an inland kingdom, Lan Xang was prevented from entering into direct relations with Western merchants. But for trade with Yunnan, exchange was indirect via neighbouring kingdoms. Among other disadvantages, these circumstances made it difficult to keep abreast of changing military technology and tactics. More powerful and more accurate European firearms reduced the value of elephants in warfare, while the availability of European mercenaries and purchase of Europeans weapons (especially artillery) meant

that advantage lay ever more decisively with those kingdoms which had the means to pay for them. What wealth Lan Xang did possess seems to have been expended primarily on the monastic order and the court, rather than on equipping its army. By the late seventeenth century, the power of Lan Xang, despite the magnificence of its capital and the pomp and pageantry of its ceremonial, was already in relative decline *vis-à-vis* its more powerful neighbours. The dynastic collapse of the early eighteenth century merely exacerbated an already deteriorating situation.