

France's First Embassy to the Thais: Resources at the National Library of Australia

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France and Siam (Thailand) were allies in the late seventeenth century. The National Library has developed good holdings of original publications from this era as well as recent works in Thai, English and French. They cover links between the France of King Louis XIV (1638-1715) and Siam under King Narai the Great, who ruled from 1656 to 1688.

Contemporary French and other foreign sources are particularly valuable as few early Siamese documents have survived the tropical climate, insects and war, particularly the Burmese sacking of Ayutthaya, the Siamese capital, in 1767.

Louis XIV sent his first embassy to Siam in 1685-1686. An embassy then meant a visit by envoys to a foreign country, not a permanent presence there. Louis had several reasons for sending two ships filled with gifts, diplomats, missionaries and soldiers across the world. He and Narai wanted to counter the Dutch, the dominant European power in Southeast Asia. The French sought more trade with Ayutthaya, then a cosmopolitan commercial centre. Louis had also been advised, quite wrongly, that Narai was ready to become a Christian.

France's embassy failed to convert the king or improve trade, but has been called the best documented voyage of the seventeenth century. The Library holds no fewer than five published accounts by members of the mission. The three major works which appeared soon after the events they described are by the Ambassador, the Chevalier de Chaumont (died 1710); the Coadjutant Ambassador, the Abbé de Choisy (1644-1724); and the Jesuit, Guy Tachard (1651-1712).

The Library contains an English translation of Chaumont in *Aspects of the Embassy to Siam 1685*. The Ambassador wrote a short, rather dry book. Its most striking feature is the list of lavish presents from King Narai to the French monarch and his family.

In contrast Choisy's *Journal du Voyage de Siam fait en 1685 et 1686* [Journal of a Voyage to Siam 1685-1686] is a delightful piece of travel literature in diary form, full of lively detail. Choisy was well-connected at court and persuaded Louis XIV to appoint him Coadjutant Ambassador, even though the king grumbled that he had never heard of such a title. The Library holds the 2nd Paris edition of 1687, later French editions, a modern English version and a Thai translation. His description of Ayutthaya is worth quoting. "The pagodas are all gilded, and there are at least as many as there are churches in Paris... I am never tired of admiring this very large city on an island surrounded by a river three times bigger than the Seine, full of French, English, Dutch, Chinese, Japanese and Siamese vessels and an uncountable number of barges, and gilded galleys with sixty oarsmen."

In its Jesuit Collection the Library houses the original 1686 Paris edition of Tachard's *Voyage de Siam, des Pères Jésuites, Envoyez par le Roy aux Indes & à la Chine* [A Relation of the Voyage to Siam : Performed by Six Jesuits, Sent by the French King, to the Indies and China]. There is also a 1687 Amsterdam edition in French, as well as English and Thai translations. Tachard's detailed account stresses the religious aspects of the embassy and urges greater efforts to convert the Siamese. Both the Paris and Amsterdam editions are richly illustrated.

Tachard's book drew on the writings of another Jesuit, Joachim Bouvet (1656-1730). His *Voyage de Siam* [Voyage to Siam] was only published in 1963 from a manuscript at Cornell University. The fifth account is by Claude de Forbin (1656-1733), the Ambassador's lieutenant, who stayed on to work for Narai after the embassy departed. His book did not appear until 1729. The Library holds an English translation, *The Siamese Memoirs of Count Claude de Forbin*.

These volumes are complemented by a beautiful original 1687 coloured map by the famous Italian cartographer Vincenzo Maria Coronelli (1650-1718) showing the voyage of the embassy's ships. It is entitled *Route maritime de Brest à Siam, et de Siam à Brest, faite en 1685 et 1686...* [Sea Route from Brest to Siam and Back in 1685 and 1686...]. The Library purchased it from a London map specialist in 1996.

The National Library, with Australia's largest Thai collection, continues to acquire works about the early Franco-Siamese relationship. They include Thai and Western language reprints, translations and new titles.



Photos: *The ruins of Ayutthaya, the former capital of Siam*

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