NEW TOWNS IN FRANCE AND THAILAND IN THE MIDDLE AGES, A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

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Striking formal similarities exist between the plans of bastides, ancient new towns of southwestern France, and the plans of certain towns of northern Thailand. In remote cultural areas, both groups of settlements arose during a specific period, the late Middle Ages, and their geographic situation away from industrial regions enabled them to retain much of their traditional identity until recent times. This article stresses what is culturally specific to each group, but also attempts to explore similarities in their creation and perpetuation. It first looks at the foundation of the two groups of towns. Then, from an environmental and architectural point of view, it examines their plans, their ramparts, their systems of roads, and the apportionment of land within them. Afterwards, it compares their building traditions, investigating both common dwellings and specific structures such as palaces, temples, altars, churches, and market halls. Finally, the article considers the further development of the towns and how the problems of physical growth outside their ramparts have been solved.

CAN A COMPARISON BETWEEN TOWNS BELONGING TO VERY different cultures help encompass the issue of tradition? In studying the built environment of Asia, we are often led to connect the loss of traditional forms to an increase in foreign, mainly Western, influence. But framing this issue in terms which rely so heavily on a perceived duality between First and Third Worlds makes it easy to confuse two very different factors. The erosion of traditional forms in Asia has involved cultural and economic domination of the East by the West. But it has also involved the dynamic of tradition itself.

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Nezar Alsayyad observes that "most researchers of traditional environments go elsewhere to study rather than focus on questions close to home." Perhaps this is why we find it so difficult to make comparisons between traditional environments in the First and Third Worlds. But we attempt here to arrive at just such cross-cultural insights. Specifically, we ask whether a better understanding of traditional Thai towns can be reached by drawing parallels to traditional towns in France. In designing such a project, we are conscious of the ambiguity of classifying Thailand as a Third World country. Current connotations of this term certainly do not fit the case of a country with a long history amply documented in written form, a rich culture, and a present economic vitality that could make the First World jealous.

**SOME INITIAL SIMILARITIES**

The comparison between French and Thai towns begins during a period when Western Europe and Southeast Asia had very few links. The first exchange of ambassadors between France and Thailand did not occur until the seventeenth century. Nevertheless, both countries experienced a growth of new settlements during a period, the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, that corresponds to the end of the Middle Ages in Europe. At the end of the thirteenth century, big migrations of people, such as those of the Mongols and the Thai in Asia and those caused by the Crusades in Europe, came to an end. The creation of new towns at this time was linked to the strengthening of the power of local princes. These political figures found new towns useful for marking the boundaries of regions recently won from enemies and for holding populations to cultivate the land.

In France the phenomenon included the emergence of more than 200 *bastides.* Documentation is less extensive concerning new settlements in northern Thailand, but it seems likely that this region also contained many towns created during the period. In 1885 Hellet wrote: "Many evidences of a once larger population were met with — deserted cities with huge earthwork fortifications were passed and the position and names of upward of thirty of them ascertained."  

On the surface there were many similarities between the two groups of settlements. For example, both the *bastides* and the town of Chiengmai, which will serve us here as the main example of a northern Thai town, came into being as the result of explicit, datable acts. Spiro Kostof discerns two kinds of processes that lead to the creation of towns: those that are spontaneous and those that are planned. Here we see clear evidence of the latter, as the creation of the towns was bound up with a kind of colonial enterprise that resulted from local wars.

Common features also emerged in the naming of the towns, and thus some were simply called "New Town." We can find several "Villeneuves" in France (Villeneuve sur Lot, Villeneuve d’Aveyron, etc.), and the name Chiengmai has a similar significance, maï meaning "new" in Thai. At the same time, the names of many towns contained references to the concept of ramparts. The generic name *bastides*, signifies the rampart of a town (bastion), and chieng or vieng in Thai means both rampart and town. Indeed, all Thai towns and some but not all *bastides* originally were surrounded by walls.

Finally, in the naming of the *bastides*, we may notice one further phenomenon: as European immigrants to the United States gave the names of European towns to their new settlements (such as New York, New Orleans, etc.), so the founders of the *bastides* chose the names of existing towns for theirs: for example, Pavie, Grenade, Pamplone and Bruges. Maybe they thought the prestige of these famous cities would help their new creations prosper.

**THE FOUNDING OF THE TOWNS**

The birth of the *bastides* was bound up with a series of historic occurrences. France at the time was experiencing a demographic surge which had begun in the tenth century. Politically and militarily, the Capetian dynasty, allied with the Counts of Toulouse, was fighting with the English, who occupied the Aquitaine. The French and the English each needed to improve and defend their territories in this region, and the new towns were intended to attract people, develop agriculture and commerce, and create strongholds for use in military conflicts.

The *bastides* were born from contracts of *parrage,* or feudal convention between a Seneschal, the representative of Royal authority, and the local authority, be this a lord or an abbot. The two parties shared the rights, benefits and costs of the new development. The lord or abbot offered the land, while the representative of the sovereign ensured order and security. A charter of freedom or common law followed, giving status to the local population. This population was deemed free and allowed to hold fairs and markets. A municipal administration was created, made up of a *baile,* a representative of royal authority, and *consul* representative of the community.

Historic documentation is much less precise concerning the founding of Thai towns of the same period. At the end of the thirteenth century Thai principalities became stronger after
a long period of pacific or non-pacific coexistence with other ethnic communities such as the Mon and the Lawa. King Mengrai founded Chiengrai in 1262, Muang Fang in 1273, and captured Chiengkhong in 1269. In 1283 the capital of the Mon kingdom, Haripunjaya, was also captured by Mengrai and later came to be called Lampun. Chiengmai was founded in 1296, though its site was probably already populated.

At this period Thai towns were founded by a prince who controlled all the surrounding region. The population inside the towns was organized in a strong hierarchy made up of the prince, nobility, Buddhist clergy, freemen or commoners called pai, slaves, tradesmen and handicraftsmen. If these last belonged to non-Thai ethnic groups, they would dwell outside the town walls. The inhabitants of towns were permitted to hold markets, and important systems of irrigation around the towns helped fix an agricultural population which fed the relatively idle population within the walls.

We may immediately notice two coincidences here. The first is that the population of both bastides and northern Thai towns were free. In the West, as in the East, rulers had to draw people, and to do this they had to cultivate the land and feed the towns. Thus, the status of freemen was granted to all residing in the town. The second coincidence was that a major advantage of living within a town in both countries was the ability to hold markets. It seems that the creation of markets was an important element in the founding of both types. Bastide charters make specific mention of them, as do the oldest chronicles of Chiengmai.

The towns created during this period in France and northern Thailand have had various destinies. Out of 267 bastides, 12 have disappeared, 109 (42 percent) currently have populations of less than 500, and 217 (83 percent) have populations of less than 2,000. Only six bastides now have more than 10,000 inhabitants. The biggest, Montauban, has 50,000 inhabitants. Epidemics, poor crops, and military misfortunes have all contributed to their decline. But the prosperity of several bastides has been ensured by their location at important geographical sites such as river crossings or the intersections of major roads. Of the six currently largest bastides, five are located along rivers (FIG. 1).

By way of contrast, Thai towns are all located along streams, because until the beginning of the twentieth century there was no other means of transportation (FIG. 2). The destiny of northern Thai towns has been even more irregular than that of the bastides. A very great number of them have disappeared entirely: for example, the ancient chronicles tell about Kumkam and Mae Chaew, towns founded by King Mengrai and later flooded and abandoned, and the circular town of Ched Lin to the northwest of Chiengmai was said to have been abandoned because of a lack of water. Examples of total disappearances can be explained in two ways. First, a high level of insecurity prevailed in the region until the end of the nineteenth century, induced by local guerillas and a war with Burma that lasted several centuries. Second, after a military defeat, the population of an area was often deported. The relative impermanence of houses built with materials derived from the local vegetation made the towns easy to abandon and allowed the population to rebuild quickly in new areas. Many such ephemeral towns thus simply disappeared, leaving no trace other than vestiges of their walls.

Of course, some towns had a more fortunate career, and some have persisted to the present day. In 1980, for example, Chiengmai had a population of 100,146. Lampang was the next largest with 43,112 inhabitants; Chiengrai had a population of 40,641; Phayao, 24,000; and Lampun, 12,884. The present population of Chiengmai has increased considerably from the 1980 figure and now exceeds 150,000 people. These towns are thus more important to the present structure of their area than the bastides are to theirs. Chiengmai, the former capital of the Northern Thai Kingdom, is today a regional capital with a rapid pattern of growth.

**MORPHOLOGY OF TOWNS: THE RAMPART**

If the plans of Chiengmai and the bastides present certain formal analogies, they conceal a very different reality. For example, while the bastides were built with masonry, Thai towns were built almost exclusively of wood. This crucial difference has given the built form and morphology of the towns very different characteristics.

In the bastides, a condition of security was necessary for the development of the community and was often the first issue expressed in foundation charters. Protection could therefore initially be achieved by the construction of a simple palisade lined with a ditch and an earthen bank. Fully fortified walls were often not built until some 50—100 years after the founding of the town. In times of serious trouble, however, the population did require a permanent rampart. This wall was generally built by the citizens, with the authorities being called upon to participate in the financing.

By contrast, it seems that construction of a wall was the first step in the founding of a northern Thai town. The ancient chronicles relating the founding of Chiengmai by King Mengrai mention a group of workers being divided into two parts: 50,000 to build the king’s palaces and 40,000 to build
In Thailand, the wall was the first physical manifestation of the town. As already mentioned, the word actually denotes both things. Walls were built under the authority of a prince. In the bastides, however, the first buildings were usually houses, especially those around a place, or central square. The rampart only came later, encompassing all that preceded it (FIG. 4). We can thus see two processes in opposition to one another: one in which the building of a wall was necessary to protect a town built from impermanent materials, and one in which the building of masonry houses according to a preestablished plan gave way to the construction of a rampart when the residents could obtain funds for it. The second process indicates a less pressing need for immediate defense. One might conclude that the area of France where the bastides were created was more peaceful than northern Thailand, or else one might conclude that heavy masonry houses offered more resistance to armed bands.

One final point needs to be made here. This is that the ramparts of Thai towns were more extensive than those of bastides. Besides the different value placed on them in the overall design of the settlement, one reason for this was that they also encompassed a considerable amount of agricultural land.

THE SYSTEM OF ROADS

The plans of half the bastides were formed around the orthogonal intersection of two roads, a situation that created an
Orthogonal block layout with streets crossing at right angles. This system allowed the equal assignment of land for cultivation within the planned territory. Bastide plans were further regulated by the creation of a place that would be surrounded by houses with couverts, or covered ways. In the bastides that followed the model prevalent in the Aquitaine, a series of longitudinal streets were crossed by smaller, transverse ones, making a pattern of rectangular blocks. As the place was generally square, this meant that a row of square blocks sometimes remained along one of the town's axes, as in Grenade-sur-Garonne (FIG. 5).

In Lampang, Phrae and Chiengsen, principal streets, running roughly parallel to the river, were also crossed by secondary streets (FIGS. 6, 7). In Chiangmai, the main east-west axis was crossed by two streets to form a kind of checkerboard — although one that is not as regular as that found in the bastides. The north-south streets in Chiangmai were the vestiges of four ancient canals that ran inside the town walls.

**APPORUTIONMENT OF LAND**

In the bastides that followed the model prevalent in the Aquitaine, the dimensions of the regular blocks varied from 50–100 meters. The houses aligned their facades with the narrow sides of their lots along the long sides of the blocks. Thus, a block contained two parallel, back-to-back rows of houses, each fronting onto a principal street. The remaining short end of the deep lots was used to collect wastewater. Here a lane or trench several meters wide called a carreyron defined a boundary between two half-blocks. This space could be filled and reapportioned by the inhabitants, or it could serve as a semi-private alley.


Ancient towns often had an open-air system for the evacuation of wastewater, and vestiges of these systems can sometimes still be seen in traditional towns. In the bastide of Mirande, water coming from wells and springs was carried away by the gutters of the streets and by the lanes crossing within the interiors of the blocks; it was eventually channeled to flow into the external moat (FIG. 8). In Chiangmai the inside canals have disappeared, but in certain streets we can still find open-air wastewater trenches (though the city has taken steps to replace them with underground mains).

In France the rectangular blocks of bastides were formed by four squares of 20x20 to 30x30 meters, that is, four or five Gothic portions of land, 5–7 meters wide and 20–30 meters long. At one end of the block, the property-line system often turned to continue along important transverse streets (FIG. 9). Square blocks were more unusual.

In large bastides with a dense urban fabric, the interior portion of a narrow lot was sometimes built upon. But in other bastides we find gardens here (FIG. 10). Usually the main fruit or vegetable gardens of the town, called cazals, were to be found just outside the wall, if one existed. In Thai towns, fruit and vegetable gardens were located inside the wall. It seems that formerly even paddy fields could be found inside town walls. Is this the reason why so many Thai towns, with such a small number of inhabitants, occupied such a large area?

In the bastides most of the individual properties were equal in size. A few bigger ones could be kept for convents or large gardens, but these were rather uncommon. In Thai towns large properties attributed to noblemen were frequent. The disparity in the amount of land associated with different dwellings confirms the strong social hierarchy of Thai towns. In bastides the pattern of equal properties expressed a communal desire for equality and denoted the beginnings of democracy.

THE HABITATION

Very few bastides retain original houses dating to the thirteenth or fourteenth centuries, as, for example, do Codes, Monpazier or Lauzerte. Many houses were rebuilt at the end of the fifteenth century after the Hundred Years War to employ a system of timber framing. The original houses in bastides were generally built of stone, as was the case with the one in Lauzerte which will serve us as an example (FIG. 11). In this house the room on the ground floor opened wide to the street and was used as a shop. The living rooms were located on the upper floor and contained big fireplaces, and goods were stored on a mezzanine level. In houses opening onto the marketplace, we can find open spaces under the house, forming a covered street. In some bastides we can find such convents on the main street as well. When the house was very long and filled the
entire site, some small courtyards or light wells must have been built for air and light.

In Thai towns the traditional houses were very different, since they were built with materials derived from the local vegetation — mainly wood, but also bamboo and thatch. Nowadays, the type of houses built with wood have changed, but some of the old types were still evident in the 1970s and gave an idea of the types of dwelling in which people lived for centuries. Because of the risk of fire, the houses could obviously not be built close to one another. This meant that the layout of traditional Thai towns was rural and could not have become more urban. The problem of “the acclimation of rural housing types to city streets,” of which Spiro Kostof writes, was almost impossible to resolve within this context. In fact, contemporary urbanization of these towns only came with Chinese cultural influence and the introduction of Chinese building types constructed of masonry and concrete. In modern Thailand a discontinuity exists between rural and urban building types. In France, however, there was no such discontinuity, since both types could be built with the same materials.

Shophouses are the main building form in Thai towns today, and a coincidence exists between the spatial organization of the old house in Lauzerte and a modern shophouse in Chiangmai (FIG. 12). Both buildings house living space as well as a shop that opens wide onto the street, and the plans of both are long and narrow, with the upper floors being used for living and storage. The newest type of Chinese shophouses even have mezzanines. These similarities make us wonder if there is not a wider pattern for the design of dwellings on commercial streets in traditional towns. We can surely find patterns similar to these in many other cultures.

SPECIAL BUILDINGS

Thai traditional towns are characterized by the importance in number and size of Buddhist temples, or wats. These building complexes are located on large sites inside or outside the walls of the town. It seems wats were more numerous in Thai traditional towns than churches were in bastides. A bastide of average size usually only had one church. The church in a bastide was often sited at one corner of the place or on a block adjacent to it. Besides their ceremonial uses, wats were used as gathering places by the citizens of Thai towns — as were churches, but only for special occasions. The building of a wat was an occasion for the residents of a Thai town to show off their piety, as was the building of a church.

In a Thai town, the palace of the prince was located in a central location on a large piece of land. It seems that at the time of the founding of Chiangmai, the palace occupied a section of the town extending from the northern wall to its main east-west axis. The palace disappeared when the administration in Bangkok came to govern the town at the end of the nineteenth century. In the bastides there were no such palaces. There might have been a castle or a nobleman’s house, but these were not as important as in Thai towns, and many disappeared a long time ago.
Another coincidence between the two types of settlement is the existence in both cultures of the symbolic "post of the town," which was normally erected at the time of its founding. In Thai towns this sacred post is located in the central part of the town, the Lak maung. In Chiengmai this place is called Sao Inthakin. The post symbolizes the territorial unity of the town and the province around it, and is a reminder of old Lawa cults. It is now situated in the precinct of the Wat Chedi Luang, one of the most important temples of Chiengmai.

At the founding of a bastide, a post would be planted before the first house was built. For example, Divorne, Gendre, Lavergne and Panerai write: "So Eustache de Beauharnais would have come on the plateau of Pampelonne, and following the custom, would have planted the post: the pal, in the center of the future place, symbol of the heart of the town." They wonder if this pal would be the remnant of the Roman groma used for marking the two perpendicular directions that generated the layout of the Roman town. In Asiatic cultures, the Chinese gnomon played an equivalent role.

In Chiengmai there were nine sacred points on the rampart and one sacred point in the center of the town (the Sao Inthakin discussed above). Four of the sacred points on the perimeter were situated at the four angles of the rampart, and the other five at the gates. In each gate, a niche in the wall sheltered an engraved stone which sanctified the town. In the bastides, too, a symbol of spiritual protection could be found at the entrance of the town: a statue of the virgin or of a saint under the arch of the gate or in a niche in the wall. These figures protected the place of access and the whole street that led away from it.

One of the main differences in the layout of the two types of settlements, however, was the location and character of their main commercial areas. In the bastides this took the form of a marketplace. In Thai towns, however, markets were generally held in the main east-west street.

In the bastides the marketplace was used as a gathering place for the townspeople or for troops. It was a symbol of the desire for equality in the organization of space. On the place were generally built a market hall, the communal hall, the house of the bailie, the residence of the Seneschal or of the abbot, and the principal wells. The communal hall was often situated on the first floor of the market hall, and was where the bailie and the consuls met for the administration of the town. The market hall, in the center or to one side of the place, was an open building, a big roof supported by posts. Sometimes it sheltered fixed grain gauges (FIG. 13).
In Chiengmai, as in other Thai towns, there was no marketplace, not even a public square. Big places could be found in the palaces, but these were not public. Instead, people would gather in the yards of the wats, semi-private open spaces enclosed by walls. For centuries, the market, which was never permanent, was held in the main street. In the nineteenth century it came to be located permanently outside the square wall, near the river. The market street was a central element in many European towns, as in Berne, Switzerland, for instance, where it is 27 meters wide. In the Italian terre nuove, towns created by Florence in the fourteenth century, the market street was lined with arcades. In Southeast Asia trade has always been independent of political power in the community, so the market has never given rise to a square. Even in the commercial area of Chiengmai to the east of the walled town, developed in the nineteenth century, there is no open place near the market, even though it is surrounded by very dense urban fabric.

**THE DEVELOPMENT OF TOWNS**

Unlike the citizens of the bastides, commoners had no power in the administration of a Thai town except through elders’ councils held at the local level in the wats. In Thailand there was no “bourgeoisie” which ruled the municipality. Power in the city was held by the prince and his direct subordinates. When Chiengmai began to expand in the nineteenth century, therefore, no administrative control was applied to its growth. In fact, the municipality was not created until 1935. This is why the intricate layout of the streets outside the square wall, and even in some areas inside it, still bears the mark of ancient rural lanes. In essence, the quarters in the town have retained their village structure.

In the bastides, the extension of the town outside the wall created discontinuities in the layout of the streets and in the built form. Ramparts were usually torn down in the nineteenth century, leaving a situation where most old streets, except those that led through gates, ended at the site of the old rampart. Outside the wall, the layout of streets was generally completely different than it was inside. Only in a few bastides did the original street grid come to extend outside the wall.

In Thai towns people let the ramparts fall to ruins in the nineteenth century, giving up certain habits based on the social hierarchy of which the wall was a physical expression. New ideologies emerged at this time based on material values that were bound up in the development of commerce. A continuity between quarters inside and outside the walls was established by prolonging the streets. During the first half of the twentieth century streets were pierced through what had once been the wall and extended to bridge the moat outside.
CONCLUSION: TRADITIONAL TOWNS IN THE MODERN ERA

In all these new towns, both in France and Thailand, the growth of economic and commercial activity was the main factor that encouraged their development and led to a loss of their traditional character. In northern Thai towns the Western influence was less perceptible than in Bangkok. Other foreign influences, notably that of the Chinese, were very powerful. These influences helped bring about new traditions.

In the bastides tradition is still readable in the environment thanks to the durable stone with which they were built. This has meant that even though houses have been rebuilt, the spatial organization of the town has remained constant. So it is that the weight of stone has been used to fix patterns. In most of the bastides today the built environment is not changing because of a lack of funds.

In Thailand the built environment did not change much until the 1960s. Since, the transformation of the built form has been much more far-ranging than in France. One reason is that materials derived from the local vegetation offered less resistance to change. After 30 years of quick changes, the Municipality of Chiangmai, aware of an interest in its traditional built form, has tried to preserve what remains. The construction of high-rise buildings is now forbidden inside the square of the original town. Many people come from Bangkok to seek a human-scale urbanity; a feeling of identity that derives from the environment.

The recent economic boom is the cause of impending changes in the morphology of Chiangmai: in 1990 the authorities were discussing the foundation of a "new town" of high-rise buildings 15 kilometers to the east.

REFERENCE NOTES

6. Townspeople were urged to build quickly. In Sauveterre-de-Rouergue, new occupants had to pay a fine if houses were not built within a year. A Laurie, R. Malebranche, and G. Séraphin, Bastides, villes nouvelles du Moyen-Age (Toulouse: Milan, 1988), p.89.
7. Divorne, Gendre, Laverge and Panerai write: "In Santiago, Chile, the original town, founded in 1541, has a 64-block grid, and an internal irrigation system crosses all the blocks from east to west according to a principle similar to that of the carreyrou." Les Bastides d’Aquitaine, p. 95.
9. They could serve to house the assemblies of leading citizens or as a place of safety in times of war, Laurie, Malebranche and Séraphin, Bastides, p.124.
11. The dimensions of the square vary from 40–70 meters for one side, but many of them do not exceed 50 meters. The marketplaces are larger in the regions where the people rear cattle.