

The Temples of **Thailand**

Sukhothai, Ayutthaya & Bangkok



Introduction

The temples of Thailand — overflowing with golden Buddhas, soaring spires and glistening surfaces of infinite complexity — stir the spirit, inviting contemplation and wonder. This Approach Guide reveals the country's best art and architecture from its three great historical capitals: Sukhothai (1238-1368), Ayutthaya (1350-1767), and Bangkok (1782-present). It is yours to discover.

What's in this guidebook

- **Art and architecture review.** We provide an overview of Thai art and architecture, isolating trademark features that you will see again and again while touring. To make things come alive, we have packed our review with high-resolution images.
- **Tour of the highlights.** Following our tradition of being the most valuable resource for culture-focused travelers, we offer a tour of Sukhothai, Ayutthaya and Bangkok's greatest Buddhist monuments (itinerary below). For each, we reveal its most important architectural and decorative features and offer a discussion that ties it all together.
- **Advice for getting the best cultural experience.** To help you plan your visit, this guidebook supplies logistical advice, maps and links to online resources. Plus, we give our personal tips for getting the most from your experience while on location.
- **Information the way you like it.** As with all of our guides, this book is optimized for intuitive, quick navigation; information is organized into bullet points to make absorption easy; and images are marked up with text that explains important features.

Tour itinerary

To help with prioritization, must-see temple sites in each city are marked with asterisks (*).

- **Sukhothai:** Wat Chang Lom, Wat Chedi Si Hong, Wat Chetuphon, Wat Mahathat*, Wat Phra Phai Luang, Wat Sa Si, Wat Saphan Hin, Wat Si Sawai*, Wat Si Chum*, Wat Trapang Ngoen, Wat Trapang Thong Lang.
- **Si Satchanalai (Sukhothai daytrip):** Wat Chedi Cha ng Lom*, Wat Chedi Chet Thaew*, Wat Khao Phanom Phloeng, Wat Khao Suwan Khiri, Wat Nang Phaya.
- **Ayutthaya:** Wat Chai Watthanaram, Wat Mahathat*, Wat Maheyong*, Wat Na Phra Men*, Wat Phu Khao Thong, Wat Phutthaisawan, Wat Ratchaburana*, Wat Si Sanphet*, Wat Suwandararam*, Wat Yai Chai Mongkon.
- **Bangkok:** Buddhaisawan chapel*, Wat Arun*, Wat Benchamabophit, Wat Bowornivet, Wat Khrua Wan*, Wat Pho aka Chetuphon*, Wat Phra Kaeo*, Wat Suthat*, Wat Suwannaram*.

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We hope this cultural guidebook offers you fresh insights into Thailand's fantastic art and architecture and sets you on a path to making your own discoveries.

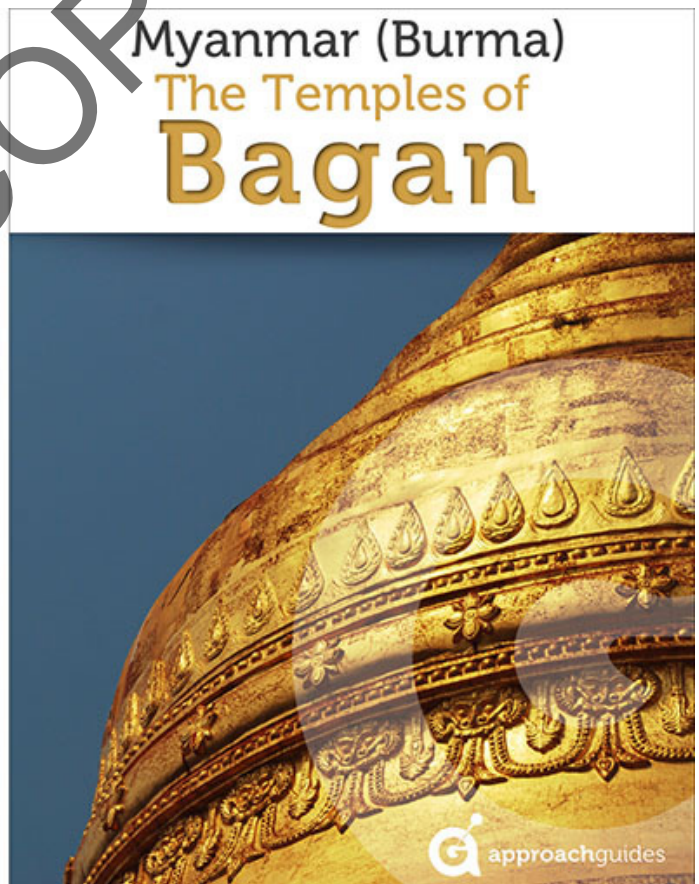
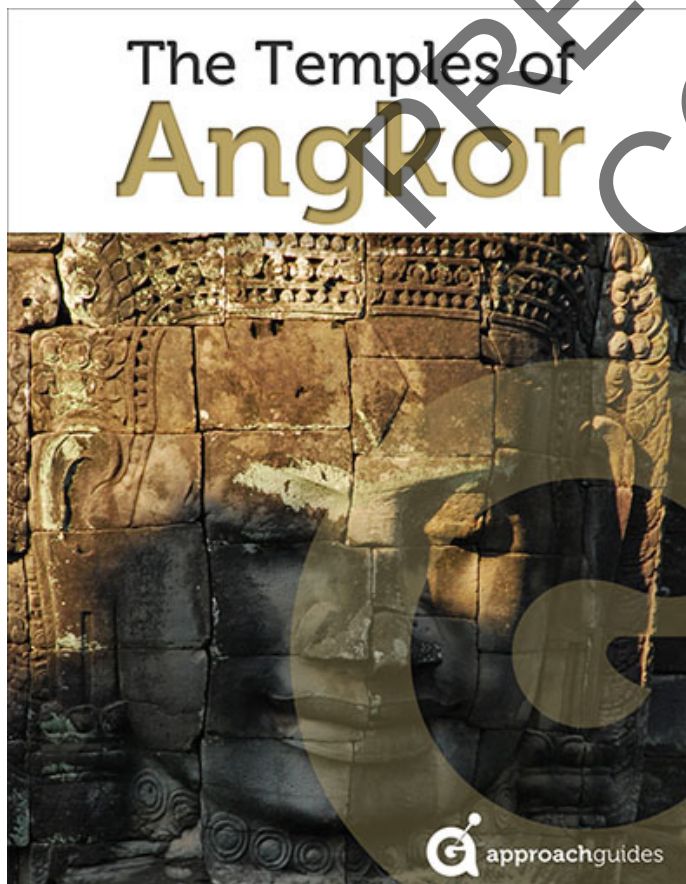
Enjoy your trip!



David and Jennifer Raezer
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The Temples of Thailand: Sukhothai, Ayutthaya, and Bangkok

Version 1.1

by [David Raezer](#) and [Jennifer Raezer](#)

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9. Wat Yai Chai Mongkon

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The beauty, splendour, and numbers of the
temples of Bangkok — their enormous size, their rich ornaments,
their peculiar architecture, the extent and variety of buildings
enclosed within their walls — embarrass the powers of description ...
they are of magnificence ... of which in Europe we have no idea ...
many pyramids of delicate forms, gilded or covered with
vitrifications or porcelain, raise their
ornamental spires to the height of two or three hundred feet.

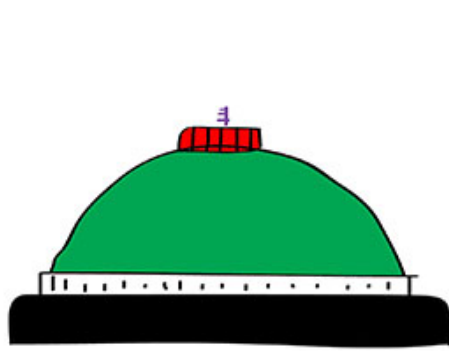
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Sir John Bowring, on Bangkok in 1855.
You can download the book,
[“The Kingdom and People of Siam,”](#)
for free to read his complete thoughts
on the country and its king, Rama IV (Mongkut).

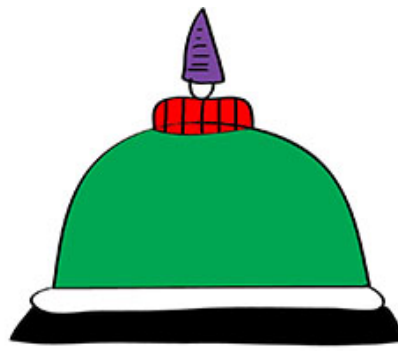
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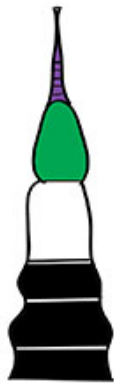
INDIA (SANCHI) STUPA



SRI LANKA STUPA



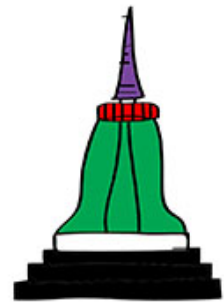
BAGAN (MYANMAR) STUPA



THAI STUPA #1



THAI STUPA #2



THAI STUPA #3

Fig. 4. Thai stupa predecessors and types.

The Thai Stupa

There are three basic forms of the Thai stupa; each will be explored in turn. These forms — as well as those of India, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar's Bagan (Burma) — are laid out in Fig. 4. Note that andas are highlighted in green, harmikas in red, chatras in purple, and bases and terraces in black. We will continue to refer to back to this three style framework as we review the stupas at specific temples in sections that follow.

Thai stupa type #1: lotus bud-shaped anda

Author Tip: Thai stupa type #1 is unique to Sukhothai and its satellite cities: Si Satchanalai, Kamphaeng Phet, and Phitsanulok.

Unlike in later periods where vihans, ubosots, and prangs assumed fundamental importance, **stupas were the central and primary structure in Sukhothai period temples.** They are character-

ized by their extreme delicacy and spire-like soaring verticality.

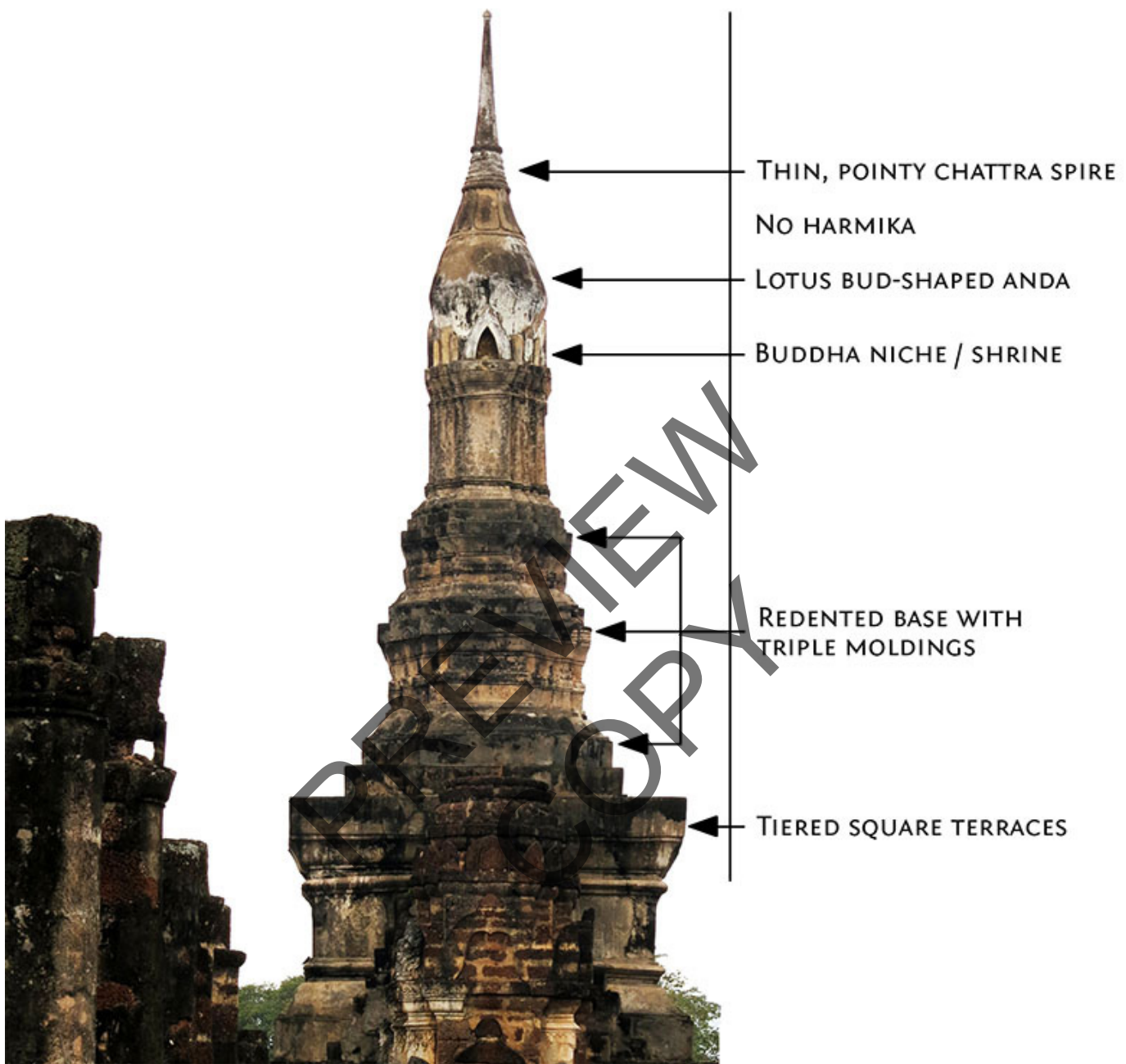


Fig. 5. Thai stupa type #1. Wat Mahathat, Sukhothai. Highlights added.

Defining characteristics of Thai stupa type #1 include (Fig. 5):

- **Lotus bud-shaped anda.** The anda resembles a closed lotus bud. This is the Sukhothai stupa's most distinctive feature. It has decorative niches/shrines on the cardinal points.
- **Delicate chattra.** The umbrellas (chattra) are tightly grouped, so much so that they are not visible as discrete elements. Their overall shape resembles a narrow inverted cone, much more delicate than that of Sri Lankan prototypes.
- **No harmika.** Unlike Sri Lankan models, this style stupa does not employ a harmika, affording it a more integrated, delicate profile.

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Vihans and Ubosots

The vihan and ubosot (Fig. 17) house sacred Buddha images and serve as the principal hall of worship for laity and the congregation-ordination hall for monks, respectively. First and foremost, these buildings were visited to **engage in direct and personal interaction with the Buddha**. At the same time, ritual associated with this interaction facilitated education on the fundamental tenets of Theravada Buddhism.

Both structures share the same basic architectural profile. This section covers their **defining architectural features** and points out the unique forms they assume in the Sukhothai, Ayutthaya, and Bangkok periods.



Fig. 17. Ubosot. Wat Na Phra Men, Ayutthaya.

Layout

- **Enclosure wall, gallery and courtyard.** In Thai architecture, the primary structure in a

temple — whether it be a stupa, prang, vihan, or ubosot — was located at the center of the complex, surrounded by an enclosure wall. Just inside the wall lies a covered gallery (*phra rabi-eng*) — lined with Buddha images (green highlights in Fig. 18) — that opens onto a courtyard.

- **Plan.** The vihan and ubosot (yellow highlights in Fig. 18) are rectangular in plan, with a central nave that is occasionally widened with lateral aisles. The principal entrance is typically from the east; the Buddha image sits opposite on a platform. Porches extend from either end.
- **Ubosot-vihan of central importance in Bangkok.** While the prang and stupa were typically the primary religious structures in Sukhothai and Ayutthaya (with the ubosot and vihan serving supporting roles), the vihan or ubosot assumed the central position in Bangkok.

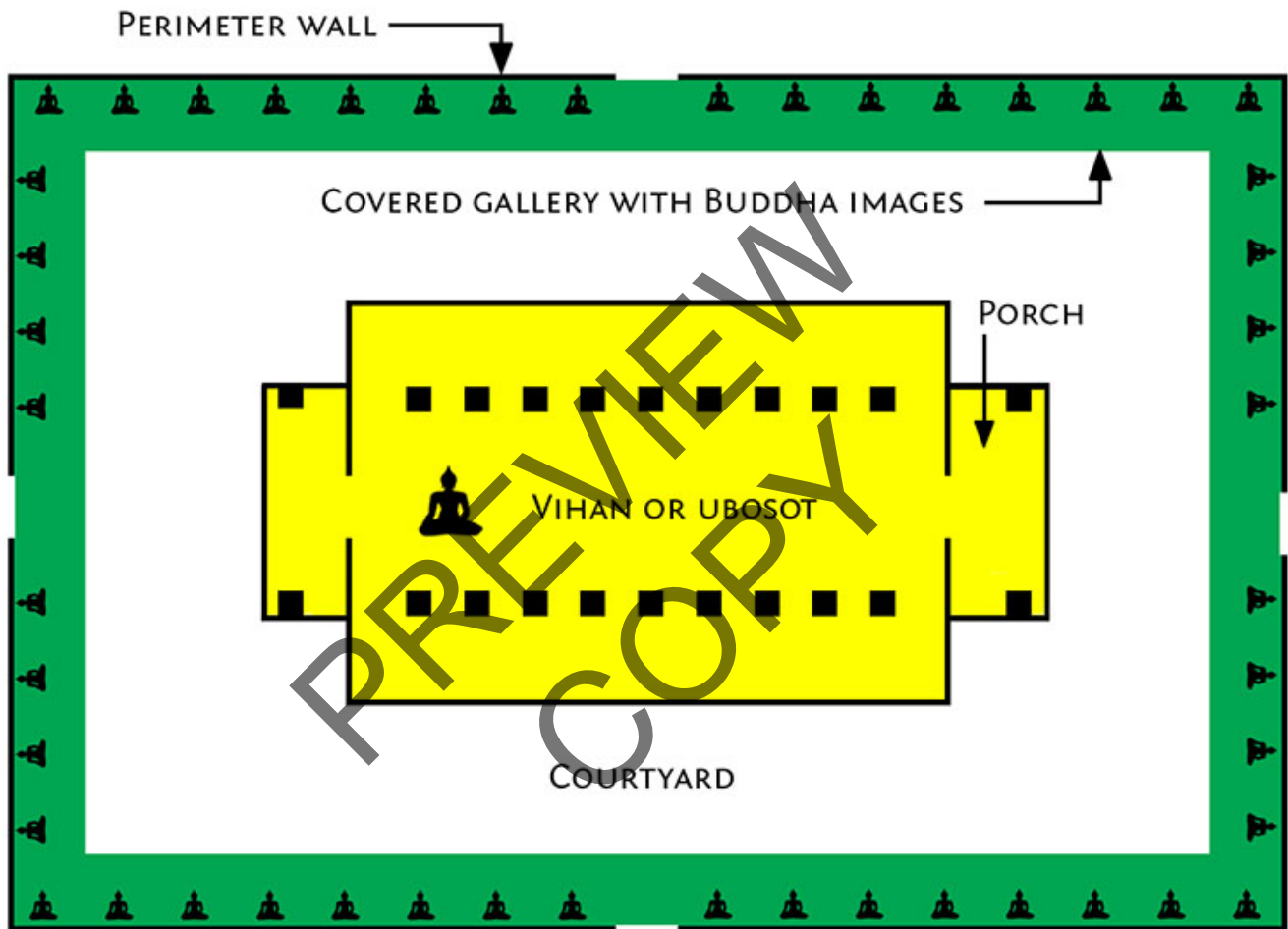


Fig. 18. Sample temple layout with ubosot-vihan at center.

Roofline

The colorful glazed tile roofs of ubosots and vihan — **notable for their series of overlapping, sloping, concave curves** — are one of the most distinctive features of Thai architecture.

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Subject Matter and Location

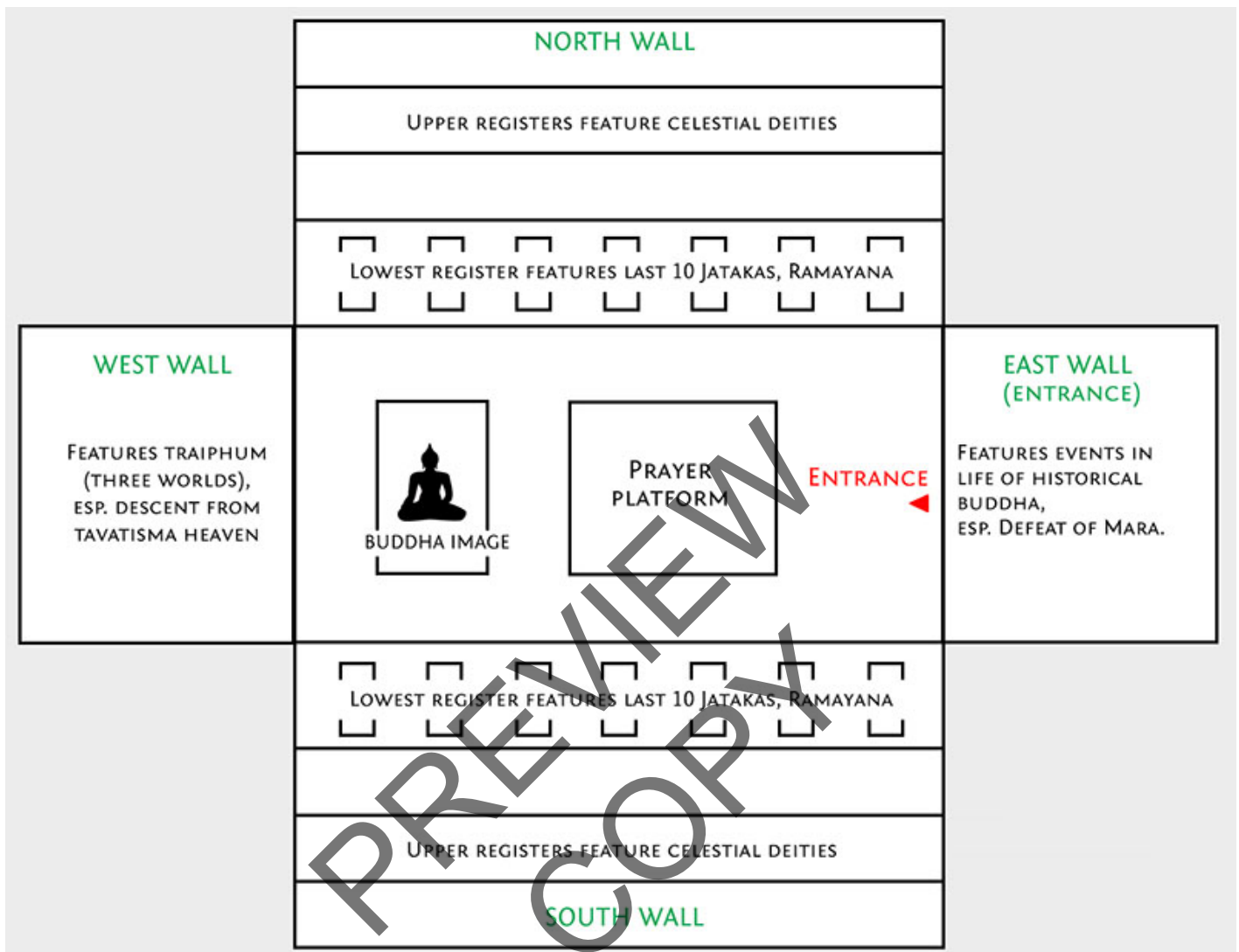


Fig. 32. Layout of paintings in typical ubosot or vihan.

Using sacred texts as inspiration, paintings in Thailand's religious structures — concentrated on the walls of vihans and ubosots, primarily — depict a consistent set of subject matter.

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These same figures also make an appearance on window and door panels.



Fig. 36. Victory over Mara. Wat Suwandaram, Ayutthaya. Highlights added.

Events in the Life of the Historical Buddha

Vihans and ubosots often enclose **scenes from the last life of the historical Buddha** (the one in which he achieves enlightenment), in addition to the Jatakas that depict the Buddha's *former lives*.

- **Key events.** The most notable of which — often referred to as the Eight Great Events — are the following: Birth in [Lumbini](#), Nepal (where he emerges from his standing mother's right side); Great Departure (when he forsakes his family for the ascetic life); Victory over Mara in [Bodhi Gaya](#), India (when he achieves enlightenment); Protected by Naga (when a serpent shields the meditating, post-Enlightenment Buddha from a flood); Preaching in Deer Park in [Sarnath](#), India (when he teaches others the path to enlightenment); Performing Miracles at [Shravasti](#), India (when he amazes non-believers); Descent from Tavatimsa heaven (discussed

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smaller and less pointed in these manifestations, however.

- **All four recognized positions.** The artists of Sukhothai were the first to depict the Buddha in all four accepted positions: standing, walking, seated, and reclining.

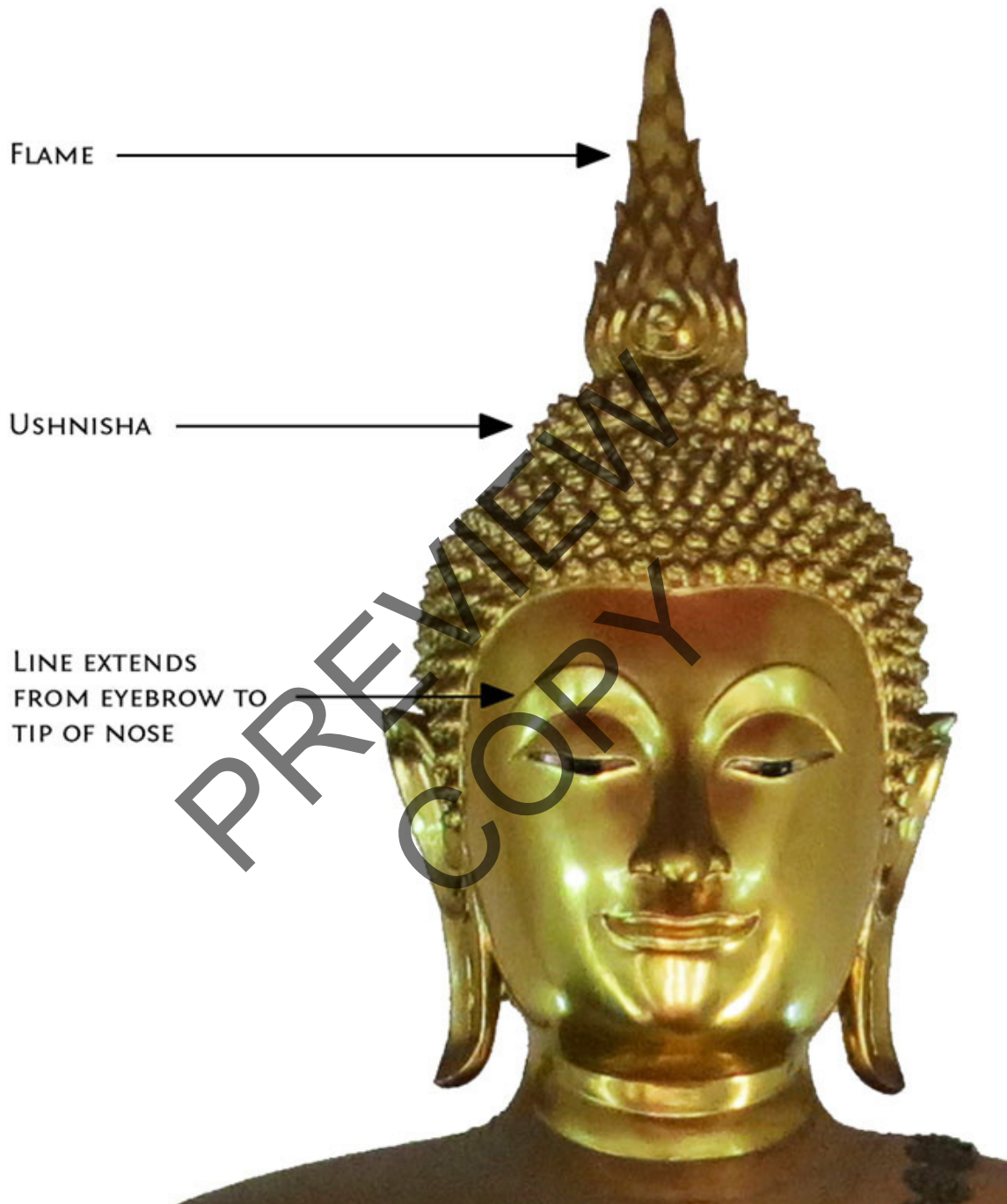


Fig. 47. Distinctive facial features, Sukhothai period Buddha.

The Sukhothai Trademark: Walking Buddha

The Sukhothai period's claim to fame is its walking Buddha (**Fig. 48**). They represent **the apex of**

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The Buddha's Mudras

Buddha images always display ritual hand gestures (mudras). Although there are a large number of sacred mudras, we only profile those that you will most frequently encounter in Thailand.



Fig. 51. Bhumisparsa mudra. Wat Mahathat, Sukhothai.

Bhumisparsa Mudra

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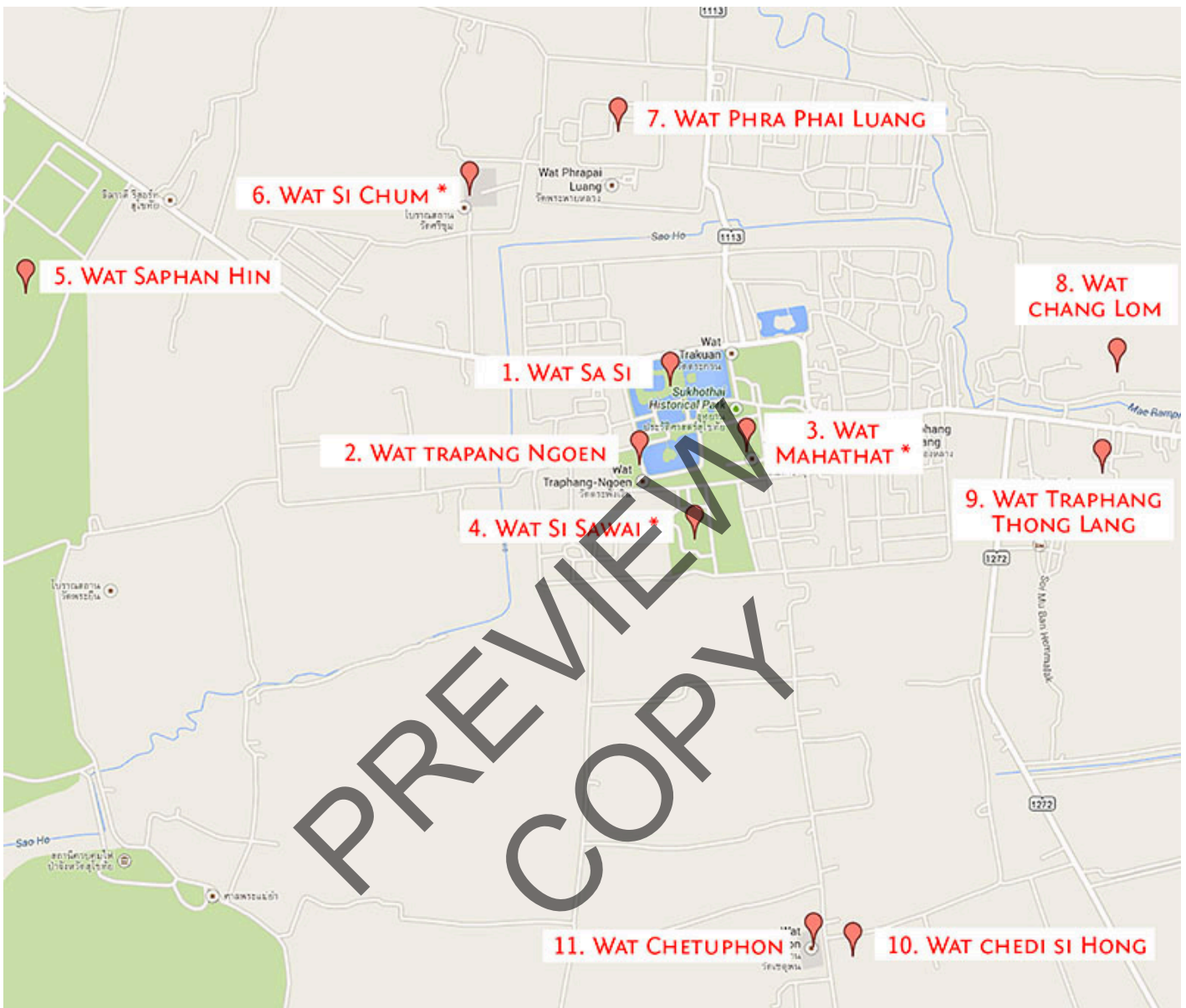


Fig. 54. Top temple sites, ancient city of Sukhothai. See in [Google Maps](#).

Itinerary

Author Tip: *To make things easier and allow you to focus on the real highlights, particularly if you only have limited time in this city, we have marked those sites that we believe are must-sees with asterisks (*).*

Temple Highlights

1. **Wat Sa Si.** Notable for: Thai stupa type #2; walking Buddha statue.
2. **Wat Trapang Ngoen.** Notable for: lotus bud chedi (Thai stupa type #1); ubosot at center of lake; reliefs of walking and standing Buddhas.
3. * **Wat Mahathat.** The first truly Sukhothai monument. Notable for: first time we see lotus bud chedi (Thai stupa type #1); reliefs around central stupa; two eight meter tall standing Buddhas.
4. * **Wat Si Sawai.** Notable for: prang-centric arrangement; excellent stucco decoration on the exterior of its three prangs.
5. **Wat Saphan Hin.** Notable for: position at top of hill; giant standing Buddha.
6. * **Wat Si Chum.** One of the most stunning temples in Sukhothai. Notable for: mandapa-centric arrangement; giant seated Buddha in mandapa; only extant Sukhothai engravings are in the ceiling of the mandapa stairway (no entrance allowed).
7. **Wat Phra Phai Luang.** Notable for: resembles temples built under Angkor-based Khmer ruler Jayavarman VII (ruled 1181-1218); triple-prang arrangement; good reliefs.
8. **Wat Chang Lom.** Notable for: chedi (Thai stupa type #2) ringed with elephants.
9. **Wat Trapang Thong Lang.** Notable for: mandapa-centric arrangement; much deteriorated bas-reliefs of Buddha's Descent from Tavatimsa heaven and the Taming of the Elephant.
10. **Wat Chedi Si Hong.** Notable for: good stucco reliefs around primary chedi (Thai stupa type #2); base ringed with elephants.
11. **Wat Chetuphon.** Notable for: tall stucco bas-reliefs of standing and walking Buddhas; thick enclosure wall made of bluish-gray slate.

Visiting

- **Visiting hours:** Sukhothai's temples are open daily from 6am - 9pm. For more information, see the [official website](#).
- **Logistics.** The temples are spread out over a large geographic area. While all of the temples in the old city center — the first four temples on our itinerary — can be visited on foot, you will require a tuk-tuk or car to tour the remaining temples around its periphery. Further, you will likely require transportation to the old city center itself, as most hotels are located outside of reasonable walking distance.

What to Look for in Sukhothai and Si Satchanalai

Author Tip: As you visit the temples in Sukhothai and Si Satchanalai, let this list serve as a quick reference checklist of the most distinctive features of art and architecture in these two seminal locations.

Quick Checklist

- **Lotus bud chedi.** In Sukhothai's grandest temples, the stupa assumes primary importance at the temple site. A stupa with a lotus bud-shaped anda (Thai stupa type #1) is Sukhothai architecture's most distinctive feature.
- **Mandapas, filled with massive Buddha images.** The Sukhothai period is unique in positioning a Buddha-filled mandapa at the center of a temple complex and using it the primary religious structure. While the aforementioned stupa-centered temple model prevails in its grandest temples, this mandapa-centered model is often employed for smaller temples.
- **Elephants surrounding stupa platforms.** Although used rarely in subsequent periods, this is yet another distinctive feature of Sukhothai architecture and was likely borrowed from Sri Lankan prototypes.
- **Bell-shaped chedi.** While the lotus bud chedi has come to define the Sukhothai period, the bell-shaped chedi (Thai stupa type #2) was also used, albeit in a secondary role. These stupas do not have a colonnade between anda and chattra, however, unlike those of the Ayutthaya and Bangkok periods that followed.
- **Courtyards.** Square courtyards lined with Buddha images surround the primary structures in temple compounds.
- **Slit windows on vihans.** Vihans are illuminated by thin slit-shaped windows.
- **Detailed relief decoration.** Sukhothai period temples are also known for their well-rendered, delicate, and detailed stucco reliefs.
- **Extremely graceful Buddhas in Sukhothai style.** Sukhothai period sculptures are the most graceful, delicate, and spiritual in the Thai tradition. They are unrivaled.
- **No paintings.** Unfortunately, no paintings have survived from the Sukhothai period. However, we can gain some insight to how this period's paintings might have looked by extrapolating from Wat Si Chum's engraved panels.
- **Red-colored, porous laterite stone.** Covered with stucco, laterite was the primary building material, in contrast to the bricks used in later periods.

For more detail on any of these features, see the introductory sections on Thailand's art and architecture.

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3. Wat Mahathat *

Background

- **Location:** Old city center (historical park). See in [Google Maps](#).
- **Built:** Initially under ruler Sri Indraditya (ruled 1239-1279) and reconstructed in the 1340s under Lithai (ruled 1347-1368).

Author Tip: Wat Mahathat is the first truly Sukhothai monument. With the city's trademark lotus bud stupa rising from its center and super high quality bas-reliefs, it is an architectural wonder and a highlight stop on our tour.

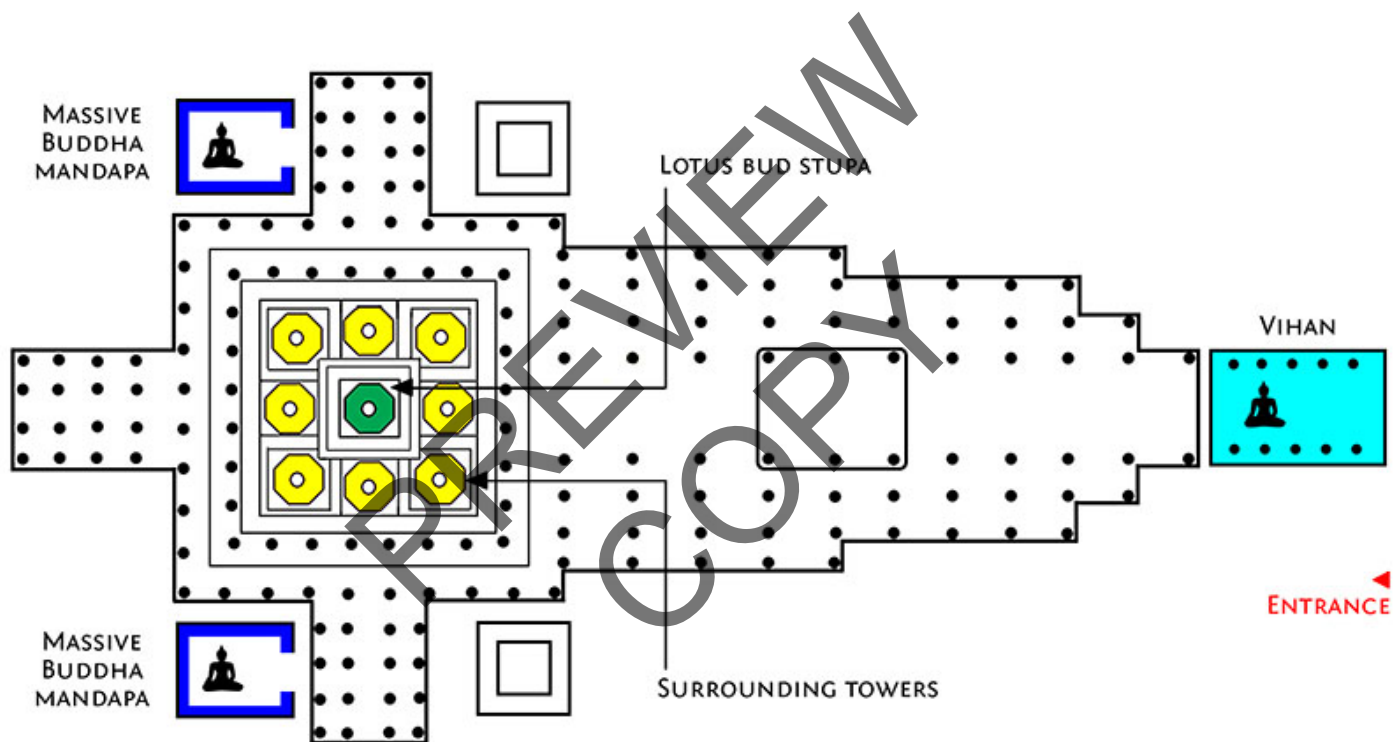


Fig. 60. Layout, principal area, Wat Mahathat.

Layout of the Principal Area

- **Vihan.** On the far eastern side, an elevated vihan with a Buddha in bhumisparsa mudra greets visitors to the temple (light blue highlights in Fig. 60).
- **Core platform.** A square platform directly opposite — the temple's core area — supports a highly elevated **lotus bud stupa** (green highlights in Fig. 60) surrounded by **eight smaller towers** (yellow highlights in Fig. 60).
- **Standing Buddhas.** Two massive Buddhas stand in mandapas that flank the primary plat-

form (dark blue highlights in Fig. 60).

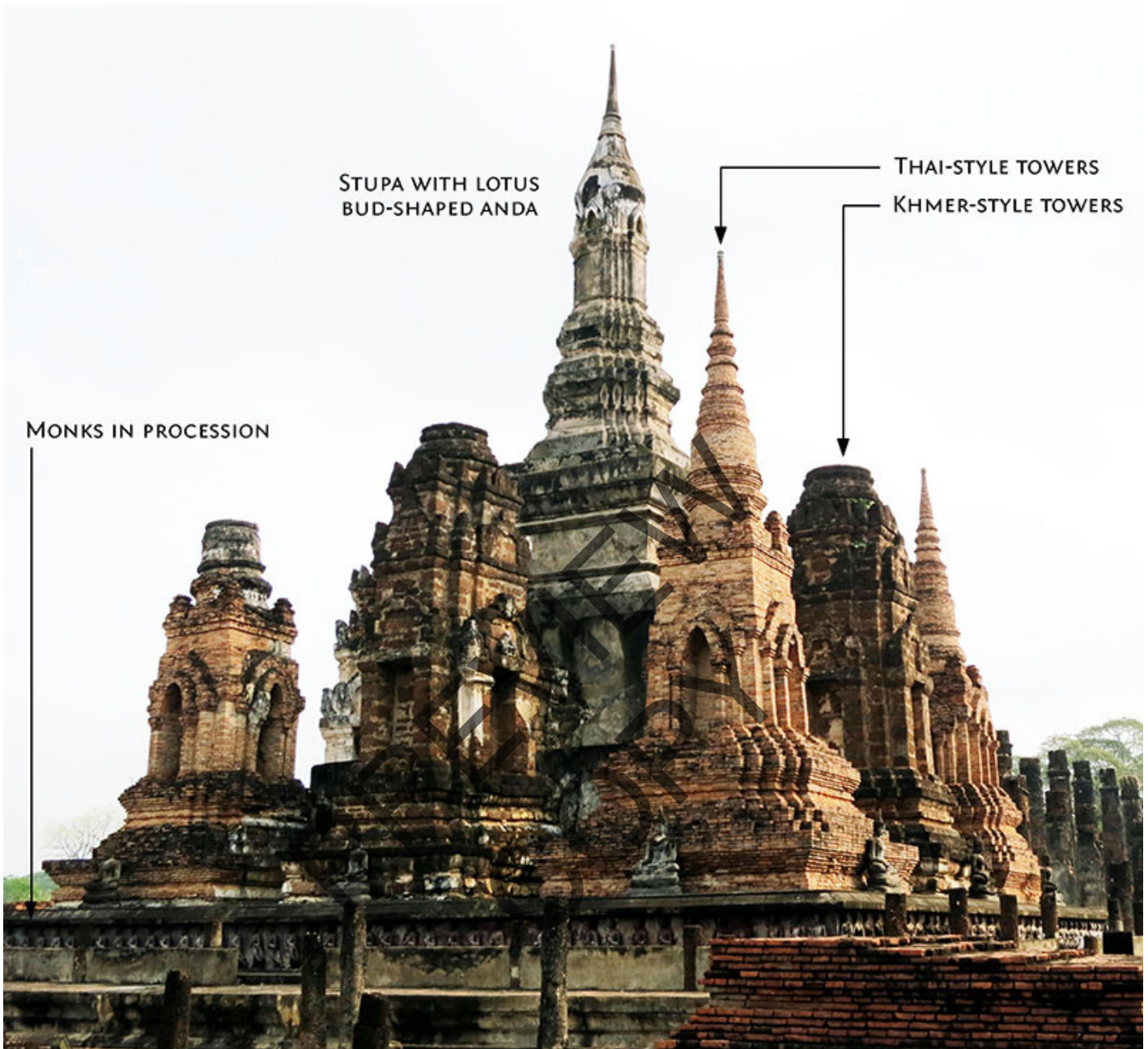


Fig. 61. Principal area, central stupa and towers, Wat Mahathat. Highlights added.

The Central Stupa

The tremendous scale of Wat Mahathat's central stupa (Fig. 61) — made of stucco-covered laterite — makes it the **quintessential example of Thai stupa type #1**, profiled in the introductory section entitled “Stupas.”

- **The defining feature: lotus bud.** Most notably, the stupa has a lotus bud-shaped anda.
- **No harmika.** Unlike earlier Sri Lankan and later Thai stupas, Sukhothai lotus bud stupas do

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Ayutthaya (1350-1767)

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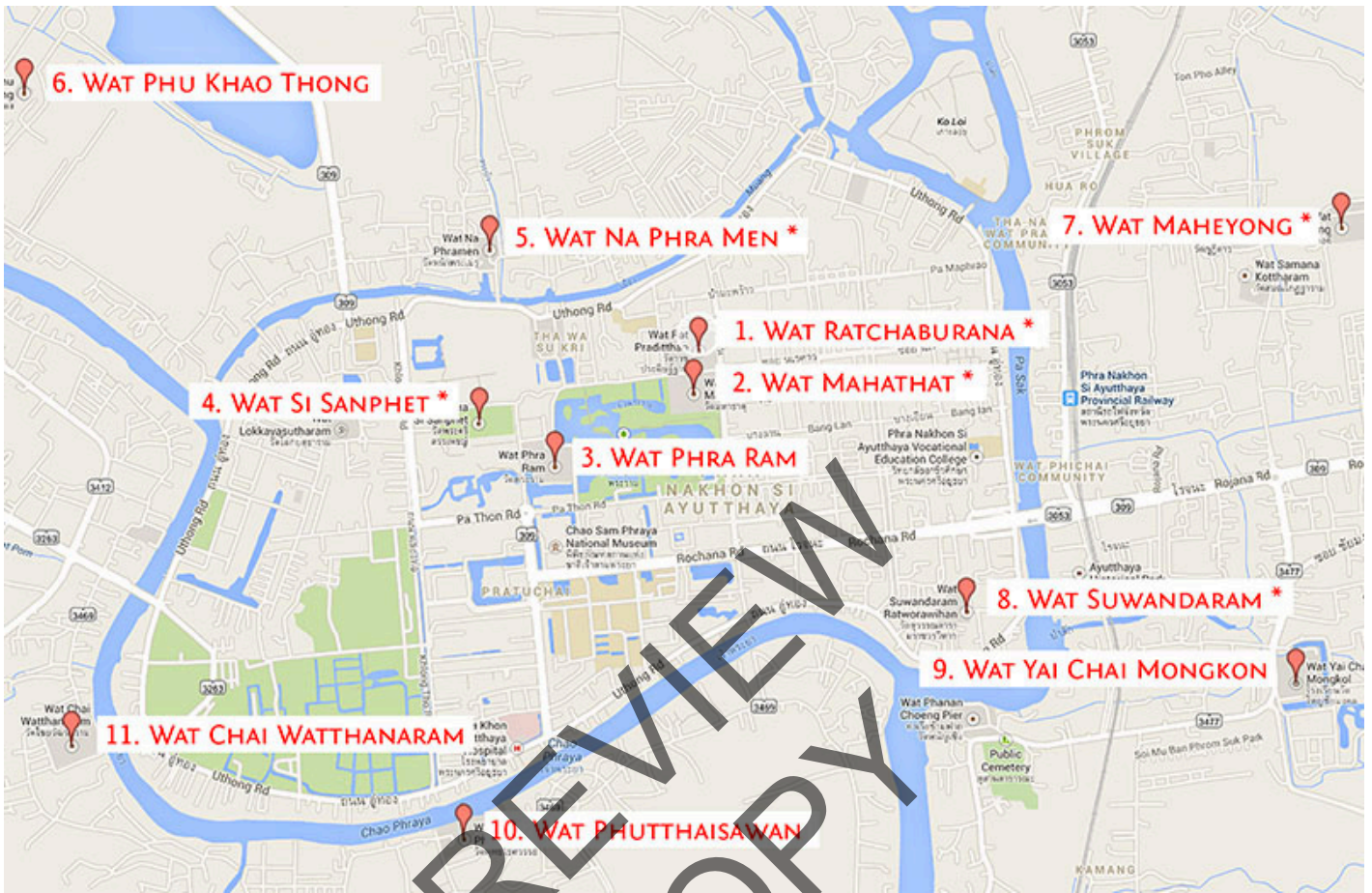


Fig. 109. Top temple sites, ancient capital city of Ayutthaya. See in [Google Maps](#).

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1. Wat Ratchaburana *

Background

- **Location:** Old city center (historical park). See in [Google Maps](#).
- **Built:** Early Ayutthaya period, 1424 by ruler Borommarachathirat II (ruled 1424-1448).

Author Tip: Wat Ratchaburana is a highlight on our tour. The crypt of its stunning large prang tower has some of the oldest paintings in Thailand. The journey down into the crypt can be a bit unsettling, but some of the frescoes are in a good state of preservation, making it worth the trip.

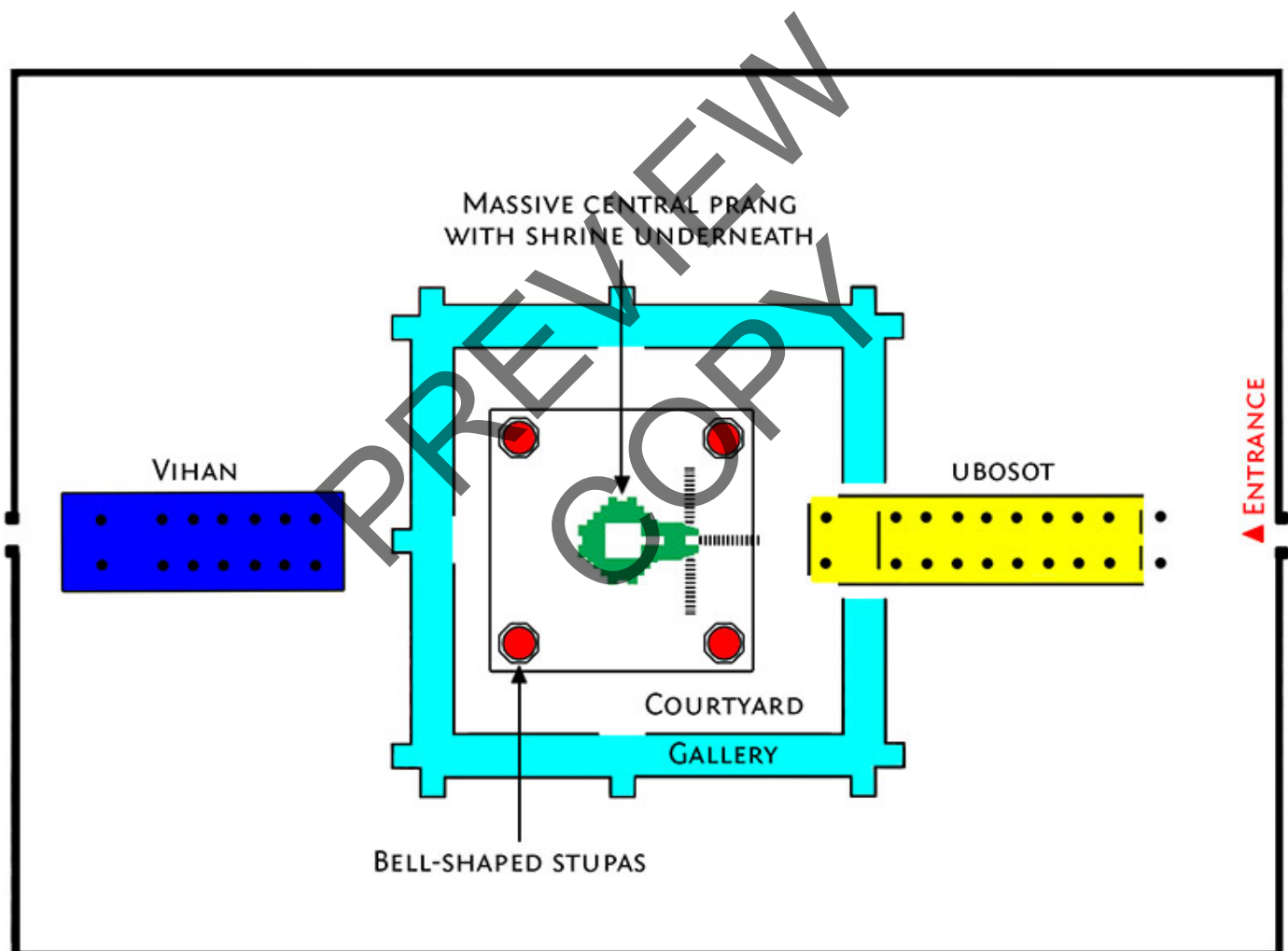


Fig. 110. Layout, Wat Ratchaburana.

Layout and Appearance

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The Primary Vihan

While the large vihan is mostly in ruins, it still has some important Ayutthaya period features worth exploring.

- Most of the **large round columns** that once supported a peristyle around its periphery are still intact.
- Its **slit windows** (Fig. 124), a trademark Ayutthaya period feature, are still visible in those few walls that remain standing; note the diamond-shaped openings below.

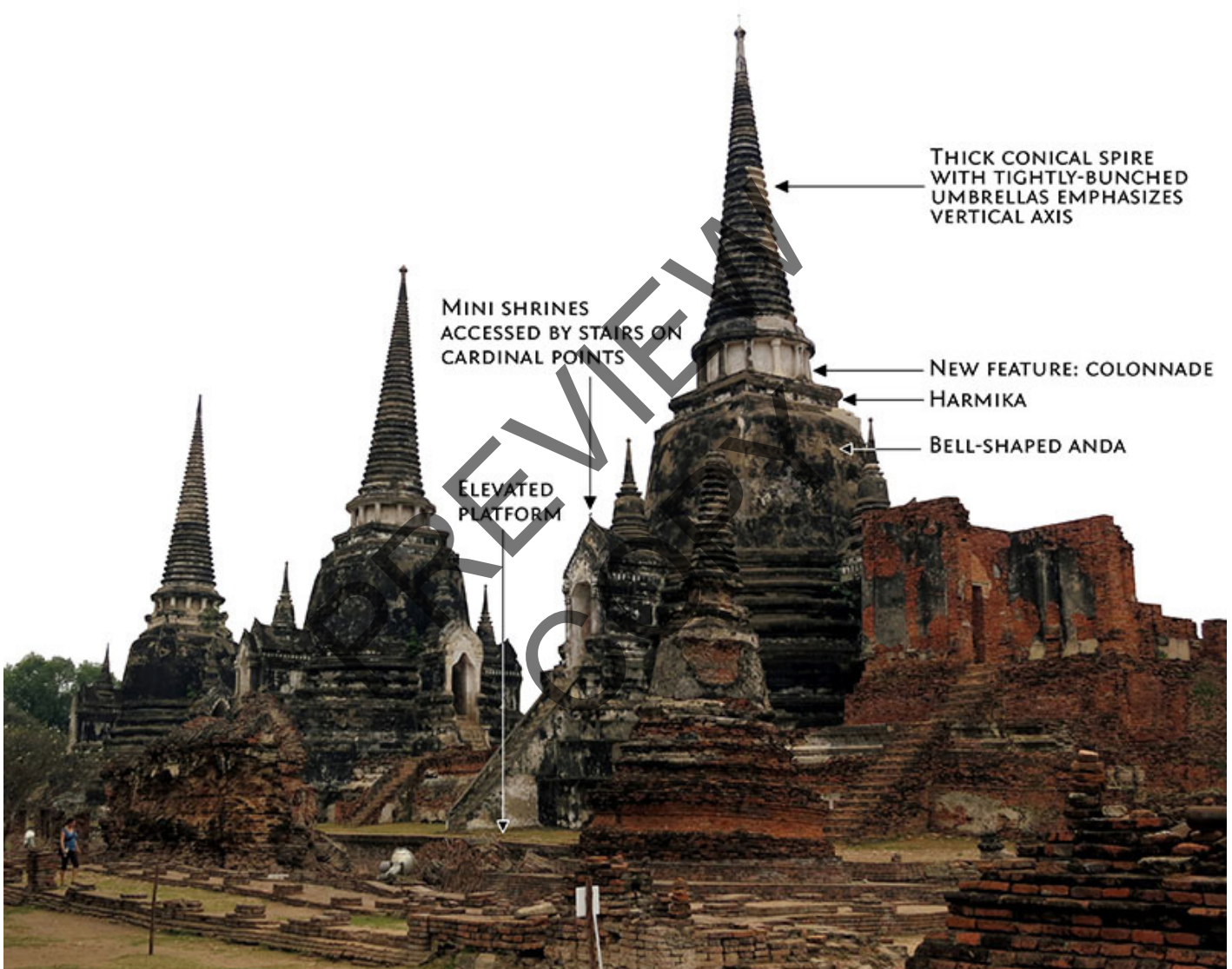


Fig. 125. Distinctive features, three stupas, Wat Si Sanphet. Highlights added.

Three Stupas

Wat Si Sanphet's **three bell-shaped stupas** are what make this temple distinctive (Fig. 125). Conforming to Thai stupa type #2 profiled in the introductory section entitled "Stupas," they display trademark Late Ayutthaya period features. In addition to the standard features — bell-shaped anda,

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Bangkok (1782-present)

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Fig. 151. Top temple sites, present-day capital of Bangkok. See in [Google Maps](#).

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Fig. 167. Sukhothai Buddha, Buddhaisawan chapel.

Sculptures

- **Sukhothai period Buddha image.** The gilt bronze Buddha image, Phra Phutta Sihing, is one of the most revered in Bangkok ([Fig. 167](#)).
- **Wooden Buddhas** stand in front of the Sihing image.

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5. Wat Phra Kaeo *

Background

- **Location:** Ratanakosin neighborhood. See in [Google Maps](#).
- **Built:** Under ruler Rama I (ruled 1782-1809) to house the Emerald Buddha; it was restored extensively in 1982.
- **Visiting hours:** Daily from 8:30am - 3:30pm. For more information, see the [official website](#).
- **Dress code:** There is a strictly enforced dress code: no shorts or sleeveless shirts (a scarf cover-up does not suffice).

Author Tip: *The most popular site in Bangkok, Wat Phra Kaeo — Temple of the Emerald Buddha — offers a great introduction to the Thai architectural and artistic aesthetic. While this is a sacred center, many of the religious forms take on a political dimension under Bangkok's Chakri dynasty; at Wat Phra Kaeo, religion and politics are one.*

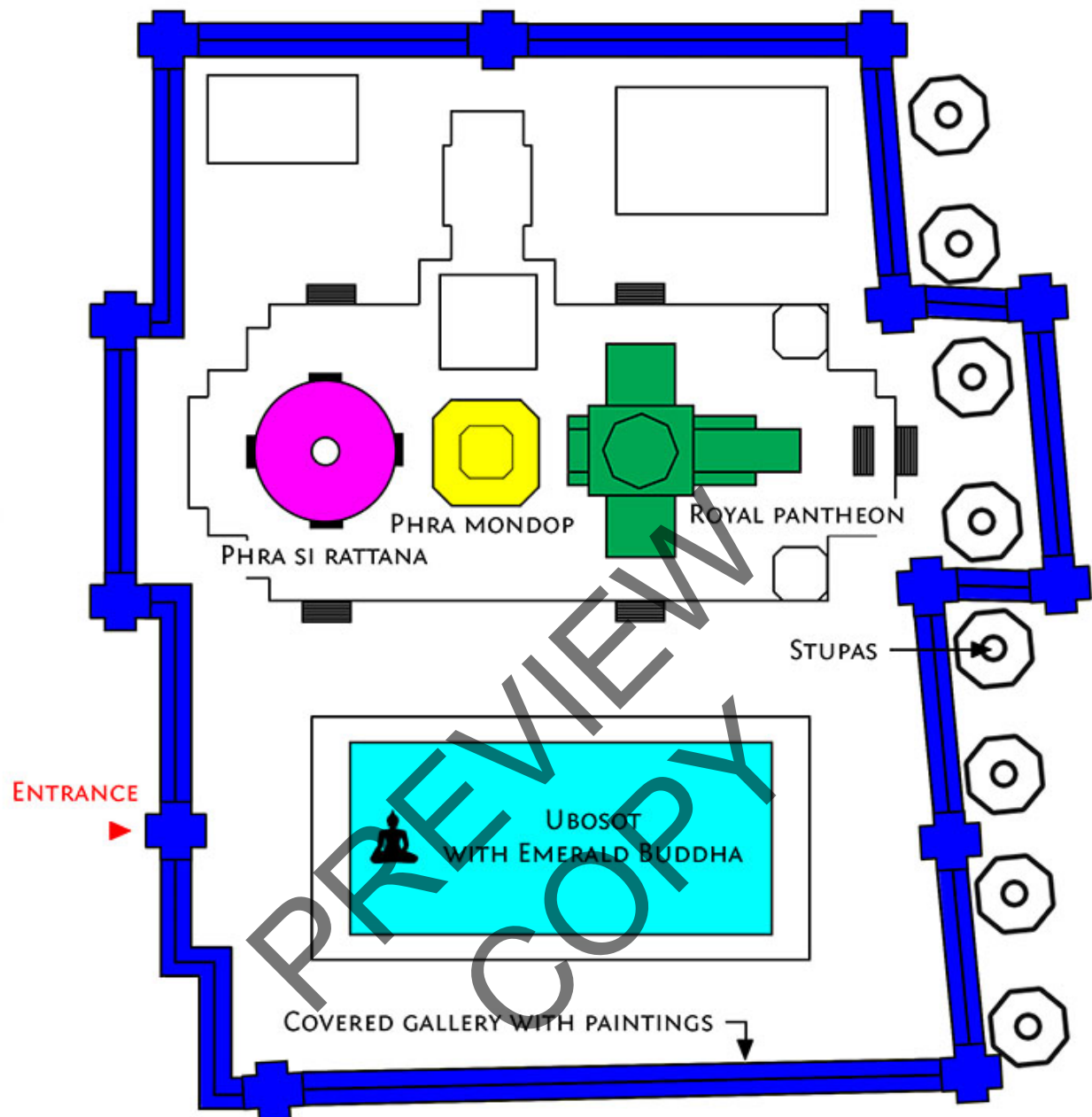


Fig. 168. Layout, Wat Phra Kaeo.

Overall Layout

Wat Phra Kaeo can be a bit overwhelming, so we recommend focusing on its most important features.

- **A large rectangular ubosot**, the religious center of the complex, holds the Emerald Buddha (light blue highlights in Fig. 168).
- **The northern platform** holds three structures: Phra Si Rattana (pink highlights in Fig. 168), Phra mondop (yellow highlights in Fig. 168), and the Royal Pantheon (green highlights

in Fig. 168).

- **A gallery.** A covered gallery lines the enclosure wall and is decorated with Bangkok period frescoes (dark blue highlights in Fig. 168).

The Ubosot

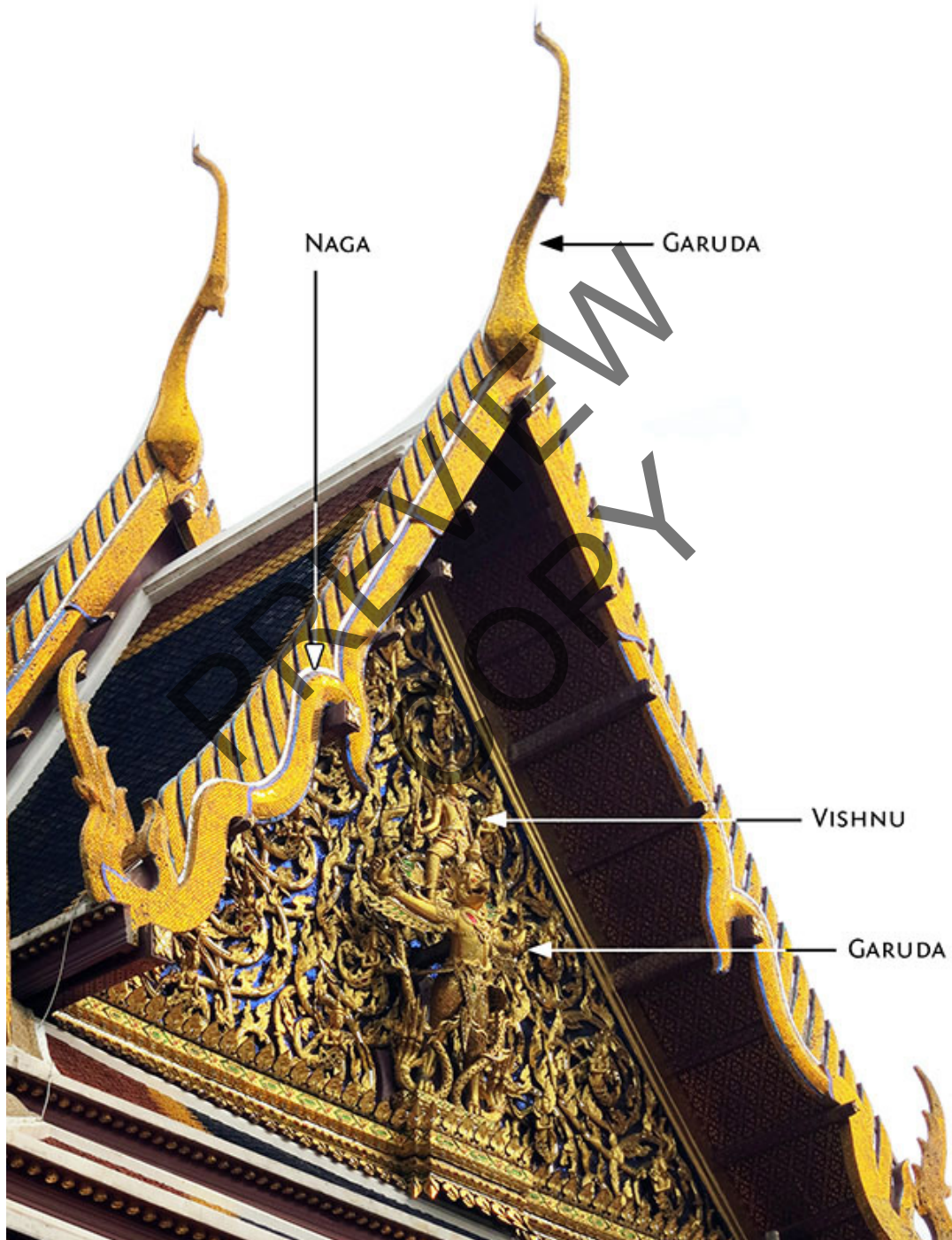


Fig. 169. Gabled roof, ubosot, Wat Phra Kaeo. Highlights added.

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Thailand Reading List

We've re-imagined the travel reading list for those seeking more rewarding and fulfilling experiences around the world. [Explore our collection](#) of "Trip Reads" — expertly-curated print books, ebooks, magazine articles, papers from leading academics, online resources, music, podcasts, videos and more.

Here are just a few of our Thailand recommendations ([see the complete list](#)):

- **Thailand: The Cookbook** The author brings together 500 authentic recipes from every region. *By Jean-Pierre Gabriel.*
- **"How to Survive 10 Coups: Lessons from the King of Thailand"** Bhumibol Adulyadej managed to stay on top of one of the most coup-prone countries. How? *By Kathy Gilsinan for The Atlantic.*
- **Buddha in your Backpack: Everyday Buddhism for Teens** For teens looking to learn more about Buddhism, this book introduces Buddha's teachings with advice for navigating everyday situations. *By Franz Metcalf.*

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Los Angeles Times

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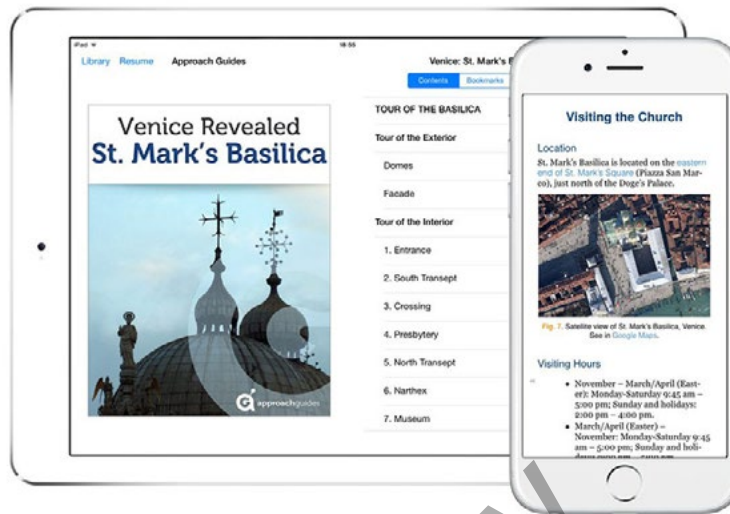
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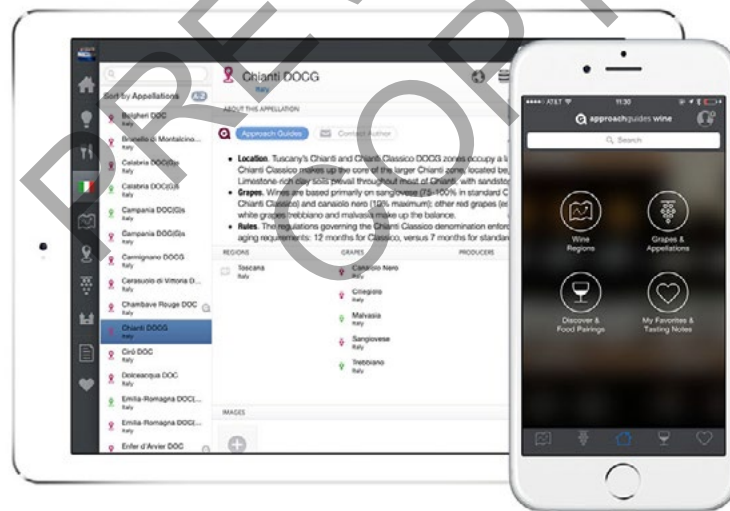
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