



CHAPTER 1

The History and Development of Muay

With a lack of written records and an oral tradition which has been highly embellished by legends and stories, the pre-20th century history of *muay* is hard to plot with any degree of certainty. This chapter provides as accurate a picture as it is possible to form of the origins of *muay* and its development down the centuries.

The "History at a Glance" section makes it easy to set these developments in the context of Thai history in general. In order to distinguish between the old and modern forms of this martial art, "Muay Thai" is used only of the post-1920s era, after the introduction of gloves and other elements of Western boxing, while "*muay*" is used to refer to the original concept, modified as necessary by the addition of other terms: *Muay Khaad Chuek*, *Muay Luang*, *Muay Boran* and so on.



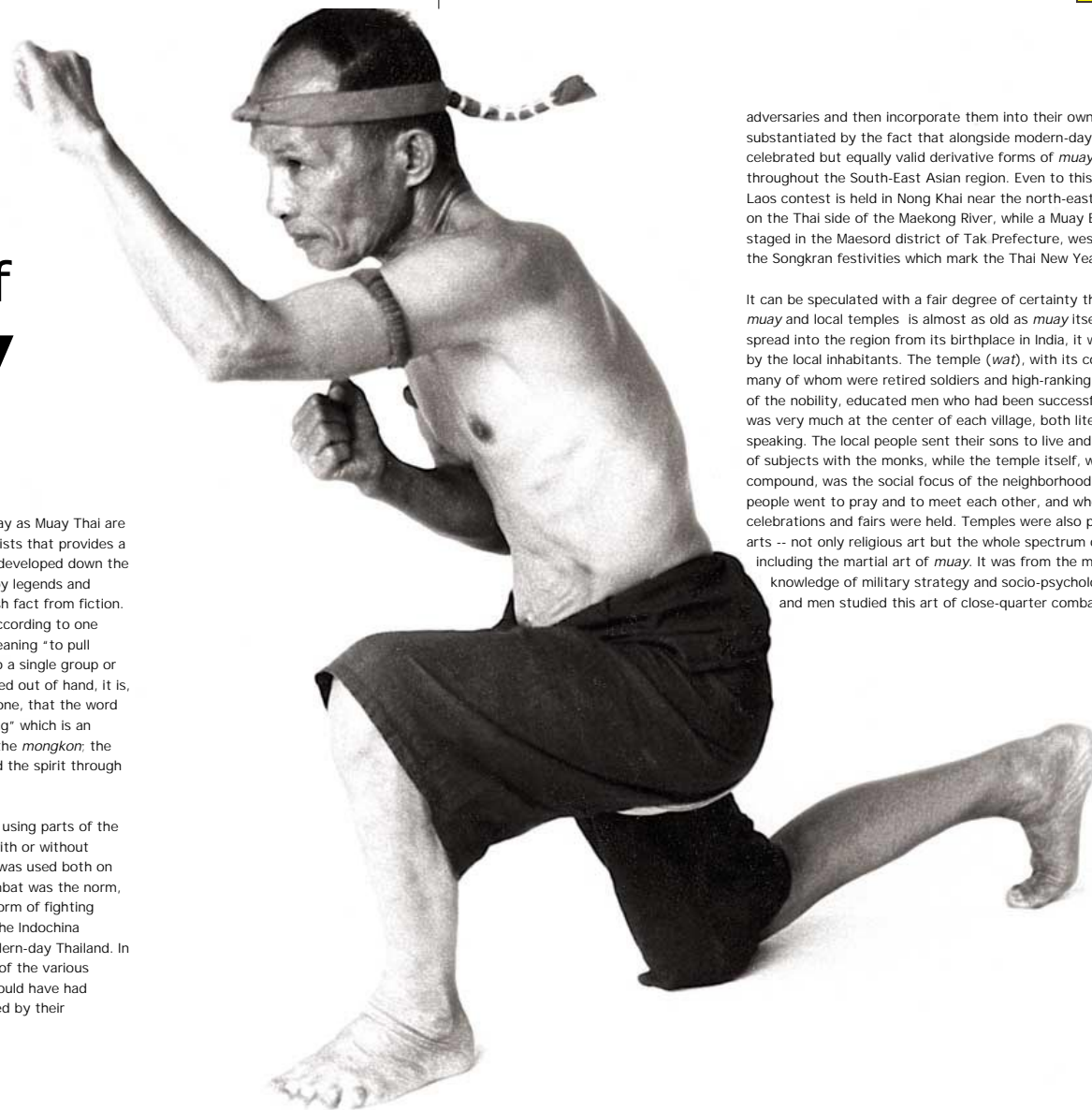


The Origins of Muay

(Muay - มวย)

The precise origins of the martial art which is known today as Muay Thai are hazy and imprecise. Very little written documentation exists that provides a factual and accurate picture of how and in what ways it developed down the centuries, while the oral tradition has been embellished by legends and hearsay to the extent that it is now difficult to distinguish fact from fiction. Even the derivation of the term *muay* itself is unclear. According to one school of thought, it comes from the Sanskrit *mavya*, meaning "to pull together", as in pulling hair into a pony-tail, "to form into a single group or unit", or "unity". Although this theory cannot be dismissed out of hand, it is, surely, rather too glib deduce from this, as some have done, that the word can be directly linked to the "pulling together" or "binding" which is an important aspect of four elements in *muay*: the head in the *mongkon*; the biceps in the *paa-prajied*; the fists in the *kaad chuek*; and the spirit through the uttering of incantations.

Undoubtedly *muay* originated as a practical fighting skill, using parts of the body itself -- the head, fists, elbows, knees and feet -- with or without additional weaponry such as swords, pikes and staffs. It was used both on the battlefield itself, at the time when hand-to-hand combat was the norm, and to protect the community against marauders. This form of fighting must have developed concurrently throughout most of the Indochina peninsula and not in isolation in the area covered by modern-day Thailand. In the frequent aggressive encounters between the forces of the various kingdoms which existed in centuries past, the fighters would have had chances to observe the techniques which were being used by their



adversaries and then incorporate them into their own arsenal. This can be substantiated by the fact that alongside modern-day Muay Thai, less celebrated but equally valid derivative forms of *muay* are practiced throughout the South-East Asian region. Even to this day, an annual Muay Laos contest is held in Nong Khai near the north-eastern border with Laos, on the Thai side of the Maekong River, while a Muay Burma contest is staged in the Maesord district of Tak Prefecture, western Thailand, during the Songkran festivities which mark the Thai New Year (13th April).

It can be speculated with a fair degree of certainty that the link between *muay* and local temples is almost as old as *muay* itself. When Buddhism spread into the region from its birthplace in India, it was readily embraced by the local inhabitants. The temple (*wat*), with its community monks, many of whom were retired soldiers and high-ranking officials or members of the nobility, educated men who had been successful in their secular lives, was very much at the center of each village, both literally and figuratively speaking. The local people sent their sons to live and study a broad range of subjects with the monks, while the temple itself, with its extensive compound, was the social focus of the neighborhood, the place where people went to pray and to meet each other, and where traditional celebrations and fairs were held. Temples were also power houses for the arts -- not only religious art but the whole spectrum of artistic endeavor, including the martial art of *muay*. It was from the monks, with their knowledge of military strategy and socio-psychology, that young boys and men studied this art of close-quarter combat.

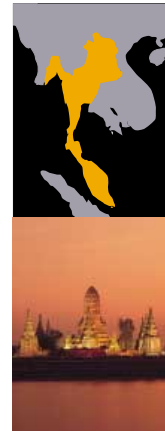
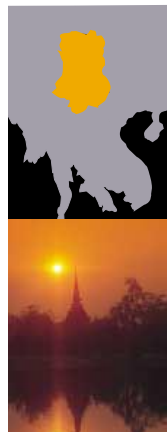


History at a Glance

Pre-Sukhothai Era c.200 BC-1238

In the 2nd or 3rd centuries BC, Indian Buddhist missionaries were reputedly sent to a land known as Suvarnabhumi, "The Land of Gold", a fertile region stretching, in modern-day terms, from southern Burma, across central Thailand to eastern Cambodia. This region became the center of the Dvaravati culture, which declined under the influence of the invading Khmers in the 11th century, while in the south, Chaiya was the local capital of the Srivijaya empire, based in Sumatra. Meanwhile, a prototype Thai state called Nan Chao was flourishing in what is now south-eastern China. At some point, the people of this state started migrating slowly southwards down the Indochina Peninsula. Some of them became mercenaries in the Khmer armies, where they were referred to as "Syams" from the Sanskrit *syam*, meaning "dark", a reference to their relatively darker skin tones. The name Syam or Siam was eventually used to denote their kingdom.

Muay: Key point: Spreading throughout the Indochina Peninsula, possibly in conjunction with Buddhism, as a combat skill



Sukhothai Era 1238-1377

In the central northern region of modern-day Thailand, the establishment of Sukhothai as the capital can, in many respects, be regarded as the birth of the prototype Thai nation itself. Founded as the great Khmer empire, which had held sway for about a thousand years, went into decline, the Sukhothai era saw a great flowering of religious art. Many experts maintain that the statues of Buddha produced during this period have never since been surpassed in terms of their purity of line, grace and spirituality. It was also during this era that Ramkamhaeng, arguably the first great Siamese king, codified the country's writing system.

Muay: Functions: Combat skill on the battlefield
Defense of the community
Martial training in peace-time

Key Point: Fighters bare-fisted

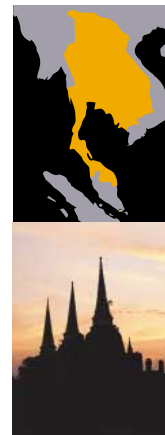
Ayutthaya Era 1350-1767

Just 76 km. (about 50 miles) north of Bangkok, Phra Nakorn Sri Ayutthaya, to give the city its full name, was the capital of the country for over 400 years, from its foundation in 1350 by King U-Thong, to its total destruction by the Burmese in 1767. It became an extremely prosperous city, thriving on trade, and many foreign envoys -- including those from Europe -- were sent there to court the favor of the monarch and to secure trading rights. In its hey-day, Ayutthaya's population and grandeur were both reputed to have exceeded those of London, and with its golden pagodas and great architectural wealth, it must have been a city beyond compare.

The Ayutthaya period provided Thai history with many heroes -- like King Naresuan who, in 1592, defeated the Burmese crown prince in single-handed, elephant-back combat -- and at least one heroin: Queen Suriyothai, who was mortally wounded in 1548 when, disguised as a warrior, she tried to aid her husband on the battlefield.

Muay: Functions: Combat skill in successive wars with Burma
Defense of the community
Means of personal advancement
Training for royalty and the elite Sport

Key Point: Introduction of *kaad chuek*
Heroes of the Day: *Somdet Prachao Suer* (cf. p.50)
Nai Khanom Tom (cf. p.51)





Royal Muay

(Muay Luang - มวยหลวง)

Muay gradually became a possible means of personal advancement as the nobility increasingly esteemed skillful practitioners of the art and invited selected fighters to come and live in the palace to teach *muay* to the staff of the royal household, soldiers, princes or the king's personal guards.

It is known that at some stage during the Ayutthaya Period, a platoon of royal guards, whose duty was to protect king and country, variously known as the *Gong Thanai Luak* (Elite Retainers), *Dhamruot Luang* (Royal Police) or *Grom Nak Muay* (*Muay* Fighters' Regiment) was established. Officers in the force were highly skilled in the art of *muay*; indeed they had attained this rank by personal selection after having exhibited exceptional skills and techniques while fighting in front of the monarch himself. This elite form of *muay*, in which fighters became honored guards who also taught the princes and other members of the nobility, became known as *Muay Luang* or Royal *Muay*.

This royal patronage of *muay* and the system of promoting the most skillful fighters to the ranks of the *Gong Thanai Luak* continued right through to the reigns of Rama V and VI, when fighters who had proved themselves through a succession of bouts in the provinces were invited to go to the capital and fight in a spectacle attended by the king himself or his representative.

