

# ARTISTIC ELEMENTS OF THE DUSIT MAHA PRASAT THRONE HALL: ARTS AND BELIEFS ABOUT THE MONARCH

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## ABSTRACT

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The artistic elements of the Dusit Maha Prasat Throne Hall embody popular beliefs about the monarch. First, the hall's name refers to *Tusita* Heaven, the abode of *Bodhisattvas*, reflecting the common belief that kings are *Bodhisattvas* who have been reincarnated to perform good deeds before returning to heaven. The throne hall's structural components include traditional Thai-style architecture with multi-tiered roof decorations, multi-coloured ceramic roof tiles, and tall spires. These reinforce the belief that this throne hall is a high-status building and an appropriate heavenly residence for kings regarded as *Bodhisattvas* in *Theravāda* Buddhism. Additionally, the throne hall contains objects like the royal throne, which rests on a gradually tapering high base with the sculptures of animals in the *Himavanta* Forest, and mural paintings that portray deities in the attitude of paying respect. These sacred objects represent ideas and meanings that amplify the monarch's long-held sacrosanctity. The Dusit Maha Prasat Throne Hall is an important venue for various royal ceremonies directly connecting to the monarch from the moment of coronation until the King's death.

**Keywords:** Dusit Maha Prasat Throne Hall; the royal court; the royal palace; the King; royal ceremonies

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Dusit Maha Prasat Throne Hall is the most important and oldest in Bangkok's Grand Palace complex. It was built during the reign of King Rama I (r. 1782–1809) as a venue to host royal ceremonies and as a royal residence. It continued to be used for important ceremonies on several occasions, even during the reigns of successive monarchs. During royal funeral ceremonies, the hall also stores the urns of deceased kings and high-ranking royals of the Rattanakosin period. Past studies on the artistic elements of the Dusit Maha Prasat Throne Hall described its construction and traditional Thai style of architecture; however, little has been said about the beliefs regarding the King portrayed through the throne hall's artistic elements, which depict the King as a divine figure based on ancient cosmology. This paper explains this critical yet understudied point. The scope of this paper is limited to the artwork inside the Dusit Maha Prasat Throne Hall; it does not cover those in the royal residence's private section.

## 2. PAST STUDIES ON THE DUSIT MAHA PRASAT THRONE HALL

The Dusit Maha Prasat Throne Hall is west of the Grand Palace complex and annexed to the *Phiman Rattaya*. The throne hall and residential buildings are located further in the private royal residence complex; thus, conducting research in the area remains challenging.

The importance of the Dusit Maha Prasat Throne Hall was established in the *Rattanakosin Royal Annals* written during the reign of King Rama I, *Chao Phraya Tipakornwong's Edition*, and the *Royal Annals of the Royal Autograph Edition*. Furthermore, *The Royal Throne Hall and Residences in the Grand Palace*, edited by Mom Ratchawong Saengsun Ladawan, first published in August 1964, also describes the importance of the hall. The author researched and gathered relevant data on the history of the throne hall and its renovations during each king's reign. Black and white photographs were provided, depicting the great restoration and renovation. Black and white photographs were provided, depicting the great restoration and renovation undertaken when King Rama IX (r. 1946–2016) returned to Thailand. The restoration commenced to comply with the wishes of King Rama IX, who suggested that royal throne halls, residences, and historical monuments are artistically valuable and of interest to the public. Therefore, documenting the history and importance of such places is essential (Ladawan, 1976, p. 2). In the last 60 years, the historical background of the Dusit Maha Prasat Throne Hall, its importance, and its records of restoration have become available to the public.

Another book that contains significant information on the Dusit Maha Prasat Throne Hall is *The Grand Palace Bangkok*, first published in April 1988. It was developed from M. R. Naengnoi Suksri's research on the evolution of the Grand Palace architecture from the times of King Rama I to those of King Rama V (r. 1782–1910). The book is a source of the Dusit Maha Prasat Throne Hall's background information and academic data regarding the hall's architecture. The book contains color photographs of different Dusit Maha Prasat Throne Hall areas, the objects stored inside, and other buildings inside the palace walls. Through such publications, the Dusit Maha Prasat Throne Hall became more widely known to the public (Suksri & Chulasai, 1988, pp. 46–94).

Other books discussing the Dusit Maha Prasat Throne Hall state its historical background and appearance, which are the same as those found in the works of M. R. Naengnoi Suksri and M. R. Saengsun Ladawan. However, these publications do not raise any new issues. Examples include *The Royal Palace of Siam*, which was composed by Phaladisai Sitthithanyakit and published in 2002, and *The Grand Palace: Dusit Maha Prasat Throne Hall and Chakri Maha Prasat Throne Hall*, which was composed by Ekawit Na Thalang and Saner Nildech (1982). A guidebook on the Throne Hall is also available, as it is one of Bangkok's main tourist attractions.

## 3. BACKGROUND AND IMPORTANCE OF DUSIT MAHA PRASAT THRONE HALL

Upon establishing the Rattanakosin Kingdom, King Rama I ordered the construction of the *Phra Thi Nang Amarinthraphisek Maha Prasat* Throne Hall; it was the first throne hall of Rattanakosin and a venue for the royal coronation ceremony. It was intended to be the same size as *Phra Thinang Sanphet Maha Prasat*, a throne hall in the Ayutthaya palace; however, it was damaged in a fire. Thus, in 1789, the King ordered the construction of a new throne hall as a replacement. He wanted it to be the same size as the *Suriyamarin* Throne Hall from the Ayutthaya period. The King anointed the new throne hall as the "Dusit Maha Prasat Throne Hall" (Thiphakonwong, 1988, p. 60) (Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** Dusit Maha Prasat Throne Hall  
Source: Lecturer Kawit Tangcharatwong, Ph.D.

When King Rama I ordered the construction of the Dusit Maha Prasat Throne Hall, he wanted it to be the same size as the *Suriyamrin* Throne Hall, not the *Sanphet Maha Prasat*. The former was where the urns of the deceased kings of Ayutthaya were stored. It might have been King Rama I's intention to use this throne hall for royal funerals. When the King died, his body was placed in an urn-shaped casket and stored in the Dusit Maha Prasat Throne Hall; this tradition continues today (Ladawan, 1976, pp. 61–62); however, we cannot conduct an artistic comparative study between Dusit Maha Prasat Throne Hall and Suriyamarin Throne Hall because it collapsed during the last war between the Ayutthaya Kingdom and Myanmar in 1767. Nevertheless, the assumption is that the elites living in the Ayutthaya Kingdom likely had a chance to see Suriyamarin Throne Hall. Therefore, we can assume that Dusit Maha Prasat Throne Hall should have been built with the same height, style, and concept as the Suriyamarin Throne Hall.

The Dusit Maha Prasat Throne Hall is a model of royal architecture that royal artisans perfected during the Rattanakosin period. The throne halls of the previous capital of Ayutthaya directly influenced the style and idea behind the construction, which remains well maintained. The Dusit Maha Prasat Throne Hall houses many items of importance, such as a royal throne decorated with a pearl inlay, a nine-tiered royal umbrella, a royal bed decorated with a pearl inlay, and the *Busabok Mala* Royal Throne at the southern portico of the hall. All these remarkable works of art of the Rattanakosin period possess immense educational value.

In the past, the Dusit Maha Prasat Throne Hall was the main venue for holding important royal ceremonies, including the royal funeral of kings and royal family members, which has been a tradition since the period of King Rama I. The throne hall has also been the venue for other ceremonies to glorify the King. For example, King Phra Nangklao (King Rama III) (r. 1824–1851) hosted a monk convention in the hall to complete the revision of the Tripitaka, which started during the reign of King Rama I. Furthermore, the coronation of King Vajiravudh (King Rama VI) (r. 1910–1925) was held in the Dusit Maha Prasat Throne Hall in 1911. According to the royal command, other ceremonies have also been organized in this throne hall.

#### 4. ARTISTIC ELEMENTS OF DUSIT MAHA PRASAT THRONE HALL AND BELIEFS REGARDING THE MONARCH

Works of art in Thailand's royal court usually regard the King as a divine figure according to both Brahmin and Buddhist religions, likening him to *Indra*, *Vishnu*, *Bodhisattva*, or Lord Buddha. These beliefs have coexisted regardless of differences in religions. They are also connected with ancient cosmology, as found in *Traiphum Lok Winitchai Katha* (The Book about the Three Worlds), which was composed during the reign of King Rama I. The different art styles in the Dusit Maha Prasat Throne Hall also reflects such beliefs. Some issues of interest are as follows.

##### 4.1 Architecture of the Dusit Maha Prasat Throne Hall

The Dusit Maha Prasat Throne Hall has four gable walls, and all porticos are built the same size. Originally, a pillar was set at the centre of each portico to support the roof's weight. However, following King Rama VI's command, the pillars were later removed when the hall was renovated using a modern construction technique; thus, the hall became open and spacious today.

The Dusit Maha Prasat Throne Hall, erected in the traditional Thai style, is a concrete structure built on raised ground. The roofs are decorated with various carvings along the edges, including *chor fa* (horn-like finial on the roof ridge), *bai raka* (tooth-like ridges on the sloping edges of the arch), *hang hongse* (snake heads at the gable ends), and *naga sadung* (sloping snake arch). One notable feature is that *naga buean* (front-facing snake heads at the gable ends) decorates the pediment instead of *hang hongse*, which is rare in traditional Thai buildings from the Rattanakosin period. The roofs of the hall are multi-tiered and made of glazed ceramic tiles; however, the roofs were initially covered with tin. The center roof is topped with a high funnel-shaped Prasat-style spire, which became an archetype of other Prasat throne halls later built in the palace complex. All decorative details suggest the idea of Prasat or the royal residence. A multi-tiered roof is a defining characteristic of the residence of high-ranking royals or a royal residence of the King with a divine-like status.

The central architectural elements that symbolize the King include the sculpture of *Vishnu* riding on a *garuda* surrounded by a *kankhot*, a vine pattern that resolves into angels of adoration. This pattern was a heritage of the Ayuttaya period (Figure 2), reflecting the belief that regards the King as *Vishnu*, the divinity with a kingly status who, according to Brahmin religion, reincarnated to rule the earth.

The four corners of the base supporting the spire on the roof were decorated with a figure of a *garuda* (a giant, powerful bird with a human upper torso and human hands) grabbing a *naga* (a serpent deity) (Figure 3). On the one hand, a *garuda* is believed to be a vessel of *Vishnu*; on the other hand, it is one of the Himavanta creatures that live at the foot of *Mount Meru* and appear in the sacred *Traiphum Lok Winitchai Katha*. In Buddhism, a *garuda* is considered to have supernatural powers, such as the ability to fly. Decorating the base

of the hall's roof with a *garuda* suggests that the building is floating in the heavens. The spire at the top of the hall is multi-tiered and likened to the heavenly residence of angels.



**Figure 2:** The figure of *Vishnu* riding a *Garuda* on the pediment of Dusit Maha Prasat Throne Hall



**Figure 3:** The figure of *Garuda* grabbing *Naga* as a supporting piece at the four corners of the Prasat spire

Throne halls, royal residence buildings, or buildings constructed as per royal commission, such as temples under royal patronage, usually emulate this architectural example, especially during the early Rattanakosin period. This style and its conveyed belief have been passed on from the Ayutthaya period (1350–1767).

The throne hall's doors and windows are decorated with Prasat-style, pavilion-like art. Such symbolism aligns with the décor on the hall's roof (Figure 4). From afar, the windows are intended to resemble an angel's residence in the sky, suggesting that the Dusit Maha Prasat Throne Hall floats in the heavens. Such creative intention also matches the hall's name, referring to the fourth level of heaven (the *Tuṣita* Heaven) in Buddhist belief. Furthermore, the paintings inside the hall amplify this message, depicting angels in an adoring gesture with two palms holding together to represent angels in the *Tuṣita* Heaven. The decorations of the moon and stars on the ceiling amplify this concept.



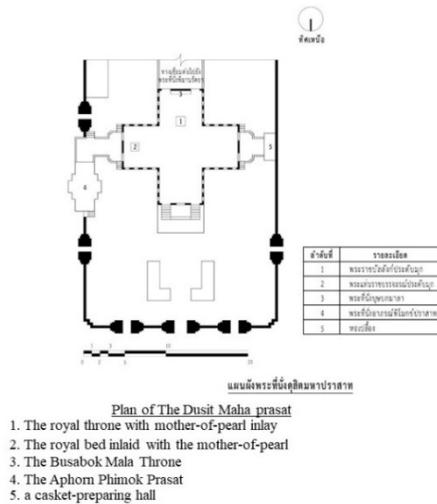
**Figure 4:** Spire-topped pavilion-style window decorations

#### 4.2 Royal throne inlaid with a mother-of-pearl

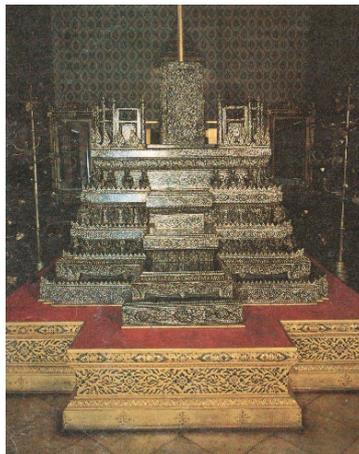
The royal throne decorated with a mother-of-pearl inlay is the main throne of the Dusit Maha Prasat Throne Hall (Figures 5 and 6). This piece of art is one of the finest of the Rattanakosin era, although no clear evidence of its construction can be found. Prince Narisara Nuwattiwong admired the artisanship in the mother-of-pearl inlay as a masterpiece, estimating that the throne may have been built at the time of King Yodfa Chulaloke (Rama I). The Prince stated:

...the royal throne inlaid with mother-of-pearl, which is situated inside Dusit Maha Prasat, was created in the reign of King Rama I. It was not made by later artisans, as seen from its highly-skillful decorative patterns sharing the same style as those found on the royal bed [in Dusit Maha Prasat – the author], and a pair of cabinets in Monthian Tham. (Narisara Nuwattiwong & Damrong Rachanuphap, 1962, pp. 90–91)

The Prince later found that Chao Phraya Mahasena (Bunnag), the Minister of Military, supervised the throne's construction, intending to present it to King Rama I along with the royal bed inlaid with the mother-of-pearl. The latter is also currently kept inside the Dusit Maha Prasat Throne Hall.



**Figure 5:** Plan of Dusit Maha Prasat



**Figure 6:** The royal throne with mother-of-pearl inlay  
Source: Suksri and Chulasai (1988, p. 34)

The royal throne is built on a square-shaped base with added corners. Each pedestal level is a different size, stacked atop one another, and decorated with traditional Thai patterns. The first level has a lion base pattern. Some layers are decorated with a row of *singha* or lion statues from the second layer, and the upper layers have *garudas* holding *nagas* and angels in adoring postures (palms together). Each row of statues is separated by a flat pedestal decorated with a leaf-like *kra-jang* pattern. On the uppermost level is a backrest decorated with an image of Chinese dragons and decorative mandap pillars on three sides. The topmost level also has an image of Vishnu resting on a serpent surrounded by a traditional Thai *ka-nok* pattern (a Thai traditional flame-like pattern). The space in the front is for the King to be seated with his legs pointing downward. The throne contains additional space for steps and a footrest. The four corners of the throne are decorated with gold and silver trees. Finally, a nine-tiered royal umbrella is erected over the throne (Ladawan, 1976, p. 55).

The mother-of-pearl inlaid throne was used when the King received an audience inside the Dusit Maha Prasat Throne Hall. When the King sat on this throne, he was considered akin to *Lord Indra* presiding over Mount Meru, the cosmic mountain that marks the centre of the universe, which is represented by the throne's grandeur. This idea is emphasized by the decorative statues of lions and *garudas* grabbing *naga* and angels in adoring poses (palms together). The statues on each pedestal level that constitute the throne signify different

realms beneath *Mount Meru*. Furthermore, the gold and silver trees at the corners of the throne symbolize the *Himavanta* forest, believed to be located at the foot of *Mount Meru*. Moreover, this throne is also a place for sacred objects to be enshrined during important royal ceremonies. These highly regarded objects include the five regalia used during the annual ceremony to celebrate the royal coronation and the Buddha statue representing the day of the week the King was born, which is used during funeral ceremonies for the King or high-ranking royal family members. Like the King, these sacred objects were believed to be worth enshrinement in a place as high in status as *Mount Meru*.

#### 4.3 *Busabok Mala* Throne at the audience portico and the southern portico

The northern portico of the Dusit Maha Prasat Throne Hall is a *Muk-Dej* or *Muk-Sadej* (audience portico) used for the King's public functions. A *Busabok Mala* Throne was installed inside the audience portico; this throne has a multi-tiered roof designed in the traditional Thai artistic style. The pedestal supporting the throne has a lion base with a row of *garuda* statues holding naga and angels in adoring postures. The statues are installed on the wooden surface, and leaf-like *kra-jang* pattern decoration was used on the top of the wooden plate. The King had to exit from the middle door of the northern portico to ascend this elevated throne (Figure 7).

The King occasionally graced the northern portico of the Dusit Maha Prasat Throne Hall. One notable occurrence was when King Vajiravudh (King Rama VI) granted an audience to public servants without titles to meet and take an oath of allegiance. This oath took place during the royal celebration of the coronation in 1911, which was the second coronation ceremony of the reign. The King was seated on the of allegiance. This oath took place during the royal celebration of the coronation in 1911, which was the second coronation ceremony of the reign. The King was seated on the *Busabok Mala* Throne at the audience portico, wearing complete kingly attire based on the ancient traditional clothing used for coronation ceremonies (Figure 8).



**Figure 7:** The *Busabok Mala* Throne at the northern portico



**Figure 8:** H. M. King Vajiravudh (Rama VI) granting a public audience on the *Busabok Mala* Throne at the portico, Dusit Maha Prasat Throne Hall in 1911

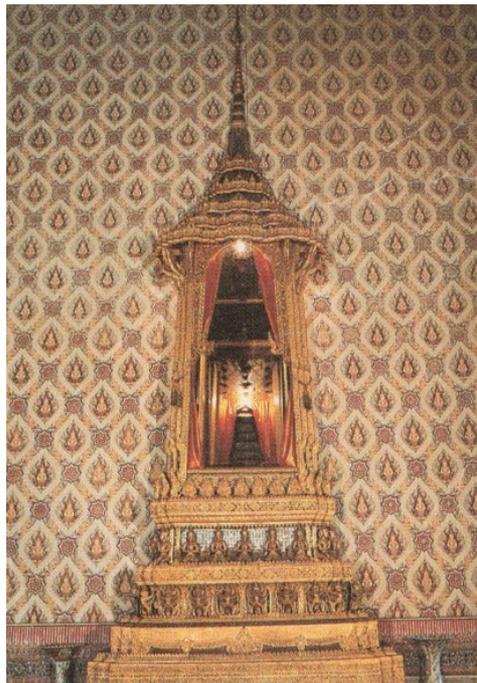
Source: The National Archives of Thailand (1911)

The throne was also used to store some of the palace's precious items. For example, the statue of *Phra Siam Devadhiraj*, a kingdom guardian deity, was enshrined for public worship on the 200th anniversary of the founding of Bangkok in 1982 (Figure 9). Similarly, during the reign of King Mongkut, this statue and a deity statue were moved from *Hor Kaew*, the shrine in the Grand Palace, and enshrined on the *Busabok Mala* Throne for an offering ceremony during the New Year celebrations (Chulalongkorn, 2013, p. 212).

The *Busabok Mala* Throne at the southern portico resembles the one at the audience portico; however, the first was built like a portal in a wall, with a passage to the hall further in the back. This throne was an addition built during the period of King Rama IV (r. 1851–1868), allowing the King to have an audience with female royal family members (Suksri & Chulasai, 1988, p. 25) (Figure 10).



**Figure 9:** The figure of *Phra Siam Devadhiraj* on the *Busabok Mala* Throne at the portico of Dusit Maha Prasat Throne Hall  
Source: Suksri and Chulasai (1988, p. 34)



**Figure 10:** The *Busabok Mala* Throne at the southern portico, Dusit Maha Prasat Throne Hall  
Source: Suksri and Chulasai (1988, p. 34)

The components of the throne and its raised height make the *Busabok Mala* Throne appear like the heavenly residence of *Lord Indra* or the *Phaichayon* Hall at *Mount Meru*, a place well suited for the highly revered King. When the King was seated in his royal attire according to ancient tradition, his divine status was amplified by the regal apparel and artwork. The throne's spire top conveys the King's high status, while the high-stacked pedestals convey the high location of *Mount Meru*. Garuda fighting naga, believed to be magical creatures living in the *Himavanta* forest at the foot of *Mount Meru*, decorate the throne. As the *garudas* have

outstretched wings, they look like they are carrying the throne or the royal residence aloft. To convey the same idea, the decorative statues of angels in adoring postures may refer to the angels residing in the lower level of heaven or those who serve *Lord Indra* in the *Tavatimsa* heaven.

Furthermore, given the name of the Dusit Maha Prasat Throne Hall, the art style of these two *Busabok Mala* Thrones might suggest another interpretation. The artwork could be attempting to convey the status of the King as a *Bodhisattva* residing in a palace in the *Tuṣita Heaven*. Regardless, the artistic elements of both thrones represent a *Prasat* or a royal residence of a king who possesses a divine status.

#### 4.4 Name of the hall and its function for lying in the state of kings

The name of the Dusit Maha Prasat Throne Hall refers to the *Tuṣita Heaven*, found in sacred *Traiphum Lok Winitchai Katha*. According to ancient cosmology, there are six levels of heaven, with *Tuṣita* being the fourth, where various divinities and the *Bodhisattvas* reside. *Lord Santusita* presides as the King of the realm. This level of heaven is also the home of Lord Buddha's parents, who are *Bodhisattvas* themselves, as recorded in *Traiphum Lok Winitchai Katha*: "...*Dusit Heaven is the birthplace of anyone who has a supernatural power—the parents of the Lord Buddhas, as well as Bodhisattvas*" (Thammapricha, 1977, pp. 230–231).

These beliefs can be considered along with the fact that the royal urn-shaped casket of the deceased King would be placed in the Dusit Maha Prasat Throne Hall's western portico. The western portico has always been the only location for the royal casket because this direction symbolizes death according to ancient Thai beliefs. Later, King Vajiravudh even issued a royal order that, for the convenience of the royal servants, a casket-preparing hall be built in connection with the western portico of the Dusit Maha Prasat Throne Hall.

The tradition of placing the royal urn-shaped casket in this throne hall reflects the belief that the deceased King was a *Bodhisattva* who had reincarnated to accumulate merits in human realms by completing royal duties. Thus, the King's death equals his return to the *Tuṣita Heaven*, the residence of *Bodhisattvas*, to wait for the next reincarnation, which leads to enlightenment (Figure 11).



**Figure 11:** The placement of the King's urn-shaped casket during the Rattanakosin period at Dusit Maha Prasat Throne Hall  
Source: The National Archives of Thailand (1910)

Furthermore, the royal casket of high-ranking royal family members, such as the Queen, is also kept at the Dusit Maha Prasat Hall, suggesting that the deceased royal family members are regarded as relatives of *Bodhisattva*. Likewise, they will be reunited with Lord Buddha's parents in the *Tuṣita Heaven*.

All elements inside the hall amplify the image of heaven: the placement of the royal casket, objects used for various royal ceremonies, and the paintings of angels in adoring postures surrounded by a *poom khao bin* (a Thai traditional lozenge-shaped pattern) pattern on the wall, along with flowers and stars on the ceiling. This heavenly depiction is especially accurate for *Tuṣita Heaven*, where angels gather to pay homage and celestial flowers fall when a significant event occurs.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The previously discussed artistic elements reflect beliefs that regard the monarch as divine, the image of the resting *Vishnu* and statues of *garuda* fighting *nagas* on the exterior of the Dusit Maha Prasat Hall. Likening the King to *Indra* would have been apparent when the King received an audience while seated on the mother-of-pearl inlaid throne or the two *Busabok Mala* royal thrones. This image also reflects the belief that the King is the *Bodhisattva* reincarnated on earth from the *Tuṣita Heaven* to perform meritorious deeds. Therefore, when the King passed away, he was considered to return to the *Tuṣita Heaven*, where he previously resided, like the *Bodhisattva*. This belief aligns with the throne hall's name and interior artistic elements. The hall amplifies the beliefs associated with the ancient royal tradition of placing the King's deceased body at the Dusit Maha Prasat Throne Hall, which aligns with the exterior architecture of the throne hall. The hall exemplifies traditional Thai architecture, with tiered roofs and tiered spires on the top, symbolizing high rank and representing the royal residence.

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