

Chakkri Dynasty

Encyclopædia Britannica Article

Chakkri also spelled Chakri,

Thailand's ruling house, founded by Rama I, who, under the title of Chao Phraya Chakkri (military commander of the Chao Phraya area), had played an important role in the struggle against Burma. Chakkri became king of Thailand in 1782 following the execution of his predecessor. As Rama I (*q.v.*), Chakkri reigned until 1809. His reign marked the reorganization of Siamese defenses to repel Burmese attacks in 1785, 1786, 1787, 1797, and 1801. His descendants reigned in an unbroken line after him.

For more than 100 years, Thai kings followed an isolationist policy toward Europeans after the so-called Phaulkon-Tachard conspiracy of 1688, but the reign of Rama II (*q.v.*; 1809-24) witnessed a renewal of official contacts with foreigners at the end of the Napoleonic wars. Agreements were reached with Portugal in 1818. A mission of the British East India Company visited Bangkok in 1822, followed shortly thereafter by the first British resident merchant.

The reign of Rama III (*q.v.*; ruled 1824-51) was marked by a limited increase of trade with European powers. A treaty was negotiated with the East India Company in 1826, followed by a similar treaty with the United States in 1833.

The strongly traditionalist concept of monarchy embodied by the first three rulers of the Chakkri dynasty did not survive under the rising tide of Western power and influence. King Mongkut (*q.v.*), Rama IV (reigned 1851-68), reoriented the policy of his government to accommodate that influence. He was forced to surrender a degree of Thai legal and fiscal independence, but his nation was saved from suffering Western invasion or permanent domination. His policies were continued and developed by his son King Chulalongkorn (*q.v.*), Rama V (reigned 1868-1910). Both monarchs endeavoured to modernize their state along Western lines with the help of European advisers. The reforms of Mongkut and Chulalongkorn, along with the need of Britain and France for a buffer state between their colonies, enabled Thailand, alone among Southeast Asian nations, to escape Western colonial rule.

The reign of King Vajiravudh (*q.v.*), Rama VI (reigned 1910-25), was characterized by social reforms. Although the king was somewhat isolated from his people, he negotiated a series of treaties restoring full fiscal autonomy to Thailand. A plot to restrict the king's power and impose a constitution was aborted in 1912.

King Prajadhipok (*q.v.*), Rama VII (reigned 1925-35), was the last of the absolute monarchs. He advocated constitutional government but failed to promote popular understanding of such a policy or enlist support from the political elite. On June 24, 1932, the so-called Promoters Revolution ended absolutism and instituted constitutionalism, though from 1933 the government was generally dominated by the military. Prajadhipok abdicated in 1935.

King Ananda Mahidol (*q.v.*), Rama VIII (reigned 1935-46), was allied with Japan and during World War II declared war on Great Britain and the United States. In June 1946 the king was shot and his younger brother, Bhumibol Adulyadej (*q.v.*), succeeded him as Rama IX (reigned 1946-). As a constitutional monarch, Bhumibol wielded little real political power, functioning instead as the ceremonial head of state.

| *To cite this page:*

MLA Style: "Chakkri Dynasty." Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica Ultimate Reference Suite. Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 2015.

APA Style: Chakkri Dynasty. (2015). Encyclopædia Britannica. *Encyclopædia Britannica Ultimate Reference Suite*. Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica.

Rama I

Encyclopædia Britannica Article

also called Phraphutthayotfa Chulalok
born March 21, 1737, Ayutthaya, Siam
died Sept. 7, 1809, Bangkok

Siamese king (1782-1809) and founder of the Chakkri dynasty (*q.v.*), which reigns in Thailand.

Rama I was the son of a high court official and his part-Chinese wife. At the time of the Burmese invasion of Siam in 1766-67, he was serving as chief judge in Rat Buri province. After the fall of Ayutthaya (1767), the Thai capital, he joined the service of Taksin, the new Siamese king, and soon became the new military commander of the northern provinces (Chao Phraya Chakkri) and his most effective general. He spent most of the next decade leading Thai armies in the field that repelled the Burmese and established Siamese suzerainty over Laos, Cambodia, and the northern Malay states. Early in 1782 a rebellion in the capital against the half-insane Taksin brought him back from campaigns in Cambodia to assume the throne of Siam on April 6.

As king, Rama I moved the capital to Bangkok and undertook a thorough renovation of all the institutions of public life. He was particularly effective in strengthening the Buddhist monkhood, for whom he convened a general synod to define the orthodox Buddhist scriptures (1788-89); and he undertook the first complete codification of Thai law (1805). He strengthened the administrative system to control a newly extensive empire, and he established Thai military supremacy throughout the central portion of the Indochinese peninsula. Rama I was a lavish patron of literature and sponsored the first full Thai version of the Indian epic *Rāmāyaṇa* (Thai: *Ramakien*) and translations of literary works from Chinese, Mon, Persian, and Javanese.

The king's reign title was Phraphutthayotfa Chulalok: Rama I is the title posthumously conferred upon him by King Vajiravudh.

To cite this page:

MLA Style: "Rama I." Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica Ultimate Reference Suite. Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 2015.

APA Style: Rama I. (2015). Encyclopædia Britannica. *Encyclopædia Britannica Ultimate Reference Suite*. Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica.

Rama II

Encyclopædia Britannica Article

also called Phraphutthaloetla Naphalai
born Feb. 24, 1768, Rat Buri
died July 21, 1824, Bangkok

the second ruler (1809–24) of the present Chakkri dynasty, under whose rule relations were reopened with the West and Siam began a forward policy on the Malay peninsula. A gifted poet and dramatist, Rama II wrote a famous version of *Inao*, dramatic version of a popular traditional story, as well as episodes of the *Ramakien* and popular dance dramas such as *Sang Thong*.

To cite this page:

MLA Style: "Rama II." Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica Ultimate Reference Suite. Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 2015.

APA Style: Rama II. (2015). Encyclopædia Britannica. *Encyclopædia Britannica Ultimate Reference Suite*. Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica.

Rama III

Encyclopædia Britannica Article

also called Phranangklaol
born March 31, 1788, Bangkok
died April 2, 1851, Bangkok

king of Siam (1824–51) who made Siam's first tentative accommodations with the West, and under whom the country's boundaries reached their maximum extent.

Rama III was the eldest son of King Rama II by a royal concubine, and in his youth he was given responsibility for overseeing foreign trade and relations. On his father's death in 1824, Rama III was much older and more experienced than his younger brother Mongkut (*q. v.*; who because he was born of a queen had a stronger claim on the throne), and the accession council chose him to succeed to the throne. His earlier experience enabled him to withstand British demands presented by the Burney mission (1826) and conclude a treaty that established regular trade with the West but yielded none of Siam's independence.

In the 1830s and '40s Rama III was preoccupied mainly with Laos and Cambodia and intervened in the latter to forestall colonization by the Vietnamese. Recognizing the strong claims of Mongkut to the throne, Rama III refrained from naming an heir apparent, and Mongkut succeeded him in 1851, as the kingdom headed for a new confrontation with the West.

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MLA Style: "Rama III." Encyclopædia Britannica. [Encyclopædia Britannica Ultimate Reference Suite](#). Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 2015.

APA Style: Rama III. (2015). Encyclopædia Britannica. *Encyclopædia Britannica Ultimate Reference Suite*. Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica.

Mongkut

Encyclopædia Britannica Article

also called Phrachomklao , posthumous name Rama IV

born Oct. 18, 1804, Bangkok

died Oct. 15, 1868, Bangkok

king of Siam (1851–68) who opened his country to Western influence and initiated reforms and modern development.

Mongkut was the 43rd child of King Rama II, but as the first son to be born of a queen he was favoured to succeed to the throne. When his father died in 1824, however, Mongkut was barely 20, and the royal accession council instead chose his older and more experienced half brother to reign as King Phranangklao (Rama III). To hold aloof from politics, Mongkut chose to become a Buddhist monk. A few years later he encountered a particularly pious monk who inspired Mongkut to turn to the strict discipline and teachings of early Buddhism. He became an accomplished scholar and abbot of a Bangkok monastery, which he made a centre of intellectual discourse that gradually came to involve American and French Christian missionaries and the study of Western languages and science. Mongkut also was able to travel in the countryside as no previous Thai king had done. The reformed Buddhism that Mongkut developed gradually grew into the Thammayut order, which to the present day is at the intellectual centre of Thai Buddhism. Mongkut's friends in the 1840s included many leading princes and nobles who similarly were excited by the West. Convinced of the necessity of accommodation with the West, they took the lead in managing the succession of Mongkut to the throne when King Rama III died in 1851. The leader of that group, Somdet Chao Phraya Si Suriyawong, became Mongkut's effective prime minister, and together the two successfully concluded treaties with Great Britain, the United States, and other powers beginning in 1855 that fully opened Siam to Western commerce. Thai concessions staved off Western imperial pressure for another generation and brought rapid economic development, but Siam had to concede extraterritoriality and limits on her taxing and tariff policies. To win recognition as an equal among the world's rulers, Mongkut corresponded with them, even offering to send elephants to U.S. Pres. James Buchanan to assist in the development of the United States. His shrewd foreign policy balanced Britain and France against each other to ensure Siam's survival. His tolerance and open-mindedness proved far more effective in dealing with Western imperialists than the xenophobia and isolationism of some of his neighbouring rulers. For a time the royal household employed an English governess, Anna Leonowens (*q.v.*), whose published reminiscences made Mongkut the model for the king in a 20th-century musical comedy, *The King and I*.

In his own reign Mongkut was unable to achieve fundamental internal reforms, but he took pains to ensure the liberal education of his sons, who in the next generation would begin the modernization of Siam.

To cite this page:

MLA Style: "Mongkut." Encyclopædia Britannica. [Encyclopædia Britannica Ultimate Reference Suite](#). Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 2015.

APA Style: Mongkut. (2015). Encyclopædia Britannica. *Encyclopædia Britannica*

Ultimate Reference Suite. Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica.

Chulalongkorn

Encyclopædia Britannica Article

also called Phrachunlachomklao , posthumous name Rama V

born Sept. 20, 1853, Bangkok, Siam [now Thailand]

died Oct. 23, 1910, Bangkok



Chulalongkorn

king of Siam who avoided colonial domination and embarked upon far-reaching reforms.

Chulalongkorn was the ninth son of King Mongkut, but since he was the first to be born to a royal queen, he was recognized as heir to the throne. He was only 15 years old when his father died in October 1868, and he succeeded to the throne under the regency of Somdet Chao Phraya Si Suriyawong (*q.v.*). Over the next five years he was prepared to assume his duties by observing court business and by travels to British Malaya and the Dutch East Indies in 1871 and to Malaya, Burma (Myanmar), and India in 1871-72.

Following his coronation in November 1873, the young king enacted a series of ambitious reforms, beginning with the abolition of slavery, the improvement of judicial and financial institutions, and the institution of appointed legislative councils. His commitment to reforms patterned on Western models, which he considered vital to Siam's survival, antagonized conservative factions at court and precipitated a political crisis early in 1875. Rebuffed by the older generation, the king instituted no further reforms for the next decade, but he slowly built up a corps of able, trusted administrators with whom he began from the mid-1880s to overhaul Siam's antiquated administration. These steps culminated in 1892 with the creation of 12 ministries functionally organized on Western lines, responsible for such functions as provincial administration, defense, foreign affairs, justice, education, and public works. He thereby drastically curbed arbitrary administration, ended the autonomy of outlying provinces, instituted the rule of impersonal law, and laid the foundations of modern Thai citizenship through compulsory primary education and universal military conscription.

Internal reforms were undertaken both because the liberal king believed them to be right and because he recognized that he had to show the colonial powers that Siam was "civilized" in order to avoid the fate of neighbouring countries that fell under colonial rule. Even so, old Siam did not survive intact. The French provoked war with Siam in 1892, and by treaties with France up to 1907 Siam had to give up its rights in Laos and western Cambodia. In 1909 Siam ceded to Great Britain the four Malay states of Kelantan, Trengganu, Kedah, and Perlis, and this brought some moderation of the system of extraterritoriality—which ended only two decades later. In relations with the West, Chulalongkorn even-handedly balanced the colonial powers against one another and consistently sought to have Siam treated as an equal among nations. During tours of Europe in 1897 and 1907, he was received as an equal by Western monarchs. When Chulalongkorn died in 1910, following the longest reign in Thai history, he bequeathed to his son Vajiravudh a modern, independent kingdom.

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MLA Style: "Chulalongkorn." Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica Ultimate Reference Suite. Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 2015.

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Vajiravudh

Encyclopædia Britannica Article

also called Phramongkutklao or Rama VI

born Jan. 1, 1881, Bangkok, Siam [now Thailand]

died Nov. 26, 1925, Bangkok

king of Siam from 1910 to 1925, noted for his progressive reforms and prolific writings.

Vajiravudh was educated at the University of Oxford, where he read history and law; he also received military training at Sandhurst and served briefly with the British Army. Having been named heir apparent in 1895, he returned to Siam in 1903 and succeeded his father, Chulalongkorn, in 1910. Although not comparable to his father as an administrative and political reformer, he promoted numerous social reforms, including a recodification of Siamese law to make monogamy the only legal form of marriage, adoption of the Gregorian calendar, implementation of universal smallpox vaccination, the establishment of the Thai Red Cross, and enactment of a law that required all subjects to take surnames. In 1917 he founded Chulalongkorn University, the first in Siam, and in 1921 he made universal primary education free and compulsory. His attempts to close gambling houses and opium dens, however, met with popular resistance.

Vajiravudh's long overseas education isolated him from the life of his people; moreover, his uncritical love of English traditions led to such unwise actions as the founding of a royal paramilitary force under his direct command, the Wild Tiger Corps, outside the regular armed forces. Resentment of this corps, coupled with youthful impatience with Siam's slow political development, led to an abortive plot against him led by young army and navy officers in 1912. He frustrated and alienated not only conservatives, who saw his reforms as undermining of traditional society and his personal life as scandalous, but also liberals, who were offended by his refusal to grant a constitution and by his obstinacy in maintaining the primacy of the absolute monarch.

Vajiravudh, however, had considerable success in foreign policy. He entered World War I on the side of the Allies in 1917 and joined the League of Nations. He used the increased willingness of the Western powers to treat Siam as a fully equal state to gain a renegotiation of earlier unequal treaties and the renunciation of Western rights in Siam.

In private life Vajiravudh was a prolific writer and translator. He introduced Western forms into Thai literature, particularly the dialogue drama. Using several dozen pseudonyms, he composed about 50 original plays, adapted more than 100 from English and French dramatists, and translated several of Shakespeare's.

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MLA Style: "Vajiravudh." Encyclopædia Britannica. [Encyclopædia Britannica Ultimate Reference Suite](#). Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 2015.

APA Style: Vajiravudh. (2015). Encyclopædia Britannica. *Encyclopædia Britannica*

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Prajadhipok

Encyclopædia Britannica Article

also called Phrapokklao , or Rama VII

born Nov. 8, 1893, Bangkok, Siam [now Thailand]

died May 30, 1941, Cranleigh, Surrey, Eng.

last absolute king of Siam (1925-35), under whose rule the Thai revolution of 1932 instituted the constitutional monarchy. Prajadhipok never expected to succeed to the throne. He was the 32nd and last son of King Chulalongkorn, the youngest of five sons by Queen Saowabha.

When King Vajiravudh died in 1925, Prajadhipok had been a likely heir to the throne for less than a year and the certain heir for only two days. He had been prepared for a military career at Eton College and the Royal Military Academy at Woolwich, Eng. Though personally convinced of the necessity of moving toward democratic political reforms, he allowed himself to be restrained by senior members of the royal family, and his inactivity brought on the Thai revolution of 1932, which bloodlessly ended the absolute monarchy. Prajadhipok welcomed the opportunity to reign as a constitutional monarch but was repulsed by growing military rule and abdicated on March 2, 1935. He died in exile in England.

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MLA Style: "Prajadhipok." Encyclopædia Britannica. [Encyclopædia Britannica Ultimate Reference Suite](#). Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 2015.

APA Style: Prajadhipok. (2015). Encyclopædia Britannica. *Encyclopædia Britannica Ultimate Reference Suite*. Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica.

Ananda Mahidol

Encyclopædia Britannica Article

also called Rama VIII

born Sept. 20, 1925, Heidelberg, Ger.

died June 9, 1946, Bangkok

eighth king of the Chakkri dynasty of Siam, whose mysterious death was one of the most traumatic events in the history of modern Thailand.

Ananda was only 10 years old and a schoolboy in Switzerland when he succeeded his uncle, King Prajadhipok, in 1935. World War II prevented his return to Thailand to assume his constitutional duties until 1946. Shortly thereafter, early in the morning of June 9, he was found dead in his bed of a gunshot wound. The case was never fully explained, and the controversy over it contributed to the weakening of civilian constitutional government and helped precipitate the return of military government in Thailand.

To cite this page:

MLA Style: "Ananda Mahidol." Encyclopædia Britannica. [Encyclopædia Britannica Ultimate Reference Suite](#). Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 2015.

APA Style: Ananda Mahidol. (2015). Encyclopædia Britannica. *Encyclopædia Britannica Ultimate Reference Suite*. Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica.

Bhumibol Adulyadej

Encyclopædia Britannica Article

also called Phumiphon Adunlayadet , or Rama IX

born Dec. 5, 1927, Cambridge, Mass., U.S.

ninth king of the Chakkri dynasty (1950–), which has ruled or reigned in Thailand from 1782, Thailand's longest-serving monarch.

He was a grandson of King Chulalongkorn and was born while his father, Prince Mahidol of Songkhla, was studying at Harvard University. His older brother, Ananda Mahidol, became king in 1935, but on June 9, 1946, Ananda was found dead in his bed of a gunshot wound. Bhumibol immediately succeeded to the throne following Ananda's mysterious death (the circumstances of which were never explained). He married a distant cousin, Sirikit Kitiyakara, in April 1950 and was formally crowned on May 5, 1950.

The absolute monarchy was abolished in Thailand during the reign of King Prajadhipok as a result of the revolution of 1932. King Bhumibol, therefore, wielded little real political power, although the constitution named him as head of state and commander of the armed forces. His most important function was to serve as a living symbol of and a focus of unity for the Thai nation.

As monarch, Bhumibol enjoyed immense popularity. He led an active ceremonial life and, despite his limited governmental powers, on several occasions played a crucial role in mediations that either resolved or helped to avoid political crisis. One of those instances came in 1992 after a military junta had toppled the Thai government and army chief Suchinda Kraprayoon assumed the prime ministership. Mass protests ensued but were violently suppressed. Bhumibol intervened, summoning Suchinda and opposition leader Chamlong Srimuang to a televised meeting, during which the king called for the violence to end. Suchinda subsequently resigned, and a caretaker government was installed until new elections could be held.

National celebrations were held in Thailand in June 2006 to mark the 60th anniversary of King Bhumibol Adulyadej's ascension to the throne. Days before the Diamond Jubilee began, United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan presented the UN's first Human Development Lifetime Achievement Award to Bhumibol at a ceremony in Bangkok.

In September 2006 Bhumibol faced a new crisis after opposition parties boycotted elections called by the prime minister, Thaksin Shinawatra. The Constitutional Court invalidated the results, and on September 19, before new elections could be held, the Thai military engineered a coup while Thaksin was out of the country. It was widely assumed that Thaksin had fallen out of favour with Bhumibol, who quickly endorsed the coup leader and gave royal assent to an interim prime minister's cabinet.

Bhumibol's designated heir to the throne was his only son, Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn.

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MLA Style: "Bhumibol Adulyadej." Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica Ultimate Reference Suite. Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 2015.

APA Style: Bhumibol Adulyadej. (2015). Encyclopædia Britannica. *Encyclopædia Britannica Ultimate Reference Suite*. Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica.