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King who reinforced Siam's status as a nation

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*The circumstances under which Varirayana Bhikkhu abruptly left the monkhood during the summer of 1851 to take over the reign of Siam as **King Mongkut** were quite extraordinary, representing one of the most intriguing episodes in the history of early Rattanakosin.*

At 47, he was already a middle-aged man, having been ordained a monk for 27 years. He did not seem to have any political base to support his claim to the vacant throne left open by the demise of his half-brother, **King Nangkhlaol** (1824-1851). It was true that Prince Mongkut was a genuine Celestial Prince, who was born of royal parents on both sides. But, as earlier Siamese history had shown, the status of Celestial Prince did not guarantee him an automatic right to the throne. It was the Accession Council, which was made up of the nobility, which decided the selection of a monarch by taking into account the political circumstances and power-broking of the time. Recent studies have sought to reinterpret the special circumstances of the enthronement of King Mongkut. The fourth ruler of the Chakri Dynasty owed his rise to the throne to the **Bunnag** clan, who at the time had virtually absolute control over Siam's military, political, economic and commercial domains. In his controversial book "The Politics of the Enthronement of Phra Chom Khlaol" (Bangkok: Matchon Press, 2004), Therdphong Khongchan argues that **Jamuen** Vaivoranat (Chuang Bunnag) and Jamuen Rajamataya (Kham Bunnag) were decisively responsible for the support of Prince Mongkut to become the new king, because he posed the least threat to the political and military power and wealth of the Bunnag clan. The two high-ranking noblemen were brothers and sons of Chao Phraya Phra Khlang (Dis Bunnag). Together with his younger brother, Phraya Sripipatranarajkosa (Thut Bunnag), Chao Phraya Phra Khlang exercised an almost monopoly on the conduct of Siamese affairs in the first half of the 19th century. Their father was Bunnag, who was a friend and in-law of King Yodfa. Bunnag married Khun Nuan, a younger sister of Than Phuying Nag, the mother of King Lertla and wife of Chao Phraya Chakri, who would later become King Yodfa. Through marriages and relations, Bunnag would be able to establish his clan as the most powerful in Rattanakosin. Chao Phraya Phra Khlang was the chief minister with the most power in Siam during the Third and Fourth reigns. His son, Jamuen Vaivoranat, who was later promoted to the highest rank of Chao Phraya Maha Srisuriyawongse (Chuang Bunnag), would become regent during the reign of King Chulalongkorn. In 1824, Chao Phraya Phra Khlang, Phraya Sripipatranarajkosa and Jamuen Vaivoranat passed over Prince Mongkut for Prince Jesda Bodin to take over as the third ruler after the demise of King Lertla (1809-1824). Prince Jesda Bodin was the eldest son of King Lertla. His mother was a commoner. But he excelled in trade, commerce and administration, helping King Lertla, who was more interested in spending his time writing poetry and appreciating the arts, to run most affairs of the state. The Bunnag clan readily supported Prince Jesda Bodin, because they considered him a strong ally to further enhance their political power. King Nang Khlaol, and to a greater degree, King Mongkut, might in theory have held absolute power in the conduct of state affairs, but in reality they ruled under "limited monarchy" with the military and noblemen exercising their mighty power in the shadows. It was not until towards the end of the 19th century that King Mongkut's son, King Chulalongkorn, or Rama V, would be able to reclaim absolute monarchy after the deaths of the key members of the Bunnag clan. The traditional-history textbooks generally give the impression that Prince Jesda Bodin was not a Celestial Prince in the strictest sense, because his mother was not a queen, and that he

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“stole the throne” from Prince Mongkut. But as is generally known, King Lertla and King Yodfa (1782-1809) – the father and grandfather respectively of Prince Jesda Bodin and Prince Mongkut – were also born commoners. Born 200 years ago on October 18, 1804, Prince Mongkut was only 20 years old when his father, King Lertla, passed away. Like all Thai men coming of age, he had just entered the monkhood to fulfil his duty as a Buddhist. His mother was Queen Sri Suriyendra, a cousin of King Lertla. Bangkok then was a young capital, established in 1782 by King Yodfa, or Rama I, right after the end of the Thonburi Kingdom and 15 years after the fall of Ayutthaya. Given the political situation of the time, Prince Mongkut decided to stay on in the yellow robe to avoid giving the impression that he had ambition for the throne. It was the tradition of the Siamese, noblemen or commoners to seek refuge in the monkhood in times of political peril. As a monk, Prince Mongkut proved to be a first-class scholar. He was the first king in Asia to learn how to speak and write English. His Pali was excellent and he was well versed in the Buddhist doctrine. He also studied modern science, geography, history, mathematics and astronomy. It was during his monkhood that he travelled to the North and reportedly discovered the Ramkhamhaeng stone, with inscriptions of the earliest known Thai language, before bringing it back to Bangkok. The prince-monk known as Vajirayana also founded a religious order, the Thammayuth Sect, which emphasised strict discipline and practices. The sect was created as a reaction to the lax religious practices of the Maha Nikaya, the mainstream Buddhism. Wat Samorai became the centre of the sect, which gained respect among the people. However, King Nang Khlao was disturbed with Vajirayana, who was summoned to stay closer to him at Wat Bovornnivej. The king would have liked one of his sons, Prince Annop – then 31 – to succeed him. But the Bunnag clan, as Therdphong points out in his book, believed that they would not get along with Prince Annop that well. Other candidates, who were either sons of King Lertla or King Nang Khlao, were passed over, including Prince Juthamani, the younger brother of Prince Mongkut. Eventually, the Bunnags decided to support Prince Mongkut, who was likely to pose the least threat to their power. Prince Juthamani would become the Second King, elevated to a full title as King Pinkhlao. The Bunnags’ power reached its zenith during the Fourth Reign, as they promoted their sons, siblings and relatives to all the key positions of state. Naturally, King Mongkut was obliged to feel grateful to the Bunnags for bringing him to power. He allowed them almost free rein to run the affairs of state on his behalf. Still, King Mongkut managed to begin consolidating Siam, which at the time was loosely divided into territories under the rule of local lords, into statehood. Colonial threats were clear, and he deterred these by institutionalising the concept of nationhood for the first time to show the colonial powers that Siam was a unified country with a great history. When he passed away in 1868, his son Prince Chulalongkorn took over the throne. Initially, he faced hardship in dealing with the nobility and the Bunnags, but when he came of age, he began, with the aid of his half-brothers, to consolidate his power. However, it was not until the death of key members of the old establishment that he could really embark on a revolution to modernise the country. King Mongkut could not have imagined that his son would pull off the task that he himself would have liked to accomplish – absolute monarchy. Thanong Khanthong celebrates the 200th birthday anniversary of King Rama IV and his accomplishments.

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