

## An Overview of the Orders, Decorations, and Medals of the Kingdom of Thailand

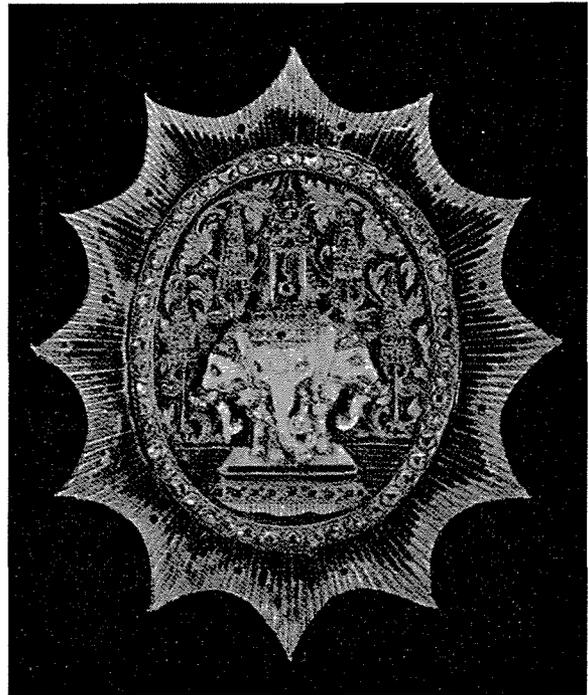
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The wearing of orders, decorations, and medals is a common practice in the Kingdom of Thailand, and there are countless photographs of military officers, government officials, and even politicians in uniform proudly displaying their awards.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, Thailand has a wide range of awards, so one or more orders and a number of decorations and medals are often seen together.

It seems that almost everyone has been conferred at least one order of some sort, and many wear the insignia of the higher classes of an order. Today, most Thai orders are similar to European orders. Some are only conferred to heads of state or to foreign royalty, while other orders are intended to recognize military, police, and government officials for service to the nation. There are also an order that recognizes citizens who contribute to the welfare of the nation or to the arts and an order that is intended only for members of the royal family.

Although not well known, the orders, decorations, and medals of Thailand are among the most beautiful and elaborate. They are as highly regarded in the Kingdom as their counterparts are in Europe, and some date back to the mid 1800s. In this article, I will attempt to introduce Thai awards by providing some general information about their history and organization.

Royal decorations of some kind have probably been bestowed in Thailand since the Sukhothai period (1240s to mid-1400). However, it is clear that by the time of the Ayuthaya period (1569-1767), the custom of bestowing awards was well established. The oldest extant royal journal, called the *Law of the Three Seals*, is from this period, and it refers to the award of various objects by the reigning King. These early decorations were an expression of gratitude for services rendered to the Kingdom or to the royal family or were a badge of rank for members of the royal family and certain officials. They took the form of crowns, hats, swords, trays, boxes, jeweled sashes, and even umbrellas and betel nut. After the Kingdom established regular contact with the European powers, the more common form of awards was adopted.



*One of the original Dtharas presented by King Rama IV, circa 1850s.*

Foreign emissaries and dignitaries have visited the Kingdom since very early times, and Portuguese missionaries were present at the court during the Ayuthaya period. Eventually, Western influence exposed the King and court officials to the European tradition of awards. The first Thai version of a European award appeared during the reign of King Mongkut or Rama IV (r. 1851-1868). In 1847, Rama IV added a royal order to the *Law of the Three Seals* that created a breast star or *Dthara* for wear on the jacket.<sup>2</sup> The *Dthara* was worn by the King himself, and there was no associated ribbon. Rama IV later presented varieties of the *Dthara* to relatives who were court officials or generals. This award was not given an official name but was simply called the *Dthara*, which translates into “star.”

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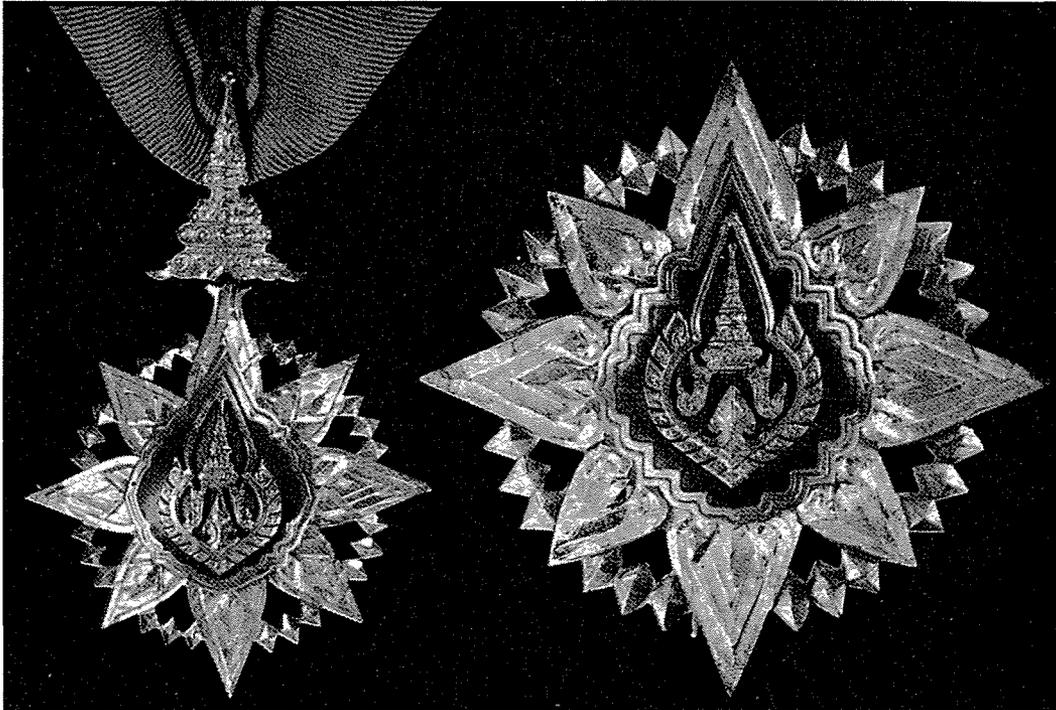
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Readers will note that the dates of royal orders, which were provided by the Thai authorities, do not coincide with the period of reign. I attempted to clarify the discrepancies in the dates with Royal Place officials without any success. I suspect the orders were backdated, but this is only conjecture on my part.

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Thailand was called Siam until 1939 and again from 1945 to 1949. The current name will be used in this article regardless of the period.

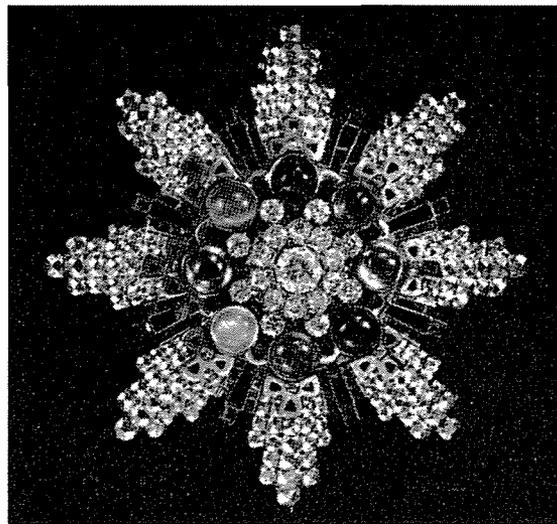


*Most Noble Order of the Crown of Thailand  
Knight Commander (Second Class) Neck Badge and Breast Star*

Several early *Dthara* are on display at the Royal Museum. One depicts the Great Seal of *Aiyarapote*, a three-headed elephant carrying on its back a throne with a spire and several state umbrellas. A *Dthara* with a slightly different version of the Great Seal was presented by Rama IV to his brother. The *Dthara* presented to his military commander-in-chief depicts a *khotchasi* carrying a crown on its back, which is a mythical animal with a lion's body and an elephant's trunk.

In 1850, Rama IV further revised the *Law of the Three Seals* and created the Most Exalted Order of the White Elephant and the Most Noble Order of the Crown of Thailand to recognize high-ranking officials and foreigners. Then in 1851, he instituted the *Noparat* or "Nine Gems" that later became the Ancient and Auspicious Order of the Nine Gems. Originally, the *Noparat* was a necklace from the Ayuthaya period that

was worn by the King at his coronation as a badge of office, but later Kings bestowed a version of the *Noparat* on members of the royal family. The *Noparat* could only be awarded to persons of the Buddhist faith, and the usual recipients were members of the royal family. Rama IV had a special *Noparat* made for presentation to Napoleon IV of France, which is the only instance of the award of this badge to a foreigner. In retrospect, Rama IV was the father of Thai orders, decorations, and medals because he provided the necessary beginning, but it was his successor who solidified these first efforts and established the basis from which modern Thai awards would take their present form.



*Ladies Breast Star of the Ancient and Most  
Auspicious Order of the Nine Gems*

In 1879, King Chulalongkorn or Rama V (r. 1868-1910) issued the first royal decree pertaining to awards. The royal decree outlined all awards existing at the time and superseded the *Law of the Three*

*Seals* as the authority for awards. It also specified that decorations would be fitted with appropriate ribbons and fashioned for wear in the European manner. The 1879 decree laid the foundation for new awards that have evolved since then. At the time, awards were referred to as “regalia,” which was later changed to “Royal Thai decorations.”

At present, Thai orders, decorations, and medals are classified into four broad categories. Category I is reserved for awards personally presented by the King to other royalty and to heads of state. Category II contains those awards intended to recognize service to the nation, while Category III identifies awards for service to the King. The last category, Category IV, includes decorations and medals for bravery, service to the King, certain commemorative medals, and special awards such as the Boy Scout Citation Medal.

Category I consists of only one order, the Most Auspicious Order of the Rajamitrabhorn. This order was established by the current reigning King, King Bumibhol Adyudej or Rama IX, on 11 June 1962. The King is the only Thai wearing this order, but he presented the order to several foreign leaders during his trip around the world in the early 1960s and to other leaders since then. Foreign recipients include Heinerich Luebke of Germany (1962), Emperor Hirohito of Japan (1962), Queen Julianna of the Netherlands (1963), King Olav V of Norway (1965), and President Ferdinand Marcos of the Philippines (1968).

Category II consists of seven orders. These orders are normally presented by the King himself at various times during the year or on special occasions. Some of the orders can be presented by the King’s designated representative, such as the Prime Minister or the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces. The following is a brief description of each order in descending order of precedence:

The Most Illustrious Order of the House of Chakri is a one-class order that is primarily conferred to direct descendants of the founder of the House, King Rama I, and their spouses. Currently, there are only twenty-five sets of the order’s insignia. There have been a few foreign recipients of this order including Queen Elizabeth II (1960) and Charles de Gaulle.

The Ancient and Auspicious Order of the Nine Gems is second in the order of precedence. As indicated earlier,



*Most Auspicious Order of the Rajamitrabhorn  
Collar Badge and Breast Star*