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Since the first Danish vessels arrived in Siam early in the 17th century, having crossed treacherous oceans to develop new trade routes with India, and further east with Thailand, ties between the Kingdom of Denmark and the Kingdom of Thailand have developed tremendously.

What a more eloquent and sparkling proof of these sustained historical ties and unblemished friendship is needed than the present state visit of Her Majesty Queen Margrethe II of Denmark, HRH Prince Consort Henrik, accompanied by HRH the Crown Prince Frederik, a visit that will last until this Monday.

Members of the Danish royal family have already come to Thailand on private and unofficial visits (such as in 1963, 1969, 1981 and 1997) but this marks the first state visit of HM Queen Margrethe II of Denmark with HRH The Prince Consort.

A more palpable proof of the ties can be found in the current exhibition at the National Museum of Bangkok entitled ``Thai-Danish Relations Through Four Centuries'', a cooperative venture between the museum, represented by Director Somchai Na Nakhonphanom and Chief Curator Mongkol Samansuk, and the Danish Secretariat for International Cultural Relations, represented by Missionary Peder Jorgensen, Chief Archivist Sigurd Rambusch and Dr Phil Jesper Trier.

On vast and beautifully arranged boards in the noble setting of the Issarawinitchai Hall in the compound of the National Museum, the four-century-long story of the relationship between the two Kingdoms is being told.

Some 100 historical pieces (letters and gifts from one royal family to the other) were brought in from Denmark for the show.

``This exhibition has been set up in order to celebrate the visit of Her Majesty Queen Margrethe II of Denmark in Thailand, as well as to mark the completion of nearly 400 years of relations between the two Kingdoms," explained Chief Curator Mongkol Samansuk.

Siam's abundant flora, valuable products and friendly people attracted the Danes early in the 17th century, he said.

``The first Danish travellers viewed Siam as a rather magical place, with luxuriant vegetation and visible happiness," Mongkol said.

However, it was not until the middle of the 19th century that the connections materialised as a few outstanding Danish personalities attained high positions in the Thai government, such as Frederik Kobke, who became the first Danish Consul in Thailand in 1868.

During the long and wise reign of King Chulalongkorn, connections between the two Kingdoms became closer, not least because Thailand felt more comfortable with the smaller European nation in its endeavours not to be invaded by great colonial powers.

This eventually led to the employment of Danish officers in the Thai navy and military, who fought loyally for their new masters. Admiral Andreas de Richelieu, for example, offered his services to King Chulalongkorn in 1875. By hard work and unfailing loyalty, he built up Siam's navy, served it with honour in the War of 1893 and was consequently made a nobleman of high rank _ Phraya _ and granted the name Chalayuthyothin.

Richelieu was active in promoting some of the most important institutions and innovations and was very influential. Danes were appointed to work in the administration, and in the military and transport sectors.

In return, Danish firms like the East Asiatic Company in Thailand created in 1884 _ and now the only company in Thailand awarded the highly prestigious Garuda symbol in recognition of its substantial contribution towards the economy and social development of Thailand _ profited from rapidly growing trade, attracting engineers, foresters, nurses, etc.

From then on Thailand was gradually modernised, administratively, socially and industrially.

At the turn of the century, the Danes in Bangkok constituted the second largest foreign community.

The warm friendship between the two royal houses acted as a catalyst, allowing many kinds of relations to thrive and grow, not only in trade and business, but also in science, culture and development cooperation, in such diverse fields as archaeology, anthropology, botany, marine exploration and environmental research.

During the last 10 years, the number of Danish tourists has increased substantially, running towards 100,000 Danes each year.