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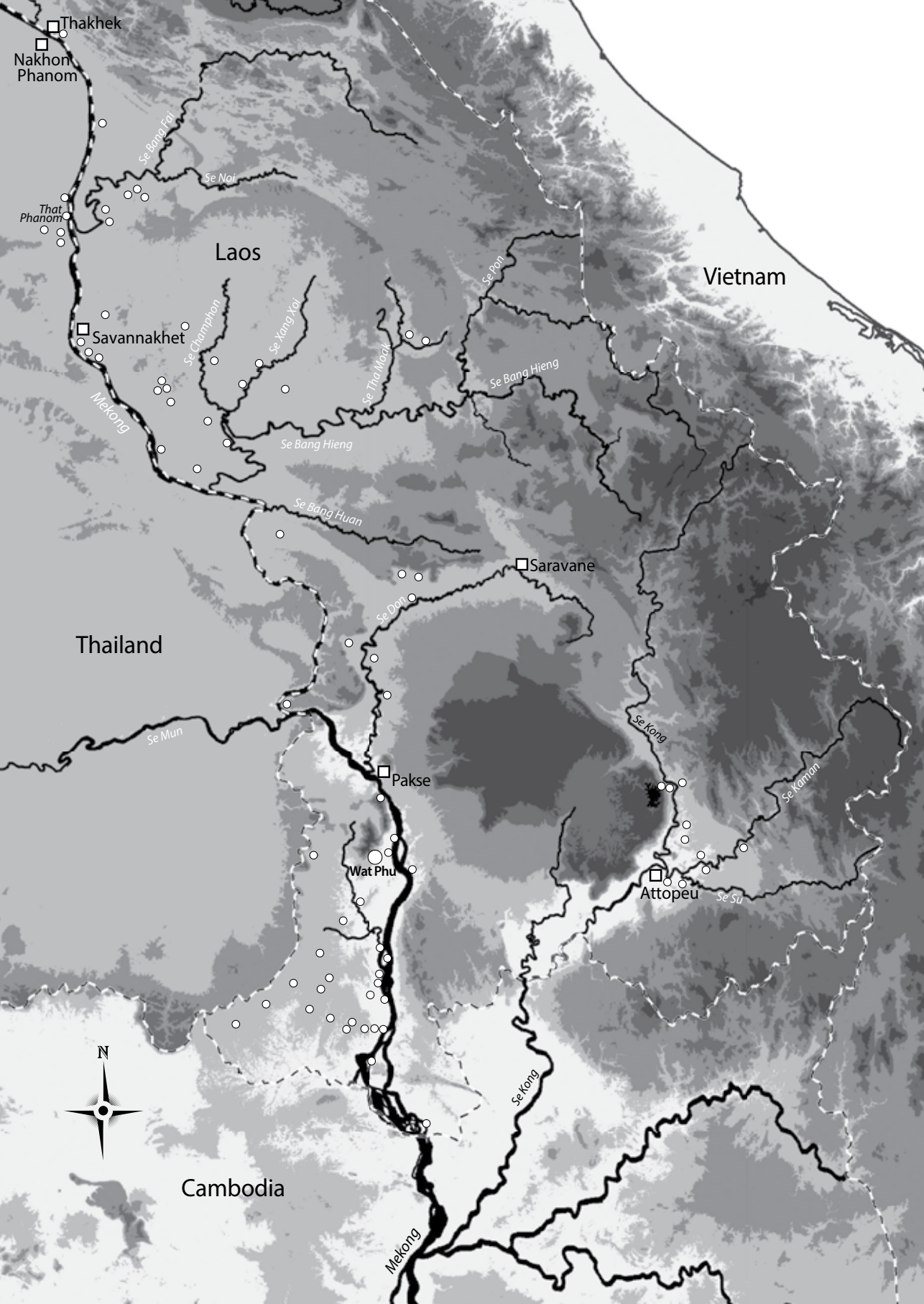
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Pre-Angkorian Communities in the Middle Mekong Valley (Laos and Adjacent Areas)

MICHEL LORRILLARD

Introduction

The earliest forms of “Indianisation” in Laos have not been the subject of much research to date. Henri Parmentier (1927: 231, 233-235), when introducing some two hundred sites related to “Khmer primitive art” – soon reclassified as “pre-Angkorian art” as being prior to the ninth century – took into account only five such sites located upstream of the Khone falls. Three of them are located in the Champassak region [Map 3], viz. “Bàn Huèi Thàmô” (i.e. Huei Tomo), “Vat Phu” (hereafter, Wat Phu) and “Căn Nakhon” (i.e. Phu Lakkhon); the other two being in Savannakhet province [Map 6], viz. “Thắt Phon” (i.e. That Phon) and “Thắt In Rân” (i.e. That In Hang). Although the latter are relatively far away from the Cambodian border, their position was not surprising to the architect as communication would have been easy via the Mekong river with the southernmost sites. This holds true for two other sites in the middle basin of the Se Kong river (Attopeu province) [Map 2] – “Vat Sai Phai” (Upmung Se Su) and “Bàn Sâke” (Ban Sakhae) – that can also be easily connected to the pre-Angkorian sanctuaries discovered at the confluence with the Mekong in the Cambodian districts of Stœng Treng and Thala Borivat (Parmentier 1927: 230). Among these seven sites, six – Wat Phu excepted – have not been researched until very recently.

That part of Laos was largely integrated in the Khmer cultural sphere was however made explicit at a rather early stage. Auguste Barth edited and translated two inscriptions from the Champassak region at the beginning of the twentieth century, namely K. 367 (1902: 235-240) and K. 363 (1903: 442-446). Parmentier (1912: 195-197) also acknowledged the very ancient origin of Wat Phu, even if the most visible parts of the sanctuary belong to the Angkorian period. The inherent sacredness of the site – the monumental complex is built at the foot of a mountain the shape of whose top suggests a natural *linga* (hence its name Liṅgaparvata) – seems indeed to have been recognised very early on by a community that had adopted the religious tenets imported from India. George Cœdès (1918: 1-3) even considered in his pioneering writings that the area had exceptional historical importance, for he viewed the site as the cradle of the first Cambodian dynasty – the “land of Kambu” – i.e. the territory from which Zhenla had begun expanding to the extent of conquering Funan. This theory, based primarily on the interpretation of a late Sanskrit inscription found at Wat Phu (K. 475), was reaffirmed later on the basis of arguments found essentially in the Chinese annals (Cœdès 1928: 124). It then received considerable support with the

Opposite Map 1: Khmer and Mon sites in southern and central parts of Laos. All the sites have been referenced by EFEO, excepted some sites in Champassak province where coordinates have been given by PRAL [Drawing courtesy of Jérémy Ferrand].

edition and translation of the Wat Luang Kau stele (K. 365), dated paleographically to the second half of the fifth century (Cœdès 1956). This inscription, which had been ordered by a *mahārājādhirāja* named Śrī Devānīka, had been found less than 5 kilometres away from Wat Phu in a vast complex whose groundplan had at that time just been revealed by aerial photography. The images clearly displayed what was hardly visible on the ground: in this case a quadrangle of 2,400 m. x 1,800 m. (with the Mekong as the eastern side), composed of several concentric earthen levee enclosures containing the buried remains of many monumental structures. In spite of the importance of the discovery – i.e. the remains of an ancient city comparable to Sambor Prei Kuk in Cambodia – it did not rapidly trigger the excavation campaign that Cœdès called for.¹ Most archaeological research at the time was focussed on the Angkor area where so many other monuments still had to be inventoried and uncovered. Some twenty years later, Bernard-Philippe Groslier expressed great interest in extending research in southern Laos, but the political situation was already such that access to the area was impossible.

The absence of excavation programs in this region for most of the twentieth century was detrimental to the recognition of Laos as a territory in mainland Southeast Asia deserving in-depth historical studies. Concerning the period prior to the emergence of the Lao kingdom of Lān Xāng (fourteenth century), the country still appears as a large blank spot on the published historical maps where only the site of Wat Phu is sometimes mentioned. This observation does not only affect the history of Laos itself; the damage caused by the lack of documented research also severely impacts the overall vision and the degree of knowledge that we can achieve when dealing with regional history. As long as we ignore this territory, in spite of it being geographically located at the crossroads of the great civilisational currents of Southeast Asia, many key questions cannot be satisfactorily addressed. The remark applies to the so-called Indianisation process in inland regions, and to the type of contacts that may have been established between the first historical cultures of the middle Mekong valley and those which thrived in the Delta (Funan) or even in the coastal areas of central Vietnam (Campā) or central Thailand (Dvāravatī). Moreover, this lack of data has prevented any real constructive reflection on the development of the first territorial entities created by the Tai-Lao people. At the turn of the first millennium CE, this Tai-speaking population gradually moved southward along the rivers and settled in areas that other ethnic communities had occupied before them. Myths and legends aside, the questions of historical continuity on the Mekong banks and of the persistence of a cultural substrate have yet to be investigated.

However, thanks to some recent French and Italian field-research programs carried out in cooperation with the Lao Ministry of Information and Culture, it has now become possible to submit all these issues to a thorough review. The archaeological work done in Wat Phu between 1991 and 1998 under the aegis of the *Projet de recherche en archéologie lao* (PRAL) led to the discovery of pre-Angkorian structures in the upper part of the sanctuary and to the excavation of two monuments in the ancient Mekong riverside town (Santoni & Hawixbrock 1998; Santoni & Souksavatdy 1999). In the latter case, geomagnetic surveys provided substantial data about the settlement pattern, highlighting the

existence of about thirty structures that are still buried. The surveys carried out by this team in 1998 and 1999 further led to the discovery of new temples in the southern part of Champassak province, close to the Mekong and along the old road connecting Angkor to Wat Phu (Santoni & Hawixbrock 1999). More recently, PRAL launched new excavation campaigns leading to the partial uncovering of two pre-Angkorian monuments in Nong Mung (2011) and Wat Sang-O (2013), in and around the ancient city (unpublished reports).

From 2003 to 2009, the École française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO) centre in Vientiane has furthermore carried out an ambitious research program in the form of extensive surveys focussing on the identification and inventory of historical material in the seventeen provinces of Laos. While the northern part of the country offers a sizeable amount of useful evidence related to Tai-Lao culture in the second half of the second millennium, research in the southern and the central parts revealed – in addition to Lao remains – about eighty historical sites with much older data, dating back to the second half of the first millennium and the beginning of the second one [Map 1]. These sites belong to the Khmer (pre-Angkorian and Angkorian) and Mon cultural areas that had hitherto been largely unnoticed or ignored. This essay will focus mostly on the historical value of pre-Angkorian material found in the middle Mekong valley, mostly in modern-day Laos from Champassak up to Khammuan province, with some references to directly adjacent areas in Thailand and Cambodia.²

Backgrounds on a Regional History

Whereas our knowledge of the ancient history of Cambodia, Vietnam and Thailand is more advanced than that of Laos, the geography of pre-Angkorian sites in these three countries has not been extensively documented so far.

The main resource available in this respect is Parmentier's book (1927), whose value is still undiminished in spite of its age. The author recorded over one hundred and seventy sites in Cambodia and southern Vietnam that can be considered as pertaining to Funan and Zhenla. New research has of course resulted in the discovery of other pre-Angkorian structures and artefacts. Some art historians and archaeologists (e.g. Pierre Dupont, Mireille Bénisti, Jean Boisselier and Miriam Stark) have significantly contributed to scholarship with relevant information or clarification on matters of style and dating. The study of inscriptions, developing from Cœdès's work (1937-66), has also led a few scholars (mainly Claude Jacques and Michael Vickery) to supplement and reconsider some matters concerning the dawn of Khmer history. All the data currently available in the region should thus be collected and submitted to a comparative study taking into account, for instance, what we know about settlement modalities, monuments, statuary, material culture and textual sources.

Archaeological research in Thailand has also made considerable progress, highlighting the high degree of specificity of the northeast part of the country, where several native cultures have been recognised. It has now been shown that the first historical communities established in the region had developed into complex societies as early as the Iron Age and already attained an advanced level of technical development

before they start to show evidence of influence from India (Higham & Rachanie 2012). The ethnic identity of these people during the early centuries of the Common Era is still a highly speculative issue. They probably belonged to the large Austro-Asiatic group, but it is impossible to say whether they were part of Khmer or Mon speaking communities before the seventh century when some inscriptions in these vernacular languages make their appearance (after an initial phase of writings in Sanskrit).

This may be of great importance if we consider, following Cœdès, that it was perhaps in both northeast Thailand and southern Laos that the first Khmer polities have arisen. Admittedly, information about the sites of the first millennium CE identified in northeast Thailand was still very scanty in the first half of the twentieth century. However, scholars' attention was drawn after a few Sanskrit inscriptions dated to the late sixth century were discovered in the Mun river basin (see *infra*). Remains of great value were also identified in some sites that appear to have been important cities, not only in the centre of the Khorat Plateau such as Mueang Fa Daet and Kantharawichai, but even more so in the western and southern border areas such as Si Thep and Dong Si Mahosot.

In the mid-1970s, B.-P. Groslier led two missions in northeast Thailand (1997: 199), one of his objectives being to collect information about the place of origin of the Khmer communities who had already been united into a political entity. He finally discarded the Khorat Plateau, where he did not find sufficient data, and pointed rather towards the southern Dangrek range (now in Cambodia) and possibly southern Laos, i.e. the Wat Phu region, for further investigation. He became aware, however, of the importance of the "Round Cities" (i.e. large moated sites) in northeast Thailand and drew a parallel between these protohistoric sites and most of the places that were later selected by the Khmers of the Angkorian period to build temples (1997: 206-207). Apparently, Groslier made a clear distinction between the communities that founded these moated cities with their peculiar hydraulic infrastructures and those that later founded the Khmer empire, never thinking of a possible continuity in the settlement process. Furthermore, he separated the two above-mentioned areas from a third one whose limits included the present-day Thai provinces of Kalasin, Sakon Nakhon and Nakhon Phanom. There, according to him, a "Civilisation of steles" – a type of artefacts already reported by Subhadradis Diskul (1956) – emerged as a cultural area that was even more different from that of the Khmers (1997: 202). Groslier's assumptions, stimulating as they were at the time, are now outdated. The large-scale work carried out by Thai archaeologists from the 1970s onwards, paired with the comprehensive research that has been conducted recently by Stephen Murphy (2010), has shown that the area over which this culture characterised by "Buddhist steles" (i.e. *sema* stones) indeed extended throughout the Khorat Plateau, with significant concentrations in some specific places. They also evidenced a link between this culture and a Mon-speaking population similar to that among which the Dvāravatī culture developed in the Chao Phraya river basin (Reville, this volume).

The Geography of Pre-Angkorian Sites in the Middle Mekong Valley

Although based on only seven sites, the limits that Parmentier had set in 1927 for the pre-Angkorian area in Laos differ only slightly from those that are currently established on the basis of the *circa* fifty sites that have been recently inventoried by the Vientiane EFEO centre in the southern and central provinces. The contribution of recent research concerns the composition and the density of this area rather than its geographic extension.

Not only do the historical sites dated to the second half of the first millennium appear to be far more numerous than those dated to the first half of the second millennium, but they are also more evenly distributed, in relation with the constraints and assets of the environment. Parmentier wrote that "the structures displaying primitive Khmer style are rather close to rivers" (1927: 44), and his study is to a large extent structured on the basis of this observation. Apart from the introductory chapter devoted to Sambor Prei Kuk, the work is composed of three parts which cover successively the lower Mekong basin, the Tonle Sap basin and the upper reaches of the great river (upstream from Phnom Penh, including southern Laos and northeast Thailand). The maps provided to illustrate his study place particular emphasis on the secondary drainage system that is otherwise not so very clearly visible in the vast plains of Cambodia and whose importance is often underestimated. In Laos, as most of the territory is covered with mountains, the role played by the Mekong and its major left-bank tributaries appears similarly decisive.

The Se Kong Basin

The Se Kong river, whose upper and middle courses are located in the eastern part of southern Laos, flows into the Mekong in Cambodia, less than 50 kilometres downstream from the Khone falls, the traditional and current frontier between the two countries.

The archaeological wealth at the confluence in both Stœng Treng town and Thala Borivat village on the opposite bank has been highlighted in previous studies on the pre-Angkorian period (Parmentier 1927; Bénisti 1968; Lévy 1970), but current historical works tend to neglect it. The near total absence of field work so far in the region is surely the reason why no Khmer remains has ever been recorded in the lower basin of the Se Kong upstream of the confluence of the Se San (less than 10 kilometres away from Stœng Treng) up to the border of the Lao province of Attopeu, i.e. over a distance of some 150 kilometres. Partial surveys carried out over a distance of about 50 kilometres in Lao territory downstream from the town of Attopeu have not yet been conclusive. However, many remains have recently been found by the EFEO team in the middle basin of the river up to the limit of Sekong province – the upper basin could not be explored due to difficulty of access to the territory – thus confirming the existence of relations with pre-Angkorian sites bordering the Mekong [Map 2].

Map 2: Pre-Angkorian sites in the middle Se Kong basin, Attopeu province, Laos [Drawing courtesy of Pierre Pichard].

1. Ban Khum Kham
2. Ban Sok
3. Ban Sapoan
4. Ban Sakhae
5. Ban Halang
6. Ban Se Kaman Nua
7. Upmung Se Su
8. Ban Fang Daeng
9. Ban Wat That
10. Ban Tatkum

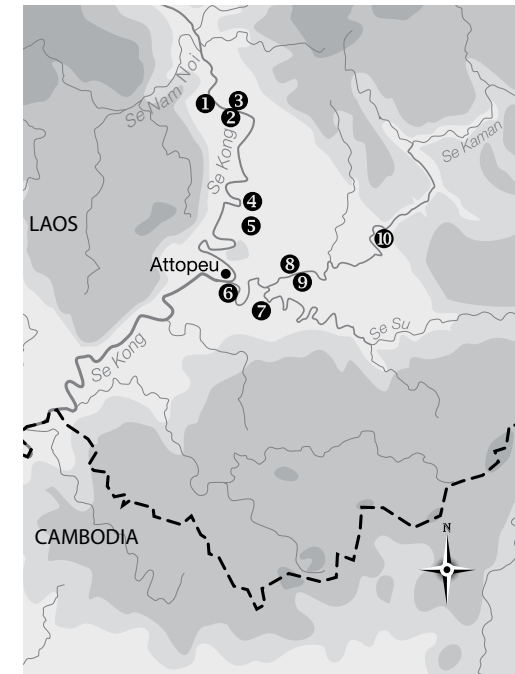




Figure 1: Stele or ogee step, Upmung Se Su site, Attopeu province, Laos [Photograph by Michel Lorrillard].

Terrestrial east-west routes also ran across the Boloven Plateau from these lowlands to the territory surrounding Wat Phu (Attopeu and Huei Tomo are located at the same latitude) over a distance of about 100 kilometres. Whereas the Attopeu plain is rather vast – about 40 kilometres at its widest point – thus offering much space for human settlement, we can observe that the communities gave preference to riparian habitats, thereby confirming Parmentier’s views. Eight of the ten sites where evidence of the pre-Angkorian period has been found seem to have been places where at least one monument was erected.

On the banks of the Se Kong, at a short distance from each other, three sites with both architectural components and ceremonial objects have been identified. Ban Khum Kham – the site located furthest upstream – has revealed several door jambs, one door head/sill, two ogee steps, a *somasūtra* and fragments of ablution basins (*snānadroṇīs*) among

various heaps of bricks. These remains may have belonged to the same complex as those found in Ban Sapouan and opposite Ban Sok, 2 kilometres downstream, in particular large-sized bricks and rectangular sandstone slabs which might have been door jambs. In four different places in the village of Ban Sakhae, at about 20 kilometres further south, on the outer side of a narrow bend, significant remains such as a lintel (see *infra*), thresholds, door heads/sills, door jambs, a *somasūtra*, parts of a pedestal and heaps of bricks, suggesting the presence of an important shrine, have been located. A few sandstone fragments found in Ban Halang, 2 kilometres south, could be related to this site.

The modern town of Attopeu lies at the confluence of the Se Kaman, a major river whose source is located in the Annamite mountain range, at the border of Quang Nam province in Vietnam. On the left bank of this river, less than 1 kilometre away from the confluence, the former existence of an ancient structure is indicated only by the presence of a concentration of large bricks amongst which are a few scattered objects that suggest religious activity such as fragments of a pedestal. After navigating past the meanders of the Se Kaman over a distance of about 12 kilometres, travellers arrive at the confluence with the Se Su, another river with its source in Kon Tum province in Vietnam. An important pre-Angkorian site called “Upmung Se Su” has been discovered 2 kilometres upstream on the west bank of this river.

At least two monuments must have existed there, as can be deduced from about twenty sandstone architectural components that were found and the extent of the area covered by bricks [Figure 1]. The site has obviously been heavily looted and no remains of cultural objects have been found. The structures were discovered in the early twentieth century and the French colonial authorities made arrangements to transport two lintels of the seventh-eighth centuries that looters had not yet taken away to the former *mueang* (town) of Attopeu, somewhat further upstream on the Se Kaman. One of them is still displayed in the modern Lao temple of Ban Fang Daeng, along with the fragment of a colonette probably originating from the Se Su site as well.



Figure 2: Detail of a stele with a symbolised trimūrti, Ban Tatkum, Attopeu province, Laos [Photograph by Michel Lorrillard].

Ban Wat That temple, on the left bank of the Se Kaman and almost precisely opposite Wat Ban Fang Daeng, is famous for its *stūpa* that tradition assigns to the reign of the Lao King Setthāthirāt (mid-sixteenth century). However, the site might well be much older, since many Khmer remains, apparently belonging to the pre-Angkorian period, have been discovered there. This applies in particular to the fragment of a pedestal cornice and the corresponding dado with pilasters that is still half buried. Three large rectangular sandstone slabs may also belong to an ancient monument. The remaining parts of a large stone statue of the Buddha (crossed-legs and the head) that were to be assembled – as shown by the presence of a mortise – have however raised some doubts. Some stylistic features, for example the straightened hair, are rather reminiscent of the Angkorian style. The site of Ban Wat That might well have been a stopover along the course of the Se Kaman, as was the case with the Ban Tatkum site located about 30 kilometres upstream, at a distance of only 5 kilometres from the nearest mountain barrier belonging to the Annamite range.

Of all the ancient historical sites identified in Laos, Ban Tatkum is easternmost (one can hardly find a sanctuary lying further away to the east, given the geography of the country); it is also the closest one to the historical territory of Campā in Vietnam. The existence of an ancient structure cannot be proven. However, the area is characterised by the presence of a large stele that lay among some sandstone blocks of indeterminate purpose; the upper part is carved in low-relief and represents a symbolised *trimūrti* [Figure 2]. Particular attention has been paid to the carving of attributes: a trident (*triśūla*) for Śiva, flanked by the water-pot (*kamaṇḍalu*) for Brahmā and the wheel (*cakra*) for Viṣṇu.³ The three figures stand above a rectangular shape with rounded corners, bearing a bulge on the left-hand side. This curious design is reminiscent of the shell of a turtle – possibly the turtle supporting the cosmos.

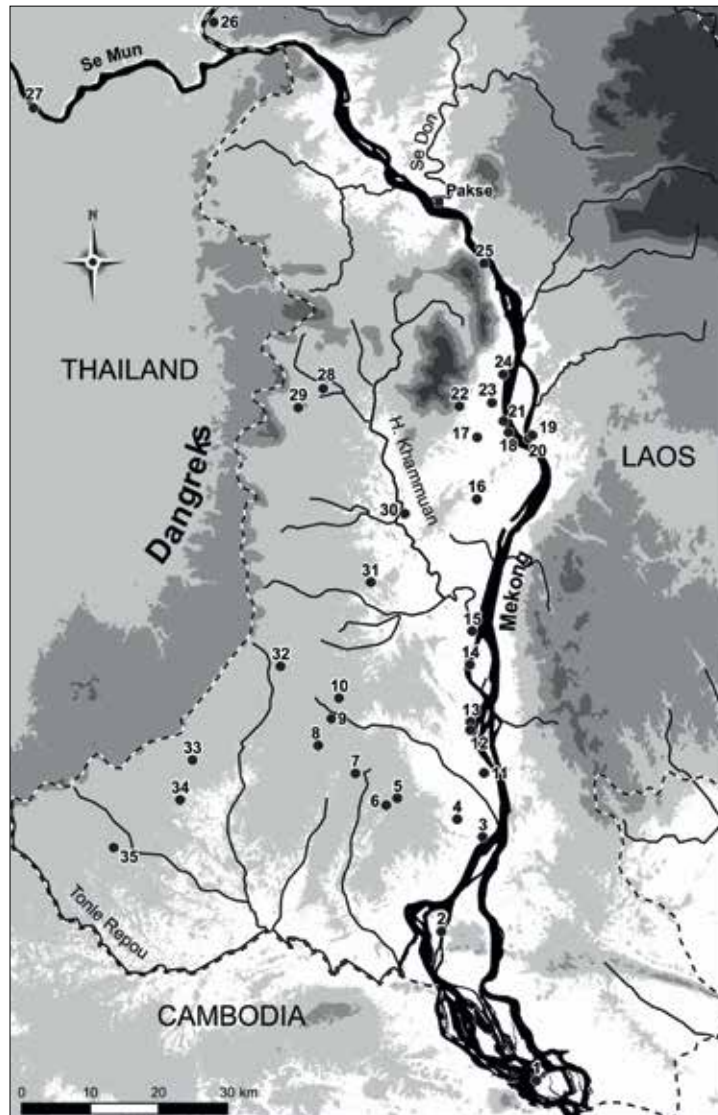
The Champassak Plain

Champassak province, bordering Cambodia and extending on both banks of the Mekong, is not surprisingly the area with the highest number of ancient remains. Some twenty-four pre-Angkorian sites have so far been identified (with Wat Phu and the old city each counted as one) whereas only a dozen Angkorian sanctuaries have been found in the same region [Map 3]. Virtually all pre-Angkorian sites, from Khong island in the south to Phu Lakkhon in the north, are located along the Mekong or in its immediate vicinity. The maximum distance from the riverside does not exceed 20 kilometres, except for the Ban Huei Na/Phu Lek complex (about 30 kilometres), which might have been a stopover on the transverse road leading to the Mun valley without having to travel up to the confluence. The rationale underlying the position of sites is clearly different from that of Angkorian sanctuaries that were meant to be primarily stopping places on the land route between Angkor and Wat Phu.

The Huei Tomo site at the confluence of the river bearing the same name should be considered as a particular case, not only because it is positioned on the left bank of the river (which is unique in the province), but also because it harbours both pre-Angkorian (lintel, *somasūtra* with *makara* head, and perhaps a *mukhalingā*) and Angkorian remains

Map 3: Khmer sites in Champassak province, Laos [Drawing courtesy of Jérémy Ferrand].

1. Wat Don Khone
2. Khong
3. Ban Saphang
4. Nong Sombat Nai
5. Nong Boa Bo Pong
6. Nong Sombat Noi
7. Nong Sombat Gnai
8. Huei Kadien
9. Sang Mouang
10. Nong Saming
11. Veun Kaen
12. Non Sombat
13. Non Pha Khao
14. That Don Sai
15. Ban Outhoum Mai
16. Ban Na Khi Khuai
17. Ban Khok Khong
18. Ban Katup
19. Huei Tomo
20. Khan Mak Houk
21. Ban Muang Kang
22. Wat Phu
23. Wat Phu ancient city (Liṅgapura?)
24. Wat Lakhon
25. Phu Malong
26. Phu Lakkhon
27. Ban Saphu
28. Ban Huei Na
29. Phu Lek
30. Ban That
31. That Na Samliang
32. Dong That
33. That Ban Don
34. That Nang In
35. Nong Pham Ban Vienne



(sanctuary, inscription K. 362). We still do not know why Yaśovarman I (r. 889-910) chose to establish one of his hermitages (*āśrama*) in this place – about 10 kilometres from Wat Phu, specifically on the side of the eastern foothills – where occupation seems to have been much more modest.

Khone island also harbours an example of an Angkorian structure located along the Mekong; however, with due consideration for the continuum that seems to have existed between the oldest sites in Stœng Treng province in Cambodia and those in Champassak province, we may assume that the place has also been occupied in the pre-Angkorian period. The nearby waterfalls separating the modern territories of Cambodia and Laos may have been appealing as much as it was a cause of fear, and in-depth research on this area would be profitable. A few kilometres upstream of Khone island (almost precisely opposite to Khong island)

is also the confluence of the Tonle Repou, a right-bank tributary of the Mekong separating Laos from Cambodia for more than 80 kilometres. This river (flowing NW-SE), which the Angkor-Wat Phu land route crosses, must have played a major role in giving access to the southern flank of the Dangrek range, particularly to the Preah Vihear temple, whose religious importance may have been based on the transfer of a fragment of the natural Wat Phu *liṅga* in the early ninth century (Jacques 1976: 363; Sanderson 2003-04: 410-420). A pre-Angkorian temple with two inscriptions on door jambs dating possibly from the seventh century (K. 341) was also built on this axis on the Cambodian side, about 30 kilometres from the Lao border (Cœdès 1966: VIII, 134). This region may have been used to travel to Sambor Prei Kuk via Mlu Prei and along the Stœng Saen river in Cambodia. Very little research has been carried out in these remote areas, particularly on the southern and western edges of Champassak province, due to the presence of large non-cleared areas.

The Mekong riparian sites in Champassak province belonging to the pre-Angkorian age display a linear settlement pattern that cannot be so clearly identified in Cambodia, where sites are much more scattered. The complex formed by the original Wat Phu sanctuary and the adjoining ancient city has obviously played the role of a focal point in this network. The remains found there are much older, so that it can be assumed that the construction of the monuments really started and developed from the time when the sanctity of the mountain was recognised, after its summit had been identified as a *liṅga*. It is interesting to note that an almost precisely north-south line of about 80 kilometres, with an alignment connecting most of the other sanctuaries, can be drawn between the old city and the pre-Angkorian temple on Khong island located closer to the Khmer border. It even seems that the early communities, when electing sites for settlement up to a distance of 20 kilometres downstream from the city, where the Mekong forms a loop imposing increased travelling time, preferred to settle away from the riverside to remain in the alignment and therefore use the overland route. This is illustrated by the find-spot of certain remains, such as a *somasūtra* with a *makara* head and a *snānadromī* with its *liṅga* in Ban Khok Khong, a *pancaliṅga* in Ban Na Khi Khuai, and even more clearly by the location of many ancient artificial basins, as is revealed with remarkable accuracy by aerial photography.

The existence of several pre-Angkorian sanctuaries erected along the Mekong is further evidenced by the presence of seemingly very early lintels (Khong island, Veun Kaen, Non Sombat, Non Pha Khao, That Don Sai, Wat Phu ancient city, Phu Malong), and other architectural remains such as door jambs (Outhoum Mai) and vestiges of brick structures (Ban Saphang, Wat Lakhon in Champassak). The distance between these sites never exceeds a dozen kilometres (some are even very close to each other), indicating a rather even distribution. Five other small pre-Angkorian sanctuaries (Nong Sombat Nai, Nong Sombat Noi, Nong Sombat Gnai, Huei Kadien, Nong Saming), forming another alignment perpendicular to the river, though never far removed from it, could be slightly more recent, as suggested by K. 1201, an inscription of Jayavarman I dated to 654 CE found near Huei Kadien [Figure 3], and a different construction mode (Santoni & Hawixbrock 1999: 396). Lintels have never been found there. As indicated by their



Figure 3: Inscribed door jamb from Huei Kadien, Champassak province, Laos [Photograph courtesy of Ang Choulean].

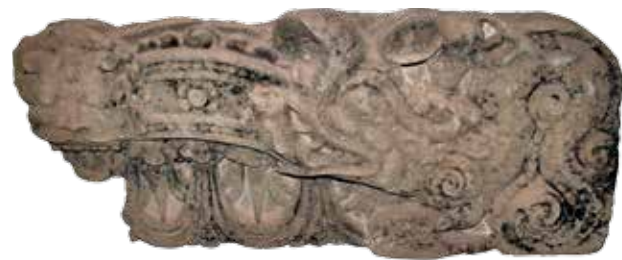


Figure 4: Lintel from Ban Huei Na, Pakse Museum, Champassak province, Laos [Photograph by Michel Lorrillard].

names in many cases, these sites are here again related to rectangular ponds (*nong*) enclosed in large earthen levees. Champassak province is home to hundreds of such artificial basins; these are very common in Cambodia (*trapeang, barai*) but are almost non-existent elsewhere in Laos. A study of their distribution is extremely informative, not only because it shows a parallel with the location of the shrines, but also indicates ancient settlements that have now been swallowed by the forest.

Some areas that are still unexplored but for which aerial photography reveals a number of such structures probably harbour a rich archaeological potential.

The rivers flowing from the eastern end of the Dangrek range down to the Mekong, whose general course is roughly west-east, also deserve special consideration as they relate to a large extent to the modes of settlement. Attention should also be given to Huei Khammuan, a stream whose source is located on Phu Pasak, i.e. one of the heights overlooking Wat Phu, due to its numerous meanders that make it the longest and widest river of Champassak plain.

Very few shrines have been built on high ground, so that the Wat Phu sanctuary, standing on the eastern slope of Phu Kao, is an exceptional example. Nevertheless, other places of worship have been created along this specific mountainous alignment, including some cave structures with only pre-Angkorian inscriptions (K. 723, K. 724, K. 1040, K. 1059). The Upmung shrine, very close to Wat Phu, as well as the Phu Malong sanctuary that was recently discovered at the other end of the range, are early buildings that may have been vested with a religious status superior to that granted to the monuments erected close to the riverside downstream from the ancient city.

It is possible that, starting from Wat Phu, travellers circumvented the Phu Kao (1,416 m.) and Phu Pasak (1,408 m.) mountains along the western route and progressed northward to reach the vast plain of Phon Thong district, thus easily gaining access to the Mun valley. No sanctuary has been found there yet, though several artificial basins have been identified. We have already referred to another road crossing the Dangrek range, with a stopover in Ban Huei Na/Phu Lek, where an interesting fragment of a pre-Angkorian lintel has been discovered [Figure 4]. However, the road most travelled must have been the Mekong up to the confluence with the Mun at a distance of about 70 kilometres from Wat Phu. Apart from the Phu Malong shrine located on a hill, it does not seem that any sanctuary was built along this way, so that a clear distinction should be maintained between the area extending upstream from Wat Phu and that located downstream, up to the Khone falls.

The Lower Mun Basin

George Cœdès was among the first to put forward the idea that there was a form of unity in terms of communities and culture between the basin of the Mun river in Thailand [Map 4] and the Champassak area in Laos; however, the suggestion has never really been substantiated with conclusive data. As a matter of fact, it is highly questionable



Map 4: Ancient historical sites in the Lower Mun basin, Thailand [Drawing by Michel Lorrillard and Nicolas Revire].

considering that the Khorat Plateau – especially on the western side – has not yielded any quantity of pre-Angkorian material comparable to what has been discovered in Cambodia and even in southern Laos. Just as we can claim that the lower basin of the Mun river has played virtually no role in the process of Angkorian penetration beyond the Dangrek range – as it developed mainly via passes in the western part of the range in the Khmer provinces of Utdor Meanchey and Banteay Meanchey –, we must also acknowledge that pre-Angkorian culture was propagated to a large extent following the course of the main rivers, confirming the importance of the middle Mekong, the Mun and its tributaries.

Concerning the lower Mun basin, references are currently restricted to the six Citrasena/Mahendravarman inscriptions found in the immediate vicinity of the confluence. We should set apart the inscribed stele found in Phu Lakkhon (K. 363) since it is located opposite the place where the Mun reaches the Mekong, i.e. in Lao territory. Among the other five inscriptions found in Ubon Ratchathani province, Thailand, two were discovered in Khan Thewada (K. 496 and K. 497), on a hill overlooking the confluence; two in Tham Prasat (K. 508 and K. 509), a cave shelter overlooking the Mun 2 kilometres from the preceding location; and the last one in Pak Dom (K. 1190), 4 kilometres further upstream. All of them are fairly short and the few French and Thai epigraphists who have examined them suggested that they were items commemorating victories (Jacques 1993). In spite of variations that are worth examining, these inscriptions prove similar to those found on the banks of the Mekong in Cambodia (K. 116, Chroy Ampil and K. 122, Thma Krê, Kratie province) and Laos (K. 363, K. 1193 and K. 1194, Champassak province), but also farther west on the Khorat Plateau (K. 377, Surin province; K. 514, Buri Ram province;⁴ K. 1102,

Khon Kaen province; K. 1106, Nakhon Ratchasima region and K. 1280, Roi Et province) and in Prachin Buri province (K. 969). Whereas most of the bases used for these inscriptions are plain steles, one of the two Tham Prasat inscriptions (K. 509) is engraved on a large pedestal serving as a base for a stone carved bull, as is the case at Wat Phu (K. 1193 and K. 1194), Roi Et (K. 1280), Surin (K. 377) and Khon Kaen (K. 1102).

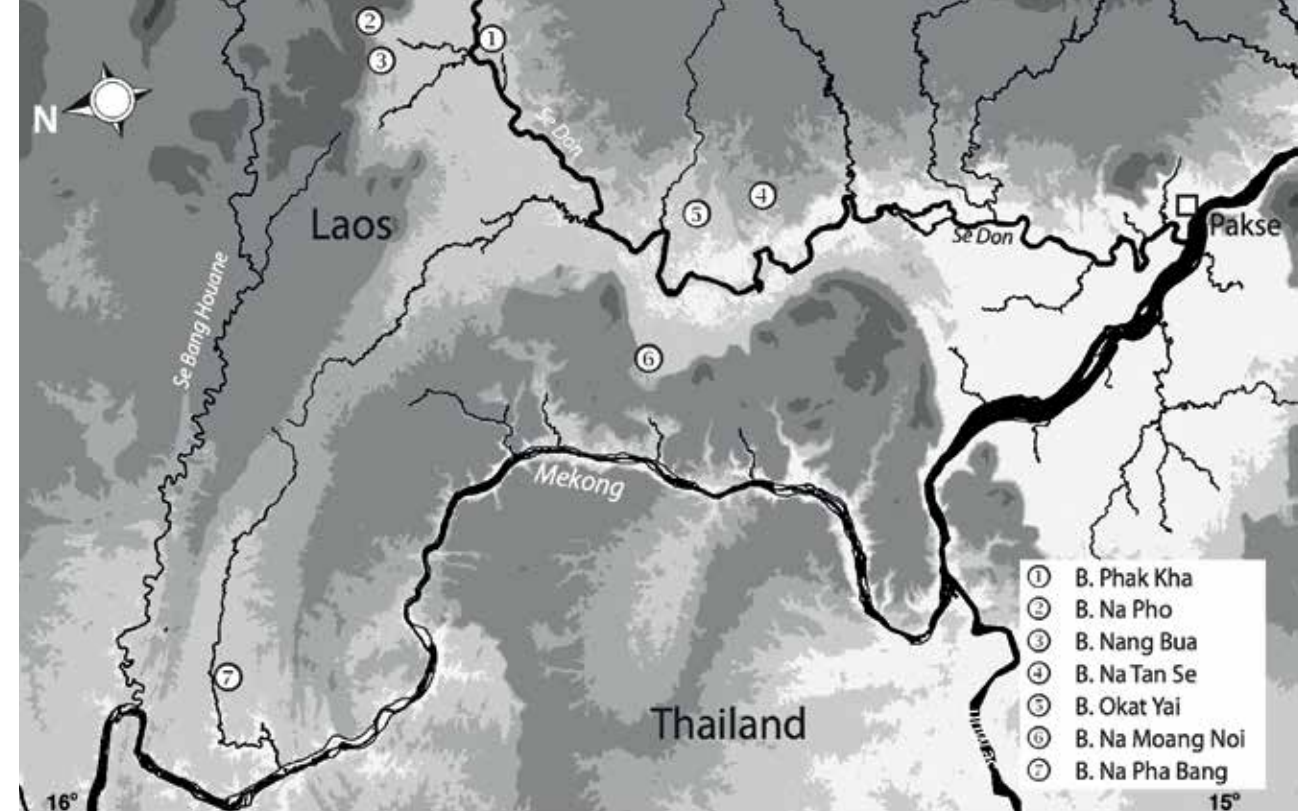
Another short pre-Angkorian inscription (K. 1096) was found before 1975 (FAD 2529: I, 284-286) at Wat Sa Kaco, Phibun Mangsahan district, Ubon Ratchathani province, just in front of the Keng Sapheu rapids on the Mun, but it seems to have disappeared (FAD 2535: 80). It mentioned a king named Nṛpendrapativarman,⁵ possibly a relative of Mahendravarman. Anyway the place where the inscription was found is most interesting since it is also there that the first evidence of pre-Angkorian architecture was discovered upstream from the confluence of the Mun, at a distance of about 40 kilometres, taking all meanders into account. On both sides of the river where large rocks make it possible to wade across in the dry season, three sites have revealed the remains of buildings made of bricks with some sandstone components, including two fine lintels dating back to the seventh or eighth century CE (Le Bonheur 1995: 67, 79-80; Piriya 2012: 120).

No other important vestige from the pre-Angkorian era has been found in the lower reaches of the banks of the Mun itself, but some sites located along its tributaries show that the earliest Khmer culture had expanded widely in the region, that is in Ban Kaeng Toi (*somasūtra*, colonettes) on the Lam Se Bok river in Ubon Ratchathani province; in Don Mueang Toei (brick building, inscription K. 1082) on the Chi river in Yasothon province;⁶ in Don Khum Ngoen (architectural remains, inscription K. 1280) on the Lam Siew Noi river in Roi Et province (Kongkaeo 2549; Charuek 2550); and probably also in Ubon Ratchathani province (Nam Yuen district) along the lower reaches of the Lam Dom Yai river (reclining Viṣṇu carved in rock) whose source in the Dangrek is close to that of the Tonle Repou river flowing on the other flank of the range down to the Mekong (Dhida 2536: 48).

The first “Indianisation” process in this region, i.e. the introduction of new Indic concepts and forms of aesthetic expression, must have developed rather rapidly under political impetus. It is very likely that exchanges by waterway were preferred. However, the position of some pre-Angkorian sites in the Mun basin shows that the Mekong, via Wat Phu, was not the only communication channel from (and to) Cambodia. It is highly probable that additional land routes were also rapidly established across the Dangrek range, especially in its westernmost part. For instance it seems that the early Prasat Phum Pon, dated to the second half of the seventh century according to Piriya (2012: 119), in Surin province, was integrated rather into an overland network, even if two nearby waterways, in the east and west, facilitated communication with the Mun.

The Se Don Basin

After establishing the existence of a link between pre-Angkorian structures and waterways beyond the Khone falls on the right bank of the Mekong, it is reasonable to assume that this also applies to the



left bank in Laos. The course of the Se Don river, whose confluence is 40 kilometres downstream from that of the Mun river, was even more likely to harbour substantial archaeological potential as it represents a very good alternative to the Mekong for north-south communication [Map 5]. When reaching this portion of its course, the Mekong had to cut its way across a mountain range over a distance of about 100 kilometres between the fifteenth and sixteenth parallel and was forced to change its orientation (predominantly NW-SE) over a significant distance. Navigation in this reach is hampered by dangerous rapids; and human occupation, as attested by the presence of cave paintings, seems to have been limited only to the prehistoric period. To the east of this range, the lower Se Don valley represents a real corridor bordering the northern part of the Boloven Plateau.

The attention that ancient communities paid to the physical features of this territory is particularly evident in Ban Na Moang Noi, on the right bank of the river. The mountain range bordering all the western side of Saravane province is characterised there by a narrowing of the ridge line so that the valley of the Se Don could cut its way across it. A pre-Angkorian temple was built at the tip of this wedge formed by the lowlands, at a distance of only 11 kilometres from the Mekong. Due to the presence of a pass, access to the river via a west-facing trail is easy, whereas it is virtually impossible elsewhere unless the traveller is prepared to prolong the journey by several dozen kilometres to circumvent the range. The ruins of the sanctuary form a mound with several pieces of carved sandstone emerging out of the ground. Parts of a pedestal, as well as a *snānadronī* with its *līṅga* [Figure 5] have been found on the eastern side, on the edge of a rectangular pond.

Map 5: Pre-Angkorian and Mon sites in Saravane province, Laos [Drawing courtesy of Jérémy Ferrand].

Figure 5: Ablution basin (*snānadronī*) with its *līṅga*, Ban Na Moang, Saravane province, Laos [Photograph courtesy of Mr Phakhanxay].





Figure 6: That Phon, Savannakhet province, Laos [Photograph courtesy of EFEO photographic archives, Fonds Parmentier, PAR00563, dated 1911].

Other remains – including a door jamb and a door head, the fragments of a base and a *līṅga* of rough workmanship – have been found in Ban Na Tan Se and Ban Okat Yai, two sites at a distance of 7 kilometres from each other, close to the left bank of the Se Don. Furthermore, at about 30 kilometres upstream, a *līṅga*, a pedestal dado (or a socle) and three *peṣanīs* (grinding stones) have been discovered in three additional sites, of which two are located on the sloping right bank of the river. The upper valley of the Se Don, where the Annamite range commands the vast Saravane plain in the east, has not so far revealed any trace of ancient remains, though the region may also harbour archaeological potential.

The only option when travelling between the isolated province of Saravane and Savannakhet is following the Lakhon Pheng corridor, a narrow (4 kilometres in the centre) and long (about 60 kilometres) NW-SE oriented strip

of lowland wedged between two ranges. On its western side, where the mountains are much less elevated, this corridor is cut by the Mekong, but geologically extends far beyond the river up to the vast plains of the Thai provinces of Amnat Charoen and Ubon Ratchathani. The latter feature is quite important as it accounts for the specificity of this archaeological space representing the southernmost limit in Laos of a cultural area that is distinct from that of the Khmers, though equally ancient. Seven *sema* stones decorated with the stylised representation of a *stūpa* and a low-relief image of a sitting Buddha have indeed been discovered at two sites close to each other, in the village of Ban Na Pha Bang, at a distance of 12 kilometres from the Mekong. These carved stones, one in particular with the *kumbha* motif, are typical of the Mon culture that developed in the second half of the first millennium in northeast Thailand (Murphy 2013). The sandstone surface covering the first site has been dug out to create a rectangular space, as aerial photography shows. Rectangular or oval cavities looking like mortises were probably meant to be the base of specific objects (*sema* stones?). The second site, displaying a rather coarse rectangular substructure with a medley of sandstone blocks and large bricks, may have been a place of worship too, although it has probably been refurbished by the Lao people at a later date.

The Se Bang Hieng and Se Bang Fai Basins

Two major left-bank tributaries of the Mekong cross the Savannakhet plain in Laos: the Se Bang Hieng in the south and the Se Bang Fai in the north, together with their own tributaries, some of which have their source in the Annamite range. We can assume that this vast



Figure 7: That In Hang, Savannakhet province, Laos [Photograph courtesy of EFEO photographic archives, Fonds Parmentier, PAR00472, dated 1911].

lowland area – four times larger than the Vientiane plain – has been an attractive zone for settlement, even if the Lao people settled there only at a late date. The twenty-four ancient sites that have been found there are distributed among different basins, predominantly on the western side, where wetlands are larger [Map 6].

The *circa* fifteen sites dating from the second half of the first millennium are at a short distance from the Mekong and compose a relatively continuous network of stations along the river up to the confluence with the Se Bang Fai, opposite the old sanctuary of That Phonom in present-day Thailand. This monument, whose original structure collapsed in 1975 along with the larger Lao period *stūpa* that covered it, must have been very similar to the pre-Angkorian towers of That Phon [Figure 6] and That In Hang [Figure 7], whose shapes have survived in spite of successive “restorations.” The few remains (bricks, door head/sill, pedestals, *somasūtra* with *makara* head, *snānadroṇīs* with *līṅga*, inscriptions) of the sanctuaries in Ban Na Khu, Ban Nong Hai, Ban Don Seng and Nong Hua Thong, located between the Se Bang Hieng and the Se Bang Fai, may date back to the same period (eighth century?). It seems that the Khmers of the pre-Angkorian era never expanded beyond the seventeenth parallel, on either bank of the Mekong.

The Mon people, who actually also occupied this area as well as others situated much further upstream, in particular in the vast basin of the Nam Songkhram in Thailand and in the Vientiane plain, have left in Savannakhet province a legacy of about 30 *sema* stones with

Map 6: Khmer and Mon sites in Savannakhet province, Laos [Drawing courtesy of Pierre Pichard].

1. Ban Hua Hat
2. Ban Na Khu
3. Ban Nong Hai
4. Huan Hin
5. That Ku
6. Ban Na Katang
7. Ban Tum Yé
8. Ban Nong Savang
9. Ban Mueang Phong
10. Mueang Phin
11. Ban Se Tha Moak
12. That Phon
13. Ban Phumma Chedi
14. Ban Don Tum
15. Ban Tak Daet
16. Ban Pha Kha Niai
17. Ban Sompoi Noi
18. That In Hang
19. Ban Don Seng
20. Nong Hua Thong
21. Ban Mak Nao Tai
22. Ban Kang
23. Ban Na Moang
24. Ban Sikhai
25. Ban Xieng Vang Tha
26. That Sikhot

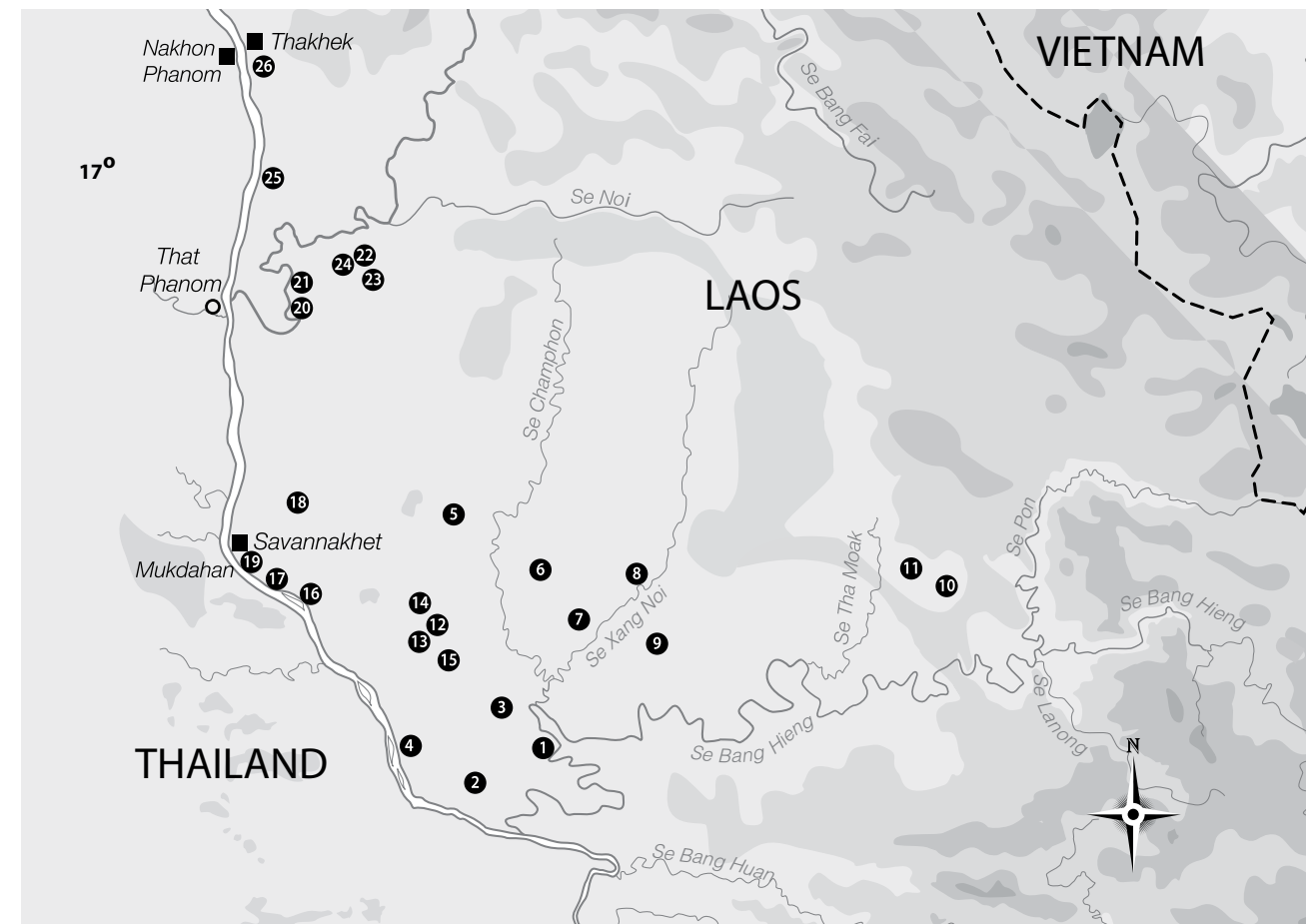




Figure 8: Sema stones, Ban Na Moang, Savannakhet province, Laos [Photograph by Michel Lorrillard].

stylised *stūpa* images, including some large-size and well-crafted pieces [Figure 8]. These objects of worship have been discovered mainly in two areas, each of them harbouring several locations, close to That Phon (Ban Tak Daet, Ban Phumma Chedi) and the confluence of the Se Bang Fai (Ban Kang, Ban Na Moang, Ban Sikhai, Nong Hua Thong), where they tend to mingle with pre-Angkorian vestiges.

The Khmers of the early second millennium also left evidence of their presence in this area. About 50 kilometres downstream of Savannakhet, they built (but left unfinished) the Huan Hin temple, which at this stage of knowledge definitely represents the northernmost Angkorian monument erected on the riverside. It was certainly related to several sites that appear to have been established on an axis parallel to the Mekong at about 30 kilometres inland, in the Se Champhon basin. That Ku, a very small ruined building consisting of three aligned cells, is the furthest north. In Ban Na Katang, satellite photography has revealed the presence of a double rectangular enclosure made of earth levees. On-site surveys led to the discovery of sandstone sculptures, including a Buddhist triad of the Bayon style (cf. Multzer o’Naghten, this volume, fig. 18). Other carvings in Khmer style have been found in Ban Tum Ye, Ban Non Savang and Ban Mueang Phong, between the Se Champhon and the Se Xang Noi.

Two sites have been identified much further inland, in the basin of the Se Tha Moak; at this stage, they should be considered marginal, as they do not fit in the network of sites identified on the Mekong, but further research may lead to identifying such places as stopovers. Ban Se Tha Moak and Mueang Phin are indeed positioned on an overland route crossing the Annamite range at the nearby Lao Bao Pass. A base with a mortise of clearly Khmer style has been discovered in the Lao temple of Ban Se Tha Moak, but we have no information about its place of origin. It might be appropriate to examine whether there is a link between this item and a square pedestal found together with a partially buried sandstone block (a dado?) 11 kilometres to the south-east, close to Mueang Phin. However, these two remains protrude

from a mound covered with vegetation together with five *sema* stones decorated with the *stūpa* image, thus suggesting that this region adjacent to Quang Tri province in Vietnam received influence from both ancient Mon and Khmer cultures.

Whereas the Savannakhet plain opens widely out onto the lower basin of the Chi and the Mun rivers, the scanty lowland spaces bordering the Mekong in Khammuan province, upstream from the confluence of the Se Bang Fai, represent – in terms of physical geography – a continuation of the Nam Songkhram and Nam Kam basins (Thai provinces of Nakhon Phanom and Sakon Nakhon). The Angkorian culture that spread across the region has left some traces on the left bank of the Mekong, but no certain conclusion can be drawn as to their origin. The angle antefixes in the form of *nāgas* and the beautiful stele reused in Lao time, which were found in the immediate vicinity of That Sikhot, raise questions about the internal structure of the monument, which could well be much older than is generally assumed. The origin of a door jamb (likewise reused for a modern Lao inscription) found in Ban Xieng Vang Tha, about 20 kilometres downstream, is also challenging. The presence in the same area of two straight earth levees, running parallel and continuously over 750 metres, linked by perpendicular sections distributed at regular intervals and thus creating compartments, as well as large *trapeang/barai*-type basins, may indicate that this has been an area of settlement in ancient times, comparable to Nong Hua Thong located at a distance of about 20 kilometres. However, no firm conclusion can be drawn at present as no datable remains are available.

General Interpretation

This brief review of the pre-Angkorian archaeological evidence made available for southern and central Laos – in relation to that in the neighbouring regions of Thailand and Cambodia – highlights the importance of certain areas that would already have been prime candidates by mere examination of a topographical map. Similar to what had been noticed for Cambodia, the lowlands represented a privileged space for settlement, the more so when the area concerned lay close to a waterway. In this connection, the banks of the Mekong played an essential role. Contrary to what happened during the Angkorian period, we observe an undeniable continuity of occupation along the river in the pre-Angkorian era, and there was no major difference in the type of settlements both downstream and upstream of the Khone falls. However, the distance separating individual sites was variable and we observe that uninhabited areas were maintained between the settlement clusters. Champassak province, with its regular line of sanctuaries distributed over some 100 kilometres (*circa* 20 spots between Khong island in the south and Phu Malong in the north), is comparable – in terms of wealth in religious sites – to the area of about 50 kilometres in length between Thma Kre and Koh Krieng, in the adjacent Khmer districts of Kratie and Sambor. Because of an apparent lack of remains, this latter cluster is isolated from that of Støeng Treng/Thala Borivat located 60 kilometres upstream. Two territories characterised by a comparable paucity – one extending from Støeng Treng up to Khong, the other, further north, from the Phu Malong site up to the confluence with the Mun – cover

the same distance. Savannakhet province displays a regular series of pre-Angkorian sanctuaries between Ban Na Khu and That In Hang over about 60 kilometres, and then presents an area devoid of archaeological remains of about 40 kilometres up to the next cluster, that in the confluence of the Se Bang Fai (Nong Hua Thong/That Phanom).

Whereas islands were sometimes preferred to establish sanctuaries (Khong and Don Sai in Laos), not all sites were located very close to the riverside. It is worth noticing that, when the river flows in vast plains, the ancient communities seem to have preferred erecting the monument in a place slightly removed from the banks of the river. There is no evidence that systematic settlement of riverbanks was sought, probably because of flood risk or enhanced exposure to specific dangers such as invasions. Nevertheless, the Mekong was the key artery for communication in mainland Southeast Asia up to the beginning of the modern era, and many sites owe their importance to this river. The Wat Phu complex, apart from its being located at the foot of a mountain with sacred status, would probably not have developed to the extent that it has if it had not been erected close to the Mekong, especially during the pre-Angkorian era. Later, the site became the goal of a SW-NE-oriented land route coming from Angkor. With this new route, travellers came closer to the Dangrek range and could also reach Preah Vihear via an additional branch. It is likely that, with the westward shift of the seat of power that occurred at the time, the role of the river sharply declined, including in religious terms.

Even if the investigations carried out by prehistorians have not to date proven the existence of important settlements on the banks of the Mekong, it cannot be denied that, in the first centuries of the Common Era, the river, as a major link for communication, had led to the development of large entities. Attention has so far been paid almost exclusively to sites located near the coast, such as Oc Eo and Angkor Borei in southern Vietnam and Cambodia, which are associated with the Funan culture (without any certainty as to the part played by the Khmer component in their development). The shortcomings of research in this area is evident: whereas older studies in art history have already demonstrated the importance of clusters of monuments built on the banks of the Mekong – e.g. Sambor and Stœng Treng/Thala Borivat – no historical study has yet attempted to make their specificity explicit.

The ancient city adjoining Wat Phu has also been largely ignored in the work of many authors. Among the ancient remains that have been found there, it is particularly surprising that the large Devānīka (Wat Luang Kau) stele that, according to Cœdès (1956: 211), dates back to the second half of the fifth century CE, did not spark more questions. It seems more appropriate to consider that the “king of kings” who ordered the inscription and “came from far away” originated from downstream in Funan rather than in a territory to the east (Campā), or even to the west (Si Thep) as has sometimes been claimed (Jacques & Lafond 2007: 69). As the new evidence above demonstrates, Wat Phu sanctuary in its earliest phase was far from being isolated. It was part of a network of sites located along the banks of the Mekong that extended from the Delta up to a limit that might have reached the confluence with the Se Bang Fai at a very early time. It would be no surprise if the

pre-Angkorian temples (or the simpler structures that preceded them) – in addition to being stopping places on popular routes – had indeed been erected along much older exchange routes, especially those used to transport prized merchandise. We can for instance observe a fairly high degree of correspondence between the location of the first historic sites in the Mekong middle valley and the places where the bronze drums, whose major production centres were in northern Vietnam, have been discovered (Eiji 2005). A significant number of these ceremonial objects have been found in the Se Bang Hieng basin (Phin, Phalanxai and Xonburi districts), not far from the Annamite range, but also on the banks of the Mekong up to the confluence with the Mun, and its basin.

We also know that the Khorat Plateau in Thailand experienced an important development in the Iron Age, paired with the emergence of numerous sites displaying a complex layout (Higham 2002). These were related to the emergence of chiefdoms for which assertion of power was associated with the accumulation of wealth of various origins. Supposing that there was shift from the numerous “moated sites” that appeared on the Khorat Plateau in protohistoric times to the quadrangular cities with a moat on all four sides that developed during the pre-Angkorian period – with the same purpose of having good control on water resources –, the process that brought about this change has not been much investigated. In Laos, the only two large sites surrounded by earth levees are the ancient city of Wat Phu and Nong Hua Thong, both located close to the river bank. In the former case, the borderlines are quadrangular whereas, in the latter one, a semi-circular enclosure was combined – probably at a later stage – with a straight double wall. We have to turn to Cambodia to identify structures comparable to the model displayed by the city of Wat Phu, namely at Sambor Prei Kuk, which seems to have been erected somewhat later, or possibly at Banteay Prei Nokor, to which Parmentier gave special importance in his last writings (1948: 93-94).

Laos does not present the type of large sites with a curved shape and moats that exist in Thailand on the western flank of the Khorat Plateau, such as Si Thep (Phetchabun province) and Dong Si Mahosot (Prachin Buri province), nor the type of protohistoric sites such as Noen U Loke, Ban Non Wat or Nong Mueang Kao (Nakhon Ratchasima province). However, due to their layout, a number of sites on the left bank of the Mekong may be related to more modest places belonging to an early period, such as Ban Tamyac, Pit Tong and Nong Phayu in the lower basin of the Mun (Si Sa Ket province). I refer here to dozens of villages in some specific parts of the Lao provinces of Saravane, Khammuan and Savannakhet, corresponding to areas where pre-Angkorian ruins have also been found (Lorrillard 2013b). These villages become clearly visible with aerial photography, due to the oval or quadrangular green belt enclosing them and hinting at the possible existence of a former moat that was fed by a stream.

Some Historical Markers

Whereas pre-Angkorian dynastic history remains to a large extent unknown in Cambodia, certain amounts of data delivered by studies in epigraphy and art history provide precious historical markers. The



Figure 9: *Wat Luang Kau or Devānīka stele (K. 365), Face D, Wat Phu Museum, Champassak province, Laos [Photograph courtesy of EFEO photographic archives, Fonds Laos 21533a].*

seventh century seems to have been a period of relative unity, at least up to the reign of Jayavarman I who died *circa* 680. The inscriptions for this period are much more numerous and informative than those of the eighth century which has often been described as a period of great instability related to a lack of central authority (Dupont 1943-46). Michael Vickery (1994), however, has questioned this political turmoil in the eighth century and the subsequent split into “Land” and “Water Zhenla” after Jayavarman I’s death. He says that if it did exist “it was not the type of division that has traditionally been postulated,” and he strongly believes that Cambodia was in fact at peace during the last century of the pre-Angkorian period (1994: 209-210). It appears that northern parts of the Khmer realm preserved indeed a political autonomy for decades. It was certainly the case for Śāmbupura in the Kratie-Sambor region (Vickery 1998: 379-393), and was likely the same a few hundred kilometres further upstream in Savannakhet province, and in the Mun, the Se Kong and the Se Don valleys in modern-day Thailand and Laos.⁷ At any rate, the intensity of creative activities was probably not much affected by the “political turmoil” as shown by the number of monuments built until the advent of Jayavarman II, in 802, as the first king of the Angkorian era (Boisselier 1968; Bénisti 1971).

The Inscriptions

We have drawn attention to the specific features of the pre-Angkorian inscriptions in the Mun basin and the questions raised by them. As for Champassak province, it offers a high number of epigraphic sources relative to its territory, along with an impression of historical continuity. I have already pointed out above that it was in the ancient city of Wat Phu that the famous Wat Luang Kau inscription (K. 365) was found [Figure 9]. Its text refers in particular to the consecration of a great pilgrimage site (*mahātīrtha*) named Kurukṣetra. Another inscribed stele (K. 477), very large in size, has been discovered in the early twentieth century in the same area (Parmentier 1913: 54, 56; Cœdès 1966: VIII, 154). It can be surmised, due to the resemblance in shape and the apparently archaic form of the script used, that it could also date back to the period of King Devānīka (fifth century). Unfortunately the text has eroded and become illegible. Two inscribed pedestals (K. 1173 and K. 1174) serving originally as a base for a stone bull were also found very close to the Wat Luang Kau (Jacques 1993). They had been ordered by Mahendravarman (*circa* late sixth, early seventh century) after his coronation and pay tribute to his father and his uncle in a territory where they may have reigned. These two bases were probably related to a nearby monument whose foundations were discovered in 1993 (Santoni & Souksavatdy 1999: 190). A third Mahendravarman inscription has been located on the left bank of the Mekong at Phu Lakkhon (K. 366), almost exactly opposite the confluence with the Mun [Figure 10], about 70 kilometres upstream of Wat Phu (Barth 1903). None of the sixteen inscriptions now assigned to this ruler indicates that his “kingdom” extended downstream from the Khone falls and we can assume that the middle Mekong valley was the territory he preferred.⁸ As for his son Īśānavarman I (r. ca 612?-637?), he seemingly did not leave any inscriptions in Laos or northward of the Dangrek range, perhaps because he was busy consolidating his power westward



Figure 10: *Phu Lakkhon stele (K. 366), Champassak province, Laos [Photograph by Michel Lorrillard].*



Figure 11: *Inscription on a silver plate (K. 1264), Nong Hua Thong, Savannakhet province, Laos [Photograph courtesy of Viengkeo Souksavatdy].*

and southward from Sambor Prei Kuk. Jayavarman I (r. ca 655?-680?) came back to the Champassak region and committed himself to developing this territory, as testified in a few inscriptions (K. 367, K. 1197, K. 1201, K. 1224).⁹ This may also have applied to his predecessor, Bhavavarman II (r. ca 637?-655?), as both are mentioned together in a rock inscription near Wat Phu attributable to a royal servant (K. 1059).¹⁰ At least eight other inscriptions prior to the ninth century have been found in the same area.

No ancient inscriptions have been found so far in Attopeu province, although it can be assumed that the region has played a major role in the regional network of communication. It was reported to Aymonier (1901: 173) at the end of the nineteenth century that an ancient stele in Ban Sok had slipped into the Se Kong. It was never recovered. A local resident who was recently asked by the present author about the Se Su site mentioned the existence of an inscription but the information was too vague to spot the object. Unearthing the large sandstone slabs that are partially buried in this site, however, is still a desideratum.

Savannakhet province, in which the presence of major ancient sanctuaries has also been established, has recently revealed some epigraphic documents of great interest. A large base on which a line in pre-Angkorian characters dating back to about the eighth century has been engraved can be seen among other sandstone blocks in Ban Na Khu, a site in ruins; the Sanskrit text is too damaged and does not allow accurate deciphering, but it is probably the expression of an offering involving a king (*nṛpa*).¹¹ Three inscriptions have been identified in Nong Hua Thong on the edge of silver plates and bowl belonging to a “treasure hoard” unearthed in 2008. According to Claude Jacques (pers. comm.), one of these inscriptions (K. 1264), written in Sanskrit, refers to a person who donated land, slaves, cows and money to ensure Śiva worship [Figure 11]. It appears on palaeographic ground to date from the eighth century. The other two (K. 1262 and K. 1263), which are short donative formulas in Khmer, have been engraved using a script that probably dates back to the ninth century. It is then necessary to move up to the Vientiane plain to find inscriptions prior to the fourteenth century, but these are related to the Mon culture and the Angkorian period (Lorrillard 2013b).

Architectural Decoration

The lintels – and to some extent the colonettes and low-relief brick decoration representing miniature edifices (also called “flying palaces”)



Figure 12: Lintel from Ban Sakhae, Attopeu province, Laos [Photograph by Michel Lorrillard].



Figure 13: Lintel 1 from Upmung Se Su site (now in Ban Fang Daeng), Attopeu province, Laos [Photograph courtesy of EFEO photographic archives, Fonds Laos 21928, dated 1903].



Figure 14: Lintel 2 from Upmung Se Su site (lost), Attopeu province, Laos [Photograph courtesy of EFEO photographic archives, Fonds Laos 21927, dated 1903].

– are the only architectural components that make it possible to assign a date with reasonable accuracy to the pre-Angkorian sanctuaries. For a long time, just seven lintels were the only decorative pieces mentioned in the studies on early art history in Laos, and comments were very brief.

The first three were found in Attopeu province in the early twentieth century and did not attract much attention (Anonymous 1903: 141-143). Recent surveys have shown that two of them still exist. The lintel found in Ban Sakhae [Figure 12], with its three pieces now glued together with cement, was made in “vegetal” style that developed in the setting of the Kompong Preah style during the eighth century (Le Bonheur 1995: 78). Two more lintels have been found 20 kilometres to the south on the banks of the Se Su (see *supra*). The first one also displays the Kompong Preah style [Figure 13]; however, because of the large central figure of Garuda, it has a very special character whose model may be sought in Campā (Le Bonheur 1995: 78-79; Boisselier 1968: 130). The second one, which seems to have disappeared [Figure 14], is related to a sub-category of the Prei Kmeng style (Le Bonheur 1995: 77), possibly a late form that can be dated to the second half of the seventh century.

Parmentier referred in 1927 (233-234) to two other lintels found in Savannakhet province; however, they were never mentioned thereafter, except briefly in his posthumous work on Lao art (1988: 148,153). The lintel of That Phon is hardly visible because it has been re-used in ancient times as a door jamb of the sanctuary [Figure 15] and partly disappeared in a layer of concrete cast to make a threshold step behind a heavy wooden door that usually remains closed. Due to its vegetal decoration, it undeniably belongs to the Kompong Preah style (eighth century). The second lintel, of which a fragment was still visible in the early twentieth century in That In Hang has now disappeared. Parmentier, who left a picture of it [Figure 16], suggested that it should be assigned to the Sambor Prei Kuk style – although the presence of a *makara* cannot be established – and therefore assessed it as a model that could be dated from the mid-seventh century.

The other two lintels that have already been mentioned in previous studies originate from the province of Champassak. The first one, discovered in Huei Tomo, was described by Parmentier (1927: 231) as “a tangle of foliage made in a spirit of fun, typical of the primitive Khmer art style with capitals” [Figure 17]. It also belongs to the Kompong Preah style and is reminiscent of some eighth-century lintels found in Cambodia, for example in Ak Yum (cf. Boisselier 1968: fig. 20). The second lintel was brought to the attention of Mireille Bénisti (1974: 154-155) with a photograph that Jean Fillionzat had taken in 1970 in the old city of Wat Phu, perhaps after uncontrolled excavation work



Figure 15: Lintel/door jamb from That Phon, Savannakhet province, Laos [Photograph courtesy of EFEO photographic archives, Fonds Parmentier, PAR00564, dated 1911].



Figure 16: Fragment of lintel from That In Hang, Savannakhet province, Laos [Photograph courtesy of EFEO photographic archives, Fonds Parmentier, PAR00474, dated 1911].

Figure 17: Lintel from Huei Tomo, Champassak province, Laos [Photograph courtesy of Bruno Bruguier, Cisark, ref 871_Bruguier_2009_10].



Figure 18: Lintel (allegedly) from Huei Tomo, Pakse Museum, Champassak province, Laos [Photograph by Michel Lorrillard].



Figure 19: Lintel from Veun Kaen, Pakse Museum, Champassak province, Laos [Photograph by Michel Lorrillard].



Figure 20: Colonettes from Wat Kaeng Toi, Ubon Ratchathani National Museum, Thailand [Photograph by Michel Lorrillard].



Figure 21: Silver mitred Visnu head (lost), found near Wat Phu, Champassak province, Laos [Photograph courtesy of EFEO photographic archives, Fonds Gîteau, GITM01783, dated 1969].

had led to the unearthing of the item. Bénisti considered it evidence that may be essential for a better understanding of the development of pre-Angkorian style. Because of its heterogeneous character, this lintel may be assessed as a transitional model which, according to the standards of Thala Borivat, introduced innovations that were subsequently maintained and developed into the Sambor standards. Bénisti concluded finally that the Champassak lintel was not sufficient evidence to deliver a final opinion on this issue, for it was stylistically unique at the time she wrote.

However, over the past twenty years, field surveys have revealed the existence of twelve other lintels in Champassak province, close to Wat Phu. All of them can be traced to the beginning of the pre-Angkorian period, thus opening new perspectives, not only concerning the history of these types of architectural decoration, but also that of the propagation of the decorative motifs originating from India. These lintels, often very simple in appearance, do not display the complex shapes of those visible in Cambodia, raising the question whether this should be seen as forms of degeneration due to a marginal position or rather an archaic trait. All of these belong to the founding styles of Thala Borivat, Sambor Prei Kuk and Prei Kmeng, though they also display many original features. For instance, they may deliver valuable data when studying the transition between the *makara* figure and the “*heuron*” motif. The real provenance of a few pieces is not always

certain. For example, a nice lintel in Sambor Preah Kuk style [Figure 18] is also reported to come from Huei Tomo, Pathumphon district, but it is not found in Parmentier’s list. The Prei Kmeng style is represented by an elaborate lintel from Veun Kaen [Figure 19], about 50 kilometres downstream to Wat Phu – and in an even more surprising manner by an exceptional lintel that was found in Thailand in Phibun Mangsahan district, Ubon Ratchathani province, in the lower basin of the Mun, at the same place as a lintel in Thala Borivat style (Le Bonheur 1995: 79-80). Other decorated pieces discovered in the vicinity (Dhida 2536: 93), such as colonettes in Prei Kmeng style [Figure 20] in Wat Kaeng Toi (Don Mot Daeng district, Ubon Ratchathani province) and a beautiful decorated base found in Don Mueang Toei (Kham Khuean Kaeo district, Yasothon province) show that this region was far from being isolated from the sculpture workshops where innovative stylistic forms emerged from the seventh century onwards.

The Statuary

It is much too early to submit a comprehensive assessment about the traditions applying to the sculptures that developed in southern Laos as the near totality of the artefacts have been discovered only in and around Wat Phu and the process of inventorying local museum collections has just started.

Christine Hawixbrock (2013) has provided evidence of the wealth and variety of the collections at the Wat Phu Museum, with special emphasis on the significant number of sculptures dating back to the pre-Angkorian era and the very ancient character of some of them. Saiva sculpture is represented mostly by a large number of *lingas* that were found in various scattered places, and some bull statues representing Śiva’s mount. However, no human representation of the god has been discovered to date, including in the specific form of Harihara that is so well represented in pre-Angkor Cambodia (Lavy 2003). Vaiṣṇava sculpture seems to have been much favoured in Wat Phu. Several figures of Viṣṇu have been found, including a magnificent silver head [Figure 21], now lost;¹² these are either standing, with a long *dhoti* or a short *sambot*, or riding Garuḍa who sometimes appears separately. To these we should perhaps add a large sandstone *cakra* and a stone image of a mitred female divinity [Figure 22].¹³ The wealth of ancient Buddhist sculpture at Wat Phu has been the cause of an even greater surprise. It displays features seemingly betraying not only relationships with Dvāravaṭi art – with for instance a large pendant-legged fragment of a seated Buddha¹⁴ [Figure 23] – but also specific links with images from southern Vietnam and Angkor Borei (Funan), especially regarding the head features [Figure 24].¹⁵ Recent excavation work and surveys have also revealed the existence of at least two ancient sanctuaries inside and in the close vicinity of the old city of Wat Phu that seem to have been devoted to Buddha worship, namely Nong Vienne (Santoni & Hawixbrock 1998: 388) and Wat Lakhon in Champassak town.

Further to the north, in Savannakhet province, Parmentier (1927: 235) already mentioned the existence of a statue associated with That In Hang tower, but its unexpected style led him to write “that it cannot be assigned with certainty to primitive Khmer art.” This



Figure 22: Mitred female divinity, Wat Phu Museum, Champassak province, Laos [Photograph courtesy of Stanislas Fradelizi, DPV].



Figure 23: Pendant-legged fragment of seated Buddha, Wat Phu Museum, Champassak province, Laos [Photograph by Michel Lorrillard].



Figure 24: Buddha head from Wat Lakhon, Wat Phu Museum, Champassak province, Laos [Photograph courtesy of Stanislas Fradelizi, DPV].



Figure 25: Brahmanical (?) image, That In Hang, Savannakhet province, Laos [Photograph courtesy of EFEO photographic archives, Fonds Parmentier, PAR00481, dated 1911].

statue broken in two pieces corresponding to the head and the torso has sunk into oblivion since it is now secluded in the pre-Angkorian sanctuary. It is perhaps one of the early rare human representations of Śiva, whose *jaṭāmukūṭa* is composed on the front side of a chignon with three horizontal plaits [Figure 25]. However, the poor condition of the figure and the advanced deterioration of the stone make it impossible to spot details – e.g. a third eye or the moon crescent – to validate this identification.¹⁶ Hindu or Brahmanical iconography is illustrated in the same area by the three decorated metal plates belonging to the treasure found in 2008 in Nong Hua Thong [Figure 26]. These might date back to the eighth century, just like one of the inscriptions engraved on a plate belonging to the same treasure. They may be associated with the rather similar plates reportedly found around Si Thep in Thailand and currently housed at the Norton Simon Museum in California (Woodward 2003: 90). In a recent conference paper (Lorrillard 2012), I have suggested that an overland road may have existed between Si Thep and Nong Hua Thong via Mueang Fa Daet and Kantharawichai to explain such artistic similarities between the two areas.

Conclusion

The number and variety of historical sites dating back to the first millennium CE that have been identified primarily in southern and central Laos but also in their neighbouring regions of modern-day Thailand and Cambodia lead to revisiting the current views about both the role of this continental region in the so-called “Indianisation process” and the movements that marked the dawn of Khmer history. The most recent findings confirm the importance of the Wat Phu region in the early period, and also the existence of a link between its earliest archaeological remains and those which were found much further downstream in Cambodia and southern Vietnam, thus encroaching on the coastal cultural area of Funan.

The Mekong has to a large extent facilitated the first wave that disseminated the ideas and practices from India. Further upstream from Wat Phu, the major tributaries on the right and left banks have contributed to the maintenance of this dissemination up to a certain limit after which the overland routes took over this function. It is now widely recognised that the extraordinary development of the Khmer and Mon cultures from the first millennium CE is to be assigned to the major impact of Indic beliefs and customs on the already well-organised “inland” protohistoric communities. The middle Mekong valley, at a time when Khmer history was apparently rather turbulent (eighth century), certainly continued to play a crucial role, due in particular to the transverse routes that at all times served to connect the western and eastern parts of the Indochinese Peninsula. If, as inferred by Chinese annals and the paucity of inscriptions, a clear distinction between “Land” and “Water Zhenla” is to be given some credit for the period just before the emergence of the Angkorian empire, the territories extending upstream from the Khone falls, i.e. north of present-day Cambodia, certainly offers a rich potential for future archaeological research and should spur more collaborative works amongst scholars of Laos, Thailand and Cambodia.

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Figure 26: Brahmanical image on metal plate, Nong Hua Thong, Savannakhet province, Laos [Photograph courtesy of Viengkeo Souksavaldy].

Endnotes

- 1 This city is sometimes called, after Cœdès, “Śreṣṭhapura.” A more appropriate name, according to the inscriptions, seems to be “Liṅgapura” or even “Kuruṣetra.”
- 2 Contributions in the *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient* (Lorrillard 2013a-b) provide more detailed data in French on all the discovered sites. A paper presented at the 14th EurASEAA Conference also dealt with specific issues concerning the ancient Mon Buddhist culture in Laos (Lorrillard 2012).
- 3 This type of iconography is rare. For a rather similar artefact dating back to second half of the seventh century and found in a nearby area (Sambor), see Baptiste & Zéphir (2008: 48).
- 4 Concerning Tham Pet Thong, Cœdès (1966: 160) refers both to K. 513 and K. 514, dating back to the same period, but the texts are short and not very informative. A third inscription found on the same site has been edited and published (FAD 2529: I, 153-154). This inscription mentions the name Citrasena, so that the total number of known inscriptions commissioned by this prince/king could to date be seventeen.
- 5 Personal communications with Arlo Griffiths and Dominic Goodall (EFEO rubbing no. 1350). The name was read by Cha-em Kacoklai as “Mahipativarman” (FAD 2529: I, 286). Two kings named Nṛpendrādhipativarman (father and son?) appear in another inscription (K. 388) from Nakhon Ratchasima province, some 300 kilometres away to the west, which has been variably attributed from the sixth to the ninth century CE.
- 6 This pre-Angkorian inscription mentions a genealogy of kings who reigned in Saṅkhapūra, i.e. Pravarasena, Kroṅcabahu and Dharmasena; no link could be established with the rulers of Cambodia (Jacques 1995: 43).
- 7 The specific artefacts found in these areas are sufficient to raise new questions about various entities which are mentioned in Chinese annals for the eighth century. On this issue, see Woodward (2010).
- 8 The two documents found in Cambodia in Chroy Ampil (K. 116) and Thma Krê (K. 122) in Kratie province, both sites being close to the banks of the Mekong, just mention Citrasena's princely name. On the basis of more recent inscriptions found in Cambodia (K. 149, K. 151, and K. 153) in which Mahendrarman is mentioned together with his brother and his son, it could be extrapolated and claimed that this king had reigned on regions such as Sambor Prei Kuk.
- 9 Santoni & Hawixbrock (1999: 396), according to information provided by Jacques.
- 10 The chronology of pre-Angkorian rulers is not firm. The dates of the reigns which are given here rather follow Vickery's appreciations (1998).

- 11 Personal communication with Dominic Goodall.
- 12 Madeleine Giteau (2001: 9, 64) dates this head to the beginning of the eighth century.
- 13 Christine Hawixbrock (forthcoming) and Valérie Zaleski (2012: 28) identify it as a representation of goddess Śrī, but John Guy (unpublished report) recognised in this sculpture the goddess Umā (Śiva's wife), an identification which is reported on the Museum caption. Paul Lavy (pers. comm.) also suggests a Śaiva affiliation and proposes more precisely an identification with Durgā.
- 14 On this iconography, see Revire (2011).
- 15 See Zaleski (2012: 60). This Buddha head, like others found in Champassak province, can especially be compared with sculptures found in the Mekong Delta which could date back to the fifth or sixth century (cf. Baptiste 2008: 22-23).
- 16 Paul Lavy (pers. comm.) shares Parmentier's doubts about the Khmer origin of this image and suggests an affiliation with Cham sculpture, especially Khuong My and Tra Kieu styles of the tenth century. The possible artistic influences of Campā in this part of the middle Mekong valley, especially regarding the site of That Phanom, has already been pointed out by Boisselier (1965: 153), Woodward (2003: 133-135) and Piriya (2012: 122).

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