

# Epigraphic Research in Laos

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Compared to the countries that surround it - China, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam - Laos remains rather backward in the field of historical research: its territory is almost untouched by archaeological survey and the vast majority of its written sources have not been analysed or used. The Vientiane centre of the *École Française d'Extrême-Orient* has over the last dozen years conducted studies on a number of vernacular manuscript traditions (religious literature, chronicles, customary law treaties, astrology manuals), and is now also working on an inventory and publication of the rich body of Lao epigraphy. This project, launched in 2001, was formalised on 24 July 2003 through the signing of an agreement with the Department of Museums and Archaeology, part of the Lao Ministry of Information and Culture. It will culminate in the publication of four works presenting all the known material, sorted chronologically, geographically and ethno-linguistically. The first two volumes will be dedicated to epigraphic sources concerning the Lao domain proper: the territory of the unified Lan Xang kingdom (end of the 15<sup>th</sup> – end of the 17<sup>th</sup> centuries) and the territories of the individual kingdoms of Luang Prabang, Vientiane and Champassak (beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries). The third volume will present inscriptions from northern Laos covering the Yuan, Lü and Phouan domains (end of the 18<sup>th</sup> to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries). The fourth volume will stem from research conducted by the Vientiane centre as part of the Khmer Inscriptions Corpus project (CIK): it will cover sources from the pre-Angkorian and Angkorian periods (5<sup>th</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup> centuries), mainly found around the monuments of the Vat Phou complex. Each of these works will consist of photographic reproductions of the inscriptions or their rubbings, a double transcription of the texts (orthographic archaic and modern), French translations accompanied by a commentary, plus a number of resources (glossary, index, maps, etc.). A purely Lao language edition of the corpus is also planned.

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Research on epigraphic sources has been carried out in all the provinces of Laos, as well as in northeast Thailand, where the Lao have long been settled. The work is the fruit of a very productive partnership between the scientific team of the Vientiane centre and the civil and religious authorities, mainly at the district level (systematic visits) and in villages. The first stage consists of identifying the sites where epigraphic documents could exist. The study of maps brings much valuable information, because it provides a picture of the main settlement areas - thought to be ancient and well organised on religious principles - but also and above all of the hubs and outposts of pre-modern communication networks. Meetings with the local culture officers, and with the elders of the villages themselves, allow some refinement of the research. The inscriptions discovered (usually carved on a stone stele or on a Buddha image) are then listed, copied and digitally photographed, and even scanned or rubbed. When they display enough chronological indicators, it is possible to precisely date them through a software package that converts dates to the Julian or Gregorian calendars.

Initial investigations were carried out in 2001 in the Vientiane region, the political heart of greater Lan Xang since the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. These were based on two earlier studies by P.-M. Gagneux and T. Punnothok<sup>1</sup>, which provide a very valuable resource, for they contain together transcriptions of 247 inscriptions conserved in the Lao capital and in northeast Thailand. These inscriptions have mostly been verified through a direct reading of the epigraphic materials and new transcriptions have been made to record the original orthography and script. The list has also been updated to include recently discovered inscriptions, and those inscriptions now lost but recorded by rubbings made by H. Parmentier at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These rubbings have proved extremely useful in reading steles whose inscriptions are now very worn, such as the two steles of Vientiane's That Luang. In addition, comparative analysis of epigraphic materials from

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<sup>1</sup> P.-M. Gagneux. Contribution à la connaissance de la civilisation laotienne d'après l'épigraphie du Royaume de Vientiane (15<sup>th</sup> - 19<sup>th</sup> centuries), 3<sup>rd</sup> cycle EHESS thesis, 1975; Th. Punnothok, Silacareuk Isan Samay Thai-Lao [Isan inscriptions from the Thai-Lao period], Rama Khamheng University, undated (in Thai).

both sides of the Mekong – never carried out before – has allowed the recovery of a good deal of information. This has great implications for our understanding of the region's history, for it contains evidence of the geopolitical and religious importance of various *muang* near the capital, previously missed by historical research.

In March 2002, a mission was carried out in the northern province of Sayaboury. This area was always likely to yield a fair number of epigraphic sources, as it previously marked, on the right-hand bank of the Mekong, the border between the ancient kingdoms of Lan Xang, Lan Na and Ayuthya. The results of the mission surpassed all expectations, with 160 previously unrecorded inscriptions added to the inventory. The great majority of these (130) were found in the three most northern districts of the province, which also happen to be the most difficult to access. Carved, or sometimes painted, on wooden Buddha images, they were mostly left by Lü groups who settled in the region during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and then by Yuan and Shan peoples, the dominant ethnic groups in north Thailand and the northeast of Myanmar. They provide interesting evidence on the history of the settlement of the right-hand side of the Upper Mekong, and are particularly handy for understanding how local forms of Buddhism were transplanted into new geographic and political frameworks. The Lao inscriptions, mainly carved on stone or bronze images, are less numerous, but better distributed over the territory. They are also older (many date from the 16<sup>th</sup> century) and generally associated with sites of rich archaeological potential. This is the case in the north of the province, not far from the Pha Dai cliff (which used to mark the northern border of the Lan Xang kingdom), but also in the central Pak Lay area and in the south along the Nam Heuang, a tributary of the Mekong.

A second mission in northern Laos was conducted in May 2002, this time in Luang Prabang province. The research concentrated on the former royal capital because of the richness and age of its temples. 104 inscriptions were listed and studied, the great majority of which were carved on images of the Buddha (in wood and bronze). Among the most interesting discoveries were various 16<sup>th</sup> century steles which provide

very useful data on the religious history of Lan Xang. Around Luang Prabang, several ancient sites and temples were also identified.

Results from research on Lao inscriptions in the southern province of Champassak, in March 2003, matched expectations. The south of Laos, a long way from the royal powers of Luang Prabang and Vientiane, was reached relatively late by the waves of Buddhism that spread through the T'ai-Lao, and has a rather poor and scattered religious heritage. The total of 17 Lao inscriptions collected was thus relatively satisfying. The most interesting piece is without doubt a Buddha inscribed with the date 1784 and referring to Phra Phutthi Chao Ong Luang, the second sovereign of the Champassak dynasty. Practically all the other inscriptions date from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a time when the south of Laos was under Siamese suzerainty and greatly influenced by Siam. The second purpose of the mission to this province was to update information on Khmer and Sanskrit inscriptions from southern Laos. These inscriptions now number 35, of which seven are kept abroad (four in Cambodia, one in Thailand, one in Vietnam and one in France). While most of these were discovered a long time ago, some were only identified recently and have not yet been assigned an inventory number (K). Among the interesting pieces which require further study, are two digraphic steles (to be compared with the Huei Thamo inscription, K. 362), fragments from Phon Sao E, and the Khone stele (K. 1041), which may perhaps have some connection with the inscriptions of Mahendravarman; and, above all, an inscription from Paksé museum that is written in a script otherwise unknown in the region.

During April-May 2003, a mission was conducted in the northern provinces of Bokeo, Luang Nam Tha and Oudomxay. The results were just as positive as those from the trip to neighboring Sayaboury, with 182 inscriptions detailed. These come from four different cultures and present very distinct elements of interest. The oldest (15<sup>th</sup> –beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century) come from the culture of the Lan Na kingdom. The most important of these inscriptions is without doubt a slate fragment from 1569 found in That Chom Sing at Muang Sing. It effectively proves how far north the Yuan culture extended, a conclusion that had already been suggested by examination of the local chronicles. This is also confirmed by some very old architectural styles found in the area. Most of the other

inscriptions emanate from the Lü and T'ai Hneua cultures, still very present in the north of Laos, southern China (Sip Song Panna) and the adjacent parts of Myanmar. The oldest of these do not date from before the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but do contain elements important for understanding the migrations of T'ai peoples from the Upper Mekong, especially when they are examined in relation to the inscriptions of the same type found in Sayaboury, or in the Thai province of Nan. A few of the inscriptions – those geographically situated on this side of the ancient northern border of Lan Xang – belong to the field of Lao proper studies. These are not very old and can be compared to the inscriptions on wooden Buddhas found in Luang Prabang.

While the northwestern provinces of Laos were among the first to be touched by the Theravada Buddhism that was reawakened by the traditions of Lan Na, the country's northeastern provinces, visited in March-April 2004, were the last places that this current reached. It is important, however, to clearly distinguish between the provinces of Xieng Khuang and Hoa Phan. The former is a specific political and cultural entity that for a long time was at the crossroads of four different influences: Luang Prabang and Vientiane firstly, followed by Vietnam and Siam. Despite the ravages of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century wars, some *stupa* of remarkable size and architectural quality still survive, testament to the vigor of a previously-practiced Buddhism. No stele inscriptions have been recovered in this region however. It could be that they have been destroyed, but it is also possible that they never existed. There are a few images and Buddha thrones, still used to hold ancient texts. These are in bronze and can be placed in two categories: the first is a small group of statues from the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century that reveal the stylistic influence of Vientiane; the second group show superior and manifestly older production techniques, undoubtedly originating from Lan Na and Myanmar.

The very northern region of Hoa Phan was controlled by the Luang Prabang royal family from the onset of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, but Buddhism appears to have arrived very late and only in a very localised manner. Very few examples of bronze statuary with inscriptions have been found: the oldest are from the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and

again show the influence of Vientiane, most likely *via* Xieng Khuang. The Buddhism of the Lao and the Phouan did not spread among the other T'ai groups in Hoa Phan.

Research is currently being carried out on epigraphic sources from the central Lao provinces. This is proving promising, notably in the Mekong river valleys of Borikhamxai, Khammouan and Savannakhet. For example, on the ancient site of Lakhon or Muang Kao (just downriver from Thakhek), a great temple foundation stele has been discovered, carrying the date Thursday, 17 April 1494. This old Lao epigraphic document has significant impact on our perception of the diffusion of Buddhism in Laos, since the earliest evidence previously found along the Mekong has not been further south than Vientiane and its satellite *muang*. While this stele was found very far south, it still carries the mark of Lan Na, particularly in its use of the horoscopic disc, which was imported from Myanmar and spread through all the northern T'ai regions from the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Through the Lao chronicles, it was already obvious that the political and economic centre of Lakhon, from very early on, was closely linked to the Luang Prabang royal family. As the provinces of Khammouan and Savannakhet are rich in totally abandoned ancient sites (which have only just begun to be examined), it is not impossible that in the months to come, other discoveries will be made that will have great effect on our understanding of Laos' past.