CHAPTER 3

Interconnections between Lan Xang Epigraphy and Other Ancient Lao Textual Corpora

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1 Introduction

The study of the textual corpora of the unified Lao kingdom of Lan Xang (fourteenth to seventeenth century CE) is still at a nascent stage. In this context, the theme of this volume—'inscribed copies'—appears at first sight to be particularly challenging when applied to this former politico-cultural area of the Middle Mekong Valley. Epigraphic research is still at the early stage of collecting documents in the field, since no exhaustive inventory of Lao inscriptions has yet been published. Over the past decade, however, the EFEO Centre in Vientiane has undertaken precisely this task, surveying all the provinces of Laos and Northern Thailand to identify inscriptions, document their contexts of production, and prepare critical editions. We have already presented certain features of Lao epigraphy in previous publications, but it will be useful here to begin with a general overview. We will then examine data from the Lao epigraphic corpus that attest to the relatively common practice in the Lan Xang kingdom of duplicating texts for clearly defined objectives. We will thus verify that, beyond the literary tradition (whose transmission is inherent to the genre), there was an administrative textual production based on widely distributed manuscript models. We will conclude with a specific inscription for which several types of original sources can now be identified.

2 Some Generalities on Lao Epigraphy

The first Lao inscriptions dated with certainty appear in the early sixteenth century, first in the northern city of Luang Prabang, the original capital of Lan Xang, and soon after further downstream, around the city of Vientiane, which became the centre of royal power from 1560 until its complete destruction by Bangkok troops in 1828.[1] In the early eighteenth century, the Lan Xang

1 Lorrillard 2018; Lorrillard 2020. All dates in this chapter are in the Common Era (CE).

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kingdom split into three rival principalities—Luang Prabang, Vientiane, and Champassak—which soon came under Siamese rule.

To date, only about 130 Lao inscriptions on stelae have been identified. By contrast, inscriptions on images of the Buddha, cast in bronze, silver, or gold, but also carved in wood, number over six hundred. Most of these images, however, are small, and their text often provides little information. The majority of inscribed stelae were produced between the mid-sixteenth century and the mid-seventeenth century, followed by a long hiatus in lithic epigraphic production until a few stelae reappeared in the early nineteenth century. Almost all Lao inscriptions record the founding of temples or *stūpa*s or donations to shrines (land, servants, Buddha images, etc.).[2]

The turn of the fifteenth and sixteenth century marks a decisive period in the history and development of Lao culture. As noted above, this is the time when the first inscriptions appear, and it also yields the first evidence of scripts, since no older manuscripts have survived. Two relatively distinct Lao scripts can be identified: a 'religious' script, more complex and richer in characters, designed primarily for the notation of Buddhist texts in the Pāli language; and a 'secular' script used mainly for vernacular texts in extra-religious fields. Both writing systems were borrowed from the neighbouring kingdom of Lan Na, in northern Thailand, which reached its cultural peak between the mid-fifteenth and the early sixteenth centuries.[3] Notably, in Lan Na only the first script, of Mon origin and whose name *Tham* ('dharma') betrays its religious character, has survived to the present day. The second script, Fak Kham, derived from the Sukhothai script (itself based on a Khmer model), is known only from ancient inscriptions. It was widely used until the mid-sixteenth century, particularly for the manuscript production of non-religious writings, but was soon supplanted by use of the Tham script, adapted for the notation of the northern Thai language, no doubt under Burmese influence, as Burma controlled the territory of Lan Na from 1558 onwards for two centuries. As with Sukhothai, culturally close to Lan Na but whose apogee is a little earlier (fourteenth century), all written traditions on perishable materials have disappeared. This makes it difficult to establish a link between the high-quality inscriptions on stelae and earlier manuscript models that must have existed.

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2 We know of only two examples of Lao inscriptions devoted to other subjects: a 1563 treaty of 'friendship' between the kingdom of Lan Xang and the kingdom of Ayuthya (the Dansai stela) and a 1530 stela from Luang Prabang apparently marking the boundaries of private land (both discussed below).

3 Lorrillard 2022a.

The written culture of Lan Xang, preserved mainly on palm leaves, owes a great deal to the written culture of Lan Na, particularly in the sphere of religious literature. The Lao historiographic tradition itself has its origins in a Buddhist hagiographic tradition that developed earlier in northern Thailand. The first Lao chronicles must have been written in the mid-sixteenth century, but the surviving texts are essentially late compilations. Because of successive wars, only the chronicles of Luang Prabang preserve a memory of Lao royal succession from the fourteenth to the nineteenth centuries. Until the early 2000s, the few studies devoted to Lao history were based solely on these northern chronicles, whose content was often accepted in a literal and uncritical manner. As a result, the immense field of Lao written culture, with its various corpora of religious texts, technical treatises, codes of customary law, fictional histories, etc., remained largely ignored. Stela inscriptions commemorating temple foundations and privileges were also neglected, as was the archaeological data. Over the past two decades, however, historical research methods have been renewed. This has made it possible to reconsider the history of the Lan Xang kingdom on a new basis, and to situate it within the wider cultural landscape shaped by earlier civilisations (Mon, Khmer) that left enduring legacies, particularly in the material domain, across Laos and northeastern Thailand.

The comparative study of chronicles and epigraphic sources has, first of all, enabled us to consolidate our knowledge of the chronology. More importantly, it has revealed correspondences between inscriptions and certain versions of the annals, notably texts in the Pāli language that until now had been ignored. This made it possible to carry out a true stratigraphic analysis of the Lao historiographic tradition, revealing layers of ancient data that rare manuscript copies have not altered. In a previous contribution, I have shown how an event that occurred in Luang Prabang in 1527—commemorated the same year in stone and later recalled in a different form in a 1555 inscription—left a profound imprint on the historiographic tradition, in particular through the reinterpretations and extrapolations found in Lao manuscript copies until the mid-twentieth century.[4] This offers a significant example of intertextual relations between two distinct written media: stone and palm leaves. It demonstrates that historiographers could occasionally use inscriptions as sources of information, or even as models. The reverse relationship, i.e. the use of manuscript texts for the production of inscriptions—which is the subject that concerns us here—is less immediately evident, since no complete Lao text survives in both manuscript and epigraphic form where the manuscript can clearly be shown

4 Lorrillard 2021a.

to be the earlier source. However, it is clear that epigraphic production did not develop in total isolation. On the contrary, it is linked to, and in many respects dependent on, an underlying manuscript culture.

We have evidence, for instance, that the inscription engravers borrowed formulas from handwritten texts, especially from religious literature on palm leaves. This is particularly clear when the terminology used is in the Pāli language, a feature made all the more evident by the use of the Tham script in Lao inscriptions. A case in point is the introductory lines of the first dated Lao inscription in religious script—the stela of Vat Sangkhalok in Luang Prabang (12 April 1527), which is also the second oldest dated Lao inscription in the country. Describing the virtues of King Phothisarat (r. 1520–1548), these lines are directly inspired by a passage of the Pāli *Abhidhamma*. Such examples can thus directly inform us about the level of religious culture reached in a specific place and at a given time.[5]

3 The Precious Metal Plates

Although the material evidence does not allow us to prove conclusively that a manuscript text served directly as a model for the engraving of an inscription, we do know that the inscriptions drew on complex intertextual relationships with diverse sources and media. The practice of the engraver using earlier texts—either by copying them in full or in part, adapting their formulas, or alluding to their content—is already attested by explicit or implicit references in several epigraphic documents.

The clearest formula appears in the first line of the large stela of Wat Sri Muang at Nong Khai, some twenty kilometres downstream from Vientiane. It states literally that 'this text is on a gold plate (*lāp kham*) and it is the same words as here'. It is significant that this information even precedes the date (4 March 1567), which is usually the first piece of data engraved on the stone. Since the inscription is explicitly presented as a royal ordinance (*rāja-ājñā*), establishing measures for the foundation of a temple bearing the name Wat Sri Suphan Aram and the privileges it enjoyed, it is only logical that the lapicide had a model for his text. Was this the gold plate itself or a copy on another, less precious medium? In any case, this reference to an original text reproduced using the 'same words' is unique in Lao epigraphic production. It raises the question whether, in other cases, copies were less faithful to the original—since

5 Lorrillard 2021a, 57.

by function, material constraints, and undoubtedly other practical reasons, a manuscript text and stone inscription could never be rendered in exactly the same form.

The use of texts engraved on precious metal media already appears in earlier Lan Na inscriptions. The stela at Wat Prasat in Chiang Saen, dated 9 August 1496, records that donations of slaves and land were made in accordance with those indicated on a gold plate, guaranteed by the king and queen mother.[6] At Wat Mün Rai in Chiang Rai, in an inscription dated to the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century, the queen is said to have issued an order on a gold plate for the donation of slaves.[7] These documents, whose precious medium alone conveyed royal authority, clearly contained precise directives, but they do not appear to be complete models for the stela inscriptions that mention them. Instead, Lan Na's lithic epigraphic sources reflect local contexts and reveal a certain freedom of composition that is largely absent from later Lan Xang inscriptions. If the Lan Na stelae were engraved on the basis of previously prepared texts, these models were likely the work of local scholars or dignitaries attached to a city or an administrative centre (*muang*) across a vast territory where the practice of writing was evidently widespread. By contrast, the engraving of royal ordinances in Lan Xang appears to have been the task of a small number of agents dispatched directly by the Lao royal court.

Very few metal-leaf inscriptions have been found in the territory of the ancient kingdom of Lan Xang, and none can be identified as a direct model for a stela inscription. An exceptional case is an inscribed gold leaf discovered at Vat Chom Tay in Vientiane in 1954, later stolen in 1975 with no surviving photographic reproduction. Fortunately, Pierre-Marie Gagneux studied this piece and thus preserved its contents.[8] This sheet bore an exact date—Thursday, 13 February 1567—and referred to an important dignitary, Phaya Siharat Ananda, referred to as Chao Vieng Chan ('lord' of Vientiane), as the founder of a *stūpa*. Formally, this document most closely resembles the short inscriptions found on Buddha images or their thrones, though parallels can also be drawn with certain brief stela inscriptions. Of particular interest is this document's engraved horoscopic disk of the day, with planetary positions rendered accurately, a feature frequently shared by stela inscriptions but rare in other inscription media. Although we do not know the exact *stūpa* that the text refers to, the founder's high rank suggests that it was a monument of some size, which

6 Penth et al. 1997, 77–90.

7 Penth et al. 2008, 159–171.

8 Gagneux 1975, 182–183.

may have given rise to the production of other documents. The gold leaf of Vat Chom Tay is thus comparable to references to similar materials already noted. While not a direct prototype for a stela, it may have served as a source of information—in this case, a precisely dated record linked to a favourable astronomical and astrological configuration—that could later be incorporated into a more important inscription.

4 Duplication of Epigraphic Documents

Some epigraphic evidence proves that the more or less perfect duplication of the same text on two or more lithic surfaces was possible, even if the reasons and preliminary stages remain unclear. One of the earliest dated stelae of the Lan Xang kingdom, that of Wat Daen Muang (no. 1) in Phon Phixai (Northeast Thailand)—the former Muang Pak Huay Luang, some 100 kilometres downstream from Vientiane by river (only 50 km by land)—appears to testify to the clumsiness of the first Lao lapicides.[9] The object, whose lower part was long hidden within a cement gangue, reveals that the Lao engravers re-used a Mon *bai sema*, that is to say a cult object sculpted earlier, between the eighth and eleventh centuries, as was often the case in the sixteenth century in the Vientiane region. This stela bears almost the same text on both sides, dated to Tuesday, 28 March 1531, inscribed in the upper parts. The engraving is extremely crude, especially on one face where the text fills all the available space without any prior attention to the overall composition. Lacking room to complete the inscription, the engraver repeated it on the reverse side, this time calibrating the text according to the space available, and even adding the horoscopic disk at the top, aligning the inscription more closely with the models from Lan Na. In this particular case, it is possible that the engraver composed his first version without working from a written model, producing the text directly on stone. The wording appears spontaneous and clumsy, whereas the second version shows greater precision and clarity, suggesting better preparation. The text refers to a power (*ājñā*) given by the king (*mahārāt*) to local authorities. Yet, this reference does not seem to imply the prior existence of a written document relating to the foundation of Wat Daen Muang and its boundaries, the subjects of the inscription. At that time—during the early years of Phothisarat's reign (1520–1548)—royal power in the Vientiane region was not yet fully consolidated, as it would become a few years later.

9 Punnothok 1987, 230–235.

A second example of duplicated stone inscriptions belongs to a very different context: the installation of King Setthathirat in the ancient city of Vientiane (around 1560), which became the new capital of the kingdom. Our sources from this period are characterised by accounts of great works and donations relating to That Luang *stūpa* of Vientiane—referred to at this time as the 'Phra Mahā Thāt Chao Chiang Mai' (great *stūpa* of the lord/king of Chiang Mai). The site is first mentioned in an important sandstone stela (height 1.22 m; width 92 cm; thickness 16 cm), dated Saturday, 4 May 1566, and again in a second stela of similar appearance (height 1.15 m; width 75 cm; thickness 12 cm), dated 1593/1594 (reign of Hno Muang), which extends privileges to distant domains.[10] These two beautiful inscriptions are placed on either side of the eastern door of the monument. Another Setthathirat ordinance engraved in stone, dated 12 September 1567, also records details of nearby lands granted to the *stūpa*. This text survives on two different stelae: one preserved at Vat Ho Phra Kaeo, the other located at Vat Hnong Bone, in the immediate vicinity of That Luang.[11] The first is in a good state of conservation and allows for an almost complete restitution of its text. The second is heavily damaged, but enough fragments survive across the inscription to demonstrate that its text is identical to that of the first stela. One stela is therefore a copy of the other, unless both are based on the same model.

The stela now preserved at Vat Ho Phra Kaeo is a sandstone block 84 cm high, 63 cm wide and 10 cm thick. The choice of stone appears not to have been dictated by aesthetic considerations: the inscription is engraved on a practically untreated material (the levelling is very rough), with numerous surface irregularities. The scribe was not overly affected by this: he engraved across both the flat and 'hollow' parts. The writing is, however, quite beautiful and—uniquely among Lao inscriptions—the second side still preserves the horizontal guide lines that regulated the size of the characters. Both sides are inscribed: the first has fourteen lines, the second ten. The stela that remains at Vat Hnong Bone is 88 cm high, 50 cm wide, and 15 cm thick. The sandstone used is the same as that of the large stela at That Luang. It also shares the shape of the latter and the stone has been perfectly prepared to receive its text. Today, only fifteen lines remain on the first side and nine lines on the second, all incomplete. It is clear, however, that additional lines—now completely erased—once existed on the upper part of the first face and on the lower part of the second

10 Lorrillard 2003. The mention 'king of Chiang Mai' applies either to Setthathirat who actually reigned for a short period, from 1548, in Lan Na, or to his grandfather who was also ruler of this kingdom in the early sixteenth century.

11 Lorrillard 2003.

face. A comparative study of the two stelae does not allow us to determine conclusively which was the original and which its copy. Both inscriptions are written in the same variety of Tham script—the 'Tham Lan Na'—suggesting that both texts were engraved in the mid-sixteenth century. At first glance, the crude form of the stela at Vat Ho Phra Kaeo might suggest that it was hastily engraved and that it served as a draft, later replaced by a more carefully executed version in keeping with the royal inscriptions. It is possible, however, that the inscription preserved at Vat Hnong Bone was the original, and that the Vat Ho Phra Kaeo example was produced as a copy on inferior material. In support of this last thesis, one could argue that copies, by definition less ancient than the originals, are more likely to be better preserved. In this case, however, this argument must be rejected, because we know that the stela of Vat Hnong Bone was long used to sharpen knives and therefore deteriorated much more quickly. A third possibility is that both stelae were engraved at the same time from the same model, now lost, with the intention they be placed in different locations. The text itself seems to support this hypothesis, since it records that the lands offered to the *stūpa* and the *saṅgha* (clergy) were vast and widely dispersed.

Another lithic testimony seems to attest to this process of duplication aimed at disseminating the same royal message in different places. This is stela no. 2 from Wat Daen Muang in Phon Phixai, dated Tuesday, 21 September 1535, carved on a reused Mon *bai sema*, whose material is exactly the same type of support as stela no. 1 from the same temple.[12] The text has many interesting aspects, some of which have been analysed elsewhere.[13] What concerns us here is that the royal ordinance was clearly not written, as is usually the case, for a specific temple with its particular provisions. Instead, it is addressed to a group of sanctuaries located in a more or less defined space. It also seems to be part of a series of reforms of Buddhist practice that King Phothisarat sought to implement across his realm, first in Luang Prabang around 1527 and later in Vientiane, where he probably settled for a time—hence the city being mentioned, for the first time, with the qualifier *rājadhānī* (royal town, or capital). The king explicitly commands that his 'purifying' ordinance be carried by dignitaries to all the temples in Chanthaburi (Vientiane) and, it is implied, to Pak Huay Luang (Phon Phixai), where the Phaya Saen, the first dignitary named in the text, usually resides. One can deduce that the original decree circulated on highly mobile material supports—engraved sheets of metal or palm

12 Punnothok 1987, 236–240.

13 Lorrillard 2021a.

leaves (or even inscribed wood, or paper or cloth marked with ink)—and that it was eventually copied onto stelae, as in the case of stela no. 2 at Wat Daen Muang, while other stelae have now disappeared. The royal rhetoric of the 1535 ordinance proved influential, for this inscription is also the first in Lan Xang to conclude with a warning to local lords who might not respect the privileges of the temple, threatening them with the most terrible hell. This recourse to dissuasive imprecation was undoubtedly a response to a recurring problem and such threats would be used systematically, with little variation, in later royal inscriptions.

A particular example also highlights the copying process, this time adapted to two distinct sets of observers (witnesses or readers). This is the famous Dansai stela (in the Thai province of Loei), discovered at a geographical site that remarkably marks the watershed between the Mekong and the Menam Chao Phraya—a pass of clear importance in antiquity. It was here that an oath of friendship was sworn on 7 July 1560 between the Lan Xang and Ayuthya kingdoms, and a *sema* was installed on 6 May 1563 to mark the union of the two parties.[14] The *sema* in question was probably the stela itself, which indeed has the characteristic shape of this type of ritual marker. The inscription refers to the number 'two', which, in this unclear passage, may refer to its two inscribed faces, each a specific version of a common text (Thai and Lao languages are very similar). One face, written in Tham script, represents the Lan Xang kingdom version; the other, in Khom or Khmer script (often used for official documents) was for the Ayuthya kingdom. Apart from these graphic differences and the precedence given to either Chanthaburi (Vientiane) or Ayuthya, depending on the intended audience, both sides clearly derive from the same preliminary model, which must have existed on a light and mobile medium. The rhetoric employed, as well as the use of the *saka* era instead of the small era (*culasakarāja*)—systematically used in the Middle Mekong Valley—lead us to believe that the original text was composed primarily by Ayuthya scholars. A meticulous analysis of the content (unfortunately incomplete, since the stela has been broken into several fragments and parts have disappeared) will undoubtedly allow us to clarify the context of its writing. In any case, we are in the presence of a unique document—a diplomatic inscription—unparalleled in the region, with no manuscript equivalent predating the late eighteenth century.

14 Finot 1915, 28–36. This stela, which was brought to Luang Prabang in the early twentieth century by the Maha Uparat Boun Khong, sent to the Hanoi museum, and then returned to Laos in 1954 (it is currently in the Vat Ho Phra Kaeo museum), was itself copied onto a manuscript, then onto a new stela, which can currently be seen at That Sri Song Hak in Dansai.

5 The Role of Forms: *rāja-ājñā*, *kongdin*, etc.

The fact that most stela inscriptions—at least those that refer to royal authority—were produced according to a general model, or at minimum a set of widely diffused rhetorical patterns, is clear from their content and form. Not all of them were necessarily based on a specific master copy, such as the Wat Sri Muang stela, or on a broadly applicable decree copied onto several stelae, such as that of Wat Daen Muang no. 2. Yet, all belong to a set of texts that is explicitly presented as *rāja-ājñā*, i.e. royal ordinances. Although this type of production is already visible in Lan Na epigraphy, it is far more pronounced in the epigraphy of Lan Xang. Unlike the inscriptions of northern Thailand, which often give pride of place to narrative, those of Laos are strikingly stereotyped in both character and structure. Generally, they begin with a horoscopic disk in which the planets are positioned for a specific moment. A date follows—usually corresponding to the position of the planets in the disk—but indicated in a much more obvious way, thanks to the use of several calendrical systems. They thus explicitly express their character as royal ordinances, name the temple concerned, and list the donations made to it, as well as the names of local witnesses from both religious and lay communities. Finally, they end with imprecatory formulas directed against malevolent secular dignitaries. Such uniformity could only have been achieved through the rapid establishment of a general form recognised by local authorities—both lay and religious—and perhaps also in a broader way in the collective consciousness. Nothing was left to the discretion of the engravers. Their role was strictly contained, and when a stone inscription falls into the category of *rāja-ājñā*, the texts are often strikingly standardised, reduced to a set of summary data.

A few epigraphic texts in the margins—among the oldest we possess—nevertheless bear witness to a different model of writing. These are associated with practices that seem to have been widespread throughout northern Laos, and whose evolving character is also visible in manuscript production. This is the category of writings designated by the term *kongdin* (the territory) whose primary purpose is to delimit a space by carefully circling its limits—an idea expressed by the first element of the compound (*kong* = circle). The first stone inscription to be dated with certainty, stela no. 1 of Vat Yai Pha Hot in Muang Sanakham from 1510/1511, can certainly be classified as a *kongdin*, since fourteen of its twenty-five lines are devoted to listing the physical landmarks (trees, canals, ponds, etc.) that mark the boundaries of the territory allocated to a new temple. A stela from Luang Prabang dated 8 January 1530 departs even further from the rest of the epigraphic production: totally secular in character, it makes no reference to any religious action (Figure 3.1). Sixteen of its twenty-three lines



FIGURE 3.1 *Kongdin* type stone stela, Luang Prabang, 1530. Photograph © Michel Lorrillard

are also intended to delimit a set of lands purchased by an individual, again according to precise landmarks. This practice appears to have been adopted only partially in regions further downstream, whose topography was different, especially around Vientiane. From the mid-sixteenth century, the boundaries for temple territories were still recorded in inscriptions, but according to procedures that are often much simpler: in particular, a central point was taken as a reference and distances were calculated in a linear manner in the four cardinal directions. From the seventeenth century onward, manuscripts from northern Laos using different media (palm leaves, paper, fabrics) preserve numerous other testimonies of the *kongdin* type. The two early stelae, dating from the early sixteenth century, thus show that the practice was much older. One can also assume that these two epigraphic examples were inspired by handwritten models.[15] The stone engraving of *kongdin*, however, was probably short-lived. Their highly precise delimitation of territories could not remain valid over time—especially for large areas, where boundaries were subject to regular revision. One *kongdin* could easily be replaced by another.

6 Authentication and Legitimation of the Document

In contrast to the large corpus of customary law (*kotmāy*) manuscripts, whose prototypes have disappeared and whose successive and multiple copies soon entered the timeless field of 'tradition', the texts recognised as *rāja-ājñā* or *kongdin* (sometimes found in an amalgamated form) are tied to specific times and places and, consequently, appear as genuine administrative documents. The same can be said of most Lao stela inscriptions that derive from these models.

This administrative character is underscored by formal aspects of the presentation of the documents. In the introductory formula that asserts the legitimacy of the inscription, the term *rāja-ājñā* is often associated with the ancient formula *lāy chum*, which clearly refers to a graphic mark analogous to a seal. The chronicles of Lan Na, for the earliest periods, already used this formula in connection with official documents of high value. In Lan Na inscriptions, the horoscopic disk—by virtue of its graphic representation—generally functioned as this legitimating mark. However, in some royal inscriptions from the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, the place usually occupied by the horoscopic disc contains a symbolic representation consisting of a circle enclosing a decoration, which may properly be interpreted as a seal. Similar conclusions can be drawn with regard to the Lan Xang kingdom, where horo-

15 On this point, see the discussion below.



FIGURE 3.2
Rubbing of the Don Hon temple stela inscription, with clumsy reproduction of a Chinese seal in top left corner. Archives of the École française d'Extrême-Orient, Fonds Laos, no. N111

scopic disks likewise occupy a central role in legitimating documents. In some cases, however, other graphic representations more clearly evoke seals. One particularly striking case—anecdotal yet enlightening and significant in terms of the turbulent political context of the time (subjection to Burma for some twenty years)—is the engraving carved in 1577 at the top of the stela found in Don Hon (an island on the Mekong in the Lao province of Sayabouri). Here, the engraver appears to have placed a clumsy copy of a Chinese seal addressed to Lan Xang (Figure 3.2).[16] Although the inscription concerns donations made to a temple, this curious preliminary reference may have been intended to recall

16 Finot 1915, 36–38.



FIGURE 3.3 Royal ordinance on canvas (*bai cum*) from the Lord Governor of Chanthaburi (Vientiane) to Phraya Khwang Ma of the city of Pua, 1652. © National Library of Bangkok, after Phaibunwangcaroen 2000, 61, *bai cum* no. 3

the ancient relationship of dependence that bound the Lao kingdom to the Chinese 'Celestial Empire', thus signifying his opposition to the new Burmese domination. The engraver may have chosen to reproduce in stone ideograms whose symbolic charge he knew, albeit imperfectly. The temple of Don Hon was clearly an important religious foundation, revered by Lan Xang kings since the early sixteenth century. Yet, how this Chinese 'text', however inaccurately copied, came to be known and reproduced at this site remains difficult to explain.

Closer to the horoscopic disk, other graphic marks—long considered as simple decorative elements—more properly testify to the legitimacy conferred

on the act. In all cases, it is a disk placed at the head of the inscription, whose edge is formed by a double circle containing regular motifs (triangles, small circles, etc.) and whose interior is marked by a central point from which rays or flower petals radiate. Frequently, the disc is itself enclosed in a square with several concentric borders, whose corners are sometimes cut by a series of lines. This last representation is especially striking. We observe the same type of image painted on some thirty long manuscripts on canvas or traditional paper found in the northern province of Hua Phan.[17] These texts, dating from the mid-sixteenth to the mid-nineteenth century, are all royal ordinances, mainly from Vientiane (Figure 3.3). The correspondence between the manuscripts and the inscriptions is unmistakable, reinforced by certain shared rhetorical formulas that introduce the texts. Notably, many of these ordinances contain real *kongdin*—detailed demarcations of large territories—thus linking the manuscript tradition back to practices whose antiquity can be verified by epigraphy.

7 A Particular Case: The Vat Vixun Inscription and Its Models

Comparative analysis of Lao written sources on media as different as stone, metal, palm leaf, cloth, or traditional paper has only just begun, yet it already attests to intertextual relationships that are sometimes complex and difficult to reconstruct. For the moment, we seem to have only one example of an inscription that could have been inspired directly by a purely literary tradition, in this case a religious chronicle. This conclusion is based less on the presumed dating of the two types of documents (which appear to be more or less contemporary) than on the fact that the second one is both richer and more precise, and thus evidently closer to the now-lost original document (an engraved metal plate?).

The short epigraphic document whose text and translation are published in the Appendix was discovered early on (Figure 3.4). It is an inscription of ten lines engraved on a schist plaque, unearthed in 1887 at Vat Vixun in Luang Prabang by Auguste Pavie and then taken a few years later to the Hanoi Museum where it is still preserved.[18] The plaque is broken into several fragments, and both its upper and lower parts are missing. The upper part once indicated the date, of which only the final indications—concerning the day and the approximate hour—have been preserved. The lower part probably held the end of

17 Lorrillard 2021b.

18 Pavie 1898, 381–383. Pavie's rubbing shows only nine of the ten lines.

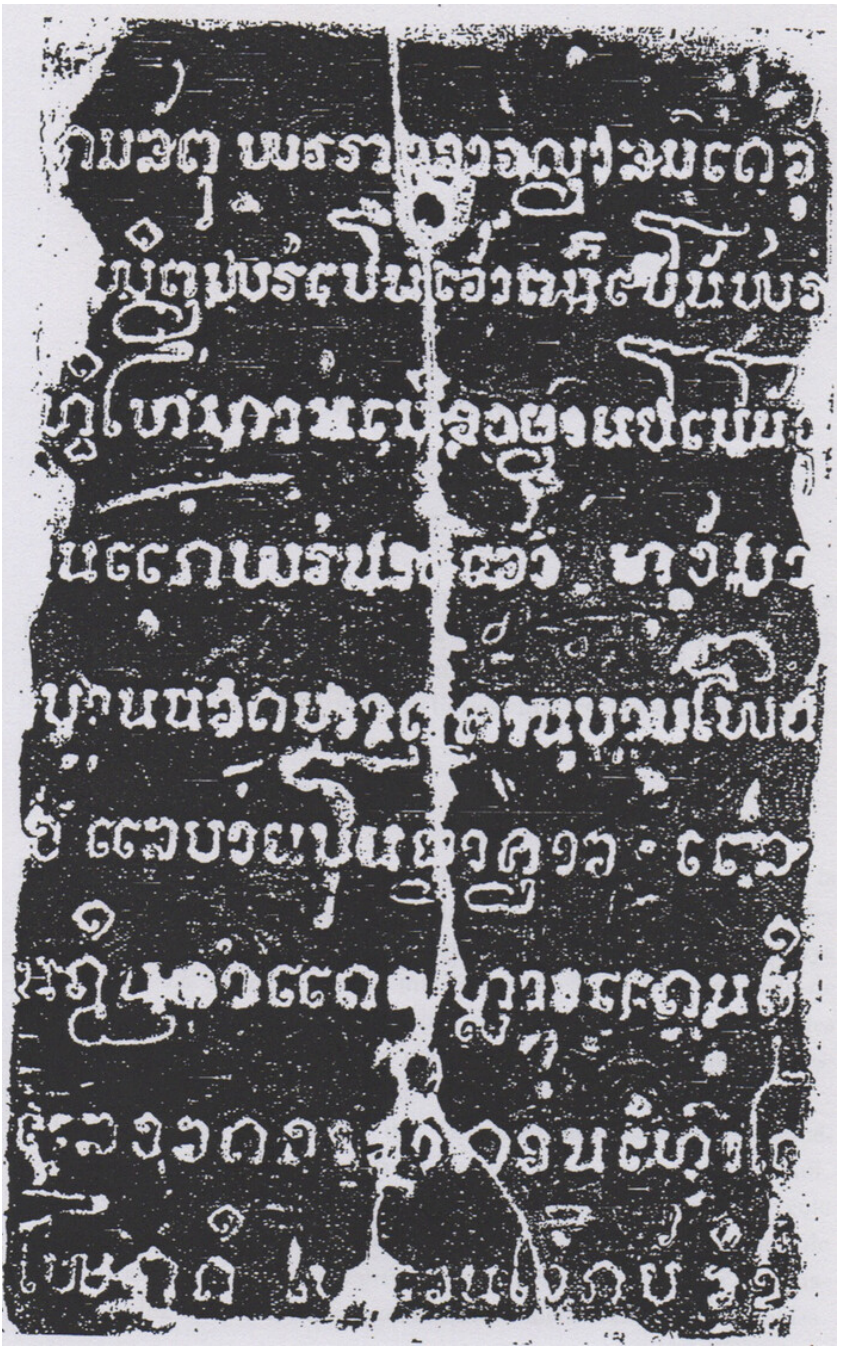

FIGURE 3.4 Vat Vixun inscription, second half of the sixteenth century. Rubbing by Auguste Pavie (Pavie 1898, inscription XVI)

the text, including a typical concluding formula. The year of engraving is not known to us, but palaeographic clues tend to suggest the second half of the sixteenth century, since other inscriptions from northern Laos and northern Thailand display the same elegant type of Fak Kham writing. A misreading by Father Schmit in the late nineteenth century, compounded by a lack of knowledge of the regional historical context, long led to the mistaken belief that this small inscription concerned gifts made to Phra Naray, i.e. to Vishnu. However, a recent study shows that the real recipient of the gifts is the Phra Bang, the famous Buddha image that gave its name to the ancient capital of Lan Xang.[19] The place where the stela was found, as well as the reference in the text to Vat Vixun, were already sufficient to identify the Phra Bang, since tradition holds that this statue was kept for a long time in this temple founded for him in 1512. Consideration of previously neglected texts now reveals a great deal of information about the association of the Phra Bang and Vat Vixun. It appears that a charter, since lost, inspired both the manuscript traditions and the epigraphic production.

The inscription of Vat Vixun is limited to listing six localities (*muang* 'chief town' and *bān* 'villages')—one of which is composite and seems to associate two distinct places. It also contains a vague mention of taxes and servants granted for the service of the Phra Bang and Vat Vixun. Due to missing parts, one of the village names is illegible, while another survives only in part (Ban Phon …). The remaining (four or) five are Muang Pha Noy, Ban Not / (Muang?) Hat Khan, Ban Pun Pha Khao, and Ban Thin Kham Daeng. It is clear that this inscription, which mentions the king without naming him, was only a secondary document, a synthetic reminder of an earlier, much more complete act.

The statue of Phra Bang—traditionally believed to have come from Cambodia but more likely originating on the plain of Vientiane—has been venerated in the Lan Xang kingdom since at least the second half of the fifteenth century. This veneration was magnified in the mid-sixteenth century with the rise of a written hagiographic tradition, inspired by important models from the neighbouring Lan Na kingdom. Chronicles of precious statues are characterised by accounts of mythical origins and legendary peregrinations, with the progressive integration of historical memory, notably that of the royal dynastic succession. The story of the Phra Bang is the nucleus for two distinct historiographical traditions that emerged in the second half of the sixteenth century: that of the *Nithan Khun Borom* (Story of Khun Borom) and the corpus eventually known as the *Phongsavadan* (Chronicles).

19 Lorrillard 2022b.

The *Nithan Khun Borom* appears to have been completed toward the end of the Setthathirat reign (1548–1571). The Phra Bang story plays a central role, but it is mainly used to highlight the role of King Fa Ngum (1353–1373), founder of the Lan Xang kingdom, who is presented both as the heir of a (mythical) dynasty of lords of divine origin and as the ancestor of a (historical) line of rulers respectful of Buddha's Law. Vixun (1501–1520) occupies a special place in the narrative, and it is possible that the writing of the chronicle started during his reign, or at least that documents from that period influenced the historiographer. Hitherto neglected manuscript versions of the *Nithan Khun Borom* provide fairly precise information about the privileges that Vat Vixun would have enjoyed after its foundation, as well as its boundaries, when the Phra Bang was invited to reside there, around 1515, after a stay at an older temple. One passage resonates directly with our inscription, since it refers to the large and small localities (*muang* and *bān*) offered specifically for the service of the statue, explicitly citing Muang Hat Khan and Muang Pha Noy, i.e. two of the seven places mentioned on the stone. It also specifies the assignment of 80 families of servants, and refers to the transcription of this information onto gold plates bearing the seal (*sai nai hlāp kham*, *sai hlāp thong lè cum*). This last detail is of particular importance.

While the *Nithan Khun Borom* gives Phra Bang a special place in its narrative, it is another textual tradition that emphasises the story of the statue more fully: the *Aḍḍhabhāgabuddharūpanidāna* (Account of the Buddha Image [Made of Different] Shares of Wealth), a hagiographic chronicle in Pāli composed by the monk Ariyavamsa during the third quarter of the sixteenth century, although its narrative concludes at the end of Vixun's reign (1520).[20] Together with the *Amarakaṭabuddharūpanidāna* (Story of the Phra Kaeo or Emerald Buddha), which extends the narrative until around 1570, it constitutes a prototype for later vernacular chronicles. These include successive versions of the Phra Bang story (*Nithan Phra Bang*, *Pheun Phra Bang*, *Tamnan Phra Bang*), and ultimately the Lao historiographical tradition of the *Phongsavadan*, which continued into the late nineteenth century. While the *Aḍḍhabhāgabuddharūpanidāna* does allude to rich offerings made to Vat Vixun and to the Phra Bang statue, its concise character, peculiar to this type of composition in the Pāli language, prevents detailed description. More precise information instead appears in two successive Lao versions: the *Pheun Phra Bang* (Land of Phra Bang), also written shortly after 1570, and in a single manuscript found of the *Tamnan*

20 Schnake 2025.

Phra Bang (Chronicle of Phra Bang), composed around 1620.[21] Without dwelling on the exceptional interest of these two texts, let us simply say that they consist of eclectic compilations and that several of them seem to be directly inspired by earlier documents, such as the previously mentioned *rāja-ājñā*. The administrative character of the sources used for our chronicles is proven by the 'copy/paste' reuse of typical rhetorical formulas also well attested in the Lao epigraphic corpus: the introductory formula *Subham astu phra rāja-ājñā somdet* … ('May there be happiness! The royal ordinance of His Majesty'), of a specific clause (*pakān* 1) and imprecatory formulas supposed to prevent the non-observance of the royal decision by malevolent dignitaries. These sources may well have been the engraved gold plates referred to in the *Nithan Khun Borom*. Compared to the latter text, the information preserved by the *Pheun Phra Bang* and the *Tamnan Phra Bang* is more complete. Both list the seven localities indicated in the inscription of Vat Vixun—Muang Pha Noy, Ban Mot, Muang Hat Khan, Ban Not (Noat), Ban Thin Kham Daeng, Ban Pun Pha Khao, and Ban Phon Thong. The second and last names allow us to reconstruct the missing text on the stela. They also mention the different taxes attached to these localities, details absent from the inscription itself. It thus appears that at least three types of documents and media recorded the arrangements made for Vat Vixun and the Phra Bang statue: official acts (*rāja-ājñā*) engraved on precious metal (gold) plates, chronicles that integrated information from these acts, and a stone inscription that preserved only condensed data from the preceding documents. This inscription, by virtue of its medium and format, was fixed to the monument and played a secondary role. It is highly probable that a genuine foundation and donation stela also existed—comparable to the more precise documents offered by the lithic epigraphic corpus of Lan Xang—but has since been lost. A similar situation is suggested by the *stūpa* of Vat Mahathat in Luang Prabang, where only a sandstone plaque attached to the monument survives, recording information on the taxes decided in 1548.[22]

8 Conclusion

If the models used for the writing of the Lan Xang inscriptions have now disappeared, the references contained in various sources—not least the epigraphic documents themselves—make it clear that these original texts were mostly

21 Lorrillard 2021a and 2022b.

22 Lorrillard 2022b.

royal ordinances: administrative acts that were first engraved on precious metal sheets, especially in gold and silver. These acts conformed to rhetorical models whose earliest examples in Laos can be dated to the early sixteenth century, but which clearly reflect cultural influence from the kingdom of Lan Na (northern Thailand), already evident by the mid-fifteenth century. At the same time, they seem to have integrated practices typical of northern Laos, such as the delimitation of territories according to toponymic and topographic markers, as exemplified in the *kongdin* texts. It is possible that in the particular case of certain foundations—that are difficult to quantify—versions on palm leaves were also used. Since this material is fragile and these uses are very localised, such models would have disappeared quickly. The provisions relating to Vat Vixun may be the only surviving witness to this type of practice, owing both to the importance of the Phra Bang as recipient of the donations and to the written tradition relating to this statue, which became inseparable from Lao historiographical tradition itself, marked both by the *Nithan Khun Borom* and by vernacular versions stemming from the *Aḍḍhabhāgabuddharūpanidāna* and the *Amarakaṭabuddharūpanidāna*. The study of intertextual relationships among Lao written sources is still in its infancy. Future archaeological research, particularly into the materials still contained within certain religious monuments, notably the *stūpa*, will shed further important light on this subject.

Appendix: Text of the Vat Vixun Inscription

Transcription in Fak Kham Script

1 [...]ມ[ວ]າຍ[ຍ]ານ[ ] ...]
2 [ᩈ]ᩃᩋᩈᩢᩫ ᩋᩢᩫᩁᩫᩋᩫᩁᩫᩋᩫᩊᩫᩃᩫ ᩈᩋᩋᩫᩋᩫ
3 [ᩅᩫᩁᩋᩅᩫ]ᩋᩢᩫᩁᩫ ᩋᩢᩫᩁᩫᩋᩫᩅᩫᩋᩫᩁᩫᩋᩫᩅᩫᩋᩫᩁᩫᩋᩢᩫᩁᩫ
4 [ᩈᩫᩁᩫᩈᩫ]ᩁᩫᩁᩫᩋᩫᩁᩫᩋᩫᩁᩫ ᩋᩫᩁᩫᩋᩫᩁᩫᩋᩫᩁᩫ

Transcription in Modern Lao Script

1 -ມື້ຣ(ວ)າຍຍິຍາມຕຼ(ດ)-
2 [ສຸ]ພະມັດສະຕຸ ພຣະຣາຊອາດຍາສົມເດັດ
3 [ບໍຣະມະບໍ]ພິດ ພຣະເປັນເຈົ້າຕົນເປັນພຣະ
4 [ປະສິ]ດທິໃຫ້ທານເມືອງຜານ້ອຍເປັນອຸ-
5 [ປະກາ]ນແກ່ພຣະບາງເຈົ້າ ທັງບ້າ-
6 [ນ ...] ບ້ານນອດຫາດຄານ ບ້ານໂພນ
7 [ທອ]ງແລ ບ້ານປູນຜາຄາວ ແລ
8 [ບ້າ]ນຖິ່ນຄຳແດງ ຫລ້າງແດນດິ-
9 [ນ]ແລ ງວດງາອາກອນເທົ່າໃດ
10 [ຂ້າ]ໄພ່ກໍ່ດີ ໃຫ້ເວນໄວ້ກັບວິຊຸ-
11 [ນອາຣາມ] _____

Translation

1 ... the day *raway yi*, the watch of (tut ...)
2 May there be happiness! The royal ordinance of His
3 Supreme, Pure and Sovereign Majesty,
4 blessing the gift of Muang Pha Noy for the
5 service of the Phra Bang Chao, with Ban
6 (), Ban Not Hat Khan, Ban Phon
7 (Tho)ng, Ban Pun Pha Khao and
8 (Ba)n Thin Kham Daeng. The lands,
9 the taxes and the contributions of all kinds,
10 as well as the servants, are to be given to the Viju-
11 (ra-āram) ...

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