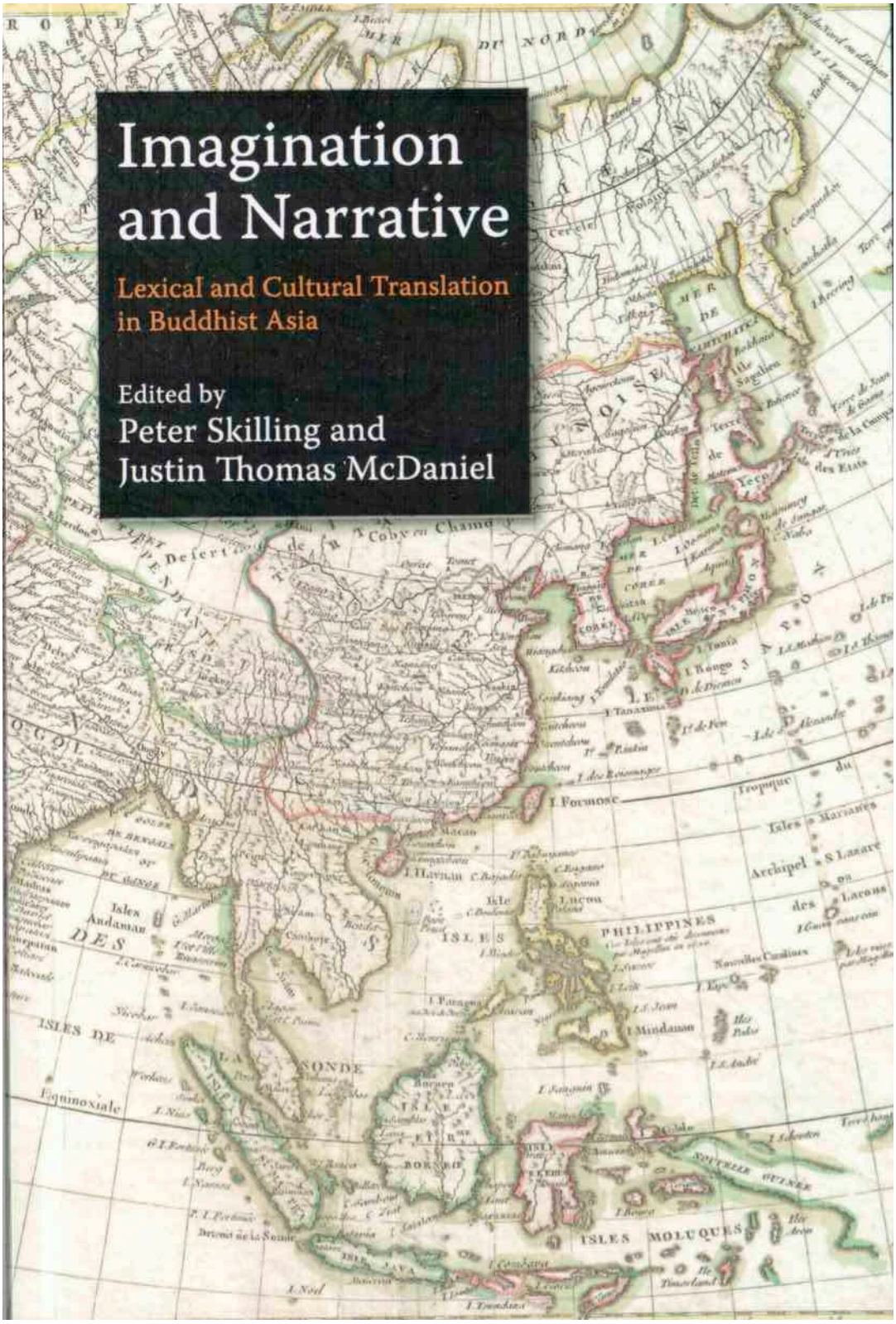
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Early Buddhism in Laos: Insights from Archaeology

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The form of Buddhism practiced in Laos has been the subject of some anthropological work, but its history has never been examined in depth. For a long time, authors were content with reiterating the Lao historiographic tradition according to which the teaching of the Buddha had been introduced from the Cambodian region into the vast territory conquered by Fa Ngum in the fourteenth century. Recent critical analysis of the chronicles, however, has undermined the trustworthiness of this tradition and it is now possible, on the basis of other written sources and archaeological remains, to provide more convincing answers to the issue of the propagation of the great religion in the middle Mekong valley. The latest data available not only shows that there was indeed a wide range of practices but also reveals that Buddhism developed in distinct geographical and chronological frames whose limits can now be more specifically established by historians.

This chapter is part of a general study aiming at laying the foundations of the historical geography of Buddhism in Laos.[1] Trying to examine the development of a religion within recent geopolitical borderlines is obviously a challenging task. The way Buddhism was disseminated and adopted in the middle Mekong valley has necessarily been a slow and nonlinear process. Therefore, the purpose of this study is not only to offer new information on the early history of Buddhism in the region that

includes modern-day Laos but also to open up new avenues for research on regional history. On the basis of some significant evidence, it moreover aims at showing that this landlocked space was never left on the margins of major civilizing movements. Because of its central position, it was on the contrary a hub for exchanges at the crossroads of various influences, a kind of crucible out of which advanced forms of social organization emerged. As is evidenced by numerous material clues, Buddhism along with its dynamic practices appeared right from the beginning as a guiding criterion for approaching the historical phenomena that marked the northern part of the lower Mekong basin (as delimited by the Mekong River Commission). Special attention in this contribution will be paid to the oldest testimonies of the development of this religion on the eastern bank of the river.

Since 2003, the École française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO) center in Vientiane has worked in cooperation with the Head Office of Heritage at the Ministry of Information and Culture of the Lao People's Democratic Republic to enhance the analytical inventory of the historical documents kept in all the provinces of Laos. The project is conceived as a kind of "upstream" research demanding intensive fieldwork as it aims at exhaustively locating the material and objects useful for a better understanding of the past in a vast territory. Much of this evidence has been inaccessible for a long time because of regional conflicts. Originally, the documents targeted were only written sources (e.g., manuscripts and inscriptions), but the scope of investigation and the research program were rapidly extended to archaeological remains as awareness was gained of the enormous potential lying therein. One of the essential purposes of the project is to classify the artifacts discovered inside homogeneous clusters defined by geographical and chronological criteria, and also to identify affinities and similarities in practices and beliefs. Consequently, the concept of "cultural areas" is frequently used. However, it will be

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shown in this paper that capturing the specific features of such areas and assigning historical phenomena to well-defined frames is not an easy task. In previous contributions relating to the history of the Thai-Lao communities of the lower Mekong basin in the course of the second millennium, I have tried to use the various markers currently available to describe how Buddhism disseminated within the borders of present-day Laos.[2] It was emphasized that even if some riparian communities of the Mekong River in the fourteenth century (in particular in Luang Prabang and Vientiane) might have been aware of some practices relating to Buddhism—due possibly to the influence of monks from Sukhothai (in present-day Thailand) traveling into the region—it clearly appears that this "transmission" was superficial and very limited in scope. It is only in studying materials from the second half of the fifteenth century that it becomes possible really to perceive the first signs of the changes operated by Buddhism on the Lao populations, or more specifically, on the sovereigns who held power. There is clear evidence from this time onward of the progressive establishment of a religious culture with elaborate ritual practices on the banks of the Mekong and some of its major tributaries. The movement started logically from the upstream side of the river. From the late fourteenth century, monks in the Lan Na kingdom in northern Thailand, after merging teachings from Sukhothai with components from its own heritage (the Hariphunchai culture) and the influences from Burma, developed within a well-structured and properly governed territory a Buddhist civilization that flourished for nearly two centuries. Many of their teachings followed the Sinhalese model.

When consulting the early historical testimonies related to the emergence of Lan Xang, it is easy to highlight what this Lao kingdom owes to its powerful neighbor. A few examples related to the dissemination of knowledge or techniques should suffice to show this. Lan Na monks and

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other specialists helped spread two distinct scripts within the Lan Xang region—the *fak kham* model, which developed into the modern Lao script, and the rounded script model called *tham*, predominantly used in temples.[3] These teachers offered a corpus of texts—not only religious ones (in Pāli and in the vernacular) but also technical treatises facilitating, for instance, the dissemination of the horoscope disc and dating methods. Moreover, the writings conveyed an ideology in which the sovereign was the center of the system. He was no more a simple tribal leader but rather a character vested with a mission to which the Buddhist religion gave nearly undisputed legitimacy. Through the foundation of sanctuaries that he initiated, there is evidence of the emergence of a new material culture whose reference models—later adapted—also originated from Lan Na. Up to at least the middle of the sixteenth century, this applied not only to religious architecture but also to sculpture. The workshops began to produce bronze images in a specifically Lao style (in particular in Vientiane) only from the seventeenth century onward. As could be expected, the development of the religion was then linked to the economic dynamism that dramatically changed the Lao way of living and further widened the gap separating the ethnic-Lao structured communities from the animist and other marginalized populations.

The story of how Buddhism grew in Laos, though, does not end here. Whereas the majority of Lao historical material—be it manuscripts, inscriptions, monuments, objects of worship, or even the recording of ritual practices—further evidences the fact that the dissemination of a Theravadin form of Sinhalese type emerged in the middle Mekong valley at a relatively late time (dating back to the fifteenth century) and originated in the north, a large number of other remains, which hitherto have been ignored, testify however to a religious history being much longer—and in any case much more complex.

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With the exception of Vat Phu (the case of this site belonging to a remote geographical area will be examined at the end of the chapter), the non-Lao archaeological remains have so far not been taken into account by researchers. It has indeed been rather difficult to identify these testimonies. They appear primarily in the form of rather crudely hewn stone carvings that did not garner much attention, being overshadowed by the large bronze statues in Vientiane and the refined wooden statues in Luang Prabang. Curators even hesitated to find a place for them in the rare museums in Laos. Only a few of these pieces—those that presented some original stylistic features—were taken into consideration but generated more questions than answers. This situation was seen, for instance, with the Vang Sang and Dan Sung Buddhist wall carvings mentioned by Charles Batteur[4] and Suzanne Karpelès[5] in the 1920s and 1940s, and with some Buddha statues in Khmer style that were located by Louis Finot in 1917[6] and mentioned again by Paul Lévy in 1940.[7] At that time, the perception of history was strongly influenced not only by the myths inherited from the Lao historiographic tradition that had not yet been scrutinized but also by the difficulties encountered when studying the expansion of civilizations beyond national borders. Very old substrates that have contributed to the rise of the Lao civilization have undoubtedly been ignored or at least neglected for a long time.

The Mon culture—uncovered in Thailand at the beginning of the twentieth century and studied ever since—had seemingly left no trace in Laos. This assessment was revisited in the late 1960s when a large stone Buddha associated with a stele bearing an inscription in Mon language and script was discovered in Ban Thalat, some sixty kilometers north of Vientiane (figs. 1–2). These two pieces are dated from the eighth century and display some features proper to the Dvāravatī civilization. Pierre-Marie Gagneux, a self-taught specialist of the Lao culture, was first to highlight the importance of this discovery for our knowledge of the

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Figure 1. Stone Buddha image found at Ban Thalat (Vientiane Province). M. Lorrillard



Figure 2. Stele found at Ban Thalat (Vientiane Province). M. Lorrillard

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history of Laos prior to the foundation of the Lan Xang kingdom. He published in a local magazine an article that conveys his enthusiasm,[8] especially because he realized that evidence for the influence of Mon culture in Laos was not rare. He had had the opportunity while visiting areas close to the banks of the Nam Ngum River to observe stone sculptures found in a context similar to that of the Ban Thalat remains. In the mid-1970s, before he was forced to leave Laos due to political turmoil, Gagneux was able to embark on various exploratory missions in the Vientiane Plain under supervision of the Lao Department of Historical Monuments and compiled an inventory of the ancient sites testifying to a common cultural identity marked by Buddhism. The remains found in these sites share many features with several artifacts in various storage places and temples in Vientiane that had never been closely examined. He worked on a catalogue with about one hundred items, the majority of them in the form of fragments.[9] Gagneux found it difficult to place these testimonies within clear-cut geographical and historical frames. He could not visit more than a few districts in Vientiane Province and extend the field of his investigations to other parts of Laos—and he was not aware of all the results provided by the archaeological work carried out in northeastern Thailand. He therefore referred to a late Lao literary tradition—that of the Sikhottabong kingdom—and assumed the existence of an ancient political and cultural entity whose center might have been located in the Thakhek area of Laos. The same assumption began to be disseminated by official Lao historiography, though it was not supported by any archaeological evidence.

The research conducted during the ten last years by the Vientiane EFEO center in all the provinces of Laos has made it possible to complement the inventory made by Gagneux and specify the time frame in which the archaeological testimonies were to be considered. Among the results obtained, what should be mentioned first is the ancient cultural unity

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and homogeneity that characterize the geographical entity traditionally called the middle Mekong valley. It had already been established that a large area on the western bank of the river, comprising the vast territory corresponding to the Khorat Plateau, including the catchment areas of the Nam Mun and Nam Chi Rivers, and also the area of Sakon Nakhon, had been a space where unified protohistorical and historical civilizations had emerged and developed. The clues provided by sheer observation of the region from the point of view of physical geography and reinforced by satellite photography were amply substantiated by field investigation: the vast plains on the eastern bank of the river, irrigated by mighty tributaries, indeed belong to the same culturally united territory that has been strongly impacted right since the earliest Indian-influenced civilizations of mainland Southeast Asia.

In the course of a period which cannot be so easily delineated in terms of chronology, though it can be assumed to have been a time when Khmer influence had abated in the area (i.e., between the seventh and tenth centuries), the Mekong valley underwent extensive development of Buddhist worship through the impetus of the Mon people, as is illustrated by numerous epigraphs. This form of spirituality may have supplemented and even replaced some forms of Hindu worship that had prevailed so far. It can be observed that there is still some confusion between this culture and another culture known under the name of Dvāravatī, which developed contemporaneously in the adjacent basin of the Chao Phraya River. Their distinct forms of religious practice should be kept separated—at least from a material point of view—as the two areas left evidence displaying clearly different styles.

It was established from the 1970s onward that the Khorat Plateau communities produced cultural artifacts that were found in large numbers and led to the expression "stele civilization." These items were assumed to be *sema*s, stone markers delineating a sacred space, which

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could possibly be interpreted as the Buddhist version of an older (but unattested by evidence) form of worship characterized by megaliths. The details of the typology of these *sema*s—a rather complex subject anyway—need not to be mentioned here. It may suffice to note that the majority of the steles are decorated, the predominant iconographic motive being a stylized stūpa. Over a thousand of such *sema*s have been recorded in northeastern Thailand. They were found in about one hundred sites scattered throughout the region. The original center of this culture is assumed to have been close to Mueang Fa Daet (Kalasin Province), since this is where the largest number and the highest-quality inscriptions have been found.[10]

Gagneux recorded fourteen specimens of *sema*s decorated with stūpas in Laos. Recent investigation has raised this number to approximately eighty, excluding about seventy other *sema*s that have no decoration, although they obviously served similar functions. Most of them have been found in the vast Vientiane and Savannakhet Plains, which may be considered physical extensions of the Khorat Plateau on the left bank of the Mekong River, surrounded by the mountain massif covering most of Lao territory. The northernmost example of such a *sema* was found in Muang Sanakham (fig. 3), just opposite Chiang Khan, Thailand; because of its stylistic features, it should be included within a large set of such items found in Wang Saphung in Loei Province, approximately sixty-five kilometers to the south. The southernmost items were located in the Lao province of



Figure 3. A *sema* found at Muang Sanakham (Vientiane Province). M. Lorrillard

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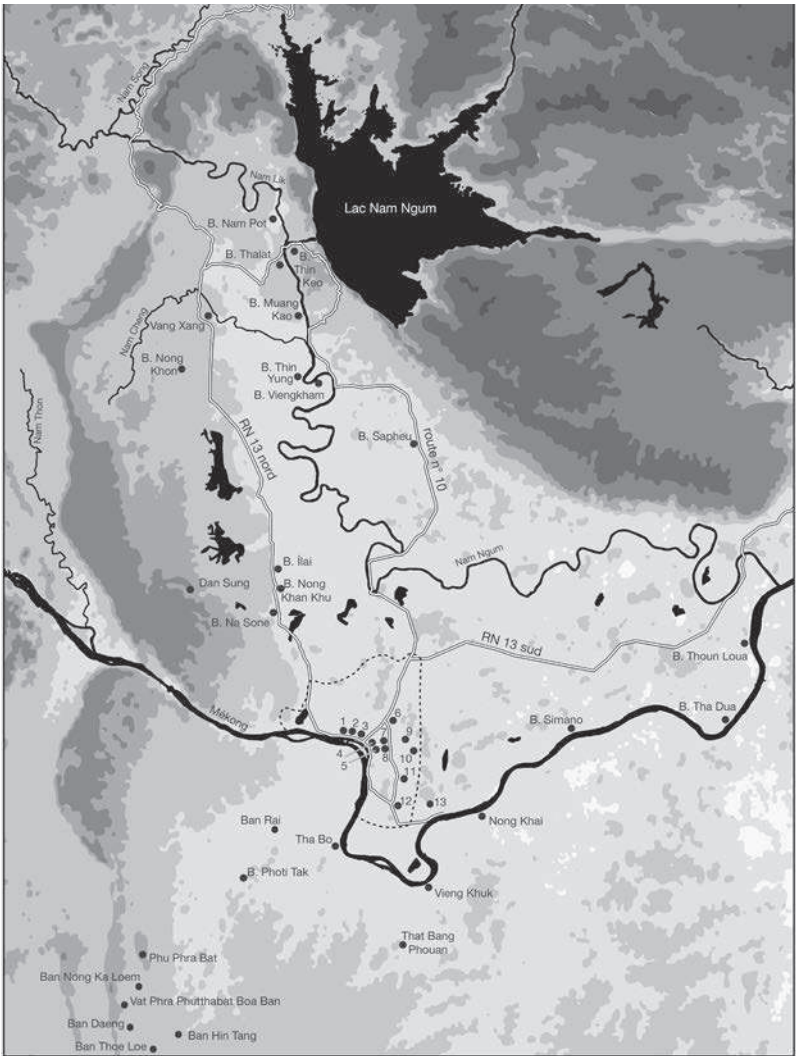

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Figure 4. Notable Khmer and Mon archaeological sites on the Vientiane Plain. Lorrillard/Ferrand

1. Vat Inpeng
2. Vat Mixay
3. Vat Si Bun Yeun
4. Vat Kao Yot
5. Vat Dong Palan
6. Vat Phon Pa Nao
7. That Luang
8. Ban Saphang Mo
9. Ban Non Kho
10. Ban Muang Noy
11. Ban Don Koy
12. Ban Somsanouk
13. Ban Dong Phosy

Saravane, a few kilometers away from the Thai province of Amnat Charoen, where a few other exemplars have also been discovered.

The Vientiane Plain has much to offer for the study of Buddhist *sema*s, not only because it harbors a wealth of archaeological finds of that type but also because they can be examined in a context that has not been subject to major disturbances. It should be noted that in a certain number of cases, in particular those where the sites have been best preserved, stone Buddha sculptures have been found too. Though they are generally roughly hewn pieces, they can be taken as reliable indicators or markers for establishing a chronology and should therefore be examined with great care. Three remarkable clusters of sites can be delineated in this area (fig. 4; for details see Lorrillard, "La plaine de Vientiane").

The first cluster—highly delimited—extends along the banks of the Nam Ngum just where this river emerges from the mountains enclosing the Xieng Khuang Plateau and merges with other rivers such as the Nam Lik and Nam Cheng. Several beautiful items have been found within a triangular space whose largest side is less than twenty kilometers long. The Ban Thalat Buddha and stele have already been mentioned above. This latter site, like many others nearby, has provided both Buddha figures and *sema*s of various types. Concerning Vang Sang, a site with wall carvings that already drew scholarly attention in the early 1920s, Suzanne Karpelès stated in 1940 that the place was reminiscent of Lopburi art, a transitional form of artistic expression that combined the Dvāravatī tradition with Khmer regional art. Her remark is still relevant, even if Lopburi is geographically very far away from the Vientiane Plain. Vang Sang, similar to other sites mentioned below, offers remains undoubtedly belonging to the Mon domain, but it also displays some specific features proper to a later form of art betraying some Khmer influence—for instance, motives referring to social insignia such as the parasol, the fly-whisk, lotus flowers, and so on (figs. 5–6).

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Figure 5. Buddha figures at Vang Sang (Vientiane Province). EFEO archives



Figure 6. Carved motives at Vang Sang (Vientiane Province). EFEO archives



Figure 7. Inscribed *sema* from Dan Sung (Vientiane Province). M. Lorrillard



Figure 8. *Sema* featuring a carved Buddha and inscription (Vientiane). M. Lorrillard

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The second cluster, closer to the Mekong, has a specific geographical configuration, connected with a small mountain range oriented north–south, which is cut in the middle by the course of the river, extending to northeastern Thailand. The area harbors famous sites with wall carvings, such as Phu Phra Bat in Udon Thani Province. The site of Dan Sung, on the Lao side, is part of the same physical unit, and the remains found there display corresponding features. The Buddha representations carved in the rock also betray the Khmer influence observed in Vang Sang. This statement is strongly supported by a unique testimony whose importance may have been overlooked so far: a stele bearing an inscription in Sanskrit that seems initially to have been written using the Mon script followed by the Khmer script (fig. 7). Numerous *sema*s, with or without decoration, have also been found all around the site, together with several sculptures whose style more specifically refers to Mon art.

The importance of the third cluster has been highlighted very recently, not only because of the discoveries made there but also because of the emerging awareness of the logic governing the geographical distribution of the sites. The That Luang marshland, about ten kilometers in length and only three kilometers in width, is a place to the east of the present-day city of Vientiane where Mon communities had settled. Eight different sites, all of them offering significant archaeological finds, have been identified (numbered 6–13 in fig. 4). The decorated *sema*s represent the most interesting type of testimonies, the more so as some of them, instead of displaying the usual stūpa motive, have carved narrative scenes and also inscriptions written in Mon script and language, with insertions of Sanskrit (fig. 8). However, some of the items should be separated from the rest as they might have been created at a later time or because the traces of Khmer influence are more visible. It might then be appropriate to compare them with Buddhist sculptures left "dormant" for many years in some Vientiane monasteries, such as two significant standing Buddha

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statues kept among other ancient specimens in Vat Inpeng (fig. 9). A difficult question then arises concerning the transition from Khmer art at the beginning of the Angkorian era (c. ninth–tenth century) to a later form of Khmer art (twelfth and thirteenth centuries) that is likewise well represented in Vientiane.



Figure 9. One of the standing Buddha statues from Vat Inpeng (Vientiane). M. Lorrillard

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Figure 10. Large *sema* at Ban Tak Daet (Savannakhet Province). M. Lorrillard

Just like the Vientiane Plain, the Savannakhet Plain covers a vast territory surrounded by high mountains on the left bank of the Mekong River. Major tributaries flow down from these mountains to the Mekong. Whereas only a few images of stone Buddhas carved in ancient style have been found there (a fact worth noting), some sixty *sema*s were discovered; some of them are of sizes (the highest being 3.05 meters) greatly exceeding those of similar remains found in the Vientiane Plain (fig. 10). Concerning the latter area, it has already been mentioned that

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the mode of transition from a Mon art style to a Khmer form of art at the beginning of the Angkorian era was a controversial issue where reference to Lopburi art might be necessary. The situation is quite different in the Savannakhet Plain. Pieces in Khmer style can be found next to Mon art remains—in certain cases both types are even mixed together—but the reference time periods are different.

It is certain that pre-Angkorian art, which is well-represented in the southernmost provinces of Laos, extended up to the Se Bang Fai River and probably further up into Khammouane Province.[11] Not far from the mouth of the Se Bang Fai, in Nong Hua Thong village, a site corresponding to an ancient settlement has recently been discovered. Its size and the quality of its layout, with city boundaries made of earthen walls, were clearly revealed by aerial surveys. The site's importance in historical terms is evinced by the value of a "treasure" composed of items made of precious metal, including gold tableware. The inscriptions appearing on three dishes use pre-Angkorian script (eighth century) and Khmer and Sanskrit languages (fig. 11). Other decorated metal plates have illustrations referring to Hindu iconography. Nonetheless, some *sema*s in Mon style have been found aboveground. The latter discovery was no surprise; Nong Hua Thong is located at the center of an area with about ten other sites where decorated *sema*s have been identified. These items form a cluster comparable to the set collected in Vientiane Province. The importance gained in the course of history by the famous That Phanom stūpa (on the western side of the Mekong River, but very close to Nong Hua Thong) probably has its origin in the fact that the site had its roots in a civilizational frame marked by both Khmers and Mons. That Phon and That In Hang stūpas are other pre-Angkorian monuments occupying sites where Mon people left a certain number of pieces of evidence comparable in size and style to the most important *sema*s found in Thailand.

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Figure 11. Bowl inscribed with pre-Angkorian script (Nong Hua Thong, Savannakhet Province). V. Souksavatdy, Lao MIC

In addition to its remains dating from the first millennium, Savannakhet Province is characterized by the presence of Khmer sites dating from the late Angkorian era, which have received little attention though they might have played a significant role in the development of Buddhism in the region. The first of these sites—the sandstone temple of Huan Hin, which was never completed—was mentioned in the seventeenth century by a Dutch merchant who navigated up to Vientiane. The edifice itself does not have decorative sculptures, but stone sculptures found on or in the vicinity of the site suggest that Buddhist iconography must have existed there. At a distance of about thirty kilometers from Huan Hin, away from the Mekong, a modest sculpture that has been exhumed gives evidence of Buddhist worship in the area under the reign of Jayavarman VII: a Buddhist triad of typical style (fig. 12). The place where it was unearthed, Ban Kathang, was no surprise since aerial photography reveals the presence of a square enclosure inside a double earthen wall, the outer wall being about four hundred meters long on each of the four sides. Two other sites were identified a few kilometers away from Ban Kathang, revealing vestiges clearly dating from the late Angkorian period, including a modest edifice with three cells erected on a rather vast and well-arranged space.

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Figure 12. Buddhist triad sculpture dating from the reign of Jayavarman VII (Ban Na Kathang, Savannakhet Province). M. Lorrillard

It is very tempting to draw a parallel between Ban Kathang and several sites in the basin of Sakon Nakhon in upper northeastern Thailand, which are in relatively marginal positions but whose material remains clearly testify to their belonging to an area controlled by the Buddhist sovereign Jayavarman VII. These are the hospital chapels in Ku Ban Phan Na (Sakon Nakhon Province) and Ku Kaeo Ban Chit (Udon Thani Province), in close vicinity respectively to the cities of Sakon Nakhon (formerly Nong Han Luang) and Nong Han (formerly Nong Han Noi). The two latter sites, with their double square enclosures made of earthen walls, are characteristic of extensive structured spaces dating from the Khmer period. Vientiane might be integrated into this space and be considered the northernmost outpost of the whole territory characterized

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by Angkorian foundations.[12] The earliest aerial surveys of the city reveal the existence of several enclosures, of which only two can be assigned to the Lan Xang period: an enclosure surrounding the old Lao city itself, with an extension in the downstream direction, and a much longer one—about ten kilometers, probably never completed—that surrounded a vast space, including the largest part of the present-day capital (fig. 13). Each of these two enclosures had a semicircular form, beginning from and ending on the riverbank. Another type of enclosure was also found outside the old Lao city: it was designed as a perfect 1,850- by 1,300-meter rectangle whose central axis is aligned with the That Luang stūpa. The link between this structure and the monument is surely not accidental. The excavation work carried out in 1977 in the yard of the latter revealed the presence



Figure 13. Aerial view of Vientiane, 1946. Williams-Hunt coll. (SOAS/CSEAS-Kyoto)

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of an axial rectilinear alley made of large laterite blocks that cannot possibly be assigned to the Lao period. Other vestiges unquestionably of Khmer origin were also found in the vicinity. An antefix representing a *nāga* is an obvious testimony of the preexistence of an edifice dating from the Angkorian era. Consequently, we are entitled to draw a parallel between this item and the sculptures currently exhibited in the galleries of That Luang, focusing on two representations whose style undoubtedly refers to the reign of Jayavarman VII: a probable image of the sovereign represented as Buddha, and a headless body (figs. 14–15). They belong to the Bayon style (identifiable because of the drape of the clothing) and remind of a wealth of other similar representations found in various places of the large territory controlled by the great Khmer monarch. They cannot but be associated with other remains found in Vientiane or



Figure 14. Probable image of Jayavarman VII represented as a Buddha (That Luang Museum). M. Lorrillard



Figure 15. Headless body in Bayon style (That Luang Museum). M. Lorrillard

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Figures 16–18. Buddhist images (Vat Ho Phra Keo Museum). M. Lorrillard

the vicinity of the city, in particular the famous *stèle des hôpitaux* from Sayfong or Buddhist images that are kept mostly at Vat Ho Phra Keo. The most refined ones can be identified as bodhisattvas. This observation applies in particular to a sculpture that was discovered at the same time as the stele (fig. 16), possibly representing one of the deities mentioned by the inscription (Bhaisajyasugata, Suryavairocana, Candravairocana) and to images probably representing Mañjuśrī (fig. 17) and Vajradhāra/Vajrapāṇi (fig. 18). However, due to the uncertainty concerning the places of discovery, there is a possibility that some items were imported over a relatively small distance from a hospital sanctuary in Thailand or even from Vat Phu, where comparable representations have been found. There is less doubt about the genuinely local origin of other types of sculptures, such as two decorated steles representing a Buddhist triad and three Buddhas (fig. 19), "pillars" with groups of Buddhas (fig. 20), or even images of the Buddha seated under the *nāga*. However, since the style is not so refined, that dating is more uncertain. Many of these statues could therefore be assigned to a transition period between late Mon art and Khmer art in the thirteenth century.

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Figure 19. Stele decorated with three Buddhas (Vat Ho Phra Keo Museum). M. Lorrillard

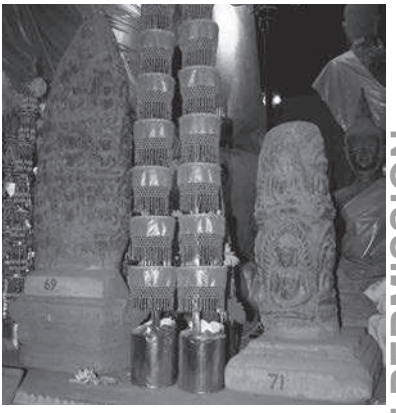

Figure 20. Pillars with groups of Buddha images in Vat Inpeng (Vientiane). M. Lorrillard

It was said above that importation cannot be excluded. The assumption is admissible when considering the remains kept in Luang Prabang, the first capital of Lan Xang, where a wide range of styles and types of artefacts is the rule. The few statues in Khmer style found there are probably eligible for this evaluation. Attention was drawn to them a long time ago, in particular by Louis Finot and Paul Levy (who mistakenly assigned them to the tradition of the fourteenth-century Cambodian mission), before they fell into oblivion for some decades. They had been brought back to light recently after thorough searches in the collections. Here shall only be mentioned some examples dating from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Most of them refer to adorned Buddhas, Buddhas seated under the *nāga* (some items are made of metal), and even bodhisattvas (figs. 21–23).

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Figures 21–23. Images of adorned Buddhas from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (Luang Prabang). EFEO archives

Buddhism at Vat Phu

The set of monuments and structures making up the Vat Phu complex and the ancient city—the only sites in Laos to which researchers have paid attention so far—hold a special position in this context. By their sheer number, concentration, historical value, and artistic quality, the remains discovered in the vicinity of the small city of Champassak represent an archaeological heritage standing in sharp contrast to all the other vestiges discovered in Laos. It seems likely that the high value of these sites will be enhanced in the next few years. Research on the collections of artifacts has just started, and excavation work covers at the moment a very small part of the pre-Angkorian and Angkorian installations delineated by aerial surveys. Further surveying in the ancient city and the sites bordering the road to Angkor will probably deliver many exciting discoveries in the near future.[13]

One of the reasons underpinning the archaeological value of the Vat Phu monumental complex is the exceptionally long period of occupancy. Epigraphic studies have shown that the *liṅga*-like top of the mountain adjoining the sanctuary was an object of worship as early as the mid-fifth century and that the "great king of kings" (*mahārājādhirāja*) who had

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come from afar had consecrated the site with deep foundations. The history of Vat Phu began indeed with the emergence of Chenla—the ancient city having probably been the first capital of the kingdom—and went on developing, at least until the end of the Angkorian era.

Vat Phu most probably held a central position throughout the pre-Angkorian era in the space controlled by the Khmers, even if the successive capitals gradually moved to the south. This religious and political specificity is a possible explanation for the existence of ancient sites located at regular intervals alongside the Mekong River and main tributaries in the five southernmost provinces of Laos. The northernmost limit of this occupation seems to have been the mouth of the Se Bang Fai, close to That Phanom and Nong Hua Thong, a place whose importance has been underlined above. All these sites seem to have been places of Hindu—in particular Śaivite—forms of worship, even if there is only scanty information about their nature.

Being located on the banks of the Se Kaman, not far from the Annamitic cordillera and thus from Cham territory, one of these sites, at which were uncovered fragments of a large stone representation of the Buddha close to vestiges of pre-Angkorian architecture, offer a possible testimony to the practice of Buddhism. However, no accurate dating of these artifacts has been done so far. The head, fifty centimeters in height, has been badly damaged, but the smooth hairstyle resembles certain representations from the Angkorian era, as opposed to older Buddha figures with curly hair. Another piece of evidence probably originating from the same site or discovered in the vicinity is even more convincing: a bronze statuette of the Buddha, forty centimeters in height, whose posture, clothing, and hairstyle refer to the pre-Angkorian period and may betray influence by Dvāravatī art.

The scientists working on Vat Phu up to recent times have paid very little attention to the possible existence of Buddhist practices during the

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period when the Khmer people controlled the territory. It was taken for granted that the monuments, their decoration, and the contents of some thirty inscriptions found in southern Laos testified to the fact that the place was devoted exclusively to a Hindu form of worship with pride of place for Śiva, to whom the sanctuary was dedicated. With the creation and the opening of the Vat Phu museum, the archaeological collections have been revisited and reexamined, leading to a change in the way the destination and significance of these remains should be evaluated.[14]

The identification of Buddhist evidence is much easier in the case of the pre-Angkorian period. Several examples of stone sculptures, whose age is conveyed by their style, are of a definite non-Hindu type. This applies in particular to a sizeable number of sculptures discovered in Vat Lakhon in Champassak, a Lao temple built on top of pre-Angkorian brick structures. The sculptures are roughly dated from the seventh, eighth, and even ninth centuries.

According to the few specialists in art history who have examined these representations, the Khmer influence can hardly be denied. However, some references to the art of Angkor Borei (specifically the Funan era) can also be observed while Dvāravatī influence—that is, Mon art—is likewise prominent. In this respect, special attention can be paid to an example of the head of the Vat Lakhon Buddha (fig. 24); being forty-eight centimeters in height, it obviously belonged to a very large statue and it can be compared with the other Buddha head that was discovered—in rather damaged condition—in the vicinity of the Vat Phu (now on display in the Paksé museum), and also with a very similar head (currently kept at Musée Guimet, no. 18225) supposed to have come from Cambodia or southern Vietnam.

Among all the ancient Buddha representations kept at Champassak, an item of unknown origin comes to the fore because of its style and the posture of the figure: a large Buddha seated in the European way—of

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Figure 24. Head of the Vat Lakhon Buddha (Champassak Museum). S. Fradelizi

which only the lower part from the thighs down has been preserved (fig. 25). This style is well represented in Dvāravatī art, but it is rather surprising to come across it on the banks of the Mekong River. Apparently, similar images were not created in Cambodia. Apart from Thailand, the only examples showing similarities can be found in central Java or on the coast of southern Vietnam.[15] This representation, if examined on its own merits, could be considered an imported object, but there is contrary evidence: its size, its presence among other sculptures influenced by the Dvāravatī art, and the fact that Vat Phu has been recognized as a place where stone carving achieved high-quality standards all advocate for local production, even if the artist originated from another region.

Other examples of unknown origin and less-refined style stored in the museum's collections surprisingly remind of the stone Buddhas seated in *samadhi* posture found on the Vientiane Plain. Similar representations

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Figure 25. Legs of a large seated Buddha (Champassak Museum). M. Lorrillard

also exist in northeastern Thailand. Here again it is rather difficult to distinguish Khmer from Mon works created during the first millennium.

Some bronze Buddha representations displaying ancient stylistic features are also kept in Champassak. While one specific piece for which "the metal is heavily patinated, with extensive evidence of corrosion" was obviously created under influence of Dvāravatī art and can be dated from the eighth century (John Guy, unpublished report), the dating of other representations created in the same stylistic frame is much more

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uncertain, and the pieces are most probably fake. This evaluation seems to apply to at least three standing statues—pointing to Indian models—that obviously were cast in the same mold. Two sitting representations, of which one is in European posture, call for an in-depth examination.

A major part of the Vat Phu archaeological objects now kept in the museum was in fact "collected" by Prince Boun Oum Na Champassak in the 1960s–1970s. It seems that he took it upon himself to enlarge the original collection with many new items that he had ordered produced in local workshops in Laos or Thailand. Some of the stone carvings, though displaying some Indian characteristics, can still be described as rather coarse and reminding of popular art. All these representations have obviously little to do with the ancient sculptures originating from the Vat Phu area.

It should be kept in mind, at that stage, that no Buddhist piece of work assignable to the pre-Angkorian era was ever found beyond any doubt in the Vat Phu complex or in the old city themselves. Archaeological excavation has indeed revealed the foundations of two adjacent circular structures reminiscent of stūpas, but they cannot be declared as definitely being Buddhist edifices, in spite of having some ornaments evocative of Dvāravatī art.[16] Vat Lakhon is located four kilometers upstream from the old city of Vat Phu. The site then testifies to a settlement in pre-Angkorian times extending beyond the earth walls surrounding the ancient city. It could also suggest a kind of "distanciation process" of the Buddhist places of worship from the Hindu sanctuaries.

Concerning the Angkorian era itself, only the modest Thao Tao monument—identified as a hospital chapel dating from Jayavarman VII—can be considered solid evidence for Buddhist influence in Vat Phu. However, some stone sculptures representing bodhisattvas and displaying Mahāyāna features can now additionally be taken into account. A body, with no head and just one arm left, of a seated deity can most probably

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be identified as a representation of Vajradhāra/Vajrapāṇi (fig. 26); it is reminiscent of two images in the same style in Vientiane and Luang Prabang that are themselves comparable to statues found in northeastern Thailand. This is clearly Bayon style. Among the dozen seated deities represented in front of a stele, some of them still have their head, each with a three-tiered topknot. Two similar images in Vientiane have been identified as the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī.



Figure 26. A probable representation of Vajradhāra/Vajrapāṇi (Champassak Museum). M. Lorrillard

In light of this limited number of representations and in comparison to the wide range of iconographic items found in sites related to Jayavarman

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VII or more generally to the Angkorian era, Vat Phu does not appear as a place where Buddhist devotion was intense. The Buddha, with or without the *nāga*, does not seem to have left any testimonies. This observation also applies to Lokeśvara, Prajñāpāramitā, the Buddhist triad, and even the characteristic worship steles. It nevertheless seems certain that Vat Phu was still an important place of pilgrimage in the late twelfth and the early thirteenth centuries. On the road leading there from Angkor, hospital chapels were possibly built. Along or close to this northeast "axis" whose course can easily be marked out, such structures could be identified in Cambodia from Beng Mala up to the present day border.[17] On the Lao side, only the Thao Tao monument could be identified so far on a one hundred-kilometer-long route. But investigation of this portion of the road is just beginning, and future research may bring to light elements of the Buddhist heritage of much greater proportion than what is currently visible.

Conclusion

Given the current scientific information, it is too early to have a clear picture of the way the early forms of Buddhism were propagated in Laos. Critical analysis of Lao historiography has shown that the tradition claiming that Pāli Buddhism is assumed to have been introduced into the middle Mekong valley around 1350 by a Cambodian mission is the outcome of a clearly erroneous construct. Buddhism in Lan Xang did not develop from a stock originally growing in the south of the lower Mekong basin, but rather from a stock that had its roots in the north—specifically in Lan Na—and was conveyed about the late fifteenth-century through reformatory traditions inspired by Sinhalese Buddhism. However, the surveys carried out recently show that Buddhism was practiced as early as the second half of the first millennium in the Mekong basin, upstream from the Khone Falls. The findings make it possible to reconsider a

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phenomenon that so far has been established only for the coastal areas. Communities with early Indian influence disseminated new creeds and techniques deep into the lowlands, and this development may have been facilitated by the fact that the cradle of their civilization was located in the mainland, in an area to which the river and its main tributaries used as communication routes had brought prosperity. Buddhism, much more than Hinduism, developed there under various forms that are not so easy to capture. Several Hīnayāna Buddhist traditions must have been represented until they were temporarily replaced by Mahāyāna traditions. The Lao people, when they settled in the Mekong basin, were aware of the existence of these ancient forms of Buddhism in the area. They probably did not mingle with the Mons or Khmers, for no clear continuum can be established between the cultures involved. However, it appears that in many cases they reoccupied religious sites and reappropriated materials that had already been used. This might be the reason why in mythical traditions there is a persistent reference, openly or covertly, to a "Khom" civilization. Archaeological research in Laos is still in its infancy. There is little doubt—provided that the specialists pay more attention to the middle Mekong valley, in particular the plains irrigated by the main tributaries of the river—that our assessment of the ancient history of Southeast Asia will be modified in depth in the coming years.

Notes

1. Michel Lorrillard, "The Earliest Lao Buddhist Monasteries According to Philological and Epigraphic Sources," in *The Buddhist Monastery: A Cross-Cultural Survey*, ed. Pierre Pichard and François Lagirarde, Études thématiques 12 (Bangkok: EFEO, 2003), 187–98; and Michel Lorrillard, "Pour une géographie historique du bouddhisme au Laos," in *Recherches nouvelles sur le Laos*, ed. Yves Goudineau and Michel Lorrillard, Études thématiques 18 (Paris: EFEO, 2008), 113–81.

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2. Michel Lorrillard, "Insights on the Diffusion of Lao Buddhism," in *Buddhist Legacies in Mainland Southeast Asia*, ed. François Lagirarde and P. C. Koanantakool, Études thématiques 19 (Paris: EFEO, 2006), 139–48.

3. Michel Lorrillard, "Scripts and History: The Case of Laos," in *Written Cultures in Mainland Southeast Asia*, ed. Masao Kashinaga, Senri Ethnological Studies 74 (Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology, 2009), 33–49.

4. Charles Batteur, "Sculptures rupestres au Laos," *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient* 25, no. 1–2 (1925): 203–4.

5. Suzanne Karpelès, "Les grottes sculptées de la province de Vientiane, vestiges de l'art de Lavapuri," *Bulletin des Amis du Laos* 4 (1949): 141–48.

6. Louis Finot, "Recherches sur la littérature laotienne," *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient* 17 (1917): 173.

7. Paul Lévy, "Les traces de l'introduction du bouddhisme à Luang Prabang," *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient* 40, no. 2 (1940): 411–24.

8. Pierre Marie Gagneux, "Vers une révolution dans l'archéologie indochinoise: le Buddha et la stèle de Thalat, Vientiane," *Bulletin des Amis du Royaume Lao* 7–8 (1972): 83–105.

9. Pierre Marie Gagneux, *Les sites anciens de la plaine de Vientiane (VIIe–IXe siècles)*, report for the Historical Monument Department of Laos, Roneotyped document, Vientiane, 1977.

10. Recently, Stephen Murphy showed in his doctoral dissertation that it is possible to categorize the evidence found in Thailand into several clusters on the basis of mostly geographical criteria. Taking style as a criterion for classification is impractical as the different types of *sema*s can be found almost anywhere in the area concerned. Stephen A. Murphy, "The Buddhist Boundary Markers of Northeast Thailand and Central Laos, 7th–12th Centuries CE: Towards an Understanding of the Archaeological Religious Landscapes of the Khorat Plateau" (PhD diss., SOAS, 2010). This work provides the most complete overview on the subject.

11. For details, see Michel Lorrillard, "Par-delà Vat Phu: données nouvelles sur l'expansion des espaces khmer et môn anciens au Laos (I)," *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient* 97–98 (2013): 205–70; and "Pre-Angkorian Communities in the Middle Mekong Valley (Laos and Adjacent Areas)," in *Before Siam: Essays in Art and Archaeology*, ed. Nicole Revire and Stephen Murphy (Bangkok: Siam Society and River Books, 2014), 186–215.

12. It should be underlined that reference is here not made to the Sayfong site, which is too often mistaken with the Laotian capital (with a distance of 30 kilometers between them) and viewed, according to a persistent legend, as an

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ancient Khmer city, though absolutely no trace of any development earlier than the Lao period has ever been found there.

13. Michel Lorrillard, "Du centre à la marge: Vat Phu dans les études sur l'espace khmer ancien," *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient* 97–98 (2013): 187–204.

14. Christine Hawixbrock, "Le musée de Vat Phu et les collections archéologiques de Champassak," *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient* 97–98 (2013): 271–314.

15. Valérie Zaleski in *Vat Phu Champassak—Museum collections*, ed. Christine Hawixbrock et al. (Champassak: Département du Patrimoine mondial de Vat Phu, 2012), 62.

16. Marielle Santoni and Christine Hawixbrock, "Fouilles et prospections dans la région du Vat Phu (province de Champassak), Chroniques/Rapports de terrain," *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient* 85 (1998): 387–405.

17. Hedwige Multzer O'Naghten, "Les fondations de Jayavarman VII: l'aménagement d'un territoire et son interprétation historique et religieuse" (PhD diss., Université Sorbonne nouvelle [Paris 3], 2011).

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