ADVANCING SOUTHEAST ASIAN ARCHAEOLOGY 2019

Selected Papers from the Third SEAMEO SPAFA International Conference on Southeast Asian Archaeology, Bangkok, Thailand 2019

SEAMEO SPAFA
Regional Centre for Archaeology
and Fine Arts
2020

Towards a new approach to the spread of Buddhism in the Lān Xāng Kingdom: The first Lao inscriptions

ແນວຄິດແບບໃໝ່ກ່ຽວກັບການສຶກສາການເຜີຍແຜ່ ສາສະໜາພຸດ ຢູ່ ອານາຈັກ ລ້ານຊ້າງ: ບັນດາສິລາຈາລຶກ ຫຼັກທຳອິດ ຂອງ ລາວ

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Archaeological evidence shows that long before the great Lao kingdom of Lān Xāng (second quarter of the 14th – end of the 17th century) was established, several forms of Buddhism were practiced in the territory of the current Lao People's Democratic Republic and parts of Northeastern Thailand (Lorrillard 2008, 2017a). Local historiography reflects in its own way the antiquity of these practices, bringing Buddhism from Cambodia in the middle of the 14th century. Numerous testimonies reveal, however, that during its golden age (mid-15th to mid-16th centuries), Lān Nā's religious culture exercised a masterly influence over the middle Mekong Valley (Lorrillard 2003, 2017b). The first Lao inscriptions, little studied so far, reveal extremely significant data on this subject. They not only change our view of the type of Buddhism that was practiced in Lān Xāng from the beginning of the 16th century, but also help us to understand the spread of a new form of religion in a space already strongly imbued with the memory of ancient civilizations.

ຮ່ອງຮອຍທາງວັດຖຸບູຮານ ໄດ້ສະແດງໃຫ້ເຫັນຮູບແບບຕ່າງໆຂອງສາສະໜາພຸດ ທີ່ເຄີຍປະຕິບັດຢູ່ດິນແດນ ຂອງ ສາທາລະນະລັດ ປະຊາທິປະໄຕ ປະຊາຊົນ ລາວ ແລະ ບາງເຂດຢູ່ທາງຕາເວັນອອກສ່ຽງເໜືອຂອງ ລາຊາອານາຈັກ ໄທ ກ່ອນຈະມີການສ້າງອານາຈັກ ລ້ານຊ້າງ. ຂໍ້ມູນຕຳນານລາວ ໄດ້ສະທ້ອນໃຫ້ເຫັນລັກສະນະທີ່ເກົ່າແກ່ອັນນີ້ ຍ້ອນວ່າໄດ້ນຳເອົາສາສະໜາພຸດມາຈາກ ປະເທດ ກຳປູເຈ ໃນກາງສັດຕະວັດ ທີ 14. ນອກນັ້ນ, ຍັງມີຫຼັກຖານຫຼາຍຢ່າງ ທີ່ສະທ້ອນໃຫ້ເຫັນວ່າ ມີການປະຕິບັດ ວັດທະນະທຳ ທາງສາສະໜາ ແບບອານາຈັກລ້ານນາໃນຍຸກຮຸ່ງເຮືອງ (ກາງສັດຕະວັດທີ 15 ຫາ ກາງສັດຕະວັດທີ 16) ເຊິ່ງມີອິດທິພົນຢ່າງໃຫຍ່ຫຼວງຢູ່ແຖບທົ່ງພຽງ ລຽບຕາມແມ່ນ້ຳຂອງ. ບັນດາ ສິລາຈະລຶກທຳອິດ ຂອງ ລາວ ທີ່ຍັງບໍ່ທັນມີການສຶກສາຢ່າງກວ້າງຂວາງເທື່ອ ໄດ້ສະໜອງຂໍ້ມູນທີ່ມີຄວາມໝາຍສຳຄັນຫຼາຍ. ອີງຕາມຂໍ້ມູນດັ່ງກ່າວ ພວກເຮົາມີມູນມອງທີ່ແຕກຕ່າງກ່ຽວກັບການປະຕິບັດສາສະໜາພຸດ ຢູ່ອານາຈັກ ລ້ານຊ້າງ ນັບແຕ່ສັດຕະວັດທີ່ 16 ແລະຍັງຊ່ວຍໃຫ້ພວກເຮົາມີຄວາມເຂົ້າໃຈ ກ່ຽວກັບວິທີການເຜີຍແຜ່ຮູບແບບໃໝ່ຂອງສາສະໜາ ຢູ່ດິນແດນທີ່ມີຮ່ອງຮອຍຂອງອະຣິຍະທຳທີ່ເກົ່າແກ່.

Within the Tai-Lao epigraphic corpus found in the present-day territory of Laos and nearby area on the right side of Mekong (Thailand), several inscriptions may be considered as being the oldest, but they do not necessarily belong to the politico-cultural area of the kingdom of Lān Xāng, or they do not offer sufficient data to be precisely dated. This is the case for the Tham Nang An and Tham Ting cave inscriptions, whose texts are very short and close to each other – in fact they are only about fifteen kilometres apart, near Luang Prabang - and whose writing appears very similar to that used in Sukhothai in the 14th century.

It is equally the case for the three inscriptions on sandstone steles from Ban Huay Say (January 18th, 1459), Chiang Khong (1513) and Muang Khop (January 20th, 1520) which obviously, given the location of their discovery, but also their so-called 'fak-kham' writing and the rhetoric they employ, belong to the ancient politico-cultural area of Lān Nā[1]. Several inscriptions on the pedestals of bronze Buddha images, which are dated prior to the mid-16th century and have clearly travelled to Vientiane, must also be placed in this same epigraphic corpus.

[1]The first was sent in 1915 from Ban Huay Say to Hanoi, where it is still kept (Historical Museum). It refers however to Muang Seung which could be identified with M. Thoeng in Chiang Rai province (See Vimolkasem, 1991). The second was first kept in Vat Vixun but belongs now to the collections of the Royal Palace Museum in Luang Prabang. It refers to Chiang Khong, in Chiang Rai province, and seems thus to have travelled. The third is in Sayabouri province, close to the borders with Chiang Rai and Nan provinces.

Two other inscriptions on sandstone steles and in Lao script are each precisely dated, but their advanced age (December 8th, 1386 and April 17th, 1494 respectively), the very southern position of the material (near Thakhek city), as well as the relatively 'modern' character of the writing, lead us to think that the chronological data are mentioned in a retrospective way, in a period which would not be prior to the 16th century. The problematic character of these two documents therefore requires a deeper analysis (Lorrillard 2019).

Another inscription on a stele, found in Luang Prabang and of which only a single fragment remains today, appears to be a very good case study (Pavie 1898: 381-385). It could equally belong to the group of Lān Nā inscriptions, since the writing is a superb example of the fak-kham script, but its schist material seems to clearly link it to Luang Prabang, as is the case for several other examples where the origin is not in doubt. On the other hand, from a palaeographic point of view, it could date from the 15th century as well to the second half of the 16th century, as demonstrated by a fragment found in Muang Sing (northwest of Laos) which is dated 1569.

Now, if we limit ourselves to perfectly dated documents, we can consider the oldest inscriptions on steles belonging to the kingdom of Lān Xāng, before the sudden expansion of epigraphic production under the reign of King Setthathirat (1548-1571), to be eight in number:

1. Stele No.1 (sandstone) of Vat Gnai Pha Hot in Sanakham, Vientiane province, dated 1510-1511, during the reign of Vixun (1501-1520), but which has retrospective references to Chao Xumphu (about 1496-1501) (Figure 1).
2. The stele (schist) of Vat Sangkhalok in Luang Prabang, dated 1527, during the reign of Phothisarat (1520-1548).
3. A stele (schist) kept a long time in Vat Vixun, in Luang Prabang, presently in the Royal Palace Museum, dated January 8th, 1530 (Figure 2).
4. Stele No.1 (sandstone) of Vat Ban Don Koat in Viengkham, Vientiane province, apparently dated 1530.
5. Stele No.1 (sandstone) of Vat Daen Muang in Phon Phixay, Nongkhay province, Thailand, dated March 28th, 1531 (Poonothoke 1987; Eade 1996).
6. Stele No.2 (sandstone) of Vat Daen Muang in Phon Phixay, Nongkhay province, Thailand, dated September 23rd, 1535 (Poonothoke 1987; Eade 1996).
7. The stele (sandstone) of Vat Si Phoum in Sanakham, Vientiane province, dated September 9th, 1545.
8. The stele (schist) of Vat Maha That in Luang Prabang, dated May 8th, 1548 (Pavie 1898, 375-379; Finot 1915, 27-29).

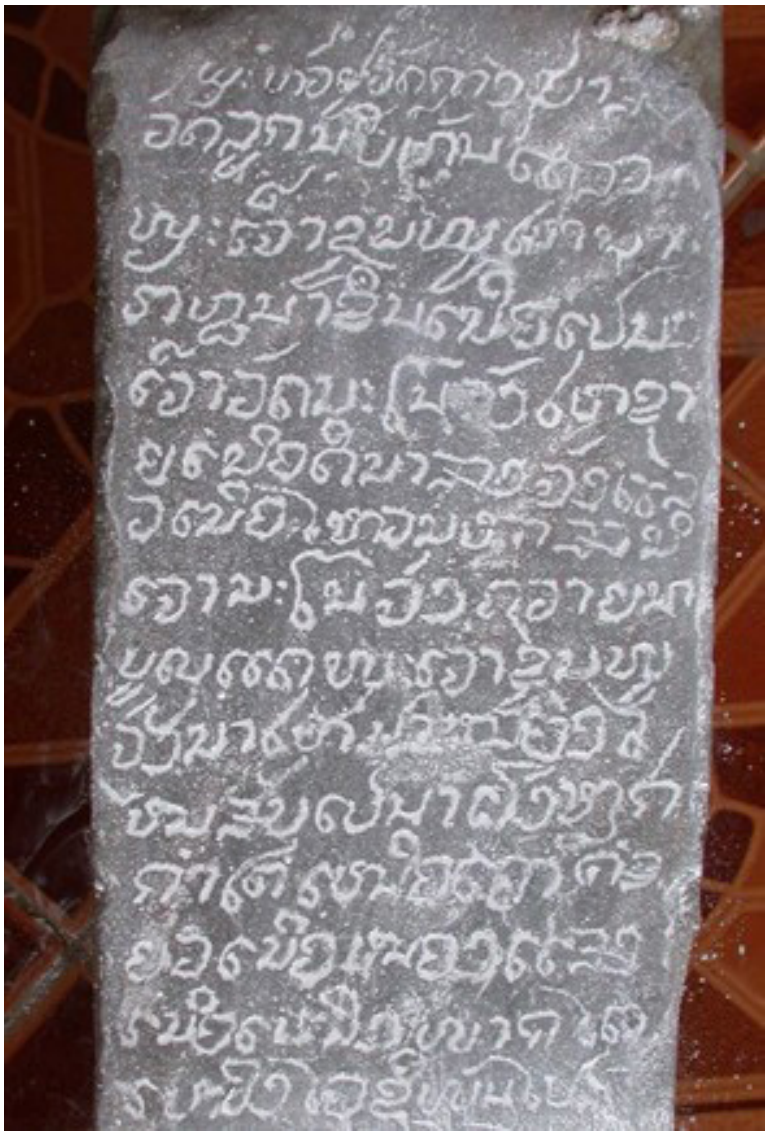


Fig. 1 Stele No.1 of Vat Gnai Pha Hot, Muang Sanakham, Vientiane province (1510-1511). Source: Michel Lorrillard.



Fig. 2 Stele (schist) previously kept in Vat Vixun, in Luang Prabang, presently in the Royal Palace Museum (1530). Source: Michel Lorrillard.

Based on *some* later Lao epigraphic texts, however, we know that other royal orders related to temples must have been engraved in earlier periods and have now disappeared. Some steles from the second half of the 16th century do indeed make retrospective reference to decisions taken by Phothisarat, Vixun, and even Saiya Chakkaphat Phaen Phaeo (1442-1480?).
It is interesting to note that the few existing inscriptions from Luang Prabang were first engraved on plaques of schist. A close study of historical remains from the Lān Xāng period shows that the Lao, experts in metal and wood production, never excelled in sandstone sculpture, in contrast to the Thais of Sukhothai and Lān Nā who left us various well-crafted forms of stele.

The production of steles in the Lao kingdom was in any case less important than in the north of Thailand. The Lao epigraphic corpus had its golden age during the reign of Setthathirat (about 25 steles) and under some of the reigns which quickly followed. From the second third of the 17th century, the engraving of royal orders seems to have ended, and it is necessary to wait until the start of the 19th century to see the reappearance of some important inscriptions in the Vientiane region. It appears that in the Lao context, the practice of engraving inscriptions did not encounter the necessary conditions for its development.

In fact, our understanding of the production of inscribed steles, even in the 16th century, appears to be somewhat truncated. It quite often happens that the supports used for engraving Lao inscriptions were reused materials, sculpted in a more ancient period. This is the case in the areas close to the two banks of the Mekong, from the Muang Sanakham (opposite Chiang Khan, in Thailand) at least as far as the ancient Muang Lakhon (near the present town of Thakhek and opposite Nakhon Phanom). Archaeological surveys have revealed thousands artefacts of Mon Buddhist culture in most of north-eastern Thailand and in the plains close to the left bank of the Mekong (Savannakhet, Vientiane) — especially large steles (*bai-sema*), most often historiated, notably with the stylised representation of a *stūpa*, and sometimes even carrying an inscription in an archaic Mon script (Murphy 2010; Lorrillard 2013, 2016).

Given the lack of research on this subject, the fact that the Lao re-used these materials has not really been noted until the present time. However, this is clearly what happened, as shown in conspicuous examples, where the historiated part from the Mon period is still well represented (Figures 3 and 4). Being aware of this phenomenon allows us to reconsider a good number of supports of Lao inscriptions which do not carry such evident marks, as for many of them the Mon workmanship can now be highly presumed (Figure 5).

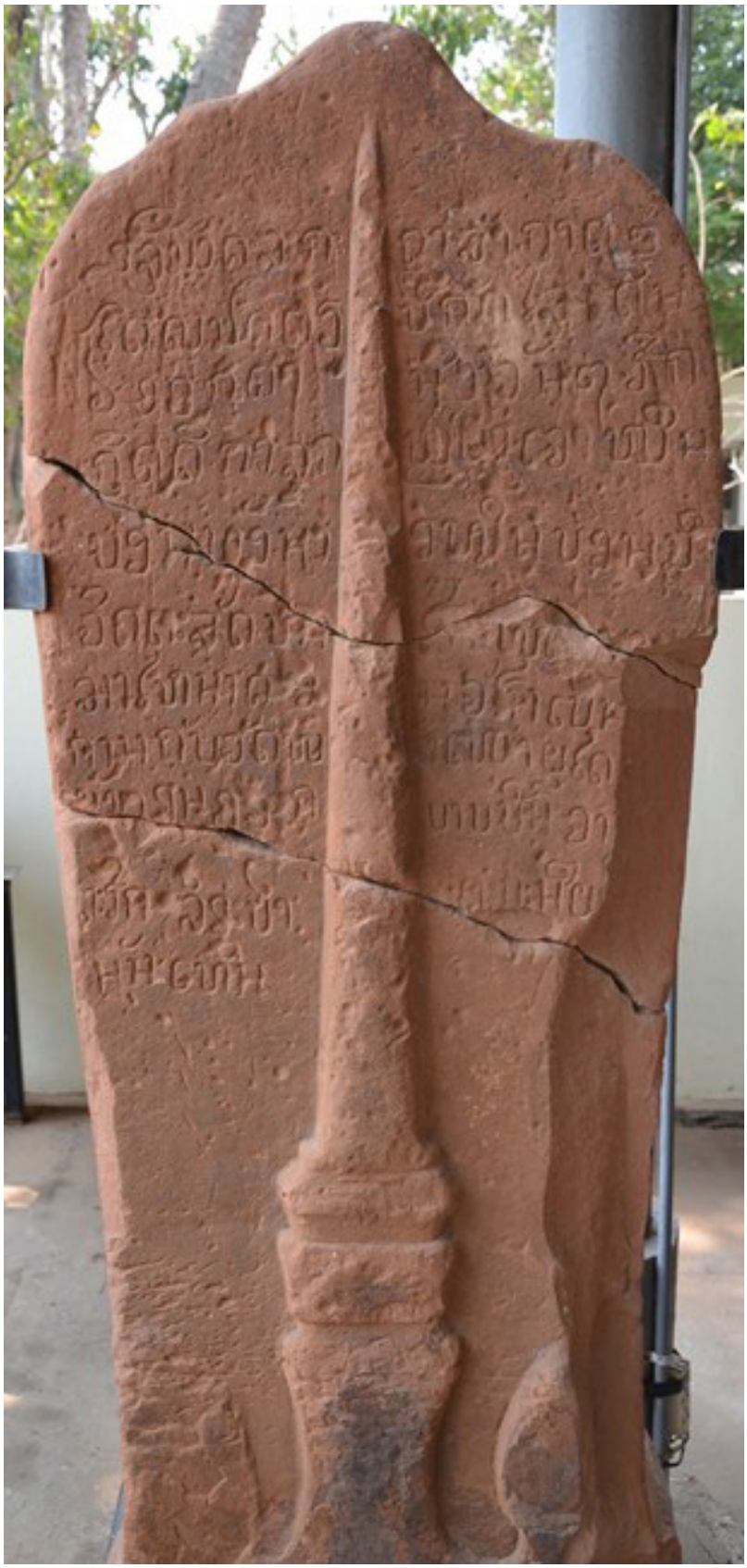


Fig. 3 Stele previously kept in Vat Sisaket, Nongkhai, presently in the National Museum of Khon Kaen (1569). Source: Michel Lorrillard.



Fig. 4 Stele of Vat Si Phoum, M. Sanakham, Vientiane province (1545). Source: Michel Lorrillard.



Fig. 5 Stele of Vat Vieng Kham, Vientiane province (1549-1561). Source: Michel Lorrillard.

The same phenomenon can be observed in the re-use of materials of Khmer workmanship, in areas further downstream, notably around the mouth of the Se Bang Fai, not far from That Phanom. Khmer temples (Pre-Angkorian and Angkorian) were used for the later practice of Theravada Buddhism. Steles, and even architectural elements such as a door jamb, were also re-used for the engraving of Lao inscriptions (Figures 6 and 7).



Fig. 6 Stele (1494?) and Khmer artefacts in That Sikhot, Thakhek, Khammuane province. Source: Michel Lorrillard.



Fig. 7 Inscription (1386?) on door jamb, museum of Thakhek, Khammuane province. Source: Michel Lorrillard.

This specific context in the centre and the south of Laos does, in some respects, recall that of Sukhothai — although in the middle valley of the Mekong there exists a genuine hiatus between the last Mon and Khmer witnesses and the first Lao witness. The 'Tai' populations moving down the Mekong thus discovered plentiful remains displaying Buddhist iconography which were no longer associated with the practice of worship, and that must have had a strong impact on their collective consciousness (Figure 8).

It is this tangible 'memory' of an ancient and glorious past which probably explains the specific character of the Lao hagiographic tradition (for instance the *Phra Bang chronicle* and the *Urangkhathat*), and also that of the historiographical tradition, strongly linked to the former, and clearly derived from it. Hence the Luang Prabang chronicles, which despite numerous archaeological testimonies showing a direct link between Lao Buddhism and that of Lān Nā, hold that the religion was introduced during the reign of Fa Ngum (1353-1373), having been brought from Cambodia, thanks to a 'mission' primed with this goal. Hence an also quite mysterious passage in the *Nithan Khun Borom*, one of the oldest historical chronicles. In this story, members of the famous mission, stopping for several days in Vientiane, ask the older people about the location of some famous sites, because the names of these sites are found engraved in stone in Inthapatha Nakhon (Angkor) "since the beginning of time". Among these names, we can easily identify the sites of That Luang and Saphang Mo, where a certain number of Khmer remains have actually been found.



Fig. 8 Various Khmer and Mon Buddhist sculptures found in Vientiane province and Luang Prabang. Source: EFEO archives and Michel Lorrillard.

The historiography of the ancient Phuan kingdom of Xieng Khuang, on the other hand, places the introduction of Buddhism in the 15th century and arriving from Luang Prabang, or even from a more westerly region. No Khmer or Mon remains can be found in Xieng Khuang; on the contrary certain objects attest to Lān Nā and Burmese influence.

In the historiographical traditions related to the introduction of Buddhism in the Phuan kingdom of Xieng Khuang, as in the kingdom of Lān Xāng, it is notable that the religion thus came to fill a lack judged to be unbearable by those who were aware of it: this was the ignorance of the Triple Gem and of all the related conceptions and mental dispositions. Buddhism equally came to substitute the previous beliefs which were judged to be barbaric and violent – those accorded to demons and spirits of all kinds – including converting the places which were first dedicated to them through rites of purification.

The first and second thirds of the 16th century, a period where Lao historiography (influenced by the chronicles of precious Buddha images) began to establish itself, offers important epigraphic witness which is not found later. It demonstrates the same spirit in which Buddhist worship must still fight against previous beliefs.

Practically all the Lao chronicles which have been found, when speaking of the ancient events of Luang Prabang, make reference to a measure taken by Phothisarat in 1527 leading to the destruction of an altar dedicated to evil spirits, to be replaced by a Buddhist temple. According to the period of writing, they present this act in a different way and use varied vocabulary. Some also make reference to the presence of one or two religious dignitaries. The study of the collected versions shows that it is the texts written in Pali which supply the oldest data, and that these are therefore very close to the original document commemorating the act of Phothisarat, that is the stele of Vat Sangkhalok which is dated April, between 11th and 16th, 1527 (Figure 9).



Fig. 9 Stele (schist) previously kept in Vat Sangkhalok (Sangkhadevalok) in Luang Prabang, presently in the Royal Palace Museum (1527). Source: Michel Lorrillard.

Analysis of this text reveals some very important contextual data. It is in fact the first royal Lao order which still remains, and it shows an exceptional engagement on the part of the King in order to reform religious practice, even if the measures taken appear to have a local character. The force of these measures leads us to conclude that Phothisarat accomplished at that moment a foundational act, which thoroughly impacted the collective consciousness. In addition to what the chronicles provide, it is however necessary to examine the text with regard to other inscriptions from about the same time, so that certain useful keys to the better understanding of Lao Buddhism become apparent.

A second epigraphic document from around Luang Prabang, the Ban Don Sing stele, commemorates the decision in 1527 and shows a new application in the erection of a *stūpa*, in 1555 (September 1st), in a location which was once again haunted (Figure 10). But the act does not appear so brutal, since the *stūpa* keeps the name of the ancient location (Don Sing), this time in a Pali form (*Sīhadipakacetiya*). Certain clues also show that the belief in spirits and in various deities remained, and that the new practice, as in Lān Nā, only assimilated them.



Fig. 10 Stele (schist) of Vat Ban Don Sing, presently kept in Vat Saen, Luang Prabang (1555). Source: Michel Lorrillard.

The Vat Daen Muang stele N° 2 of Phon Phixay, referring to all the temples in Vientiane, is dated September 23rd, 1535 (Poonothoke 1987, 236-240) and is the second and last royal order we have for Phothisarat. It also takes up the theme of malevolent beings, through reference to a *sutta* which aims precisely at self-preservation, but it moreover deals with the correct observances of monks and of the necessity for the expulsion of those who do not conform.

Our three inscriptions then – beyond the primordial opposition that they make here, with different nuances each time, between the belief in various deities and in Buddhism – also take place within a context where the practices of the religious community had attained an elevated level. This is shown by other signs attesting to a superior literary culture, notably references to concepts from Pâli *Abhidhamma*.

We should therefore ask ourselves whether the religious quarrels that had been raging between the monks of Lān Nā for several decades already have not also reached Lān Xāng - of which only the first inscriptions would still deliver some muffled echoes.

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