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Writing for Eternity

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Research on the Inscriptions in Laos: Current Situation and Perspectives

Michel Lorrillard
École française d'Extrême-Orient

Introduction

Very little attention has been paid by scholars so far to the epigraphic sources of Laos (it is true that this remark also applies to the other historical remains). Having been confined within its current borders by the French colonial power in the late nineteenth century, this very mountainous and sparsely populated country has to a large extent been considered as a marginal area unaffected by the major civilisational movements—a landlocked zone whose past was not worthy of much interest. The earliest studies carried out on ancient materials in the Middle Mekong valley have undoubtedly contributed to create this negative assumption, especially because they tended to deny that the region did have a historical dynamic of its own:

> "Laos never experienced the political unity that protects the independence of a people and promotes the emergence of a unique culture. Being originally a vassal of Cambodia [*sic*], then submitted to the competing influences of Siam and Burma, it has kept the imprint of these various nations. It would be an exaggeration to say that it is no more than a reflection of the neighbouring states […]. However […], the mainstream of scientific research has been diverted to more advantaged countries."[1]

For instance, when the first lapidary inscriptions were discovered in Angkor, the few comparable texts brought to light in Laos were naturally integrated into the epigraphic corpus of Cambodia—including a physical transfer of some specific steles[2]—without any scholar ever evoking the possible historical specificity of the territories beyond the Khone waterfalls. The habit of referring to external or other spaces is perhaps even more apparent in the pioneering studies on the inscriptions of the Upper Mekong valley. When Auguste Pavie published the first translations of Lao chronicles, he was eager to document the historiographical tradition of the independent kingdom of Lān Xāng, thus countering the discourse that the Siamese were defending about the territories on the left bank of the river (Pavie 1898). However, he surprisingly reduced the scope of his purpose by including a series of 31 inscriptions, 25 of them being from northern Thailand (Sukhothai and Lān Nā) and only 6 from Laos (Luang Prabang), with the full set of documents being presented as "Thai" texts.

1. "Laos", *BEFEO* 21, 1921: 307–312 (translation from French).

2. This applied in particular to the steles with the K. 362 and K. 367 inscriptions, currently in the custody of Angkor Conservation. Some rubbings have been made and offered recently to the Wat Phu Museum in Champassak.

The few studies that Louis Finot then devoted to the Lao epigraphy did not really contribute to any clarification due to the errors that this scholar was doomed to make about the important issue of the scripts, as his work was based on a limited corpus of texts.[3]

While it barely exceeded 20 references before 1950, the collection of inscriptions catalogued in Laos increased substantially during the second half of the twentieth century. In Volume VIII of *Inscriptions du Cambodge* published in 1966, George Cœdès gave a list of 19 Khmer inscriptions that were discovered in Laos,[4] it was complemented a few years later by two documents that had been identified by Claude Jacques (1971). The general list that he went on developing included nine additional references in the 1990s.[5] Concerning the Lao inscriptions themselves, an essential contribution was provided in the early 1970s by Pierre-Marie Gagneux with the inventory work, transcription and translation of the epigraphic documents preserved in the Vientiane temples, so that the corpus rose to 150 new items.[6] A Mon inscription in Laos was published for the first time during the same period (Guillon 1974). However, very little account was taken of these historical sources in scientific publications despite the exceptional value of some of them. As a matter of fact, whereas some integrative work on the Khmer history refers to vestiges discovered in the vicinity of Wat Phu (Jacques 2004), no study on the Khmer inscriptions of Laos was published after 1966.[7] Until very recently, the studies dedicated to the other cultures of Laos, whether past or present, have also completely ignored the epigraphic texts.

The reasons for the slow development of epigraphic research in Laos are similar to those affecting the progress of historical research in general. The country is physically partitioned (map 1), so that contact between many regions is restricted (no railway line anywhere) and until recently, it was very difficult—especially during the period when freedom of movement was severely hampered (1954–1995)—to obtain information about the ancient documentary resources outside the major cities. The relative autonomy of provinces was also an impediment to exchange between local administrative offices on issues of enhancing and protecting heritage. Modern-type museums are next to non-existent in the country: it is worth noting that almost all the inscriptions registered at national level are in the custody of three temples located in the capital city.

It is in this context that the Vientiane Branch of École française d'Extrême-Orient signed in 2003 a partnership agreement with the Department of Archaeology and Museums of the Ministry of Information and Culture of the Lao PDR. In order to collect primary sources that

3. Finot 1917. Concerning the questions raised by the script issue, see Lorrillard 2008. Two other articles published (Finot 1903 and "Les inscriptions du musée de Hanoï", *in* Finot 1915: 1–38) deal specifically with nine new Lao epigraphic items (five of which have disappeared).

4. Several of the seven previous volumes of *Inscriptions du Cambodge* (published between 1933 and 1964) already presented these inscriptions with a translation and a short descriptive note.

5. No revised list has been published in the past 45 years. However, a version with updates made whenever new items were discovered is available at EFEO ("Projet CIK", see Soutif in this volume). Other lists of Cambodian inscriptions have also been set up, outside EFEO.

6. Gagneux 1975. This remarkable study is paralleled in the work published (in Thai) by Poonotoke (1987) dedicated to the Lao inscriptions in N.E. Thailand. The kingdom of Lān Xāng ruled the territories on the right bank of the Mekong for some centuries.

7. This statement must be revised for the last few years. In January 2013, the discovery of K. 1320 in Wat Phu led to the publication of two presentations and one translation of this inscription (Hawixbrock 2012; Jacques 2014; Jacques & Goodall 2014). Recent archaeological work around this temple also led to a new interest in epigraphic sources (Estève & Soutif 2010–2011). A few studies on a more global subject mention some inscriptions of Champassak area (Sanderson 2003–2004).

may have stood the test of time, comprehensive surveys have been conducted extensively for six years, covering the seventeen provinces of the country and resulting in the identification of many ancient sites and the discovery of hundreds of archaeological remains.[8] We will focus in this paper on the data that directly concern epigraphic research. For the sake of clarity, we think it appropriate to take as the first criterion for classification, not the location of items (to avoid the risk of confusion in the case of regions where different types of sources are mixed), but rather their belonging to a large cultural area as can easily be identified on the basis of a set of specific features including language(s), form(s) of script, types of material remains, etc. We were thus able to establish three groups corresponding to separate corpora: Khmer, Mon and Lao—with the latter including, for reasons of convenience (they belong to the same Tai linguistic group), the Lü and Yuan inscriptions. This classification is based on criteria related to the chronology since Khmer and Mon inscriptions mostly refer to the second half of the first millennium and the first two following centuries, whereas the Lao inscriptions refer to the second half of the second millennium. The communities corresponding to these corpora also belong to two very different ethnolinguistic families (Mon-Khmer and Tai-Kadai).

The corpus of Khmer inscriptions

The current corpus of Khmer inscriptions in Laos contains approximately 40 references that cover a vast territory extending from the southern province of Champassak (14th parallel) to the central province of Vientiane (18th parallel). However, the items are not evenly distributed in the area concerned and some regions display specific chronological features.

The Champassak province

The major part of the Khmer epigraphic corpus in Laos was discovered in the Champassak province, an area bordering Cambodia and crossed by the Mekong River. The presence in this region of the Wat Phu sanctuary where Śiva worship seems to have endured from the fifth to the twelfth century is an explanation for this concentration of documents. Interestingly enough, it is in the wake of the study carried out by J.H.C. Kern (1882) on one of them—specifically the inscription of the Ban That stele (K. 364)—that epigraphic research applied to the Khmer began to develop between 1879 and 1882.[9] Some years later, Abel Bergaigne reported in *Inscriptions sanscrites du Campā et du Cambodge* a second inscription found close to the Wat Phu: the Houé Tamoh/Huay Tomo stele (K. 362).[10] Auguste Barth (1902, 1903) and Louis Finot[11] published four documents from the same area in the first two decades of the twentieth century, but then it took until the 1950s to have G. Cœdès translate or summarise new documents on the Champassak province in *Inscriptions du Cambodge*.

Only half of the 34 Khmer inscriptions discovered in this region and having received a "K" reference number (see Soutif in this volume) have given rise to an investigation followed by a publication. The remaining have been dated (with various degrees of accuracy) and some of

8. Lorrillard 2008a, 2010–2011, 2014, 2014a.

9. After having discovered some facsimiles of the inscriptions from the Khmer world copied by J. Harmand in the first volume of *Annales de l'Extrême-Orient* (1878–1879), H. Kern published in the same journal the first translations (into French) of these documents. The findings concerning the Ban That inscribed stele have been reported in Kern 1882.

10. Inscription LIV (Bergaigne 1893: 389–390).

11. 1912a, "Piédroit de Vat Phu", *in* Finot 1915: 107.

them were mentioned in a paper, but information about the content is only partial. About a dozen epigraphic documents—in some cases fragments of the same inscription—have been recovered during investigations conducted recently in the Champassak province; however, most of them have not yet been entered into the general inventory of Khmer inscriptions. Among these, we should mention a seven-line long inscription written on a stele using a script unknown in the Lower Mekong basin, but displaying some features reminiscent of Indian scriptural forms.

Referring to its epigraphic corpus, Wat Phu is apparently the only site of the Khmer world offering a panel of historical documents spread over eight centuries. The pre-Angkorian period is represented by at least eighteen inscriptions. The first one in chronological order is also one of the oldest inscriptions ever found in South-East Asia; according to the script used, it dates back to the second half of the fifth century (Cœdès 1956; Jacques 1962). This is the famous Wat Luang Kau stele (K. 365), the work of *mahārājādhirāja* Śrī Devanīka, about whom we are told that he originated in a faraway country (fig. 1).[12] Another large stele inscription (K. 477) can probably be associated with this document, as it was excavated in almost the same place and is very similar in shape. The text has unfortunately been severely damaged and has not to date been submitted to any study, not even a palaeographic one. The other inscriptions of the period have been dated to the period between the late sixth and the late eighth century. Four of them can be attributed to Mahendravarman/Citrasena (K. 363, K. 1173, K. 1174 and K. 1340)[13] and at least five more seem to extend back to the reign of King Jayavarman I (K. 367, K. 1059, K. 1201, K. 1224 and K. 1225). It is worth noticing that the supports for these pre-Angkorian inscriptions are quite varied: apart from the steles, large statue bases (for the bull Vṛṣabha), architectural elements and even rock walls (sheltered or not) were found.

Out of a dozen inscriptions from the Angkorian era now registered, two can be attributed with certainty to Yaśovarman (K. 362, K. 1005)—they belong to the famous digraphic inscriptions relating to *āśrama*—and two other ones to Sūryavarman II (K. 364, K. 366). Though it was found in a severely damaged condition, an inscribed stele (K. 720) interestingly betrays 1006 CE as a date. Another inscription dated twelfth or thirteenth century has the special characteristic of having been engraved on a bronze mirror; it might well be the only epigraphic testimony from South Laos during the reign of Jayavarman VII.

The inscriptions found in the Wat Phu area—even those whose translation has been published—have been widely under-utilised by the historians of Southeast Asia, even though the oldest one offers a wealth of information essential for a proper understanding of the historical geography of the earliest forms of centralised power in the Khmer world. At the turn of the second millennium, they also highlight the exceptional attention that the Wat Phu sanctuary continued to enjoy in spite of the shift of the political and economic power to Angkor and regions lying more to the west. It appears that, for the study of the reign of some Khmer monarchs in the ninth, eleventh and twelfth centuries, the information provided by the inscriptions of Champassak province may be valuable and complement the data delivered by the epigraphic corpora of ancient Cambodia and Thailand. There is no doubt that this area still represents great potential for specialists in textual sources. The current urban and land use development programs will

12. According to the authors, Devanīka might have come from the West (Si Thep), the East (Campā) or the South (Funan).

13. The pedestal bearing the latter inscription was discovered by chance by the inhabitants of Ban Don Xe (north of Champassak province) in 2006. The K. 1340 number was given ten years later and the text remains unpublished.

probably lead to the discovery of new inscriptions, especially in the vicinity of the ancient city of Wat Phu and near the old road linking the sacred complex to the Angkor temples.[14]

The other provinces in South Laos

The Attopeu province—bordering on both the Champassak province and Cambodia—has not yet yielded up any Khmer epigraphic sources, though seven sites holding remains dating from the first millennium have been identified. This testifies to the specific importance of the Middle basin of the Se Kong river during the pre-Angkorian era, especially in the area around the confluence with rivers Se Kaman and Se Su. Like these tributaries, the Se Kong has its source in the Annamite Range and irrigates the relatively large Attopeu plain that might have played the role of a transitional space between the two major cultural centres of Chenla and Campā. Future research will tell whether this enclave connected to the Mekong valley,[15] even though partly separated from the Wat Phu region by the imposing Boloven Plateau, was culturally included in the Mahendravarman/Citrasena area of expansion.

The Saravan province, located further north (15th parallel) and bordered to the west by the Mekong, has also revealed artefacts of Khmer origin and pre-Angkorian structures. This region, which can be described as a central plain where three corridors (NW-SE, EW and NS) cutting into the surrounding mountain ranges meet, did not deliver ancient inscriptions either, but further excavations might lead to discoveries. The small shrine in Ban Na Moang Noy, for instance, is respectively 26 and 40 km away from the Ban Don Xe pedestal (K. 1340) and "Phou Lokhon" stele (K. 363), and the latter is itself very close to the five other inscriptions dating back to Mahendravarman (late 6th–early 7th c.) discovered close to the Mekong-Nam Mun confluence on Thai territory.

Much more than in the enclosed plain of Saravan, we have testimonies of the Khmer civilisation in the vast neighbouring plain of Savannakhet, even if it is located further north. It clearly appears that the influence of Cambodia extended that far, not only via the Mekong, but also from the Khorat Plateau that borders the western part of this area. At Ban Na Khu, just eight kilometres east of the main river, a clearly pre-Angkorian site has provided several ceremonial items made of sandstone, including a base with a ledge bearing an inscription apparently in Sanskrit. It has about 30 characters, half of which have been well preserved and reveal an archaic form of script reminiscent of the Pallava style. This document might have been created at the same time as three inscriptions on silver plates that were unearthed in 2009 in the ancient city of Nong Hua Thong, about 100 km downstream, at the northern limit of Savannakhet province (fig. 2). These inscriptions were temporarily catalogued under No. K. 1262, K. 1263 and K. 1264; they just have one line each written in a language that C. Jacques has identified as Khmer. One of them might be dated from the eighth century, the other two could be slightly more recent. They are dedications giving indications about the identity of the donors, the gods honoured and the nature of the offerings. A thorough study of this material, in connection with the site of discovery, should provide valuable information about their historical context. The whole region, enlarged to Khammuan province, harbours many more vestiges belonging to the pre-Angkorian, Angkorian and Mon cultures that call for scholarly study.

14. In January 2013, a beautiful and important inscription now catalogued as K. 1320 has been unearthed in the northern quadrangle of Wat Phu complex. Dated around 925 CE, it contains 96 stanzas in Sanskrit with an eulogy to Indravarman I, Yaśovarman I, Harṣavarman I and Īśānavarman II. See *supra* note 7.

15. River Se Kong flows into the Mekong at Stung Treng/Thala Borivat, a place where several major pre-Angkorian sites have been located.

The central provinces of Laos

The Khmer culture does not seem to have left any trace in the central province of Borikhamxai, but offers important testimony in the neighbouring Vientiane province in the form of sculptural and architectural vestiges, and even remains of land management like *trapeang* and earthen walls (Lorrillard 2010). A "hospital stele" (K. 368) was discovered in the early twentieth century in Say Fong, a village about 20 km downstream from the capital of Laos, so that it was assumed that some sanctuary had existed there in ancient times (fig. 3). This assumption should be dismissed as the stele clearly originates from another site, possibly one of the two hospital sanctuaries identified in the close by Thai provinces of Udon Thani and Sakorn Nakhon. Another inscribed stele was discovered in the early 1990s about 20 km to the northwest of Vientiane, but it has not been deciphered or even entered in an inventory yet (fig. 4). It is one of four undecorated *sema* placed around cave No. 11 belonging to the Dan Sung religious complex—a site that was created on a rocky platform overlooking the plain which must have been inhabited for a long time by hermit monks. This inscription is comparable in a sense to the representations of Buddha carved into the sandstone walls and boulders found there, as both seem to testify to cultural practices in which clues referring to Mon and Khmer influences can be identified. The first form of culture is particularly noticeable when the immediate environment of Dan Sung is taken into account: other sites having *sema* and Buddha images typical of the Mon cultural area have indeed been brought to light (see below). But the Dan Sung Buddha figures, like those of the rock cave near Vang Sang and some images stored in Vientiane seem to be different in terms of style and iconography as they display features reminiscent of the art of Lopburi, i.e. a regional form of Khmer art. This apparent blending of cultures is also striking for the observer of the Dan Sung stele: the text is written in seven lines composed of two clearly separated hemistiches, all of them containing apparently eight *akṣara*s or syllables—indicating that the language used is probably Sanskrit (the word "śrī" can be identified). However, the last four lines use a kind of script which is most probably Cambodian (due to the presence of "hair") whereas the first three lines suggest a more archaic form of writing that seems to be related primarily to the Mon area.[16]

The corpus of Mon inscriptions

That a Mon culture had existed in Laos in ancient times was evidenced in 1972 when P.-M. Gagneux published an article reporting the discovery in Ban Thalat, about 60 km north of Vientiane, of a large standing Buddha displaying a characteristic style and an inscription in Mon language and script (fig. 5) (Gagneux 1972). This inscription commemorating the donations made to a sanctuary was translated and published two years later (Guillon 1974). The testimony failed then to attract the attention of specialists,[17] though this applies to a large extent to all ancient documents found so far in Laos. However, a major effort has lately been made to highlight all Mon vestiges uncovered in the country. These historical remains testify to the extension of a cultural area on the left bank of the Mekong, with its centre located on the Khorat Plateau in Thailand in the second half of the first millennium. The most characteristic testimonies of this culture are the *sema*, those carved milestones displaying in most cases a stylised image of a *stūpa*. About 150 items of this sort have

16. This perception is shared by G. Diffloth and K. Vimolkasem, though not without some caution, as the inscription could never be deciphered.

17. After examining the original copy, Christian Bauer has recently put forward a slightly different interpretation of the text (personal communication), even if the general meaning was not affected.

been located in Laos, mainly in the provinces of Vientiane and Savannakhet. In the first province, six *sema* that have recently been found in four different places bear damaged inscriptions, of which at least two begin with a formula specific to Mon epigraphy "*wo (...) punya*" (this is the meritorious work)[18] as was already the case with the Ban Thalat inscription. A third inscription was found at the same time and in the same place (Ban Dong Phosy) on a stele: it is engraved above a bas-relief figure, with eight lines of written text where only the words "*śrī dharmarājā*" could be deciphered so far.[19] This most interesting Sanskrit title is unfortunately not sufficient to establish the language used for the whole document. In our opinion, the rather coarse type of notation used for the rest of the inscription points to a more common language, but it would be imprudent to claim that it is Mon, even if the back side of the stele bears the characteristic *stūpa* image. The same caution should be observed with three other inscriptions related to a Mon environment (the Ban Na Sone *sema*, the stele of the south gate of That Luang, the Wat Saphang Mo *sema*) where only a few *akṣara*s are more or less recognisable. In two of these cases, the script may betray some influence of the Khmer way of writing.

The corpus of Lao inscriptions

Though the ancient Khmer and Mon epigraphic corpora have some aspects in common—to the extent that they can hardly be distinguished in northeast Thailand in the second half of the first millennium—they seem to have left absolutely no imprint on the corpus of Lao inscriptions in the Kingdom of Lān Xāng. The two sets developed during different eras and no epigraphic sources have been discovered on the present-day Lao territory for the period extending between the early thirteenth and the end of the fifteenth century.[20] The way of writing was thoroughly modified during the interval as the Lao inherited scriptural forms that had been developed in northern Thailand, rather than the models previously used in the Lower Mekong basin. It is however worth noticing that, even if the Lao culture seems not to have borrowed anything directly from the Mon and Angkorian cultures that had preceded it on the territories in central and southern Laos, it promptly reused objects of worship that these cultures had produced. This probably holds true of the oldest Lao inscription found so far: it was engraved in 1494 on a stele dating apparently from the Angkorian era, and was refurbished to fit its new function. There is no such doubt concerning some other inscriptions dated sixteenth century, whose base is indeed a *sema* from the Mon period, i.e. a material that could have been crafted seven or eight centuries earlier.[21] In fact, the few beautiful Lao steles registered are often reused *sema*—which is no surprise as stone carving never developed into an elaborate form of artistic expression in Lān Xāng, as opposed to bronze, wood, brick or stucco.

The emergence of inscriptions in Laos is closely linked to the process involved in the dissemination of scripts and the correlated (new) extension of Buddhism in the valley of the river Mekong. According to the historiographical tradition, the religion of the Enlightened was introduced in Luang Prabang by a Cambodian mission around 1350. However, the rather contrived and idealised report provided for this event, and the special attention paid to other kinds of testimonies, show

18. Christian Bauer (pers. com). The two inscriptions might be dated eighth or ninth century.

19. Ditto. The inscription might be slightly older than the previous ones.

20. The time gap might even be longer as the most recent Khmer Angkorian stele found in Laos is the Say Fong stele (dated late 12th– early 13th c.) and, as mentioned above, it was probably imported from modern Thai territory.

21. Several ancient Lao inscriptions engraved on *sema* with a *stūpa* have been found in the vicinity of Vientiane on both banks of the Mekong (as far upstream as Sanakham).

that the introduction and propagation of Buddhism is a much more complex phenomenon that results from various causes (Lorrillard 2006). The share that the Khmer and Mon influences had, at least indirectly, on this process is undeniable: as mentioned above, worship material assigned to these cultures was indeed reused to carve some of the oldest Lao inscriptions. This fact may have been the origin of the mythical tradition concerning the introduction of Buddhism into Laos from Cambodia as the chronicles refer also to the prior existence of wood and stone markers, and even to previous texts written in Khmer, to commemorate the sites selected for the new religion. The Saphang Mo district in Vientiane is mentioned and this may also apply to the most revered *stūpa* in Laos, the That Luang. Important Khmer and Mon vestiges have been found in these areas, including steles with characters that have almost completely disappeared (see above).

The two presumably oldest Lao inscriptions have been discovered in the Tham Nang An (fig. 6) and Tham Ting caves near Luang Prabang, at the confluence with river Nam Ou. They have been painted on the rock using ochre and both are very similar in form and content. Although the two sites are at a distance of ca. 15 km from each other, they were probably made at almost the same time and by the same person, but we cannot establish which one came first. There is in both cases a kind of autograph displaying the same name—a certain "Phra Mohot"—complemented in the Tham Nang An inscription with the name of a second person holding the title of "*phāya*" (lord?). The script is close to the Sukhothai type as it was used in the fourteenth century (Ferlus 1995).[22] We know that the famous Rama Khamhaeng stele (late 13th–early 14th c.) mentions "Muang Swa", which is the ancient name of Luang Prabang, and even river Nam Ou. It can therefore be assumed that the territory under the rule of the great Siamese sovereign, or at least the corresponding cultural area, extended up to the banks of the Mekong and a primary form of writing originating from Sukhothai has been used in Laos to a limited extent. However, the two rock inscriptions are not convincing enough evidence from which to draw conclusions about the history of the sites. Neither are the texts sufficient proofs for the practice of Buddhism.

The oldest examples of dated inscriptions written in Tai-Lao language (ancient Lao and northern Tai or Tai-Yuan vernaculars were very similar) and found in present-day Lao territory are rather a reflection of the almost exclusive cultural influence exerted by the ancient kingdom of Lān Nā in northern Thailand. This influence probably applied in successive waves from the first half of the fifteenth century and rapidly reached the Lao settlements located further downstream of the Mekong.

Expectedly, the northern and western provinces of present-day Laos, having been under the direct sovereignty of Lān Nā, are those revealing the deepest cultural footprint of that kingdom. A sizeable number of ancient inscriptions have been found in the provinces of Bo Kaeo, Luang Nam Tha and Sayaburi, all of them written in Fak Kham, a form of script which has its roots in the Sukhothai way of writing and was widely used in the territories controlled by the kings of Chiang Mai between the early fifteenth and the end of the sixteenth century. A slate fragment found in the small town of Muang Sing—located far north in the Luang Nam Tha province—offers one of the finest examples of this script (fig. 7). This inscription is rather recent—being dated 1567, i.e. after the submission of Chiang Mai by the Burmese. The oldest inscription in Tai-Lao language to be associated with the present-day Lao territory is the "Ban Huay Say" (Bo Kaeo Province) inscription, created in 1459, but it was most probably brought from a site near the right bank of the Mekong, i.e. Thailand. The stele unearthed in Muang Khop some 15 years

22. The inscription of Tham Ting was discovered a few years ago. Other walls from the same site of Pak Ou caves, but much harder to reach, bear drawings and lettering in red ochre.

ago and dated 1520 could be taken as more or less tentative evidence of the fact that a part of the present-day Lao province of Sayaburi also belonged to the kingdom of Lān Nā, whereas it is traditionally considered that its border ran more to the west, behind a mountain range.

From the point of view of palaeography, the Fak Kham script can undoubtedly be considered as the prototype of the Lao script.[23] It is nevertheless worth noticing that the oldest samples of the latter way of writing are already different from the model, as if the differentiation occurred rather early, possibly during the first half of the fifteenth century. The Tha Khaek stele (central Laos), dated 17 April 1494, is apparently the oldest example of genuine Lao script (fig. 8). The graphic signs can hardly be examined because of the damaged condition of the inscription, but seem to be the result of a local and independent development, displaying less mannerism in the form. This observation is supported by the few inscriptions found in the Vientiane area and dating back to the first half of the sixteenth century. The location of these early documents is relatively far away from Lān Nā. Yet, they present some specific features testifying to the extended scope of influence exerted by the northern Tai culture, e.g. astrological disks.

From the second quarter of the sixteenth century onwards, in Luang Prabang first as long as this city played the role of the capital of Lān Xāng, later and to a larger extent in Vientiane when Setthāthirāt (1548–1571) and his successors were on the throne, several steles were produced with inscriptions still using the Fak Kham type of script. These documents were most probably engraved by scribes originating from Lān Nā after Setthāthirāt had definitively renounced the throne of this kingdom (he reigned there for a few years) and abandoned his claim on Chiang Saen, of necessity after Chiang Mai had been conquered by the Burmese (1558).

The development of Buddhism in Lān Xāng from the second quarter of the sixteenth century onward is illustrated not only by the sudden emergence of a large number of steles marking the founding of temples, but also by the use of another script called Tham (from Pāli *dhamma*, i.e. sacred) imported from Lān Nā. Due to the wide range of graphic signs, this way of writing served mostly for the transcription of texts in Pāli language and thus contributed to the dissemination of canonical texts. The *Jinakālamālī*, a religious chronicle written in Chiang Mai in 1527 and providing reliable information, reported that, in 1523, the king of Lān Nā sent sixty volumes of the *Tipiṭaka* together with experienced monks to the king of Lān Xāng (Cœdès 1925a: 139; Jayawickrama 1978: 183). This information is entirely consistent with the Lao testimonies: while in Luang Prabang, King Phothisarāt (1520–1548), the son-in-law of the king of Chiang Mai, ordered, in 1527, the engraving of the oldest text using the Tham script ever found in Laos—namely an edict concerning the purification of religious practice.[24]

The importance of Pāli at this time is evidenced by another inscription written in Tham: the That Luang inscription in Vientiane, dated 1566 (Lorrillard 2003–2004). The first ten lines of the stele represent a composition using the religious language (fig. 9). The influence of Lān Nā is particularly evident in terms of palaeography, as is also the case for other royal inscriptions of the same period, such as that of Wat Suvanna Khuha in the modern Thai province of Udon Thani. The Tham-lao script then went on developing independently, distancing itself significantly from a graphical point of view, not only from the Tham script of Lān Nā, but also from the Tham-lü script, a form of writing rooted in the same model and used in northern Thailand and Laos.

23. The chronological listing of the Sukhothai, Lān Nā and Lān Xāng inscriptions is by itself sufficient to establish the historical process that led to the development of the three types of corpora. The Sukhothai script was first disseminated to the north, then to the east in the valley of river Mekong.

24. The Wat Sangkhalok stele, currently in the custody of the Royal Palace Museum in Luang Prabang.

The geographical distribution of the Lao inscriptions dating from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries clearly shows that the dissemination of the scripts on the territory of Lān Xāng was originally limited to the banks of the Mekong and its main tributaries, and concerned primarily a small number of "*muang*" located around the two successive capitals Luang Prabang and Vientiane. The Tha Khaek inscription dated 1494 and possibly an inscription found nearby (and bearing a questionable earlier date) seem to be very specific cases, because of their distance downstream, but without being aberrant in a historical perspective.[25] The more remote regions, namely those in southern Laos, and also in the former Lao territories on the Khorat Plateau (northeastern Thailand) provided epigraphic documents dating from not earlier than the eighteenth century. This also applies to northeastern Laos where the Tai communities, close to the Vietnamese territory, developed at a later time a rather unelaborated form of script, as it has no direct connection with the literary traditions and rules that Buddhism has introduced elsewhere. Nevertheless, handwritten sources show that Lao decrees were sent out continuously in this region at an earlier date, possibly beginning in the sixteenth century.

The research conducted on epigraphic documents in the 17 provinces of Laos and some bordering areas of northeastern Thailand resulted in setting up an inventory of about 130 Tai-Lao stele inscriptions and 600+ inscriptions on Buddha representations in bronze or wood. Almost all the former belong to the ancient Lān Xāng territory (we have already mentioned some special cases relating primarily to the Lān Nā culture) whereas the latter ones are separated into two halves, one referring to the history of Lān Xāng and the other to that of the Lü and the Yuan (Tai) groups of Laos.

The Lao epigraphic corpus on stone covers four centuries, from the late fifteenth century to the late nineteenth century, but we can observe that it is numerically higher (90 listed items) and "qualitatively" richer for a period of about one century—between 1540 and 1640—characterised politically by the succession of a dozen relatively short-lived reigns. Though it was deeply disturbed by numerous conflicts, this period seems to have been the climax of the kingdom of Lān Xāng, particularly during the reign of Setthāthirāt. In sharp contrast to this situation, we have next to no stone inscriptions (at least no significative one) dating back to the second half of the seventeenth century, i.e. the time corresponding to the long reign of Suriyavongsa (1638–1694?) which is traditionally regarded as the golden age of the Lao kingdom. Production remained at a relatively low level during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, after the disappearance of Lān Xāng and the partition of the territory into three rival principalities (Vientiane, Luang Prabang and Champassak), alongside "*muang*" which had gained some autonomy. The chronological study of epigraphic items shows that the inscriptions on stelae are older than those on the bronze Buddha images created in Laos; such images are anyway virtually non-existent at the beginning of the period and the few existing copies are of foreign origin. However, this distribution between the two types of medium was reversed from 1640 onward. The number of inscriptions on bronze Buddha images rose rapidly between the mid-seventeenth century and the early nineteenth century, until the destruction of Vientiane when it sharply dropped. The number of inscriptions on wooden Buddha images soared during the nineteenth century in the northern regions of Laos, after the political and economic context has changed dramatically.

25. With due consideration for the origin of the script, we could expect to find the most ancient Lao inscriptions exclusively in northern Laos, around Luang Prabang. The fact in itself that the number of steles with an inscription found in the Vientiane area is higher changes the way that we perceive the emergence of Lān Xāng on the regional scene. Finding ancient steles even further downstream, in the vicinity of Tha Khaek, shows that this area—which was already well developed in the Khmer period and is mentioned at an early time in the Lao chronicles (under such names as "Muang Kabong", "Lakhon" and "Muang Kao")—was affected more than elsewhere by a form of historical continuum.

The corpus of Lao inscriptions can easily be incorporated into the general corpus of Tai inscriptions, alongside the epigraphic corpora of Sukhothai and Lān Nā as all the components of this set are close to each other in terms of language and writing. The similarities between the Yuan and Lao inscriptions are so clear that they can hardly be distinguished when they were carved on an ancient bronze Buddha image as a support and written in the common script prevailing in the fifteenth or sixteenth century. A way to identify the cultural area to which they belong (apart from a stylistic analysis of the Buddha image itself) consists in examining the date and the calendar type. Both Lao and Sukhothai calendar systems are one month ahead of the system of the Tai of the "Upper Mekong" (Chiang Saen, Shan states, Lü region) and two months ahead of the system applied by the Tai in the Chiang Mai and Nam Ping basin. As the dates generally provide sufficient data to be accurately converted into the Gregorian or Julian dating system, it is easy—after selecting the system providing the most consistent correspondence and eliminating those displaying inconsistencies when compared—to identify, if not the origin of the image, at least that of the engraver. The other components of the date, sometimes very complex, are common to all three regions, including the data necessary to plot a "*duang sata*" (astrological disk) on the stone support with quarters displaying the signs of the zodiac and a representation of the position of major planets at a given point in time.

Some Sukhothai inscriptions have reached such a high level of detail and refinement that the authenticity of one of them can be questioned as being overly informative! The Lān Nā inscriptions, especially the rich corpus composed with items from the early fifteenth to the mid-sixteenth century, also offer a wealth of information about the religious customs and observances and the contribution of the royalty in the development of Buddhism. The Lao inscriptions are unfortunately less instructive, probably because religion did not reach such a high degree of development and sophistication in the middle valley of river Mekong, but they still provide important data.

Virtually all Lao stele inscriptions are meant to commemorate the founding of a temple or a donation of property to a sanctuary. In the first case, but often in the second too, the king is designated as the person who commissioned the work as a way to support the religious community. As his name is clearly mentioned, and the inscriptions almost always dated, it is possible to verify the chronology of the reigns described in the chronicles. The rhetorical form was determined fairly soon and rapidly became quite conventional. Generally the text begins with an ancient propitiatory formula such as "*śubham astu*" (may it be well!), followed by a reference to the royal character of the decision for a foundation or a donation, and then the sequence of titles of the sovereign and the names of some witnesses, both clerics and lay people. The purpose of the work is then presented, with details of the boundaries of a given territory or the nature and value of a donation. Many ancient royal inscriptions end with a curse on whoever violates the order, in other words the local lords who might be tempted to appropriate a part of the property or estate. The date is indicated in the form of data that can refer to various calculating systems that, when correlated, make it possible to verify their consistency and the accuracy of the information given: this date is mentioned in the preamble, often around the astrological disk which itself includes components for the dating, or at the end of the decree. The Lao inscriptions engraved on Buddha images generally display the same features, but they are much shorter, due to both the reduced area available and the modesty of the donation made (the image itself). A thorough study of these documents should supply precious socio-economic information about the Lao population in the various parts of Lān Xāng, both from a synchronic and a diachronic point of view, as the types of property donated can be very different, depending on the position or rank of the donor, his place of residence or his epoch.

There are few Lao inscriptions that are long and detailed. Only the royal steles relating to the works performed at Wat Ho Phra Kaeo (1811–1813) and Wat Sisaket (1819–1824) are exceptions that deserve special attention (fig. 10). They provide details about the materials used, with information about the quantities, weights and value. The so-called "Si Song Hak" stele is another remarkable item: it commemorates a treaty of friendship between the Kingdom of Lān Xāng and that of Ayuthyā in 1560–1563. Each has a text of its own engraved on one of the sides of the stone block. The content and language used are virtually identical, whereas the script is different: the Lao selected the Tham script while the Siamese used an adapted form of the Khmer script.[26]

Two hundred Lao bronze Buddha images with inscriptions (earlier than the 20th c.) have been found in the territories bordering the Mekong; this number is sizeably complemented if we take into account the images found in the hinterland on the right bank, especially those that were disseminated on the Khorat Plateau in the eighteenth century. It seems that the large-scale workshops manufacturing metal statuary had been concentrated in Vientiane up to the destruction of the city in 1828 (fig. 11). This is the site where the largest images and the most beautiful thrones have been found, and the few other items discovered outside the former capital seem to have been made following the same model and could thus be considered as exported items. Smaller workshops probably developed separately in Luang Prabang, but the former capital in the North made a reputation primarily on the basis of the abundant production of large and refined wooden images, often with inscriptions (fig. 12). Those that have stood the test of time were manufactured after the first half of the eighteenth century. However this observation is not necessarily significant, as older images made in such a vulnerable material may have disappeared naturally or due to accident. Copies of the wooden Luang Prabang Buddha images were made at a later time in territories on the margins of the kingdom, especially on its western border. The higher the distance from the capital, the more the images tend to be roughly carved and smaller in size. The inscriptions are also simplified, being reduced to an indication of the date and the name of the donor. The northern Lao Buddha images are then hardly different from the Lü or Yuan Buddha images from the neighbouring regions, both types being carved in wood, and usually in a sitting position. The inscription is painted or carved on a base whose height and width generally do not exceed five centimetres. Some 200 of such short Tai epigraphs have been found in the provinces of Luang Nam Tha and Sayaburi: as they are very similar to each other, their value lies mostly in the fact that they provide information about the major population movements that N.W. Laos experienced in the nineteenth century (fig. 13).

The Lao, Lü or Yuan inscriptions have rarely been engraved on materials other than stone or Buddha images (including His throne). The custom of setting a slate plate with an inscription on a religious monument existed in northern Laos (Luang Prabang, Sayaburi and Luang Nam Tha provinces): fragments of this type of support have stood the test of time, with some of them still in their original place (fig. 14). Another category of examples indicates that, just like the steles bearing information about the surface area of a temple, inscribed boundary stones could also be erected in the border areas. Such objects, however, were likely to disappear whenever the power relations changed in the region. The engraved metal plates or sheets with a text giving information and instructions to the local people and their representatives had an even shorter lifetime. This type of official notice could also be engraved on palm leaves, with enhanced symbolic value and binding character expressed by the seal affixed, or even be painted on a strip of cloth with symbolic motives enforcing its authority. The rhetoric used in these documents was similar to

26. "Les inscriptions du musée de Hanoï", *in* Finot 1915: 1–38.

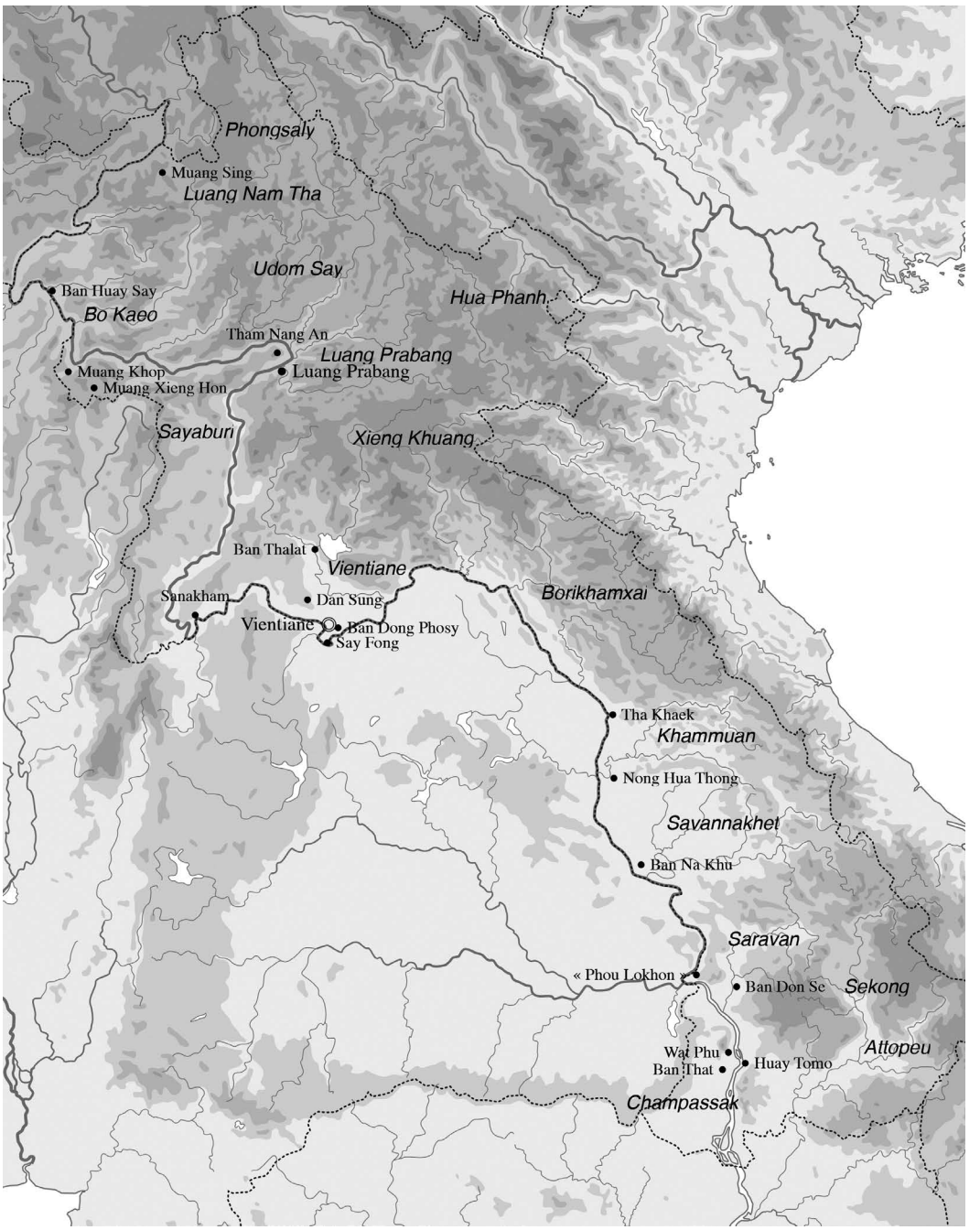
that used for inscriptions on stone. We should finally mention, alongside this type of objects, the small, engraved votive offerings (very few of them have stood the test of time) or objects of worship that received an epigraph, e.g. metal bells in some sanctuaries.

Conclusion

After having been ignored for a long time, the inscriptions in Laos offer a sizeable potential to enlarge our knowledge about the history of the middle valley of River Mekong. The documents that have recently been collected in various parts of the country display a wide range of specific features: either because they refer to different periods and cultures within one geographic area or because they refer to a wide range of forms of expression (supports used, types of script, etc.) applied within the limits of a specific cultural area.

The recent findings tend to show that the suggestions made intuitively by the pioneers of epigraphic research in the Indochinese Peninsula—i.e. the importance of some continental territories for the dissemination of cultures and the exchange of know-how—were well-founded. Laos, though appearing as a landlocked and compartmentalised area, has the advantage of a remarkable waterway network and thus served as a traffic hub for several communities, some of which had hitherto been known only for the wealth of testimonies found close to the seaside.

The (pre-Angkorian and Angkorian) Khmer and Mon cultures extended widely over the middle Mekong Valley: the river and its major tributaries were the first channels for the dissemination of these cultures—including those originating from distant regions. The religious complex of Wat Phu, which has been uninterruptedly active from the fifth century CE, is one of the major "continental" sites offering with its vestiges, in particular its epigraphic corpus, the keys to a better understanding of the "Indianisation" process that affected the peoples of Southeast Asia. The Mekong, between China and Cambodia, also represented a corridor alongside which the cultures fostered at a later time by several Tai communities rapidly developed. As compared to any other type of vestiges, the inscriptions provide data of considerable value to enrich what we know about the historical knowledge of the Lao kingdom of Lān Xāng and the neighbouring entities with which it was connected.



Map 1. —Main place names mentioned in the text.

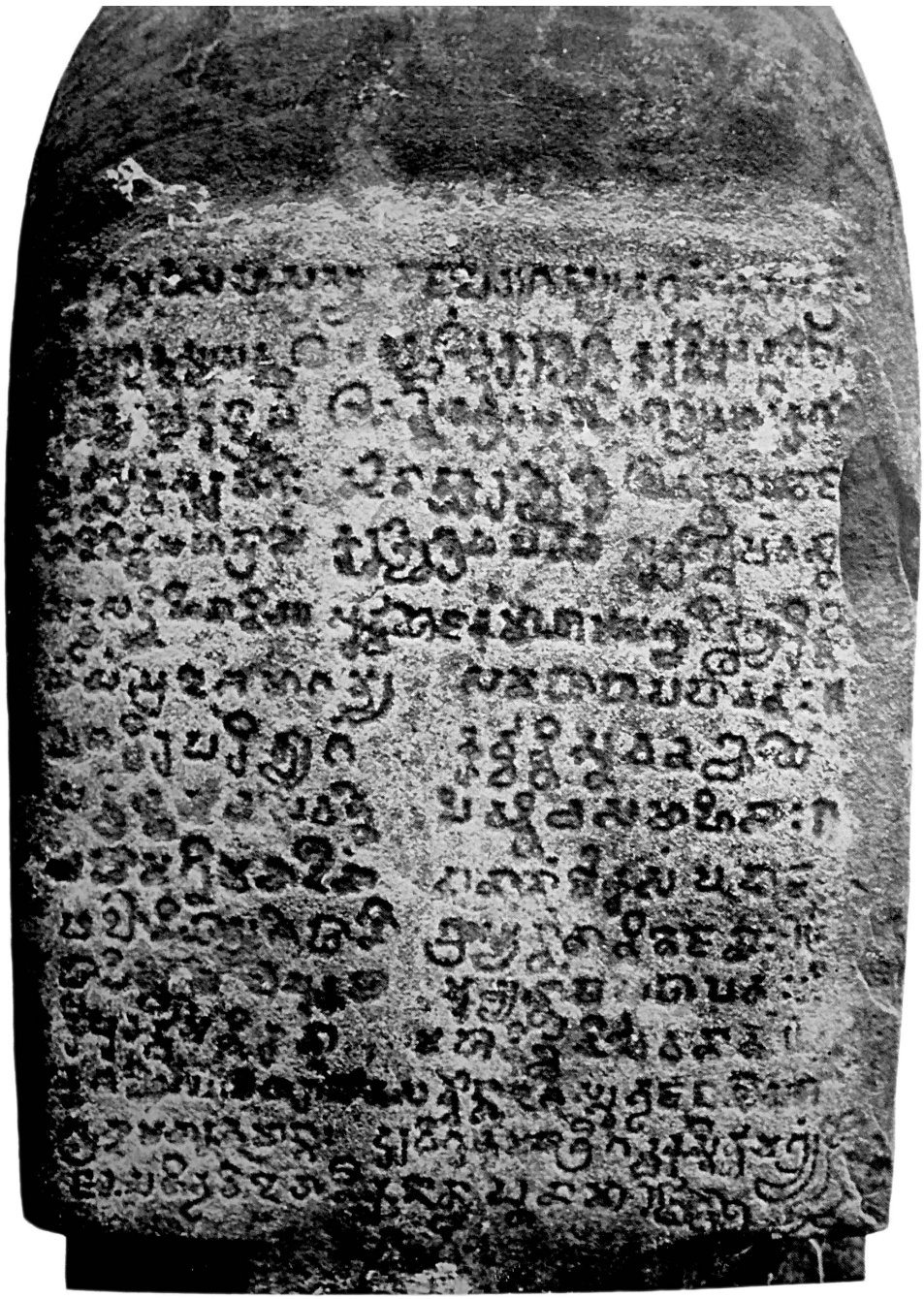


Figure 1. — Wat Luang Kau stele (K. 365, face D), EFEO.



Figure 2. — Inscribed plate (K. 1264), photograph courtesy of V. Souksavatdy, Lao Ministry of Information and Culture.

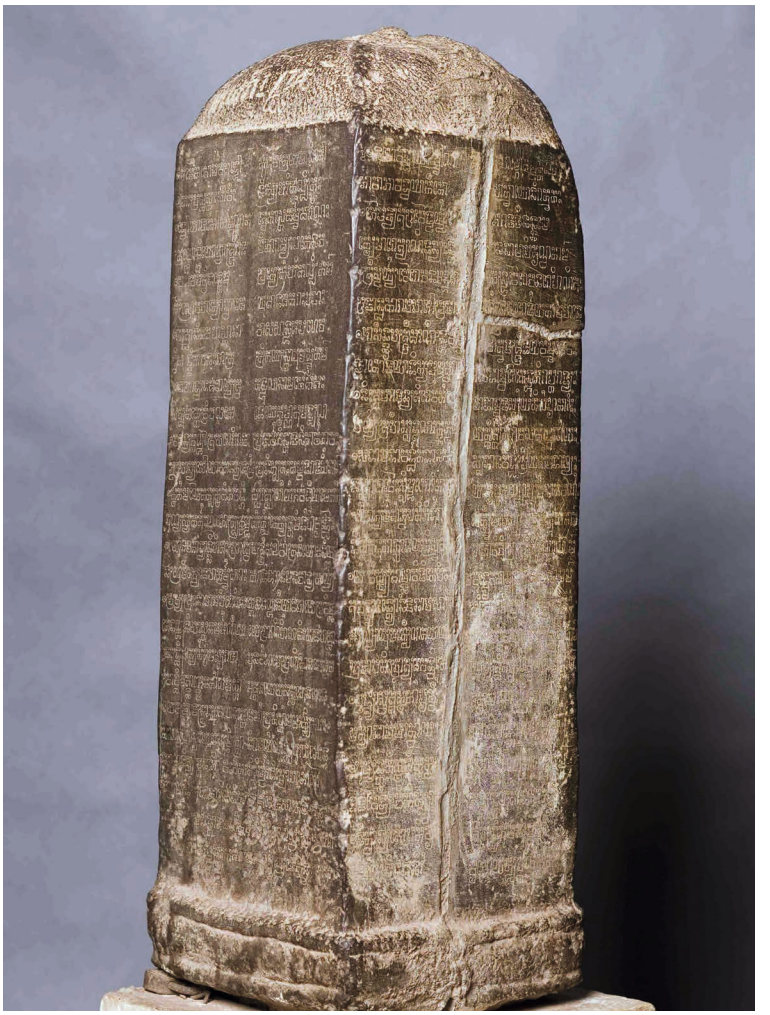


Figure 3. — Say Fong stele, Wat Phra Keo museum, EFEO Vientiane.

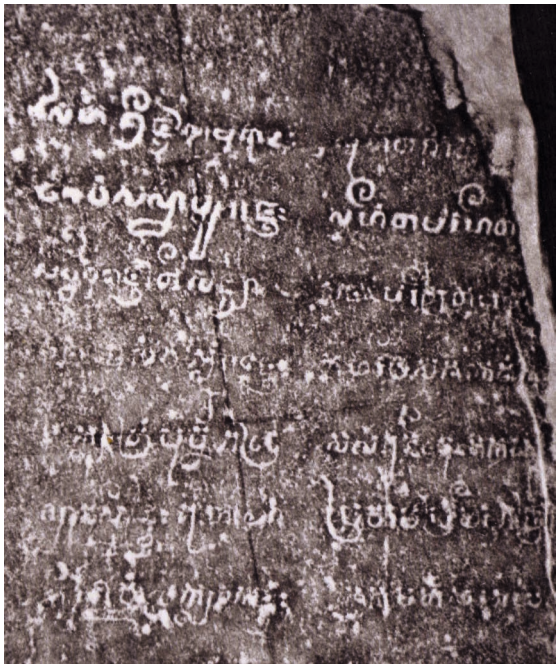


Figure 4. — Dan Sung inscription, photograph courtesy Lao Institute for Research on Culture.



Figure 5. — Ban Thalat stele, photograph M. Lorrillard.



Figure 6. — Tham Nang An inscription, photograph courtesy of M. Ferlus.



Figure 7. — That Chom Sing inscription, photograph M. Lorrillard.



Figure 8. — Tha Khaek inscription (detail, face A), EFEO archives.

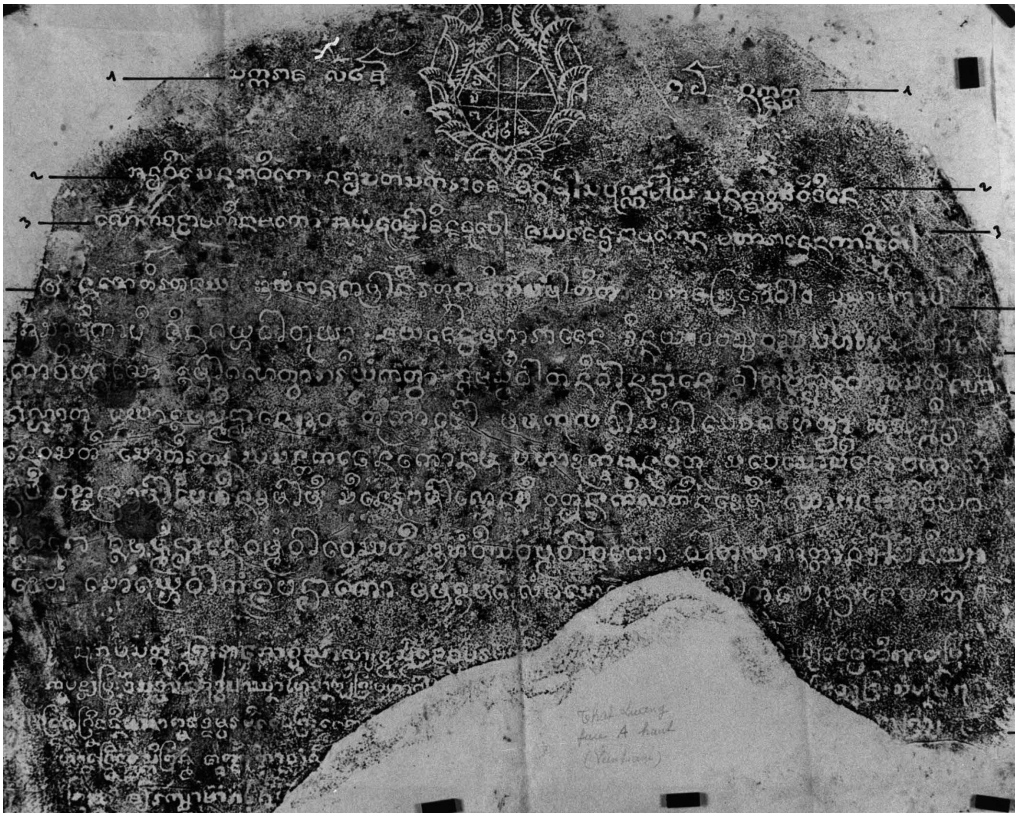


Figure 9. — That Luang inscription (face A), EFEO archives.

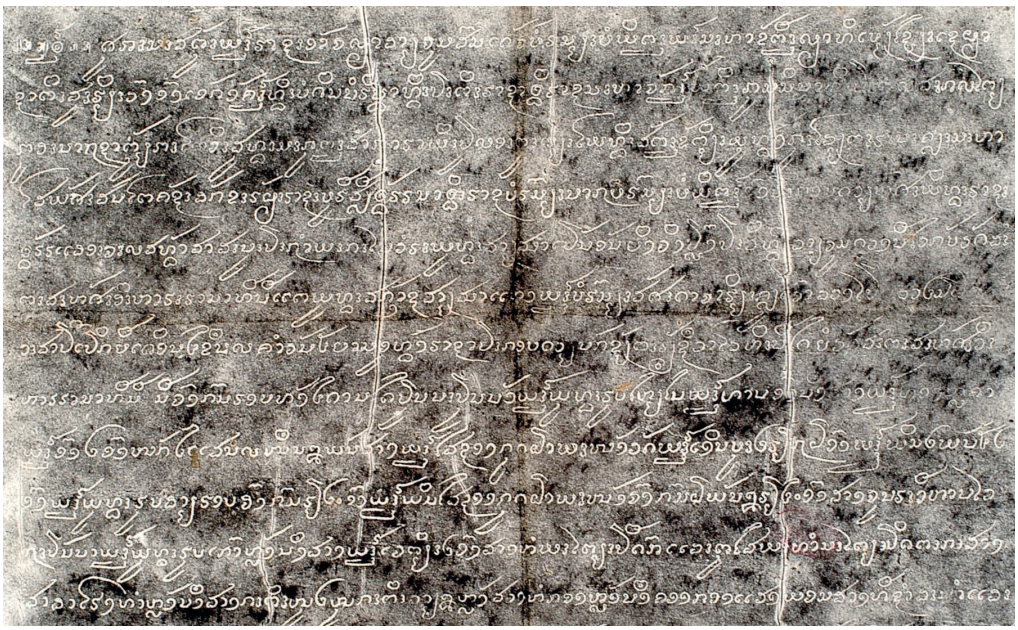


Figure 10. — Wat Sisaket inscription, EFEO archives.



Figure 11. — Inscribed Buddha (1668), Wat Sisaket museum, photograph courtesy of C. Raymond.



Figure 12. — Inscribed Buddha (1880), Wat Long Khun, Luang Prabang, photograph M. Lorrillard.



Figure 13. — Lü inscribed Buddha, Wat Tin That, Muang Sing, photograph M. Lorrillard.



Figure 14. — Yuan inscribed slab (1803), Wat That, Xieng Hon, photograph M. Lorrillard.