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An outlook on prehistoric research in Laos: An inventory and some perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Prehistoric Research in Laos was initiated during the French Indochinese period. Disrupted by unstable geopolitics, Laotian teams started to revisit prehistoric cave sites and rock shelters in the early 2000s. International interest in Laotian prehistory resumed in 2005 with a prehistoric survey of Northern Laos focusing more especially, on ancient period (pre-) Hoabinhian lithic techno-complex but also, more recently on rock art along the Mekong river banks. The purpose of this paper is not to discuss the periods classically referred to as “recent prehistory” by authors, which generally spans from the Neolithic through to Metal ages and sometimes even historical times. Rather, we provide a retrospective on prehistoric investigations, in Laos to date, independently of periods, with the main focus on stone tools. New perspectives for prehistoric research in this widely under-explored country are briefly discussed.

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1. Introduction

Between the end of the 19th century and the Second World War, few archaeological investigations were conducted in Laos. In the late 19th century, polished stones and metallic implements were collected in the Luang Prabang province during the “Mission Pavie” (1879–1895) (Massie, 1904). Mansuy (1920) conducted an archaeological survey and the excavation of Ban Don Tio cave (Fig. 1). These operations were subsequently managed by the Geological Service of Indochina, during the French Protectorate period (Fromaget, 1934, 1937a,b, 1940a, 1940b, 1941, 1952). During this period, Fromaget, Saurin and Colani became the most active and productive researchers involved in archaeological work in the region (Colani, 1932, 1935; Saurin, 1935, 1966, 1968; Fromaget, 1936, 1937a,b, 1940a,b, 1952; Fromaget and Saurin, 1936; Arambourg and Fromaget, 1938). Although some of the prehistoric sites discovered between the 1930s and the late 1960s have

been revisited and further described (Sayavongkhamdy et al., 2000), the revival of Prehistory in Laos really only started in 2005, with the Middle Mekong Archaeological Project led by J. White (Marwick et al., 2009) focussing on the Luang Prabang area. This field program allowed this team to discover and excavate the Phou Phaa Khao rockshelter and Tham Vang Ta Leow cave where an original Hoabinhian industry was unearthed (White and Bouasisengpaseuth, 2008). Another survey was conducted in the vicinity of Vieng Phu Khra, Luang Nam Tha province (Northwestern Laos) in 2010 with the Laotian Department of History of the National Academy of Social Sciences, the French Institut de Recherche et Développement and the Laotian Department of Archaeology of the Ministry of Culture and Communication (Zeitoun et al., 2012). This survey identified a new prehistoric site at the Ngeubhinh Mouxeu rock-shelter located northwest of Vieng Phu Khra. Other projects dealing with Prehistory, though focussing on rock art, appear to have potential to contribute to the development of prehistoric research and sustainable tourism in Laos. This however, is beyond the scope of this paper, which only deals with older Prehistoric periods. While Rock Art studies and Paleoanthropology arouse curiosity amongst the public, stone industries, while less sensational, are the prehistoric background of Laotian Prehistory.

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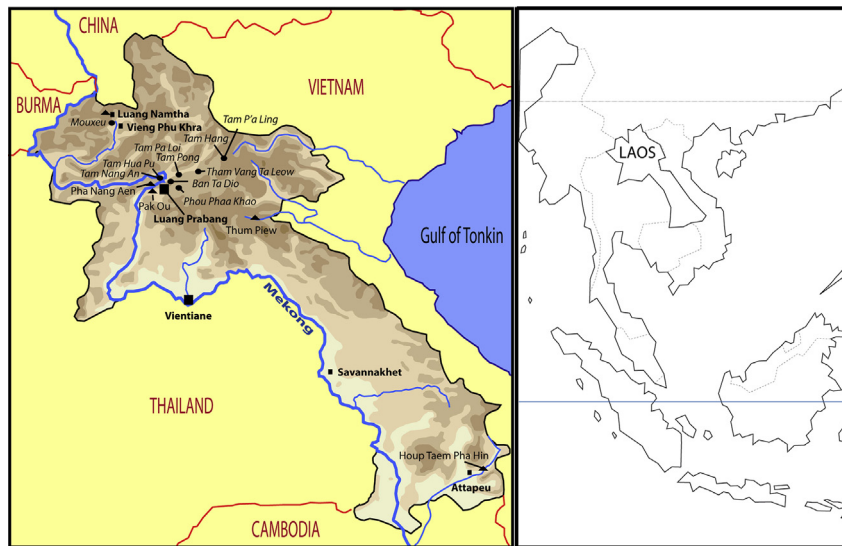


Fig. 1. Map of Laos with location of the sites referred to in the text. Round for prehistoric sites; triangle for rock-art sites.

2. Stone industries as the background of prehistory in Laos

During the French Protectorate, prehistoric excavations were conducted at three sites in the Luang Prabang and Hua Phan provinces: Tam Pong in the Seuang basin, Tam Nang An, on the right bank of the Mekong river and Tam Hang in the Khan river catchment (Saurin, 1935, 1966; Fromaget and Saurin, 1936). These sites yielded Hoabinhian artefacts, polished tools and human remains. Polished stone tools uncovered in caves may date back to the Neolithic period even though most polished artefacts are present in more recent contexts of early Metal ages. Following this early prolific period of research in Laos, only a very few isolated Hoabinhian lithics and other prehistoric artifacts have been described (Sayavongkhamdy et al., 2000; Raymaekers, 2001).

Previously discovered by Anzai (1976) on the right bank of the Mekong river at the foot of the Pu Luang mountain range, Tam Hua Pu was excavated in 1994–1995 (Sayavongkhamdy et al., 2000). Tam Hua Pu comprises Iron Age burials embedded in Hoabinhian deposits. Based on charcoal and shell analyses, this site was dated from 1340 ± 70 B P to $32,500 \pm 900$ B P. Nevertheless, the chronological series is not clearly linked to the archaeological artefacts and the authors only hypothesized that the Hoabinhian assemblage dated back to 4000 – 3500 B P without any clear supporting evidence of these dates. Due to the paucity of detailed and systematic prehistoric research in Laos, the Middle Mekong Archaeological Project (White and Bouasisengpaseuth, 2008) undertook an exploratory survey in 2005, which resulted in the finding of 58 archaeological sites in three Mekong tributary basins, upstream of Luang Prabang. Following this survey, the Phou Phaa Khao rock-shelter and Tham Vang Ta Leow rockshelter were excavated in 2007 and 2008, respectively (Marwick et al., 2009).

At Phou Phaa Khao, parts of seven human burials were uncovered in the deposit and the material recovered included thousands of stone flakes and cores with similarities to Hoabinhian technologies from Northwestern Thailand. At Tham Vang Ta Leow, abundant Hoabinhian cores and flakes were recovered from two test pits. Radiocarbon dates from the bases of the two pits indicate ages between 9450 ± 60 B P to 9770 ± 50 B P (White et al., 2009).

More recently, in 2010, a survey was conducted in the vicinity of Vieng Phu Khra, Luang Nam Tha province, within the framework of the Project “Sedentism around the Mekong” funded by the French

National Research Council (ANR), in partnership with the Laotian Department of History of the National Academy of Social Sciences and the Laotian Department of Archaeology of the Ministry of Culture and Communication. This partnership led to the discovery of the Ngeubhinh Mouxeu rock-shelter located 7 km northwest of Vieng Phu Khra (Zeitoun et al., 2012). The lithic material collected during the test pit excavations was rather scarce but allowed a precise diagnosis of the stone industry and brought to light information about the pre-Hoabinhian and Hoabinhian systems of lithic production. The objects discovered during these excavations are made on chert. They are all flakes, made by direct percussion with hard hammer. These flakes have partially cortical butts but some butts were also broken during the knapping process. Some of these flakes are tools. These pre-Hoabinhian stone tools were collected in and below sediments dated between $56,000 \pm 3000$ and $45,000 \pm 2000$ by OSL. Hoabinhian tools made with calcareous cobbles were found on the rock-shelter's floor, near the excavation. Two of these pieces had a relatively thick, elongated and rather quadrangular morphology while another one was an original convergent tool. One unifacial tool of plano-convex section displayed a classic Hoabinhian morphology and another tool, derived from an oval-shaped cobble had noticeable sharp edges on both sides and distal edge.

Partially and fully polished stone tools associated to flaked Hoabinhian tools were discovered at Tam Hang (Fromaget, 1936, 1940a, 1940b; Arambourg and Fromaget, 1938) in Hua Phan province and at Tam Pong (Saurin, 1966) in Luang Prabang province. Excavations at Tam Hang site have been conducted on an annual basis for about ten years as part of the Mission Archéologique et Paléontologique au Laos (Bacon, 2012). This site's lithic assemblage, reportedly belonging to the Hoabinhian tradition, includes large stone tools, flakes, and cores from which tools appear to have been made by direct percussion with a hard hammer (Demeter et al., 2009). Charcoals from the two main cultural layers described at Tam Hang South by Fromaget and Saurin (1936) have been dated between 7080 ± 25 B P and $11,625 \pm 35$ B P in one test-pit, and between $10,070 \pm 40$ B P and $13,215 \pm 45$ B P in a second one, and between 9380 ± 40 B P and 9775 ± 35 B P at Tam Hang Central (Bacon, 2012). Stone tools were also recovered from Tam Hang North where the third, undated layer, corresponds to the lower layer of Tam Hang South according to Fromaget and Saurin (1936 p.35).

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