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Case report

Rock art at the cave of a thousand Buddhas, Luang Prabang, Lao PDR

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ABSTRACT

The rock art of the Pak Ou Caves in Luang Prabang, Lao PDR has been known for over 20 years, but to date a complete record of the site has not been made. This paper presents an inventory of the rock art found at site also known as the Cave of a Thousand Buddhas. Over 50 rock art elements, mostly paintings, have been found in the upper cave and on the cliff face overlooking the junction of the Mekong and Ou Rivers. The oldest red paintings depict domesticated buffalo, human figures and hand prints and bear similarities with other cliff-side rock art sites in highland Southeast Asia. Other paintings are associated with the conversion of the cave into a Buddhist shrine, which according to folk tradition was home to a powerful river spirit. The most recent paintings can be comfortably dated to the 20th century. The Pak Ou Caves are a significant Buddhist site today, but the variety of rock art suggests its significance predates the Buddhist period that began in the 15th century. The layered history of the site and its rock art attests to multiple episodes of site use and re-use, from possibly the Neolithic until today.

1. Introduction

The Pak Ou Caves are a famous tourist attraction near the Unesco World Heritage town of Luang Prabang in the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR, henceforth referred to as Laos). The name Pak Ou means 'mouth of the Ou River', and the caves are situated at the junction of the Mekong, which originates from Tibetan Plateau, and the Ou River that begins from Phongsali province in northernmost Laos (Fig. 1). Even today, this mountainous region of northern Laos is hard to access, and thus these two rivers would have been important communication channels from ancient times until now.

To tourists, the site is romantically known as "The Cave of a Thousand Buddhas" on account of the many statues deposited in the cave as offerings. The caves were significant in the royal ceremonies of Luang Prabang, and most research on the site (summarized in Egloff and Kelly, 2015) focuses on the Lan Xang period and conservation efforts at the site during the 1990s. Aspects of the rock art have been previously discussed (Tan and Taçon, 2014; Tan and Walker-Vadillo, 2015) but a complete record of the rock art has never been undertaken. This paper presents the inventory of rock art located at the Pak Ou Caves at the upper cave of Tham Phum and on the cliff face of the lower cave, Tham Ting, based on my dissertation research at the Australian National University (Tan, 2014b, 2014c). Considered with the historical, ethnological and mythological knowledge of the site, the variety of rock art indicates a pattern of site use and re-use even before its

transformation as a Buddhist cave with the rock art possibly stretching back to the little-known prehistoric period of Laos.

2. Archaeology of Laos and the history of Lan Xang and Luang Prabang

Compared to the rest of Southeast Asia, the knowledge of Laos' past before the French is relatively poor. Laos is a landlocked nation-state with no access to the sea; the main waterway, the Mekong, also traverses parts of Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam. The former French colony gained independence in 1953, but later experienced civil war in the 1970s and hence has experienced relative isolation compared to its neighbors in Southeast Asia. Luang Prabang Province, the area under discussion, has had very few archaeological excavations, notably from between the 1930s and 1980s (Fromaget, 1936; Arambourg and Fromaget, 1938; Fromaget 1940a,b; Sayavongkhamdy, 1993; White and Bouasisengpaseuth, 2008). More recent archaeological work is still nascent and dependent on foreign researchers (e.g., White and Bouasisengpaseuth, 2008; Demeter et al., 2009; Demeter et al., 2012; Zeitoun et al., 2012; Singthong et al., 2016).

The city of Luang Prabang was the first capital of the Lan Xang Kingdom which became a major power in Mainland Southeast Asia in the 14th–18th centuries. The earliest known name for the settlement was Muang Sewa (also Sua or Xewa, 'Muang' denoting the presence of a polity), and the area was probably inhabited from further back in time,

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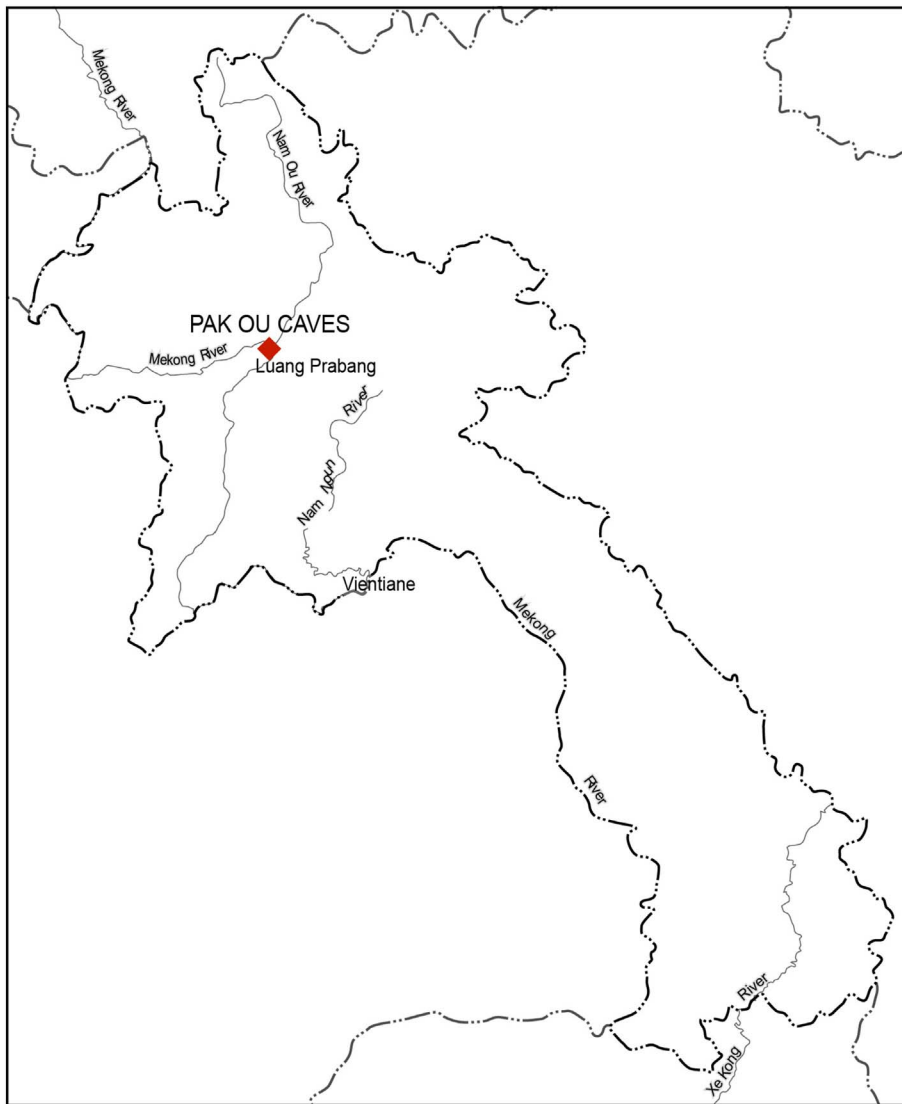


Fig. 1. Map of the Pak Ou Caves in Luang Prabang Province, Lao PDR.
Source: Noel Hidalgo Tan.

as archaeological remains such as polished stone tools and bronzes have been recovered in the vicinity by [Massie \(1904\)](#) and [Mansuy \(1920\)](#). According to the 16th century Laotian Chronicles, Lan Xang was founded by Fa Ngum, a 14th century prince of Muang Sewa who was exiled to Angkor (Cambodia) in his youth. After marrying a Khmer princess, he returned with an army and founded his kingdom of Lan Xang Hom Khao (see [Viravong, 1964](#); [Manich, 1967](#); [Stuart-Fox, 1997, 1998](#)).

While local tradition holds that Fa Ngum brought Buddhism to Laos, some form of Buddhism was already known long before Fa Ngum evidenced by a number of Mon and Khmer-style Buddhist sculptures, artifacts and inscriptions found in Lao territory that predate the 14th century ([Lorrillard, 2008](#)). However, physical evidence for Buddhism practiced around the locale of Luang Prabang only goes as far back as the 15th century. The promulgation of Buddhism in the Lan Xang period can be tied to the reign of two later kings, Phottisarath I (1520–1548 CE) and his son Setthitharat (1548–1571 CE) through evidence from inscriptions. Notably, Phottisarath established Buddhism as the state religion during his reign and unsuccessfully attempted to abolish the worship of animist spirit cults.

As with other part of Southeast Asia animist beliefs were prevalent before the arrival of the Indic religions, and even after the introduction of Buddhism the belief in nature spirits were syncretized into the Buddhist worldview (see [Ames, 1964](#); [Tambiah, 1970](#); [Ang, 1988](#);

[Hayashi, 2003](#); [Hashimoto, 2008](#)). The scarcity of evidence for Buddhism in the early days of Luang Prabang has led [Evans \(2002\)](#) to describe Lan Xang as culturally closer to the animist traditions of the mountain highlands, despite being described a Buddhist kingdom, and noted the centrality of ritual sacrifices to the territorial spirits as well as the lack of Buddhist influence in early state laws. The emergent view is that while riverine communities along the Mekong were exposed to Buddhism by the 14th century, evidence for the development of a religious Theravada Buddhist culture only appears in the later part of the 15th century ([Lorrillard, 2017](#)). Theravada Buddhism probably reached northern Laos relatively late compared to the rest of Mainland Southeast Asia.

3. The rock art of Laos and highland Southeast Asia

Laos has a few rock art sites reported in the form of Hindu-Buddhist carvings, inscriptions and red paintings, the last of which are probably some of the earliest and typical forms of prehistoric art in Southeast Asia ([Taçon et al., 2014](#); [Tan, 2014a](#); [Tan and Taçon, 2014](#)). Of the Hindu-Buddhist carvings, we have the Buddhist site of Tham Vang Sang in Vientiane province ([Batteur, 1925](#); [Karpelès, 1949](#)) and the Brahmanic carvings of Khan Mak Houk, near Vat Phou ([Santoni et al., 2008](#)). Another relatively recent site was reported by [Watanabe et al. \(1985\)](#), of black and white images from caves in Thakhek. Several sites

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