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Lao history revisited

Paradoxes and problems in current research

Michel Lorrillard

Abstract: The historiography of what is now the country of Laos has remained relatively underdeveloped since the colonial period. The earliest scholarly works produced by Lao and foreign authors were based on certain assumptions that have remained unquestioned despite serious problems with the sources. Recent epigraphical and archaeological discoveries have permitted a rethinking of these assumptions, and hold out the promise of further revisions of our view of the Lao past. Particularly worth exploring are the cultural and artistic connections between the Lao kingdom of Lan Xang and the northern Thai kingdom of Lanna.

Keywords: historiography; archaeology; epigraphy; Laos

It can be argued that historical research on the Lao lands began in 1887 with Auguste Pavie's translation and first analysis of several of the chronicles of Luang Prabang.¹ The fact is, however, that research on Lao history has made little progress since that time. Not only does the early history of what became most of present-day Laos remain very poorly understood, but the way this history has been treated has also given rise to a number of misinterpretations and distortions that hinder the quest for historical truth. The purpose of this article is to give a number of examples that illustrate the difficulties encountered today when approaching the Lao past. By 'Lao past', I specifically mean the history of the ethnic Lao, rather than that of the territory that now forms the country of Laos.² The latter can in effect be considered as a recent

¹ Auguste Pavie (1898), *Mission Pavie, Indo-chine, 1879–1985 – études diverses II: recherches sur l'histoire du Cambodge, du Laos et du Siam*, E. Leroux, Paris.

² I am aware of the difficulties surrounding this term; see Grant Evans, ed (1999), 'Introduction: What is Lao culture and society?' *Laos: Culture and Society*, Silk-worm Books, Chiang Mai, pp 1–34. Due to the lack of truly satisfactory criteria, 'Lao' is used here to denote the speakers of a specific language (comprising various local dialects) which possesses certain traits differentiating it from other Tai languages.

creation, as it did not truly become a state until its complete independence was recognized in 1953.

The history of the 60-odd years between 1887 and 1953 is in fact the history of the gestation of this new geographical and political entity, caused by the brutal irruption of colonial power into the region. This power then replaced imprecise and fluid traditional 'boundaries' with a clear and fixed demarcation that was formalized by cartography. The treaties that France signed, beginning in 1893 with Siam, Great Britain and China, were designed not to return to the Lao the territories of their former kingdoms, but rather to legitimize French claims over a vast space that they considered strategic. The borders of Laos have never matched those of the unified Lan Xang (mid-fourteenth[?] to late seventeenth centuries), which was a realm of uncertain geography, and whose power was probably more political and economic than territorial. It did not take too long, however, for historiography to adapt itself to the new situation. A *Chronicle of the Lao Country*, a publication with a completely innovative title compared with traditional historical writing, appeared in Lao in 1927 and served as a basis for the French-language work *Histoire du Laos français* by Paul Le Boulanger, still a reference for work on the region.³ The confusion between the 'history of Laos' and 'Lao history' has only been heightened since that time. This confusion of course follows from the efforts to construct a national identity, particularly since 1975.⁴ At the same time, however, it also results from factors that are usually totally forgotten – namely that misunderstandings about early Lao history stem above all from an ignorance of the sources and from the absence of a true methodology for historical research. It is these aspects that are the main concern of this brief study: I will emphasize the gaps in archaeological, philological and

³ *Phongsavadan haeng Pathet Lao khu Luang Phra Bang, Vieng Chan, Muang Phuan lae Champasak/Annales du Laos – Luang-Prabang, Vientiane, Tranninh et Bassac* (1967), Ministry of Education, Vientiane (originally published by Imprimerie d'Extrême-Orient, Hanoi, 1927). This work is a compilation of fragments from chronicles that came from Luang Prabang, Vientiane, Xieng Khuang and Champassak. 'Prathet' and 'muang' can both be translated as 'country'; the first also carries the sense of 'state'. See also Paul Le Boulanger (1931), *Histoire du Laos français: essai d'une étude chronologique des principautés laotiennes*, Plon, Paris. The title *Phongsavadan Lao* [*Lao Annals*] given to the first history written in Lao was perhaps wrongly translated in English as 'History of Laos'; cf Maha Sila Viravong (1957), *Phongsavadan Lao*, Ministry of Education, Vientiane, and Maha Sila Viravong (1964), *History of Laos*, Paragon Book Reprint, New York.

⁴ See the articles by Martin Stuart-Fox and Bruce Lockhart in this issue.

epigraphic studies in order to show, by examining certain themes, the misinterpretations that these gaps inevitably create.

The research material

Archaeology

It should be remembered that research on the history of Lao civilization has never generated a specific archaeological programme. Systematic and organized excavations have yet to be carried out on major Lao sites such as Luang Prabang, Vientiane or Tha Khek; those remains that have been unearthed have been fortuitous discoveries made during construction or road-laying work. The archaeology of the Khmer past on Lao territory has received more attention, with several research programmes conducted around the Vat Phou site in Champassak province since the beginning of the twentieth century. While Lao religious architecture has been described by Henri Parmentier, this was done with a singular lack of historical perspective, and his two-volume *Art du Laos* is a work whose true value has yet to be exploited.⁵ Parmentier's study was made at a time when knowledge of regional architectural models was minimal, and comparative analysis – notably with the architecture of neighbouring Thailand – was not yet possible due to the lack of references.

There has never been any follow-up to Parmentier's work, and to this day the perception that we have of Lao religious monuments remains totally timeless, as if these structures had appeared from nowhere without undergoing any form of broader evolution, so that they are, in a sense, without any history. Vat Ho Phra Keo and the That Luang, the most famous and imposing of Lao monuments, are good examples of this problem. They are among the few religious buildings that have been the objects of conservation programmes, since they were restored according to their last-known shape, but they have never been excavated or researched to reveal the different stages of their original construction. This is particularly regrettable in the case of Ho Phra Keo, as it is situated on grounds that formed part of the old royal palace, a site that is obviously highly favourable for archaeological research. In the case

⁵ Henri Parmentier (1954), *L'art du Laos*, École Française d'Extrême-Orient, Paris; a revised edition has been published, edited by Madeleine Giteau: Parmentier (1988), *L'art du Laos*, École Française d'Extrême-Orient, Paris.

of That Luang, we know that during restoration work in 1930, an early monument was accidentally discovered underneath the current *stupa*. Colonial administrative and financial policy, however, provided no opportunity for more research to be conducted at the time, and the That Luang was closed once more, leaving its secrets unrevealed.⁶

Philology

The manuscript sources are currently the only documents that have been used to approach Lao history. I would venture to say, however, that they do not provide any more valuable understanding than the religious architecture, since they have never been subject to a rigorous critique. All the information that the chronicles contain is generally assumed to be historically authentic, with no questions raised as to their actual value or origin.⁷ One mistake, for example, is to forget that the chronicles do not rely on a single historiographic tradition, but rather that they are divided into numerous and sometimes very distinct branches; it is thus extremely important to take these differences into account. Another error is to presume that one can write Lao history in a continuous manner – for the period between the fourteenth and nineteenth centuries – by relying on a single manuscript source. This is a gamble, as no one Lao chronicle can be considered as a basic reference text that other annals merely supplement or build on. Yet another error is to think that those texts that have provided the basis for the writing of Lao history over the past century – such as the *Nithan Khun Borom* [*Story of Khun Borom*], for instance – represent a historiographic tradition that covers the entire Lao territory. The fact is that the chronicles used so far actually all originate from Luang Prabang. They contain practically no information on Vientiane – this is particularly true for the seventeenth century – and even less on the regions further south, which were almost completely ignored by Lao court historiographers.⁸

⁶ Michel Lorrillard (2003–4), ‘Les inscriptions du That Luang de Vientiane: données nouvelles sur l’histoire d’un *stupa* lao’, *Bulletin de l’École Française d’Extrême-Orient* [henceforth *BEFEO*], Vol 90–91, pp 289–348.

⁷ Michel Lorrillard, ‘Quelques données relatives à l’historiographie lao’, *BEFEO*, Vol 86, pp 219–232.

⁸ The royal chronicles of Vientiane, which are supposed to have been more detailed than those of Luang Prabang, have disappeared; they were most likely destroyed by the Siamese in 1828. A short text consisting of a kind of chronology – the *Chotmai het Nyo Viengchan* – has survived, but it is probably only a very poor reflection of the historiographic tradition that developed in central Laos from the second half of the

It is important here to emphasize a point that astonishingly has been overlooked until now, and which of course must be placed at the centre of any historical research: the credibility of Lao historiographical sources. While historians today are in fact conscious of the blend of historical and mythical data within the chronicles, they are nevertheless absolutely incapable of clearly determining what belongs to which category. The solution that is generally found is very simple: the chronicles are neatly divided into two broad periods: one legendary, ending at the beginning of the fourteenth century; and one historical, beginning in the middle of that century with the reign of Fa Ngum, who is associated with the emergence of a great kingdom and the introduction of Buddhism into the Lao lands. The first historian really to operate within the parameters of this interpretation of Lao history was George Cœdès, with the section on ‘The founding of the Laotian kingdom of Lan Chang’ in his *Indianized States of Southeast Asia*, which remains an obligatory reference work.⁹

It must be pointed out, however, that none of the information given by Lao chronicles for the period covering the fourteenth century and the first three-quarters of the fifteenth can be verified by exterior or independent sources – except for the historical existence of Fa Ngum, who is mentioned in an inscription from Sukhothai as a lord reigning in the east, across the Mekong – and perhaps his successor Sam Sen Thai, who seems to be mentioned by Chinese sources.¹⁰ For this ancient period, the sources of Cambodia, Vietnam, Lanna (northern Thailand) and Ayutthaya do not corroborate the Lao texts, and in fact

sixteenth century. This text is partially translated in Pavie, *supra* note 1, at pp 96–102. A slightly different version transliterated into Thai is in the National Library of Thailand (1969), *Prachum phongsawadan [Collected chronicles]*, Vol 43, Part 70, Kaona, Bangkok, pp 131–161. Some local chronicles were written later in southern Laos, notably the *Champassak Chronicle*, which dates from no earlier than the beginning of the eighteenth century; see Charles Archaimbault (1961), ‘L’histoire de Campasak’, *Journal Asiatique*, Vol 249, pp 519–595. The chronicles of Xieng Khuang were inspired by the traditions of Luang Prabang; Charles Archaimbault (1967), ‘Les annales de l’ancien royaume de S’ieng Khwang’, *BEFEO*, Vol 53, No 2, pp 557–673.

⁹ George Cœdès (1964), *Les états hindouisés d’Indochine et d’Indonésie*, E. de Boccard, Paris, pp 403–407; and George Cœdès (1968), *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia* (ed. Walter F. Vella and trans. Susan Brown Cowing), University Press of Hawaii, Honolulu, pp 223–226.

¹⁰ The inscription is found in George Cœdès (1924), *Recueil des inscriptions du Siam*, Vol I, Vajirayan Library, Bangkok (Sumanakutaparvata stele). On probable Chinese references to Sam Sen Thai, see Tatsuo Hoshino (1986), *Pour une histoire médiévale du moyen Mekong*, Duang Kamol, Bangkok, pp 180–182.

have a tendency to contradict them – although these outside sources, too, must be treated with the greatest caution. When examining this first period of Lao history then, it is necessary to adopt an approach that I would call minimalist, in that it emphasizes right from the beginning the limitations of our documentation. It is vital, moreover, to remind the reader that this documentation relies on a largely oral tradition, since there is nothing that proves the use of either the Lao script or a reliable and precise calendar system before a stele dating from the end of the fifteenth century, found at Tha Khek.¹¹

Epigraphy

Although epigraphical sources constitute the only records we have for the history of the ancient Champa, pre-Angkorian, Angkorian and Sukhothai civilizations, they have never been used to write the history of the Lao lands – aside perhaps from the Dan Say inscription, which commemorates a 1563 treaty between the kingdoms of Lan Xang and Ayutthaya.¹² These inscriptions are interesting in many ways, mainly because they represent real administrative documents whose historical credibility cannot be doubted. They do not mark true shifts in the knowledge of the Lao past, as they are always linked to the founding of – or donations made to – local temples, but they do allow us to establish a certain chronology, and above all they provide the best markers for the development of Lao civilization. There is much to be learned from the comparative analysis of Lao epigraphy with inscriptions from other Tai domains, especially Lanna. A great deal of historical insight regarding the importance and influence of Lan Xang between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries can be more sharply defined. In several cases, inscriptions shed light on information supplied by the chronicles, for example the inscription of Vat Sangkhalok in Luang Prabang, which provided the historiographic *phongsavadan* tradition with the reference

¹¹ This inscription will be included in a forthcoming volume entitled *Les inscriptions du royaume du Lan Xang*.

¹² Gagneux's publication of the inscriptions found on the Plain of Vientiane must be considered a pioneering work: Pierre-Marie Gagneux (1975), 'Contribution à la connaissance de la civilisation laotienne d'après l'épigraphie du Royaume de Vientiane (XV^e–XIX^e siècles)', PhD dissertation, École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris. However, the richness of these sources had not been exploited until very recently. The 1563 inscription is translated in Prasert na Nagara and Alexander B. Griswold (1979), 'An inscription of 1563 A.D. recording a treaty between Laos and Ayodhyâ in 1560', *Journal of the Siam Society*, Vol 67, No 2, pp 54–69; reprinted in Prasert and Griswold (1992), *Epigraphic and Historical Studies*, The Historical Society, Bangkok, pp 788–803.

to King Phothisarath's famous 1527 edict against spirit-worship, or the That Luang inscriptions, which are revolutionizing our approach to the history of this period.¹³ The recent 'discovery' of the stele of Vat Ho Phra Keo contradicts the version of the temple's foundation found in oral tradition, and could well significantly modify the current perception of those religious monuments in Vientiane considered as most representative of Lao identity.¹⁴

Lao history remains poorly understood due to the lack of attention that has been accorded to archaeological, manuscript and epigraphic evidence, but also because of the general way in which all histories of the region remain full of gaps. The study of Sukhothai epigraphy dealt with only in the work of Alexander Griswold and Prasert na Nagara, and still holds a great wealth of potential information for us.¹⁵ This is even more true for the epigraphy of Lanna, which is still at the stage of being published without any analysis. Much work also remains to be done in the field of philological research, since the mechanisms of traditional historiography can only be understood through an exhaustive comparative study of the numerous local chronicles, and also of other literary genres that have influenced them: religious texts, popular stories, astrology manuals, treatises on customary law and so on. The reign of Fa Ngum is one of the most significant examples of this collusion between literary sources and historiography; it is tightly bound to the legend of the Phra Bang (the Buddha image after which Luang Prabang is named), just as the histories of other famous statues such as the Phra Keo, Phra Sihing and Phra Saek Kham form the core of the Lanna chronicles. One might even ask, in fact, if the description of his entire reign is not merely a digression that stems from this legend.

Interpretation of the sources

The difficulty in advancing our knowledge of Lao history is rooted in

¹³ Lorrillard, *supra* note 6.

¹⁴ The Vat Ho Phra Keo stele is the most important, in terms of size and length, of all the Lao inscriptions found in Laos and north-east Thailand. It is connected to some important works conducted at the temple between 1811 and 1813, which clearly paved the way for those carried out several years later at Vat Sisaket. This discovery could lead to hypotheses about the degree of influence of Siamese architectural traditions on the construction of these two temples. The text is included in Thawat Punnothok (nd), *Sila chareuk Isan [Inscriptions of North-East Thailand]*, Ramkhamhaeng University, Bangkok, pp 381–392, but the link to the temple in Vientiane is not mentioned.

¹⁵ See the Prasert and Griswold volume, *supra* note 12.

the gaps just mentioned, but to a large extent it also results from fallacious interpretations, conscious or not, on the part of contemporary historiographers and historians. Recent history books produced in the Lao PDR, of course, present striking examples of how the objectivity and rigour of historical science are mistreated when subjected to the pressure of political power. As this aspect is examined elsewhere in this issue, we can limit our attention here to three very general themes – the dimensions of time, space and power – the analysis of which has so far been neglected.

The temporal dimension

The Lao, like the Siamese, Burmese, Khmer, Mon, Cham and Vietnamese, are among the few peoples of South East Asia who are unambiguously recognized as having a history, for they are associated with a civilization whose development can be traced, particularly through written evidence. Historians require documents, but because their work is to study societies that evolve, they also need chronological markers. The absence of such markers in the memories of a number of the peoples who share the Lao territories places them in history's shadow, or even excludes them altogether. This is the case for practically all the ethnic minorities in Laos before the nineteenth century, but it is also the case for the Lao themselves before the 1300s. It is entirely reasonable to think that it was Buddhism that brought the Lao into history by providing them with a culture favourable to the development and unification of large areas of inhabited land, along with the introduction and spread of written traditions, frameworks of common thought, a strong royal ideology, a material and artistic culture, new economic foundations and so on. First and foremost, however, was the fact that Buddhism gave them a very strong awareness of the notion of time. Along with the traditional Thai calendrical system, based on the repetition of cycles of which only the most recent were remembered, they also adopted the linear system of an era (following the Indian models), which fixed events on a temporal scale that could be remembered only in writing. They used systems of complex calculations based on astronomical data by which they could determine in a precise way the years and their various subdivisions.¹⁶ From that time onward, the Lao began

¹⁶ John C. Eade (1995), *The Calendrical Systems of Mainland South-East Asia*, Brill, Leiden; Eade (1996), *The Thai Historical Record – A Computer Analysis*, Centre for East Asian Cultural Studies, Tokyo.

to refer to the distant past, to place themselves in the present with great detail, and even to project themselves into future times.

Analysis of traditional chronology is one of the methods that should allow us to approach the history of the Lao lands with more confidence. Unfortunately, the importance of this question has been more or less overlooked, and historians have preferred to accept uncritically a certain number of dates given by a limited selection of chronicles, or else by compilation works from the first half of the twentieth century, which have themselves modified the data found in the original sources. A comparative analysis of the dates found in all known versions of the Lao chronicles with those that appear in the historical syntheses by Maha Sila Viravong, Oukham Phomvongsa and Paul Le Boulanger, shows the extent to which the chronologies can vary for certain periods.¹⁷ This results in a distorted vision of the chronology of Lao history of which very few people are aware, including specialists in the history of the region. Charles Archambault, in a pioneering work on the chronicles of Muang Phouan (Xieng Khuang), established that references in these texts to events prior to the nineteenth century, whose existence could be attested to by external sources, placed them in a 'timeless' context, so that these 'facts' therefore could not be used to construct a history of Muang Phouan.

In contrast to the Xieng Khuang annals, which constitute the only local historical source for a territory that has been completely ravaged over the last two centuries, the historiographic traditions of Lan Xang can be checked against archaeological evidence and particularly against epigraphic sources. Most of the latter seem to be extremely precise chronologically, thus allowing us to verify the general accuracy of the chronicles regarding the succession of a certain number of reigns from the early sixteenth century. They also reveal some anachronisms in our current perceptions of the history of the middle Mekong valley, especially relating to religious, cultural and artistic matters. The spread of Buddhism in the Lao lands, a theme central to the comprehension of Lan Xang's development, has certainly been consistently neglected, thus giving rise to the most serious errors in understanding. We will

¹⁷ Le Boulanger, *supra* note 3; Maha Sila Viravong, *supra* note 3; Oukham Phomvongsa (1958), *Khwampenma khong Lao leu lao leuang sat Lao* [*The origins of the Lao, or telling stories about the Lao nation*], Yuvasamakhom haeng Pathet Lao, Vientiane. For a critical discussion of the modern historiography of Laos, see Michel Lorrillard (1995), 'Les chroniques royales du Laos: essai d'une chronologie des règnes des souverains lao (1316–1887)', doctoral thesis, École Pratique des Hautes Études, Paris.

limit ourselves here to an example from the history of art, since Lao art is above all religious.

The attention paid to the traditional chronology, with its regional variants, offers an opportunity to reassess the question of the origin of the earliest Buddha images considered as Lao. On the basis of an assertion found in a chronicle, it was believed until now that the Buddha of Vat Manorum in Luang Prabang, which is the biggest bronze statue in Laos, was also the oldest to have been made by Lao people, and that it dated from the second half of the fourteenth century, even before the oldest dated images from Lanna. No-one has yet inquired into this incongruity. For those statues bearing inscriptions (late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries), it can be said that the calendrical system used is that of Lanna, and that the origin of these statues is thus northern Thai – a conclusion that is borne out by examination of the script and also by stylistic analysis. This is actually no surprise, since the chronicles themselves acknowledge that in the mid-1500s, first Phothisarath and then his successor Setthathirat brought several images from Lanna, beginning with the Phra Keo.¹⁸ Contrary to the claims of certain books on Lao art, it thus appears almost certain that bronze sculpture workshops were not developed in the Lao lands before the second half of the sixteenth century.¹⁹

The lack of attention to chronology has also had the effect of limiting – indeed, even blocking – all reflection on the periodization of the different civilizations of the middle Mekong valley, particularly since the concept of ‘multi-ethnic culture’ was introduced. Works on the ancient history of Laos focus on the rise and decline of the Lao kingdoms in that particular region, but it is interesting to note that they generally devote an introduction to the periods that preceded those kingdoms, with the implicit or explicit aim of establishing a sort of continuity with what came before. This point is very important, as it leads to the

¹⁸ Phothisarath had married a Lanna princess, and Setthathirat – his son by this queen – held the throne of Lanna for several years before returning to Lan Xang. Old bronze Buddha images whose manufacture places them in the artistic traditions of Lanna have been found in several provinces of Laos; these will be examined in a future publication.

¹⁹ Madeleine Giteau, while cautious about the dating of the Vat Manorum Buddha (which she calls ‘perhaps the oldest authentically Lao statue, although it has Thai art parentage’), does not contest the existence of Lao statuary production in bronze from at least the middle of the fourteenth century. See Giteau (2001), *Art et archéologie du Laos*, Picard, Paris, p 147; this book is the best description of Lao art published so far.

idea that Lao culture must have developed not from influences coming from outside the present Lao territory (from other Tai kingdoms, for instance) but rather from a local substratum whose elements have been appropriated and reinterpreted. Moreover, this concept is not confined only to Lao-language works, but is also strong in foreign scholarship. What, then, are these substrata from which the Lao culture is supposed to have drawn some of its sources?

For several decades, following the discovery of a Mon stele and Buddha at Ban Thalot, reference has been made in historical studies to a 'Sikhottabong civilization', whose centre was in the Tha Khaek area. Pierre-Marie Gagneux seems to have been the first to have introduced the theory of this separate kingdom, and he has been followed by contemporary Lao historians.²⁰ In my opinion, this represents an extremely disconcerting detour from history. Rather than approaching the question of a Mon presence with the appropriate scientific instruments of archaeology, there is instead a real effort to link this issue with that of Lao identity. Literary references (the Prince of Sikhottabong and King Burikan, the merchant Chanthaphanit) whose antiquity has not been ascertained are used to 'prove' the direct affiliation between an independent Mon civilization and Lao culture.²¹ Mon artefacts have indeed been found in Laos, mainly in the provinces of Vientiane and Savannakhet, although in the southern region it is sometimes difficult to distinguish Mon from Khmer influences. However, while these artefacts are more numerous than had been believed, they are not at all specific to Laos; rather, they represent the northern limits of a civilization that developed chiefly in the Khorat area of north-eastern Thailand, and which can be found in Cambodia as well.

More importantly, this archaeological evidence in fact constitutes

²⁰ Maha Kham Champakeomany (1974), *Pavat phrathat chedi Vat Samkhan* [History of the Stupa of Vat Samkhan], Ministry of Religion, Vientiane seems to have been the first to introduce the theory of the existence of this separate kingdom; cited in Pierre-Marie Gagneux (1976), 'Tendances actuelles de la recherche historique en République Démocratique Populaire Lao', *Asie du Sud-Est et Monde Insulindien [ASEMI]*, Vol 7, No 4, p 9. Certain Thai historians also mention the existence of this kingdom, based on the legendary Lao chronicle of the Urangkhathat; however, they tend to locate it on the right bank of the Mekong (now the Thai side) rather than on the left; see, for example, Srisakra Vallibhotama (1990), *Aeng ariyatham Isan/A Northeastern Site of Civilization*, Sinlapawatthanatham, Bangkok, pp 20–33.

²¹ One of the imaginative discussions of the Sikhottabong kingdom can be found in Souneth Phothisane and Nousai Phoummachan (2000), *Pavatsat Lao (deukdamban – pachuban)* [Lao History (Ancient Times to the Present)], Ministry of Information and Culture, Vientiane, pp 51–54.

the best proof for the existence of a very important hiatus between the Lao and Mon civilizations, which probably never came into direct contact with each other. The most recent Mon artefacts found in Laos are clearly from the tenth century at the latest, while firm archaeological proof of Lao settlement in the Vientiane region does not appear until the beginning of the fifteenth century, although the Ramkhamheng Inscription of Sukhothai may show that they were present by the late 1200s. It is true nonetheless that the Lao settled on the exact sites that had been occupied by the Mon much earlier, and that they were aware of this earlier presence, for they discovered its archaeological remains, as we still do today. (To take a very concrete example, a few Mon steles were re-used for Lao inscriptions.)

A second example of the ‘appropriation’ of an earlier culture concerns Khmer influence, which is supposed to have left a very specific mark on Laos, since today it is common to talk about the ‘Say Fong civilization’, ‘Say Fong period’, ‘Say Fong art’ and so on. (Say Fong is on the outskirts of the present city of Vientiane. An inscription was discovered there that was attributed to the great Cambodian ruler Jayavarman VII [c 1181–c 1220]; this was believed to be evidence that Angkor’s power extended as far northward as Vientiane.)²² It is not necessary to go into this issue in great depth here, since I have already tried to demonstrate elsewhere that the idea of a Khmer settlement at Say Fong is one of a number of myths that need to be discredited.²³ It should be noted, however, that while Say Fong – where no Khmer monument has actually been found – often appears in histories of Laos, the indisputably Khmer sites of Vat Phu and the Heuan Hin temple in Savannakhet province receive almost no mention, as if referring to them poses a problem in the framework of a study in which the idea of continuity dominates.²⁴

²² The inscription is translated in Louis Finot (1903), ‘Notes d’épigraphie: L’inscription sanskrite de Say-Fong’, *BEFEO*, Vol 3, No 1, pp 18–33. See also Georges Maspéro (1903), ‘Say-Fong: une ville morte’ in the same volume, pp 1–17. Finot argued that ‘if the stele was erected where it was discovered, this would mean that at the end of the twelfth century AD the entire Mekong valley, at least as far as Vientiane, was under the authority of the kings of Cambodia’ (p 18).

²³ Michel Lorrillard (2001), ‘D’Angkor au Lan Xang : une révision des jugements’, *Aséanie*, No 7, pp 19–33.

²⁴ The paragraphs dedicated to Vat Phou in the recent work *Pavatsat Lao* (Souneth and Nousai, *supra* note 21 at pp 55–59) are extremely weak regarding the archaeological richness of the site and the surrounding region. The Lao literary traditions (in particular the legend of Khatthanam) are used to conceal the historic hiatus that exists for this region between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries. As for Say Fong,

Territoriality

I am always extremely surprised to see in works on the history of Laos (and histories of Thailand as well) chapters illustrated with historical maps depicting the supposed territorial extent of old Lao kingdoms. Coming back to my previous remarks on the problems posed by sources, it seems to me that any attempt to create a clear geopolitical cartography of the middle Mekong valley before borders were imposed at the end of the nineteenth century is necessarily doomed to failure. A critical analysis of historiographic data, concerning the fourteenth century for example, shows very few indicators that can be used in establishing a map of Lao influence at this time. It is certain that this influence extended over a great length of the Mekong and its principal tributaries, from Pak Tha to Pha Dai (on either side of the present border between the Lao province of Luang Namtha and the Thai province of Chiang Rai) upstream. It was this riverine influence that gave Lan Xang its power, as it controlled very important economic networks.

It is much less certain, on the other hand, that this influence extended over land, which was difficult to access for geographical reasons. All the steles from the founding of temples prior to the eighteenth century – which are important markers for the study of the spread of Buddhism and thus of civilization in the Lao lands – are concentrated within a few limited areas, all within the vicinity of rivers. The central and southern areas of the Isan region (north-eastern Thailand) were not reached until relatively late. The same is true for southern Laos, where there is no evidence for Buddhism until the beginning of the eighteenth century.²⁵ The manuscript archives (*bai cum*) that allow us to identify the influence of Lao royal power in the northern regions of modern Laos, such as Houaphan or Phongsaly, only date from the late 1700s, and there is no evidence that they were based on older documents. The north-western region is even more anomalous in historical terms, since no Lao evidence prior to the

the absence of remains leads Lao historians to remain extremely evasive on this 'civilization'; in *Pavatsat Lao*, the authors limit themselves to mentioning that this site was a centre of government as late as the twelfth century (pp 53–54), but it could well have been part of a vast space that extended south to Champassak, where the Khmer had played a role since at least the tenth century.

²⁵ It was also during the eighteenth century that an ethnically Lao dynasty reigned in Champassak. It is entirely probable that the current 'ethnic Lao' of southern Laos are the result of a mingling with Austro-Asiatic-speaking populations, which was much more significant in scale than was the case in the northern region.

twentieth century has been found there.²⁶ In this respect, the political influence and territorial power of Lan Xang were small compared with those of Lanna, Sukhothai and Ayutthaya, whose realms were much more vast and easily accessible, and much more significant demographically.

Royal power

Lao history from the second half of the fourteenth century is usually considered as the history of the Lan Xang 'kingdom', and Fa Ngum, as its founder, is thus recognized as a 'king'. The historian's choice of terminology is extremely important, and the question can be raised whether in these particularly significant instances the choice is justified. One of the things that is without a doubt most difficult to determine, when examining the history of those Tai peoples who developed into major civilizations, is to know at what point the traditional tribal system of authority – that of the *khun*, but also the *phraya* or *chao* (titles of leadership commonly found among Tai-speaking peoples) – evolved into a system of power in which the authority could truly be called royal. This distinction does not seem to have been linked to an effective extension of power, or at least not initially – in other words, it was not by conquering territories that one became a king. Rather, this distinction seems to have been a purely conceptual one and thus to have been linked purely to the appearance and recognition of a new ideology.

The role of Buddhism appears fundamental to this change, with the new image and legitimacy that it conferred on the holder of temporal power. Of course, this occurred only when the ruler accepted the new concept and decided to protect and sustain the monastic community. It is possible that this profound shift in models of thought appeared rather late in the Lao lands. In Sukhothai, it occurred towards the end of the thirteenth century, and was particularly evident during the reign of Dharmaraja (Lü Thai) during the third quarter of the fourteenth century. In Lanna, the shift appears to have already taken place by the beginning of the fourteenth century, and is fully visible in the latter

²⁶ It is completely incorrect to consider the site of Souvanna Khom Kham, several kilometres upstream from the provincial capital of Bokeo, as an 'ancient Lao' city. This site is clearly linked to the town of Chiang Saen, which is situated almost directly opposite on the other side of the Mekong, and was thus subject to the political and cultural influence of Lanna; Michel Lorrillard (2000), 'Souvanna Khom Kham ou Chiang Saen rive gauche?' *Aséanie*, Vol 5, pp 57–68. In the sixteenth century, this influence extended to the region of Muang Sing (present-day Luang Nam Tha) before the the Tai Leu became politically dominant there.

half of that century. In the Lao lands, on the other hand, the first true evidence for a change in the ideology of power dates only from the mid-1400s and relates to royal names, specifically that of King Chakkaphat Phaen Phaeo. This is both the first benchmark for demonstrating a genuine Buddhist influence, which was not perceptible earlier, and also evidence that the concept of the *cakkravartin* ('universal ruler', *chakkaphat* in Lao) had been assimilated by this point. It is significant that Chakkaphat Phaen Phaeo is an exact contemporary of King Tilokarat in Chiang Mai, whose ruling name also referred to the *cakkravartin* and who was one of the Lanna rulers who did the most to spread Buddhism. Another particularly interesting point is that it is not until this period that the narrative found in the *Chiang Mai Chronicle* begins to mention the Lao as a people – thus providing them with recognition on the regional scene – and more precisely the name Lan Xang, which had not previously appeared in any other source.²⁷

Conclusion

This brief overview of the problems that characterize research into the Lao past aims above all to demonstrate that any attempt to write a solid history of the middle Mekong valley remains premature. In 1975, Gagneux emphasized that 'Lao research has yet to reach the level of great syntheses; it must first pass the obscure stage of primary research, the patient collection of documents, their in-depth study and preliminary classification, without which any subsequent [re-] construction will prove to be nothing more than vain pretensions'.²⁸ The object of this brief presentation has been to create more awareness of the gaps that limit our approach, and to bring to light the obstacles that naturally hinder careful historical research when it is viewed as too time-consuming and is replaced by less credible conjecture and assumptions. The political and economic changes that have occurred in the last 15 years in Laos do, however, now allow us to make a fresh start with on-the-ground studies that were interrupted decades ago, particularly in the border areas. Archaeological research has yet to benefit significantly from this opening-up, but the recent multiplication of philological, linguistic, anthropological and geographical studies brings hope for a renewal in the depth of our knowledge on this region.

²⁷ See, for example, David K. Wyatt and Aroonrut Wichienkeo (1995), *The Chiang Mai Chronicle*, Silkworm Books, Chiang Mai, p 99.

²⁸ Gagneux, *supra* note 12, at p 4.