

The Diffusion of Lao Scripts

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The École française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO) has right from the beginning of its existence been very interested in the Lao literary heritage. The wealth of this heritage was actually affirmed in 1900 by Louis Finot, the first director of the institution, who came to Luang Prabang from Hanoi and travelled down as far as Champassak. He established the first collection of Lao manuscripts, copies of which can still be viewed today on microfilm in the EFEO library in Paris. In 1910, under the guidance of Lao scholars, several local inventories of manuscripts were also compiled, from Luang Prabang down to "Sieng Teng" (Stung Treng) in Cambodia. Louis Finot came back to Laos in 1914 to carry out a huge 218-page study on Lao literature, which was published in 1917 in the *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême Orient.*[1] This article even today remains an indispensable reference for everybody interested in this subject. It gives a classification of the different textual traditions by genre, and contains an inventory of Lao manuscripts with 1,163 titles in all. In 1918, the royal library collection alone, created in Luang Prabang after Finot's work, already numbered 1,200 manuscripts. EFEO also had a library of Lao manuscripts created in Vientiane in 1927. Shortly after, the editing of the first texts in Lao language and script began, notably a version of the *Phongsavadan*,[2] which formed the basis of Paul Le Boulanger's book on the history of Laos.[3] The work on the inventory, plus research and analysis of the manuscripts, was followed in the 1950s and 60s by Henri Deydier,[4] Pierre-Bernard Lafont[5] and Charles Archaimbault.[6] More recently, other members of EFEO have published important works on Lao literature: Anatole Peltier, on popular texts,[7] and François Bizot & François Lagirarde,

[1] "Recherches sur la littérature laotienne," BEFEO XVII-5, 1917, pp. 1-218.
[2] *Annales du Laos: Luang-Prabang, Vientiane, Tranninh et Bassac* (*ພົງສາວະດານແຫ່ງປະເທດລາວ ຄື ຫຼວງພະບາງ, ວຽງຈັນ, ເມືອງພວນແລະຈຳປາສັກ*), IDEO, Hanoi, 1927.
[3] *Histoire du Laos français*, Paris, 1931.
[4] "Les origines et la naissance de Ravana dans le Ramayana laotien," BEFEO XLIV-1, 1947, pp. 141-146; unpublished works on *Phra Lak Phra Lam* and the Lao version of the *Paññasa Jataka*.
[5] "Les écritures 'tay du Laos," BEFEO L-2, 1961, pp. 367-393, "Les écritures du pâli au Laos," BEFEO L-2, 1961, pp. 394-405, "Inventaire des manuscrits des pagodes du Laos," BEFEO LII.
[6] "L'histoire de Champasak," *Journal Asiatique* 249/4, 1961, pp. 519-595, "Les Annales de l'ancien Royaume de S'ieng Khwang," BEFEO, 53-2, 1967, pp. 557-673; *Contribution à l'étude d'un cycle de légendes lau*, PEFEO 119, 1980.
[7] *Un texte classique lao – le Syvsvat*, Collection de textes et documents sur l'Indochine, EFEO, 1971; *Le roman classique lao*, PEFEO CLII, 1988; *Nang Phom Hom*, IRC, Vientiane, 2000.

on religious works.[8] It was moreover Bizot who in 1993 created a permanent EFEO representation in Laos, within the framework of a cooperation programme with the Department of Literature and Mass Culture (Ministry of Information and Culture), a programme which had already led to the publication of various books. The EFEO centre in Vientiane, also called "Fonds d'édition des manuscrits du Laos," is currently working on several research projects concerning Lao textual traditions, notably on historical and legendary chronicles, vernacular versions of the Vinaya, treatises on customary law, and astrology manuals. In doing this, we benefit greatly from the enormous work already performed by the Lao-German Preservation of Lao Manuscripts Programme. I would moreover like to take this opportunity to thank all those working on this project, who have regularly assisted us. Our two programmes are, in fact, complementary and each in its own way contributes to highlighting the originality, diversity and great richness of the Lao literary heritage. It might be said that the Lao-German project has already performed a lot of the groundwork, in systematically listing the sources and recording them on microfilm, and that we are benefiting from this work by selecting what interests us from certain sources, for analysis and publication. The eventual goal is to see all branches of Lao literature become better known and earn the higher recognition that they merit.

In the framework of this conference, it seems pertinent to bring up the question of the spread of Lao scripts, without which the literary heritage of this country would not have its richness. There are two main reasons why I wish to speak of scripts. Firstly, because this issue has so far received very little attention, and secondly, because it is directly linked to the main research project that we are currently conducting. This project began in 2001 and was formally recognised in July 2003 by the signing of an agreement with the Department of Museums and Archaeology. Its aims are very close to those of the Lao-German manuscript project, concerning as they do the preservation of written sources throughout Lao national territory. The sources that concern our project are inscriptions, which provide very important evidence for historical knowledge, but which have, until now, been largely ignored by research. The project's goal is to publish four works that present all collected epigraphic materials, classified chronologically, geographically and ethno-linguistically. The first two volumes will be dedicated to specifically Lao epigraphic sources, i.e. the inscriptions of Lan Xang and the inscriptions of the separate kingdoms of Luang Prabang, Vientiane, and Champassak. The third volume will concern the inscriptions of Northern Laos from the Yuan and Lü areas. The fourth volume will be on Khmer inscriptions found in Laos. Research on epigraphic sources has been carried out in all provinces of Laos, and also in Northeast Thailand, where the Lao have long been settled. The result of this enquiry is the fruit of good cooperation between the Centre's team in Vientiane and the civil and religious authorities, mainly at the district and village levels.

[8] *Saddha Vimala – la pureté par les mots*, Textes bouddhiques du Laos, EFEO, Bangkok, 1996.

Initial research was carried out in 2001 in Vientiane and the surrounding area, on both sides of the Mekong River. The work here carries on from two very valuable preliminary studies by Pierre-Marie Gagneux[9] and Thawat Punnothok,[10] which already provide transcriptions of 247 inscriptions. Some new inscriptions, notably from images of the Buddha, have now been added to these.

In March 2002, a mission to Sayaboury province listed 160 new inscriptions. The vast majority of these were carved on wooden Buddha images by Lü and Yuan people. The Lao inscriptions, mostly carved on stone or bronze images, are less numerous but older, with several dating back to the 16th century. They generally come from sites that have great archaeological potential. This is certainly true in the north of the province, at Muang Khop, but also in the central and southern areas at Muang Pak Lay and Muang Ken Thao.

A second mission to Northern Laos was sent to Luang Prabang province. Research there has mainly concentrated on the former royal capital, due to the richness and age of its temples. A total of 104 new inscriptions were studied and listed there, most of which are carved on Buddha images in bronze and wood. Among the most interesting discoveries were several steles from the 16th century, which provide extremely useful data on the religious history of Lan Xang. Several sites and old temples were also identified outside Luang Prabang.

The results of the research conducted in Champassak province in March 2003 were as had been expected. The South of Laos was a long way from the royal powers of Luang Prabang and Vientiane and was moreover relatively late to receive the wave of Buddhism that penetrated the Tai-Lao culture. The result is that the religious heritage is rather poor and scattered. Seventeen Lao inscriptions were recorded there, which is a relatively satisfying number. The most interesting item is without doubt a Buddha image inscribed with the date 1784, which refers to Phra Phutthi Chao Ong Luang, the second king of the Champassak dynasty. Practically all the other inscriptions date from the 19th century, an era in which the south of Laos was under Siamese suzerainty and received great influence from across the Mekong. The second objective of the mission to Champassak was to update the data on Khmer and Sanskrit inscriptions in Southern Laos. The number of these inscriptions known today is 35.

Very recently, in May 2003, a new mission was carried out in the provinces of Bokeo, Luang Namtha and Oudomsay. The results have been just as positive as those of the mission in neighbouring Sayaboury, with 182 inscriptions being recorded. They belong to four different cultures – Lao, Yuan, Lü and T'ai Neua. The oldest, from the 15th to the early

[9] *Contribution à la connaissance de la civilisation laotienne d'après l'épigraphie du Royaume de Vientiane (XVe- XIXe siècles)*, EHESS Thesis, 1975.

[10] *ศิลาจารึกอีสานสมัยไทย-ลาว*, Rama Khamheng University (no date).

17th centuries, originate from the Lan Na culture, which for a long period ruled a large part of this area.

Research on epigraphical sources must now continue in the provinces of Northeastern Laos, as well as in more provinces in the south. These areas are mostly inhabited by non-Tai and non-Buddhist ethnic groups. It is thus unlikely that they will reveal an epigraphic heritage as rich as those already discovered in other parts of the country.

The origin and spread of Lao scripts has barely been studied, and understanding on this issue remains poor. The only studies carried out on the subject were performed by Louis Finot, in a chapter of his 1917 work, and by Maha Sila Viravong.[11] Louis Finot's study on scripts is today completely outdated, for it was conducted at a time when knowledge of epigraphic sources was still extremely weak. The work of Maha Sila Viravong is much more interesting, but unfortunately is relatively short and only provides an introduction to the subject.

It is not possible to understand the history of Lao scripts without examining the models that they evolved from. It is preferable therefore to speak of all the scripts found in Laos, not only the Lao ones, for these did not suddenly appear from nowhere. I try to present these in chronological order below. It will not be at all linear however, for in Laos different scripts developed at different times, with no necessary direct link between these evolutions, even if all of them derived from Indian models. The subject being complex, I will not however be able to go into detail, and will limit myself to a few general observations.

The most ancient example of script found in Laos seems to be the inscription of Vat Luang Kao (Plate 1), found in the old city which is situated at the foot of Vat Phu (Champassak province). This inscription, in Sanskrit language, was dated by George Cœdès to the end of the 5th century, using palaeographic criteria. It belongs then to the earliest historical period of the area – but we hesitate to identify it as a Khmer stele, especially as Coedès thought it was the work of a Cham king. The script used is from the Pallava model, a type of writing coming from Southern India, which spread across Southeast Asia from the beginning of the 4th century. It can be noted that the Khmer, Môn and Cham scripts are derived from this model. About 15 inscriptions in Pallava script dating after the 5th century have been found in the South of Laos. They attest to the great importance of this region for the pre-Angkorian historical period. They are all linked to the Khmer domain, even though written in Sanskrit.

The Vat Phu area shows three examples of steles that are said to be digraphic, that is to say written in two scripts: a Khmer script which is already a development of Pallava and a Nagari script, which comes from Northern India, and which was used in Cambodia only

[11] ປະຫວັດໜັງສືລາວ, Vientiane, 1974.

under the reign of Yaçovarman. It dates from 889 AD. The text is in Sanskrit language in both scripts.

All the inscriptions linked to the Khmer world have been found in the South of Laos and belong to very early periods. The Say Fong inscription, however, is the only exception, partly due to its rather northern position, and partly due to its date, which puts in under the reign of Jayavarman VII, that is to say the turn of the 12th and 13th centuries. I explained in a recent paper[12] why I believe that this stele is an imported one, perhaps from the Thai province of Sakorn Nakorn, where Jayavarman VII built a hospital. The script is that of the Khmer Angkorian period.

In the province of Vientiane, on the other hand, another type of script was developed during the first millennium. We have only just begun to discover this type, which is also linked to a great civilisation - that of the Môn. The stele of Ban Tha Lat (Plate 2), today in the Ho Phra Keo museum, was found in 1968, in an area where other pieces of archaeological evidence testified to an ancient Môn presence. The stele was translated in the *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient* in 1974. This Môn script is dated to the 8th century. Another example of Môn inscription was found recently north of Vientiane, at Dan Sung, but it has not yet been studied by true specialists of Môn culture. The script differs significantly from that of Ban Tha Lat. My opinion is that it appears to be older, as it seems closer to the Pallava model, but this idea awaits confirmation by specialists. What is sure is that it dates from the first millennium, as does all the Môn archaeological evidence that has been found in Laos and Northeast Thailand. It is practically certain that this inscription is in Sanskrit language, for it appears to be completely in verse.

The hiatus between the Khmer and Môn scripts in Laos and the first Lao scripts is very large, and it is therefore certain that the latter do not descend directly from the former. It is however interesting to note that some of the first Lao inscriptions re-used the actual steles carved by the Môn. We do have a few examples where the Lao inscription flanks the stylised image of a *stupa*, which is a purely Môn religious icon.

The oldest Lao texts are perhaps the two very similar inscriptions, which were painted in red in two caves, Tham Nang An (Plate 3) and Tham Ting, both near Luang Prabang. The writing is close to the Sukhothai script used in the 14th century. We know that the stele of Rama Khamheng, which dates from the end of the 13th century, mentions Luang Prabang. It is thus possible that the two cities were in contact, and that a first form of script, coming from Sukhothai, was in very limited use among the Lao. These two examples are, however, not very useful for drawing firm historical conclusions.

[12] M. Lorrillard, "D'Angkor au Lan Xang: une révision des jugements," Aséanie 7, 2001, pp. 19-33.



Plate 1: Vat Luang Kao, 5th C.



Plate 2: Ban Tha Lat, 8th C.

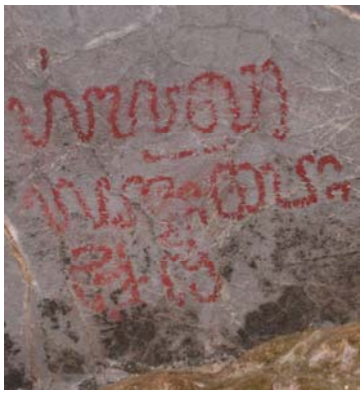


Plate 3: Tham Nang An, 14th C?



Plate 4: Muang Sing, 15th-16th C.



Plate 5: Tha Khek, 15th C.



Plate 6: That Luang, 16th C.

It would be very enlightening if the cliff wall at Pak Ou could be examined in detail. My colleague Michel Ferlus made me aware of this wall, which, at heights that are today difficult to access, bears a good number of inscriptions and designs painted in red. Some of these are drawings belonging to a prehistoric culture, while others are written texts which obviously come from the historical period. Nobody has yet managed to examine them however.

The oldest dated examples of Thai language inscriptions found on current Lao territory are in Fak Kham script and are linked to the Lan Na culture, which has left a lot of evidence in the provinces of Bo Keo, Luang Nam Tha and Sayabouri. A fragment of slate which was found recently in Muang Sing provides one of the most beautiful specimens of this script (Plate 4). It is derived from the Sukhothai script and was used extensively in Lan Na between the beginning of the 15th century and the end of the 16th century. It represents the prototype for Lao secular script, just as the Tham script of Lan Na, derived from the Môn and Burmese scripts, is the prototype for the Tham script of Laos.

The first true examples of inscriptions in Lao secular script are provided by a stele found in Tha Khek, dated to 1497 (Plate 5), and a stele in a very unusual writing, found in Luang Prabang and dated to 1530. The writing shows that they are already different from the Fak Kham script, and they can be taken as evidence of independent development.

From the beginning of the second quarter of the 16th century, and in particular during the reign of King Setthathirat, it is possible however to find various royal steles around Vientiane whose writing still follows the Fak Kham model. As I have explained in another paper,[13] it is very likely that these steles were engraved by scribes from Lan Na. The reappearance of the Fak Kham script in Lan Xang seems in effect tightly bound up with the development of Buddhism in Laos, which was strongly influenced by the religious culture of Lan Na, flourishing in the 15th and at the beginning of the 16th centuries.

The best proof for the development of Buddhism in Lan Xang, starting from the second quarter of the 16th century, is the sudden appearance of a great number of steles marking the foundation of temples, but also the appearance of a new script, the Tham script, which was used in particular for recording religious texts in Pâli language. The *Jinakâlamâlî*, a historically reliable religious chronicle from Chiang Mai, written in 1527, states that the king of Lan Na had sent 60 volumes of the *Tipitaka* to Luang Prabang in 1523, along with some very knowledgeable monks.[14] This data fits perfectly with the Lao evidence, since in

[13] "Insights on the Diffusion of Lao Buddhism," International conference *Buddhist Legacies in Southeast Asia: Mentalities, Interpretations and Practices* (Bangkok, 18-20 December 2003), to be published.

[14] G. Cœdès, "Documents sur l'histoire politique et religieuse du Laos occidental," BEFEO XXV-1, 1925, pp. 72 et 139; *Jinakâlamâlî*, A.P. Buddhadatta éd., PTS, 1962, p. 127; N.A. Jayawickrama (transl.), *The Sheaf of Garlands of the Epochs of the Conqueror*, PTS, 1978, p. 183.

1527, King Phothisarat had the first Tham inscription in Laos written in Luang Prabang. This stele, which originated from Vat Sangkhalok but is now preserved in the Royal Palace Museum, is an edict urging the improvement and purification of religious practise in the temples.

The importance accorded to Pâli in this era is attested to by another inscription in Tham script – that of That Luang – which is dated to 1566 (Plate 6). The first 10 lines of this stele are actually in Pâli language. The influence of Lan Na is particularly evident in the writing of this stele, as it is in other large royal inscriptions, such as the stele of Vat Suvanna Khuha, in the Thai province of Udon Thani.

The distribution of Lao inscriptions between the 16th and 17th centuries clearly demonstrates that the spread of scripts within Lan Xang territory was initially completely limited to the valley of the Mekong and its main tributaries, and in particular to certain important muangs around Luang Prabang and Vientiane. The more distant regions along the great river, including the whole of Southern Laos, were not reached by a written culture until a later period.