Laos' Plain of Menhirs
Hintang Archaeological Park: a work in progress

The formal conservation process for the Houaphanh menhirs has been underway for nearly twenty years. What has actually been accomplished during this period, and how are the material condition of the landscape and the artefacts now, compared with the situation between 1999 and 2002 when the authors did research on the menhirs and designed/installed interpretive signage at the site? **Alan Potkin** and **Catherine Raymond** report.

At least 1,500 years ago, people whose origin and fate we know almost nothing of have erected hundreds of menhirs along 10 km of summit trails atop forested mountains in the present Houaphanh province, eastern Laos. Three lower saddles were favoured for the main menhir fields, linked one to the next by isolated menhir clusters. The menhirs themselves, in the form of long and narrow blades, are plaques of cut schist erected upright, one behind the other, with the tallest often in the middle. Interspersed among the groups of menhirs, in no discernable order are burial chambers set deep in the bedrock. Access to the

opening below was often through a narrow vertical chimney equipped with steps. Each of these was covered by an enormous stone disk up to several metres in diametre.

In 1931, the sites around San Kong Phan were surveyed and partially excavated by a team from Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO), led by archaeologist Madeleine Colani (Colani 1932). With four decades of bitter warfare soon to follow, the Houaphanh menhirs were not further researched until 2001, when it became known that an international development project providing vehicular access to isolated upland communities that had been dependent on opium production, inadvertantly caused substantive damage – both directly and indirectly – to several of the menhir sites. Accordingly, a Lao-American impact assessment team was mobilized to re-survey the primary menhir sites; to erect in situ interpretive signage; and to devise an implementable long-term conservation strategy. A subsequent plan to gazette the

San Kong Phan menhirs cluster, Ban Pacha, Houamuong District, Houaphanh, Laos (1999)

Houaphanh Menhirs and the much-better-known Plain of Jars (ca. 90 km to the southwest, in Xieng Khouan Province) into a single prospective World Heritage Site was abandoned when the UNESCO Office of Culture in Bangkok concluded that the requisite inter-provincial co-operation would likely prove impracticable. In 2010, the Netherlands Development Organisation (SVD) prepared a draft management plan for Houaphanh site as 'the Hintang Archaeological Park,' and also formally nominated it for inclusion in the World Monument Fund's "most endangered sites" list. The formal conservation process for the Houaphanh menhirs has now been underway for nearly twenty years, so what has actually been accomplished during this period, and how do the material condition of the landscape and the artefacts compare to the situation between 1999 and 2002 when the authors worked on the site?

In January 1931, intrigued by a sketch map dated 1903 of Houaphanhh Province, within the then-French Protectorate of Laos, on which a local notable had written "cut stones", the Hanoi-based French archaeologist Madeleine Colani initiated an expedition to Houaphanh's Muang Peun region, some 100 km northeast of the Plain of Jars, where Colani had undertaken a major archaeological survey two years earlier. Her findings at both sites, including extensive field notes, maps, and photographs, were published by EFEO in 1935, entitled 'Mégalithes de Haut-Laos' (Hua Pan, Tran Nin); the two-volume edition was neither substantively translated into either Lao or English nor subsequently revised or re-published.

By the time she got there, the chambers contained, for the most part, nothing but alluvial clay that had gradually washed into the cavities. It appears that they had been originally occupied by several individual burials separated by low walls of schist plaques. Very few artefacts were recovered by the Colani expedition, apart from fragments of bones found outside of rather rough funerary urns; a number of terra cotta pots; certain objects in stone, evidently ceremonial; hanging pendants in crude ceramic; and several very simple bronze bracelets.

While the Plain of Jars became a rather well-known tourist site with the opening, finally, of Laos to international travellers in the late 1980s, the Houaphanh menhirs (the Breton word commonly used by the French for Stonehenge-like standing megaliths) remained almost completely unknown, except to local people and the handful of francophone archaeologists and cultural conservationists who were familiar with Colani's magisterial work (Giteau 2001). The Plain of Jars, in contrast, is redolent with mystery and exoticism, and was one of the most intensively bombed battlegrounds of the Second Indochina War (ca. 1962-1975).

The much-better known Plain of Jars

Following the revolutionary victories across the Indochina war zone, and the consolidation of political power by the communists in Laos in 1975, the American diplomatic situation there differed considerably from those in postwar Vietnam and Cambodia in that the US Embassy in Vientiane never ceased operations: although for the following three decades, it was certainly downsized compared to its heyday during the "Secret War" (its chief of mission was downgraded to a chargé d'affairs, until a full ambassador was eventually appointed in the 1990s).

The Secret War, a large-scale CIA-led counter-insurgency conducted largely under the cover of the US Agency for International

Development (USAID) – as well as the post-1975 Laos regime – never authorized the re-establishment of USAID operations in the country, even though much of that Agency's earlier activities were of the relatively innocuous ODA (i.e., Official Development Assistance) genre. While American support to the military units of the former Lao Royal government was certainly considerable, the hard core of the Secret War counter-insurgency was comprised of ethnic-Hmong guerillas working in close cooperation with the CIA, and plausibly covertly, the US Air Force, given the nominal neutrality of the old regime.

The Hmong paid dearly for their participation in the American war efforts, with at least a hundred thousand Hmong refugees eventually re-settled in the USA; thousands more cycled through the communist "seminars" or re-education camps; and a comparatively fraught political, social, and economic situation for the ethnic Hmong that continues till now. The Hmong armed resistance is marginalized, and little is accurately known about it, except that it is lent zero official American material or diplomatic support (notwithstanding all that, it should be noted that the remaining Hmong – about 8% of the country's overall population – certainly comprise the most economically prosperous, socially confident, and internationally best-connected minority within the country).

Given this history, it is somewhat anomalous that perhaps the largest postwar ODA activity undertaken by the Americans inside Laos (although assuredly not under the aegis of USAID), was what was called the 'Lao American Project' (1989-1999). The main geographic locus of the project was the former Muang Peun area, now the Houamuang District, of Houaphanh, whose local beneficiaries were largely upland, predominantly Hmong, ethnic minority peoples.

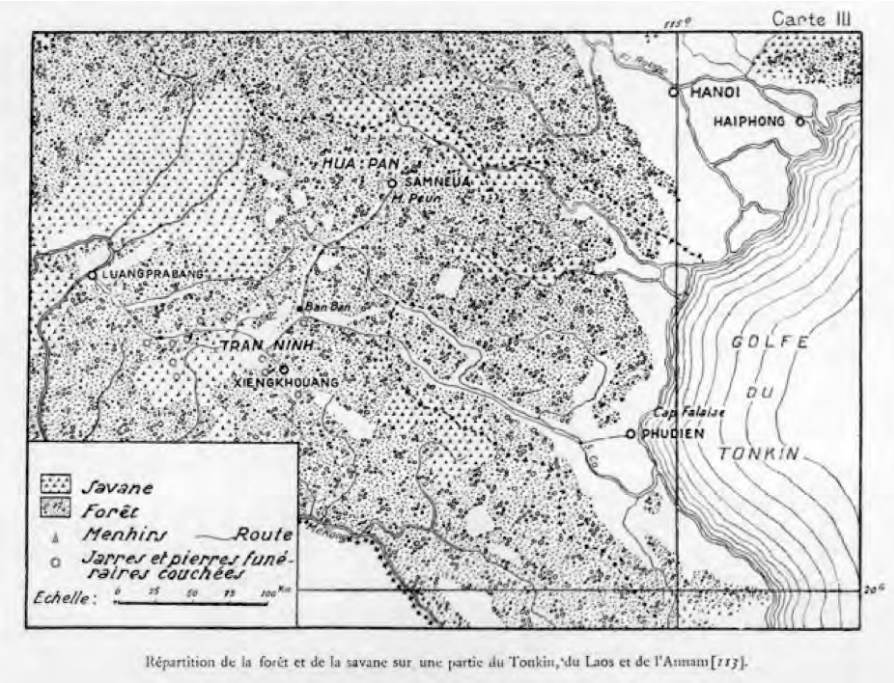
American interests in suppressing the international narcotics trade were central to the eradication strategy of facilitating the emergence of alternate upland livelihoods to replace poppy cultivation (Laos had always been a nexus of the trade, coming

third after Afghanistan and Burma). A key element was the construction of new penetration roadways to isolated mountainous regions where the absence of transport had made raw opium, with its high value-to-weight ratio, the only agricultural commodity worth carrying out on foot or packhorses. One of those new penetration roads cut southwards of Highway 6, about 15 km in length, generally running on the ridgeline above the Houay Peun river.

Presumably, both the contractors and local officials, that excluded US personnel, at the district and provincial levels would have been routinely queried about problems with the Peun south right-of-way, e.g. environmentally or culturally sensitive sites. This was obviously not a priority consideration, and a definitive impact assessment for the roadways component of the Lao-American Project did not seem to have been conducted.

When the project was completed, generally with mixed results, although the small hydropower element successfully electrified parts of the northern Peun Valley around the Houamuang District town, the US Embassy in Vientiane became uneasily aware that the new Peun ridgeline road through and beyond the small village of Ban Pacha may have "inadvertantly" damaged important archaeological resources, of which very little was known. Indeed, Ban Pacha was at the epicentre of the San Kong Phan site, which was the base camp of the Colani expedition in 1931, and the venue of the greatest concentration of menhir clusters and the associated burial chambers.

Quite by coincidence, in 1999, Dr. Potkin undertook a consultancy preparing the preliminary environmental impact assessment for a different penetration roadways project in Houaphanh, about 20 km east of the menhirs region, for implementing another combined opium suppression project by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (UNFAO) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB). Familiar with Colani's monograph on the Houaphanh Menhirs, and having gotten wind of the possible recent damage



Route of the Colani expeditions 1931-32

to the Peun ridgeline sites by the Lao-American project, French archaeologist/art historian Catherine Raymond, then also based in Vientiane, requested Dr. Potkin to informally photograph the San Kong Phan area.

It was immediately obvious that the Lao-American south Puen ridge roadway had been closely aligned with the original trail mapped out by Colani, and that considerable damage had been done to a number of menhir clusters. In some places, bulldozed, broken menhirs lay alongside the new road, while in other cases local people had taken the initiative to re-erect several menhir groups out of the right-of-way; or less admirably, had incorporated displaced menhirs, menhir fragments, and even circular stone tomb lids in their homestead structures.

On returning to Vientiane, the Public Diplomacy Officer at the US Embassy and Dr. Potkin submitted an application for a report on the existing situation at the San Kong Phan menhirs, and

a conservation project proposal for the larger menhirs region, under a prospective US State Department Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation (AFCP) grant. The grant application was successful, and the first phase of the fieldwork was initiated in early 2002.

Recent significant damage to several key sites, both related and unrelated to the Lao-American road project, has been observed. In the first category, a logging operation was well underway, partly to salvage a tremendous amount of low-value (compared to tropical hardwoods) pine which were damaged by a windstorm, but while the portable mill and crew were in place, more still standing pine were also taken down, which sometimes entailed felling large trees right onto menhir clusters throughout the site complex.

Also striking was the frequent employment of archaeological relics in local facility construction. Menhirs were also sometimes incorporated in livestock corrals; however, these practices, while degrading the sites, did not further damage the objects themselves, given that they had evidently already been broken by road graders.

The most important deliverable of the first AFCP project was large site signage, which was installed at San Kong Phan. The signage design was largely based on Colani's drawing and photographs of exactly that same location, originally produced in 1932. The approximate size of the main panel was 1.5 x 3m, and the construction was of digitally printed UV and water-resistant vinyl glued to

Tomb lid used as staircase landing stone, Ban Pacha (2002)

Logging operations (2002), dropping trees directly on menhir clusters

galvanized steel, with steel framing and a wood shingle narrow roof (the bilingual Lao-English panel was not vandalized or cannibalized for its materials and is still in reasonably good condition a full decade later, and the erection of a nearly identical bilingual panel in Lao-French nearby has been proposed).

The following year, another AFCP grant was made directly to the Department of Archaeological Research (DAR), Ministry of Information and Culture. By this time, a plan had been established to create a national archaeological park, and to put the menhirs site on the tourist map. Since UNESCO and the Lao PDR government were considering the establishment of the Plain of Jars World Heritage Site in Xieng Khouang province, it was argued that the prospective Houaphanh Menhirs archaeological park should be included in the new World Heritage Site, even though the sites were hardly contiguous (about a full day's drive apart, actually) and would entail negotiating the funding and management modalities between Xieng Khouang and Houaphanh provinces (under international donor pressure, "decentralization of governance" in Laos had been in effect for several years, and the authority of the national adminstration on matters of cultural conservation was comparatively limited).

The keystone of the DAR's AFCP project was the erection at Ban Pacha of a rustic sala, a traditional Lao shelter, built most often along pilgrimage routes or inside monastery grounds for religious travellers. The sala interior was to be largely covered by additional interpretive materials, which were indeed produced by the DAR, although never actually installed. The sala had not been commissioned, even though it was constructed on schedule. The initial problem seemed to be that diplomatic protocol required that the Houaphan provincial government formally accept the completed sala from the US Embassy, before it could be opened to the public. There were various delays, reportedly because of "banditry" in the region: an euphemism sometimes used for the ethnic, i.e., Hmong, armed resistance to the Lao PDR regime, which had never been totally suppressed in the northern part of the country.

AFCP-funded sala (pavilion) at San Kong Phan (still closed to the public)

By the time the security situation had re-stabilized, the weathering and deterioration of the unused sala, which was largely open to the elements on three sides, were significant. The DAR evidently felt that it was insufficiently presentable, and there were no funds available under the original grant for the required repairs. The US Embassy were not aware of this imbroglio, and it was not until 2008 that a ranking Embassy staffer was able to get up to Xam Neua to arrange a formal turnover to the Houaphanh provincial governor.

By this time, the UNESCO Office of Culture in Bangkok concluded that the hassles entailed in gazetting a bi-provincial World Heritage Site were just not worth the trouble, and the original Plain of Jars-only proposal was ultimately submitted. This is

presently still under negotiation, in cooperation with the Lao National Office for UNESCO, although it is not necessarily impossible that the Houaphanh menhirs element could be restored to the World Heritage Site concept, if a constituency for that was elicited. One element, potentially, of such a constituency is the prestigeous New York-based NGO, the World Monuments Fund, which in 2010 designated the Hintang archaeological landscape on its online 'current watch sites'.[1]

Other positive developments included the implementation in late 2010 of the 'Houaphanh Provincial Tourism Development Strategy', with the assistance of the Netherlands Development Organization (SNV). The strategy addressed the menhirs as a "major tourism resource".[2] The SNV project has already expanded the menhirs site signage, including trailside markers extending along the touristic footpath, and replacing/rehabilitating the Highway 6 turnoff panel that was erected by the first AFCP project in 2002, and severely damaged by a storm in 2009.

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[1] "Scattered across 72 different locations along a remote mountain ridge, the Hintang Archaeological Landscape is a collection of prehistoric megalithic sites in northeastern Lao PDR. Hidden throughout the region's lush jungle vegetation and nearly inaccessible to the outside world are 1,546 upright standing stones, 153 large stone disks, and under ground chambers dating back to the Bronze Age. Mysterious yet undoubtedly deliberate, the clusters of stone offer glimpses into an earlier era. Much is still unknown about the area's prehistoric inhabitants, but the significance of the landscape lies in the potential for cultural, ecological, spiritual, and archaeological discovery. Today, the site remains important sacred ground for the indigenous communities, who engage in rituals and make offerings to Hat Ang, a religious idol thought to be the guardian of the surrounding lands…A recent survey found that approximately one-third of the archaeological site is in a state of disrepair. Natural elements, including wind and water, have eroded the stones as well as the sites surrounding them. Further, man-made threats, including looting, uncontrolled tourism, and some road development, have placed the landscape at risk. Fighting, including the Vietnam War (known locally as the Second Indochina War) during the 1960s, left the area damaged. Unexploded ordnances remain in the area and not only threaten the safety of local inhabitants and visitors, but also hinder conservation efforts." [source http://www.wmf.org/project/hintang-archaeological-landscape]

[2] "Hintang Archaeological Park is a major tourism resource in the province. There is a need to conduct further surveys to learn more about the site and use this information for further development and interpretation. Conservation zones around the sites should be designated. There is also a need to fence the main site, renovate the sala, install washrooms, install interpretation materials in the sala, and facilitate local communities to provide food and beverage and handicraft sales. The site is closely associated with the Plain of Jars in Xieng Khuang Province. Close liaison should be maintained between the Provincial Tourism Office and the current heritage tourism project at the Plain of Jars so that Hintang may be included in the nomination for world heritage status that is being proposed for that site…"

As mentioned in the SNV report, in addition to renovating the sala at Ban Pacha, a critical issue is installing washrooms. This is easier said than done, given that modern sanitary requirements include lavatory sinks with running water, and the nearest existing surface supply is a small reservoir about 2 km upslope from the San Kong Phan site. Conceivably, a gravity piped system could be installed, although the water quality (and quantity, seasonally) is unknown.

More preferable would be to drill a tubewell as close to Ban Pacha as possible, which would have to use either a conventional windmill pump, or a solar installation of some kind (there is no mains power within 6 km of the site). Presumably, the well would have to be of sufficient capacity to also be practicably usable by the local villagers. Since the menhirs are all up on ridgelines, local groundwater hydrology might need a rather deep well that requires a relatively powerful pump. No cost estimate has been established as yet.

As things stand now, in June 2011, the US Embassy has agreed to underwrite an upgrade and modest expansion of the site signage, but will only release the funds when formally requested to do so by the appropriate Laos agency. The ambassador of France to Laos, always supportive of French efforts in the service of cultural conservation, is likely to fund installation of the Lao-Franco version of main San Kong Phan site signage. The relevant Lao agencies within the Ministry of Information and Culture, the Provincial Offices of Information and Culture, and the Lao National Tourism Agency (LNTA) are unlikely to take the initiative until the immediate obstruction to commissioning the sala is overcome, i.e., installing a reliable water supply so that sinks and toilets there are made feasible.

Meanwhile, there has been intense lobbying to resolve the water supply issue that will revive the long-stalled menhirs archaeological park project. The New Zealand bilateral aid agency (NZAID) has just launched a tourism project with the LNTA, but Houaphanh

"is not a target province". The Asian Development Bank (ADB) does have a tourism project underway in Houaphanh, but the focus has been on the Vieng Xay caves and the associated revolutionary historical sites, along with the Vieng Hong hotsprings. The LNTA and the Houaphanh Tourism Department, which has discretionary authority over infrastructure investment, allocated a budget for the September 2011 phase. Although considerable interest at the national level exists, and in particular within the Department of Archaeology, the Plain of Jars has not been listed yet as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and the prospective Keo Hintang Archaeological Park has not even been cited in the most recent discussions (KPL 2013).

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Images courtesy of Alan Potkin and Catherine Raymond

Alan Potkin holds a doctorate in environmental planning from the University of California, Berkeley (USA), following previous post-graduate training in limnology and estuarine ecology. In 1995, he founded the Digital Conservation Facility, Laos (DCFL) which is affiliated with the Center for Southeast Asian Studies at Northern Illinois University (USA), where Dr. Potkin is an Adjunct Research Fellow. Having lived and worked for decades in South and Southeast Asia, he's been continuously developing "artisanal", i.e., low-tech/constrained budget, and interactive visualization and virtual reality tools for ecological and cultural conservation relevant to impact assessment, heritage preservation, museological and site interpretive materials, public participation, government agencies, multilateral development banks, corporations, and NGOs.

Catherine Raymond received her Ph.D. in Art and Archaeology and in Indian and Southeast Asian Studies from La Sorbonne (Université de Paris III), where she was trained under Jean Boisselier (Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam); Madeleine Giteau (Cambodia and Laos); and Denise Bernot (Myanmar). She also holds a Diplôme de recherche et d'études appliquées from National Institute of Oriental Languages and Civilizations. Her research largely focuses on the iconography of Theravada Buddhism, with special interest in the arts of Myanmar. Presently, Dr. Raymond is Associate Professor of Art History at Northern Illinois University (USA); Director of the Center for Burma Studies; and Curator of the Burma Collections. She has been developing innovative digital approaches in archiving and conserving heritage sites throughout South and Southeast Asia.