

The Spirit of the Place During the Life of a Monument in the Case Study of World Heritage Site as Vat Phou (Laos)

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Abstract. To this day, Vat Phou site represents a unique example of the social and religious use while being a commercial tourist attraction. This case can be considered a model but one must consider its intrinsic future risks. Main threats and haphazard interventions and financial speculation as many have already occurred at other WHL sites over the time. The goal here is to recommend preventive and comprehensive measures to preserve the very fabric and spirit of the place.

Historical introduction

Vat Phou is considered one of the most important Khmer sites (IX-XII c. AD) along with the Cambodian ones, which have been inscribed in the World Heritage List since 2001. It is situated in the southern province of Champasak (Laos), a few kilometres from the town of Champasak, 30 kilometres from the province's capital Pakse, and about 120 Km from Cambodia.

The Khmer legend indicates Vat Phou as the birthplace of the Hindu god Shiva, that has been identified as the main sanctuary inside the hearthland of the Chenla¹ kingdom (Ishii and Sakurai 1985, 76-85). The Vat Phou complex is inserted in the Champasak plain's cultural landscape, flanked by the Phou Kao Mountain to the west and the Mekong River to the east and other sacred sites and temples around. Vat Phou was surrounded by the ancient city of Shrestrapura and the urban settlement of Lingapura (IX-XIII c. AD). According to the Chinese sources (Sui Chronicles, VI c. AD), the Phou Kao Mountain, in Sanskrit called *Lingaparvata* (*Linga*² mountain), showed a temple on the top for the king's sacrifices to the Bhadresvara's

¹ Early Khmer kingdom adherent to the Shivaist cult.

² A phallic emblem, symbolizing Shiva and his role in creation.

spirit.³ Initially, the Shivaist cult was diffused in Angkor as well as in Vat Phou. The Khmer embraced this cult to Vat Phou as a great sacred place thus allowing the continuation of donations and privileges which sustained the temple until the fall of their Empire (Albanese 2004). The abandonment of the Shivaist in favour of the Buddhist cult took place around the XV through XVI c. AD according to T. Sayavongkhamdy (Sayavongkhamdy 1996, 102) or possibly earlier around the XIII c. AD (*Nomination Form* 2000, 30). Buddhism reinterpreted the Hindu icons with a cultural interchange through a sort of symbiotic process.

The present configuration of the Vat Phou site dates back to the expansion that took place under the reign of Khmer King Suryavarman in the XI c. AD (Freeman 1996, 200-207). However, certain sections were realized in successive centuries and the oldest remains are dated before the VII c. AD.

The capital of Chenla Empire was Shrestrapura, wanted by the king Shreshthavarman. Started in the III to the VII c. AD, it was not completed until the XIII c. AD. It represents the earliest known urban settlement of the Khmer empire and the first Khmer city site scientifically excavated thus providing a valuable example of the origin of Southeast Asian urbanism (Nishimura 2004, 49-63). The planning and the modification of the landscape were a clear response to environmental, economic, social and political requirements (*Champasak Heritage Management Plan* 1999, 82). The evidence of a Hindu centre is found in the Shivaist inscriptions like the Sanskrit stele of Ban Panone (a site close to Champasak), called King Devanika inscription. It indicates the foundation of the important politic centre of Shrestrapura in the V c. AD, previously the Vat Phou construction (Coedès 1956; Jacques 1962; Santoni, Souksavady 1996, 171; Sayavongkhamdy 1996, 101-102).

2. Description of the site

The first descriptions of the site date back to the XIX c. AD. F. Garnier in *Voyage d'exploration en Indo-Chine* (1873) reported the French's missions which took place in 1866, 1867 and 1868. The first studies were made by archaeologist E. Aymonier and architect H. Parmentier (Parmentier 1914) brought them to an elaborated level.

³ King Bhadravarman, founder of this cult, built the first shrine of Shiva Bhadresvara in My Son (Vietnam) (Freeman 1996, 201).

The whole configuration of the area is not only utilitarian but reflective of the Hindu religious view in the V-XII c. AD. The *Lingaparvata* can be interpreted like the Mount Kailasha, the Shiva's sacred mountain, and the Mekong River like the Ganges River, with the plain as symbol of the Holy Land (*Kurukshetra*), and the surroundings as the symbol for the Universal Ocean. The axis from Lingaparvata to Vat Phou temple continues on through the ancient city and crosses the Mekong River to join the Tomo temple. The classical Hindu cosmology is merged with the local interpretations (*Champasak Heritage Management Plan 1999*, 82).

The Vat Phou complex is quite impressive; however to fully understand its importance we must remember that what we see now is not representational of the ancient sacred centre when it was surrounded by a vibrant and bustling town.

The complex, located under the Phou Kao mountain, is located on the natural terrace overlooking the plain of the Mekong River, which extends in length 1400m on the east-west axis. This linear axial layout is rare in most of the Khmer temples where the concentric plan is the favourite. There are three main parts. The lowest one is characterized by *barays*⁴; the central part includes a series of stairs and terraces and the upper one houses the sanctuary, the library and other significant architectural and sculptural elements (*Fig. 1*).

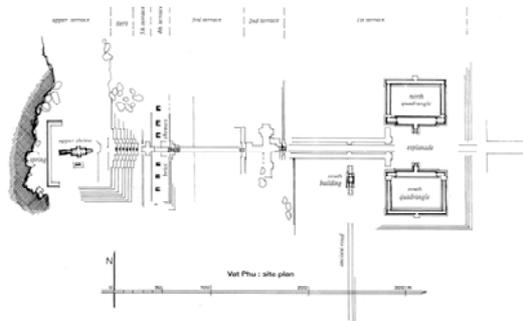


Figure 1. Plan of the Vat Phou site

(produced by Fondazione Lerici, further elaboration by P. Pichard)

At the lowest level, the entrance is in direction of the eastern big *baray* (200m by 600m, X-XI c. AD), flanked on its north by another one not aligned with the temple's axis, maybe a following donation, and on west by two smaller ones (around XI-XII c. AD). On the

⁴A man-made lake or reservoir.

western side of the first big *baray* there is a stone *gopura*⁵, surmounted, in the ancient past, probably by a timber structure and recently by a pavilion, that has been destroyed. From there, the processional causeway (350m, X c. AD, recently restored), that is delimited by two rows of lotus flower pillars with a *naga*⁶ at the beginning, leads to the quadrangular buildings. The two quadrangular buildings (62m by 42m, XI c. AD), positioned on the first of six temple's terraces, are made of sandstone and laterite on the northern one and sandstone and bricks on the southern one. All buildings exhibit remarkable carved doorways and exquisite decorations. There are no traces of the timber roofing except for the holes remaining in the masonry. It is assumed that the buildings were used for ceremonial purposes with the ones facing north devoted to the ladies and the ones facing south to the gentlemen, high rank worshippers or monks.

From the two quadrangle buildings starts the second causeway (150m of length). This element was recently restored and is bordered by stone lotus pillars and, in the past, by timber galleries on the two embankments. In the middle of the causeway on the northern terrain, there are traces of a quadrangular pavilion (1998's excavations) and on the south side, a sandstone and laterite construction called *Nandin*⁷ Hall (mid XI c. AD, preservation works in progress). According to the most recent studies, the building could be a connecting structure between the causeway on north and the big sacred road that conducted to Angkor on south. On the north and south side of the complex there are two water canals. At the end of the ceremonial causeway there is a ruined flight of stairs, flanked by two champa trees, that leads to another terrace. On this level there is a statue venerated by the worshippers as a representation of the King Khammanta, most probably a *dvarapala*⁸, like the two others lying on the ground on the north side. A long flight of stairs (75 m of length, XI c. AD) is sustained by a majestic and partially collapsed sandstone and laterite retaining wall which leads to the cross-shaped terrace. The next terrace is planned with two series of brick *prasad*⁹ (IX-X c. AD.), now

⁵An ornamental crowned gateway or entrance too a religious sanctuary.

⁶ Naga: A mythical serpent with the characteristics of a cobra, usually depicted as multiheaded or sometimes in human form.

⁷The building took the name from the Nandin pedestal found in the area. Nandin: The bull serving as Shiva's mount and symbol of fertility, found facing the main sanctuary in Shaivite temples.

⁸ A guardian of a temple door or gate often holding a club or mace.

⁹ Palace for king or god. In religious and secular architecture, the sanctuary tower represents Mount Meru.

almost entirely destroyed, and is dedicated to the *trimurti*¹⁰ aligned on the north-south axis, each one with a *linga*. The last steep sandstone stair, flanked by champa trees and two big laterite tiers (the northern one completely ruined), leads to one of the most sacred space of the complex, the sanctuary.

This terrace is almost a square (60 m by 60 m) with the Shiva's shrine in the middle and the library on the south. The main entrance of the sanctuary is on the east, and it is constituted by a *mandapa*¹¹, a vestibule with three modern Buddha statues and by the cella with the *linga*, watered by the sacred source. The outward part is beautifully decorated by *devatas*¹² and *dvarapalas* sculptures, besides the presence of the fine carved interior lintels. The building is covered by a temporary roof and the masonry structure is in very bad disrepair. On the west side are the Hindu *trimurti* carvings of Brahm_, Visnu e Shiva (XI c. AD) while on the north side sits a recent monastery, now abandoned, and a series of rock sculptures and structures (realised from VII c. AD). The remains of the uppermost terrace are the oldest at the site with the main structure belonging mostly to the VII c. AD.

The visitor and above all the worshipper's walk through their spiritual journey start them at the lowest part of the temple to the highest levels, symbolically from the rough world on earth to the world of gods where man can achieve enlightenment. Most visitors are pilgrims who go through a journey of religious nature. Lesser number is the tourists venturing to Vat Phou for purely cultural interests.

The other sites inscribed in the World Heritage List include the mentioned town of Shrestrapura¹³ as well as other related settlements like the sandstone Hong Nang Sida temple (XI c. AD) and the area around which is evidence to a well-organised settlement dating to IX-XIII c. AD, probably the Khmer city mentioned in the inscription as Lingapura. Thao Tao temple (XII beginning of XIII c. AD) is situated 300 m east of the Khmer ancient road and was discovered in 1987. In the area are included: Tham Lek (cave and inscriptions dating back to VII-VIII century), the rock inscription near Houay Kok source (VII c. AD), Vat Oubmong (IX c. AD) a brick and sandstone temple

¹⁰(Sanskrit *trim_rti*) In the Hindu concept, where the cosmic functions are personified by the forms of Brahm_ the creator, Visnu the maintainer or preserver, and Shiva the destroyer or transformer.

¹¹Antechamber, a pavilion or porch in front of the main sanctuary of a temple.

¹²A deity or a divine being in India and other countries in South-East Asia.

¹³The plan of the town was rectangular (around 2,3 Km by 1,8 Km) and the border on the Mekong is disappeared under the erosive action of the River.

dedicated to Shiva, with a Sanskrit inscription, which was found in 1973 by Pierre Lintengre, Tomo temple (around IX c. AD) and its relative Don Daend Island in front of Champasak town.

3. Studies on the Vat Phou area

In 1987 UNESCO focused the attention on Vat Phou and between 1987 and 1990 were identified the borders of the protected areas around the main erected monuments.

From 1991 to 1996 a project of research in the Lao Archaeology was developed in the area (Projet de Recherches en Archéologie Lao) and it discovered some new aspects on the Lao history and advancements in the South-East Asia history. In 1991, 1992, 1993, 1995 some excavations, wanted by the Lao Ministry of Culture and realised with a Lao-French project directed by M. Santoni of the *Centre Nationale de Recherche Scientifique*, were realised close to the sanctuary in order to verify the presence of prehistoric traces near the sacred source and to explore in detail the interesting area. Subsequently to these discoveries, the restoration plans (1989-90) that concerned the anastylosis of the monuments with the realization of a concrete platform on the ancient vestiges, were stopped and new studies were started (Santoni, Souksavatdy 1996, 177). The Italian and Russian contribution pertained to the magnetic prospections in the ancient city (M. Cucarzi, V. Glazounov), and in the Vat Phou complex for the period from 1991 to 1995. Moreover, since 1990 to present, the Italian government has promoted a few missions in the Vat Phou area directed by the Lerici Foundation-Politecnico di Milano (Director of the Italian missions P. Zolese).

In 1997 an international project focused on the importance to investigate the condition of the major monuments in and surrounding the Vat Phou archaeological site, and to recommend measures for the stabilization and consolidation of these structures (Pichard 1997, 2); the study was followed by the realization of timber supports in the main buildings and the starting of an archaeological campaign of excavation.

One of the biggest efforts to this effect has been the collection of data for the realisation of the management plan and the inscription of the site in the World Heritage List, with the updating action plan 2005-2010.

In 2004 a project concerning the conservation of the ceremonial cause-ways was conceived and completed the year after, concurrently with the training of the local staff, the topographical and archaeological mapping of the site and the arrangement of the exhibition hall built with a Lao-Japanese project (2000). This effort also involved the rehabilitation of the canals in the Vat Phou area.

For two years the Lerici Foundation with the Politecnico di Milano has been conducting a project of preservation of the Nandin Hall inside the Vat Phou complex (Scientific Director M. Boriani, Director of the Archaeological Mission P. Zolese).

4. Safeguard programs concerning the site and legislative outline

The governmental action plan, established in the foundation of the Lao People Democratic Republic (December 2nd, 1975), contemplated these actions: “to study, to compile inventories to repair and maintain the historical monuments, precious heritage of the nation”. The XIX article of the Constitution stipulates that the State assures the protection of the national antiquities and the preservation of the national historical monuments.

The first step to safeguard the site started with the preservation program of the Vat Phou monuments in 1987. The Ministry of Information and Culture defined a decennial project with the financing assistance of UNDP and the UNESCO dedicated to protect and preserve the principal monuments in the country.

In 1996, Sayavongkhamdy¹⁴'s important topics focused on the creation of a historical park for the preservation of the whole area (comprising Shrestrapura and Vat Phou) and a wide-range vision marked by crucial changes in the cultural heritage preservation safeguard including sensitization campaigns, toughening of the laws on this matter, a planned and dedicated budget, the implementation of inventories, special archives and museum systems in addition to the improvement of the structures, the establishment and training of qualified personnel (Sayavongkhamdy 1996).

In 1996 UNESCO together the governments of Italy and Japan and with the collaboration of many experts (from Italy, Japan, France, Australia and the United Kingdom) started a safeguarding project for the Champasak cultural landscape. The UNESCO-Lao project called *Capacity Building in Cultural Resource Management through the Preparation of a Zoning and Environmental Management Plan for the*

¹⁴ Director-General, Dep. of Museums and Archaeology, Ministry of Information and Culture, Lao PDR

Preservation of Vat Phou and Associated Archaeological Sites within the Framework for Sustainable Development of Champasak, Lao PDR involved a comprehensive research from different points of view, hydrological, anthropological, archaeological and environmental. All collected data were organised in a GIS and used in the redaction of the *Champasak Heritage Management Plan*, officially adopted by the Government of Lao PDR September 28th, 1998. During the realisation of the management plan a new fundamental role has been devoted to the *Lao Government's National Inter-Ministerial Co-ordinating Committee for the Protection of Vat Phou* (NIMCC) together with the *Champasak Provincial Heritage Committee* and the *Champasak Villages Liaison Committee*. The management plan is coherent with the Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the 1972 UNESCO Convention for the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage and the Lao legislation.

In the past few years, the legislation has showed a remarkable evolution from the *Provincial Decree on the Regulation for the Preservation of the Historical Site of Vat Phou and the Areas Related to Vat Phou n. 38/88*¹⁵ that concerned the Vat Phou area, Hong Nang Sida and Thao Tao to the following national *Decree of the President of the Lao PDR on the Preservation of Cultural, Historical and Natural Heritage n. 03/PR* (1997).¹⁶

Successively, the new *Law on National Heritage* dated November 9th, 2005 (approved 2006) has significantly improved the previous Decree, first of all with the heritage distinction and the inclusion of the intangible heritage. In fact, it is defined the *cultural and historical heritage*, including *the intangible and the tangible, the movable and the immovable heritage with significant value from the point of view of culture, history and sciences* (*Law on National Heritage*, 2005, Art. 3.1), also the natural heritage and its management is contemplated. Moreover, the definition of authorities and their competences within the Ministry of Information and Culture have been clarified. The museums are finally contemplated with an improved consciousness, a tendency to progress confirmed by *The Phnon Penh-Vientiane Charter on Cultural Diversity and Heritage Tourism* (2006), signed by institutional members during an ICOM Workshop concerning Southeast Asian countries. For the first time in legislation of this

¹⁵ Approved by Provincial Executive Board Committee, Pakse 11/10/1988

¹⁶ Signed by the President Nouhak Phoumsavan in Vientiane 20/6/1997.

nature, the words: *repair, restoration and conservation* are mentioned besides the measures for the protection and preservation of the tangible cultural and historical national heritage (*Law on National Heritage*, 2005, Art. 29, Chapter 3). A *Fund for the National Heritage* has been established by government budget, foreign countries and international organisations, fees/incomes from the national heritage and fund raising. The utilisation of the fund is managed by specific regulations.

The 1997 Decree was based more on defending the country's cultural heritage and fighting the illegal activities in this sector, a crucial problem in that period, rather than establishing a specific national decree on this matter. Without the enactment of this decree, the management plan and the inscription on the World Heritage List of the Vat Phou site would have been impossible. The new legislation has been written with the specific goal of solving weak management in these institutional activities. The problems are still many and span from lack of proper administrative planning, inaccurate budgeting, poor monitoring of works and the quality of work performed and scarcity of qualified personnel and last but not least shortage of funds, already publicly denounced (Sikhanxay 2004, 80).

5. Conclusion-Consequences

In the course of the last twenty years the image of the Vat Phou area has changed its aspect. The attention of international projects has enhanced this mechanism in act in the entire country and above all already verified in the northern World Heritage Site, Luang Prabang. Foreign aid, in accordance with the country policy, has started to change the economical, social and cultural conditions of the area.

During the last few years, there have been improvements in the infrastructures and improvements of the Pakse area and Champasak too such as the bridge on the Mekong and the new Pakse airport, thanks to bilateral projects with foreign countries. The request of experts in the Vat Phou complex has attracted technicians from all over the country who have collaborated side by side with international specialists. Numerous training courses have been organised as well as exchanges with the other young experts from South-Asian countries. The Vat Phou office has become a real landmark for the country, in constant evolution.

The WHS brand has attracted more tourists every year and despite its positive effect, protective measures need to be established and guidelines need to be part of the management plan. Guest-houses in Champasak have augmented since 1997, when the first ones were opened. The international eye is starting to focus on the area for new investments which need to be cautiously controlled to maintain the integrity of such a historical and sacred site.

We cannot forget that Vat Phou is mainly a religious site for the Lao people. Over the course of the centuries the site has changed from a Hindu holy site to a Buddhist one, but at its heart it remains a spiritual point of reference. The famous Vat Phou Festival draws an incredible number of pilgrims from all over the country who wish visit the monumental complex. Surely some measure of control must be established to protect the physical site while allowing visitors and devotees to share in the pleasure of the spiritual patrimony the site represents for many.

Besides the coordination of the general management plan of all the area, the archaeological and architectonical preservation works, it will be important to extend protective measures regulations on the effects of water during the monsoon season, to increase the number of experts and to attract fruitful international projects while involving the indigenous community in these activities to safeguard the needs of the local population.

At present, the authenticity and the originality of the cultural landscape of Vat Phou are unquestionable and all the improvements of the site should take in consideration the interaction between the human value and the true spirit of the place. The challenge is to balance the modernisation of the country with the historical and spiritual identity of this ancient site.

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