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TRANS-BORDER ARCHEOLOGY: VAT PHOU AND ANGKOR

Dr. Brice Vincent and Dr. Martin Polkinghorne

A workshop organized with the support of the Asian Cultural Council (ACC)

Vat Phou in Laos is one of the most significant sites of pre-modern mainland Southeast Asia. In the shadow of *Lingaparvata* mountain, the area is home to a continuously active cultural landscape. From pre-history to the present-day local custodians have lived-in and changed the landscape leaving behind a rich material and written record. The site is connected to the region by its strategic riverine location, but can also claim links overland into the heart of the Angkorian kingdom by an ancient Khmer road that traverses nearly three-hundred kilometres. Remembered today through the stories of the people who live along it, when constructed, the road served successive Angkorian monarchs who visited the most renowned Shaivite sanctuary of Bhadresvara.

The CKS and EFEO workshop gathered forty specialists from Australia, Cambodia, France, Japan, Laos, South Korea, Thailand, and the United States. Participants included cultural heritage managers involved the administration and conservation of Vat Phou; scholars from anthropology, archaeology, epigraphy, history, history of art, linguistics; and students from the National University of Laos in Vientiane and the Royal University of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh. The workshop facilitated ongoing cooperation between Laos, Cambodian and foreign scholars. More importantly, it offered opportunities to discuss future collaborations.

The two-day workshop was divided into three panels. The first panel titled *Vat Phou: Site Management* provided an overview of administration and conservation at the Vat Phou–Champasak Site since 2001 when it was listed on the UNESCO World Heritage register. Bounlap Keokangna (Vat Phou World Heritage Site) and Jean-Charles Castel (Fonds de Solidarité Prioritaire Vat Phou) outlined international cooperation and ongoing issues of site management. Vilasak Phongswat and Bounlap Keokangna (both Vat Phou World Heritage Site) discussed projects of architectural conservation including interventions of teams from France, India, and the United States. Recent architectural conservation efforts at the Nong Sida monument were introduced by Donghee Park on behalf of Kyunghwan Baek (Korea Cultural Heritage Foundation). A Cambodian-Laos exchange of expertise in sculpture conservation was described by stone conservator Sok Soda (National Museum of Cambodia) who has led numerous conservation missions to the Vat Phou Site Museum. Masao Nishimura (Waseda University) and Rie Odajima (Tokyo University of Foreign Studies and Waseda University) noted that the communities and villages of Champasak

district are equally important components of the Vat Phou heritage landscape. To wrap up this session, Damian Evans (EFEO) outlined the potential of remotely sensed laser scanning (LiDAR) for site management and landscape archaeology.

The second panel titled ‘Vat Phou: Pre-Angkorian Studies’ began with an overview of the *Projet de recherche en archéologie lao (PRAL)* by Samlane Luangaphay (Department of Heritage, Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism). Luangaphay presented archaeological investigations on the ancient city and sanctuary of Vat Phou operational since the 1990s. Additional papers provided new interpretations of the fifth to the eighth century cultural landscape of Vat Phou. Christine Hawixbrock (EFEO) described new excavations at Nong Din Shi temple, on Phu Malong mountain and David Bazin (Vat Phou World Heritage Site) presented a series of archaeological sites recently discovered on Phou Kao / Lingaparvata mountain. Connections with Cambodia, central Vietnam and Thailand were also discussed through ongoing art historical studies by Jade Thau (École pratique des hautes études). Heng Piphall (University of Hawai’i at Manoa) communicated recent excavations at the site of Thala Borivat in Stung Treng province. Connected to Vat Phou by the Mekong river, material from this site suggests a complex cultural connection not yet elaborated. While there are similarities in seventh century artistic styles, Thala Borivat rectangular brick pavements associated with decorative lintels are not observed at Vat Phou.

The last panel ‘Vat Phou: Angkorian Studies’ focused on the relationship between Vat Phou and Angkor from the ninth to the fifteenth centuries. Three complementary approaches were presented. A historical study by Ian Lowman (Independent Researcher) described epigraphical material mentioning the renowned Shaivite sanctuary of Bhadresvara and the ancient city of Lingapura. Epigraphy demonstrates that successive Angkorian monarchs visited Vat Phou and it was arguably the most important religious site in the entire Khmer kingdom. Systematic archaeological and anthropological research conducted by the Angkor Living Road Project on the ancient road linking Vat Phou to Angkor considers the enduring importance of this communication route in defining the identities of communities that live along it. Project leaders Im Sokrithy and Khieu Chan (APSARA National Authority) described new archaeological discoveries associated with the road. Finally, Brice Vincent (EFEO) and Martin Polkinghorne (Flinders University) outlined the discovery of a bronze foundry in Angkor Thom. Archaeological survey and materials analysis might demonstrate that Vat Phou and its surrounds were a potential source of copper for this production centralized at the Royal Palace of Angkor.