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Scripts and History: the Case of Laos

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1. Introduction: two Lao scripts

The affinity between the scripts of Laos and other regional writing has been recognised since the first historical studies on the country, conducted at the end of the nineteenth century.

Father Schmitt, who in 1898 published a body of 31 stele inscriptions presented as “thai”, had little difficulty associating documents found in northern Thailand, in particular at Sukhothai and Chiang Mai, with a body of six epigraphic texts discovered in Luang Prabang¹). He noted, however, a peculiarity: while two of those inscriptions follow what is called the Sukhodaya (Sukhothai) script, the other four, more recent, are graphically linked to a Burmese model (Fig. 1a-b).

At the time, the fact that the Lao had used various types of script caused no surprise. The accounts of the first western explorers to visit the middle Mekong Valley—notably those of Francis Garnier, Doctor Neiss and the members of the Pavie Mission—all recorded the complexity of human settlement in the region and the richness of its cultures.

These explorers had already met—to speak only of the main groups of Tai language speakers—the Siamese of Mae Nam Chao Phraya, the Lao and Phouan of the Mekong basin and the Korat Plateau, the Yuan of Lan Na (northern Thailand), the Shan and Khun of western Burma, the Lue and Tai Neua of southern China and northern Laos, and the Black Tai and White Tai of northern Vietnam. They realised that all these peoples were historically linked and that all of them shared written traditions marked by a number of influences.

Etienne Aymonier, a pioneer of Khmer epigraphic research, also noted the diversity of scripts used by the local populations, when travelling in 1883–84 through what he called the “Lao *muang* of Cambodia’s Siamese provinces” (Aymonier 1901: 143–148)—that is to say those provinces that currently form the northeast of Thailand (*Isan*) plus various Lao towns on the left bank of the Mekong. His observations were confused though: while he first emphasised that the script of the Lao seemed borrowed from Burmese characters, for it was rounded, he also noticed, through an inscription found at Phon Phisay, that its letters were squared and angular. He did not distinguish then, in any explicit way, that the Lao used two different graphic systems²).

Louis Finot, the first director of the *École française d'Extrême-Orient*, added his



a



b

Fig. 1 1a/b: Two lao scripts found in Luang Prabang which are derived from different models

contribution in 1903 when he studied four small inscriptions in Pali language found within the structure of the That Luang, a great *stupa* built in Vientiane in the middle of the sixteenth century (Finot 1903a: 660–663). He wrote of these, “the script is that used in Laos for religious texts and known by the name of *Tham* (Dharma) characters. This script has several varieties; that which we found here in gold leaf is very close to Burmese script”.

The resemblance of the Tham script to Burmese writing was again noted by Finot in 1915 when he wrote of the Dan Xai stele that, “the use of Tham characters, which are but a form of Burmese characters, is completely explained by the fact that the Burmese then held suzerainty over the Thai kingdoms” (Finot 1915: 30). His opinion evolved several

months later, however, when he produced his great article on Lao literature (Finot 1917: 25–29). In a long chapter dedicated to the different notation systems used by the speakers of Tai languages, he wrote of Laos that the scripts “can be divided into two types: the Sukhodaya script, and the Sipsong–panna script, which we can shorten to the name of Shan script, meaning that of the Chinese Shan states”. According to Finot, the latter is completely independent of the former by reason of the very different form of its characters: “moreover, rather than avoiding superposition of letters, it actually encourages this to the point where the text is incorrect and obscured: in effect, in subscript there are consonants which do not form a phonetic group”. Finot thus was probably the first to recognise that while these two scripts had evolved from a common Indian origin, their source in southeast Asia was not the same, and their development had occurred in distinct geographical areas.

2. Question of the origin of Tai scripts

However, Finot’s analysis remains very limited and sometimes confused, mainly due to the lack of materials at his disposal at that time. His knowledge of scripts was based essentially on observation of tracings from the Pavie mission and on some inscriptions brought to him in Hanoi³), as well as on the examination of contemporary manuscripts from various Tai groups. It was thus difficult for him to truly treat the subject diachronically.

While Finot stated with reason that the script known as Sukhodaya—the richness of which has been preserved in Siamese script—became impoverished in Laos by losing a good number of characters and tonal markers, he unwisely claimed that this script “was used in all the Lao principalities to the end of the sixteenth century for engraving inscriptions on stone, and even in Chiang Mai until the middle of the eighteenth century”. In this way he confused, with the slight qualification of “Lao principalities”, the two very distinct political and geographical entities that were the kingdoms of Lan Na and Lan Xang⁴). It was also rather risky to arrive at such definite conclusions across such large geographical areas, when no widespread survey had yet been conducted.

Regarding the family of scripts categorised as Shan, Finot noted that this group could be divided into two distinct types: those of the western Shan, who are situated on the right hand bank of the Mekong in Burma, and those of the eastern Shan, whose geographical distribution is much wider, covering northern Thailand, the whole of Laos, and southern China. Finot remarked that the former is almost identical to Burmese script, adding with reason that this trait is probably the result of borrowing or more likely modification of early Shan characters. He also seemed to think (though did not say so explicitly) that these early Shan characters had been better conserved among the eastern Shan, where the script presents three local varieties: *Tham*, used throughout Laos; *Lue*, confined to the far north of the country; and *Yuan*, the script of the Chiang Mai area. He then arrived at a new theory for the early history of Tai scripts, claiming that all these originated from the coastal area of lower Burma known as Pegu, where much material evidence of very early indianisation has been discovered. Finot was at that time strongly influenced by the discovery at Prome of various Pali inscriptions written in a southern Indian script of the fifth century (Finot 1912). He deduced that this script, adopted in lower Burma in an early era, was transmitted

to the Shan states where it then evolved independently. The Tai then imported the script during their migrations: they preserved its basic characters in the Chinese Shan states and northern Laos (through the Tham Lao, Lue and Yuan scripts); it was corrupted further as it moved to isolated groups in Tonkin; it may elsewhere have been affected by the emergence of a dominant state, such as Sukhothai, where it would have received the distinctive input of the Khmer cursive.

Such a theory is no longer acceptable today, particularly when the historical shortcuts that the idea follows have become apparent. The complex exchanges that occurred between the Pyu, Môn and Burmese civilisations are ignored, the question of the origin and spread of the various Tai groups is completely sidestepped, and the influence of Khmer civilisation on the southern Tai kingdoms is greatly underestimated. Neither is there any palaeographic analysis to support Finot's theory.

Today, however, nearly 100 years after Finot revealed his thoughts, it is hard to say that the question of the origin of Tai scripts has been resolved. In the case of modern Thai (siamese) script, for example, there is no doubt that this is an evolved form of the script used at Sukhothai at the end of the thirteenth century or at the beginning of the fourteenth century, for we can trace precisely its development over the course of the following centuries. But the origin of this archaic writing—that of the Rama Khamheng inscription or that of the Lō Thai⁵—remains obscure. Conventional thought holds that it is a direct derivation of a *Khom* (Khmer) script, which would itself have been a synthesis of a more ancient Khmer script with Mon writing⁶. However, no example of this transitional script supposedly used by Tai/Thais before Rama Khamheng, which some like to call “protothai”, has ever been found⁷. The door is thus still open to all sorts of conjecture, including some very original ideas⁸.

3. Nationalistic and partisan views on the origin of Lao scripts

The uncertainty that continues to surround the origin of the Sukhothai script is a veritable scientific problem—one that archaeological discoveries may some day solve. In the meantime, this chasm in our historical knowledge allows certain individuals—shaped more by training in identity-building rather than in rigorous methods of research—to express biased views on the question of the genealogical order of regional scripts. The field of Lao studies is affected in this way in a recurrent and systematic manner. Thus it is regularly claimed in the few historical works to have been written in Laos, that the national script is of great antiquity and owes nothing to Thai script, with the contrary rather being insinuated.

Maha Sila Viravong—the only Lao scholar to have left his mark, through the number of his publications and the influence that his works still exercise today (Comité des sciences sociales 1990)—was the first Lao writer to approach the history of the script in his country. In a short book published in 1973, greatly influenced by the theory (now abandoned) that there were early Tai kingdoms in southern China during the first millennium, he placed the birth of a Lao script to the year 613 of the Buddhist era, which is the year 70 in the Christian calendar (Viravong 1973). According to him it was at this date the Tripitaka arrived in the

“Lao kingdom of Ngai–Lao” from a Mahayana sect that had spread throughout China. The script of texts that came from India was “Sanskrit” (sic)⁹ or “Devanagari” (sic), but was quickly appropriated by the Lao, who modified it and used it for their language. It was then transformed through contact with the Khmer script, which itself came from a model of “Sanskrit” script, and then was directly developed into the current Lao script. The Sukhothai script, he maintained, was a separate result of this synthesis between the ancient Lao script and Khmer. None of these conclusions stands up to serious scientific examination.

There was then a gap of fifty years before the views of Maha Sila Viravong on the ancient past of the Lao people were to be renewed, when a new official history of Laos was published¹⁰. In this, a short chapter on language and literature reports that for more than a thousand years the various Lao tribes (sic) had their own script, which was based on the Sanskrit script (sic) of northern India, and was introduced with Brahmanism and Buddhism throughout that region—geographically uncertain—which the Indian texts call “Suvannaphoum” (the land of gold). The reference to this mythical land is well known among specialists, as it recurs in the local historiographies of almost all the countries of Southeast Asia, conferring to each of these a major role in the process of indianisation and the spread of civilisation. It is clear that contemporary Lao authors identify this Suvannaphoum with a part of what is currently Laos—for far from repeating the ideas of Maha Sila Viravong on the role of the distant Tai–Lao kingdoms of southern China, they limit their investigations to the geographical area that they know best—the plain of Vientiane—and in particular to the contents of the national museum of Vat Ho Phra Keo. Here, two significant pieces of epigraphic evidence are conserved: a Mon inscription (Fig. 2) dated approximately to the eighth century, uncovered around 60 km north of the capital, and a Khmer inscription (Fig. 3) from the end of the twelfth century, found about 20 km downstream of the city¹¹. Through a stunning rhetorical shortcut, these two documents, despite their distinctly different scripts, languages, chronologies, historical contexts and geographic situations, are presented not only as the earliest writings of a “multi-ethnic Lao culture”, but also as the first two pieces of evidence for an “original Lao script”¹². This is portrayed as a prototype that would survive the collapse of the Mon and Angkorian civilisations, and that the different Lao groups of the Mekong and Chao Phraya valleys—that is to say the Lao and Siamese peoples—would modify for their own use. Such a theory again explicitly affirms the primacy of the Lao script over the Sukhothai¹³ script. The scientific fallacy here is astonishing, since in addition to the enormous gaps in the documentation and in the methodology, there is a vision of the past that is narrowly simplistic, ethnocentric, and profoundly nationalist, and which views long-term historical development only within the frame of the strictly-defined borders of today¹⁴.

While it may be understood that the reach of this type of historical analysis is rather limited—it does not in fact travel much further than the Lao educational system—it is interesting to note that in certain cases, theories whose scientific foundation is even more arguable, do manage to reach a wide public, and even to agitate the research world. One such case recently occurred when an article appeared in several Lao publications¹⁵ and was then, on account of its “revolutionary” angle, quickly picked up by one of the Thai national English-language daily newspapers¹⁶. The articles report the claim of a certain Bounni



Fig. 2 Mon inscription dated approximately to the eighth century
(Vat Ho Phra Kaeo Museum, Vientiane)

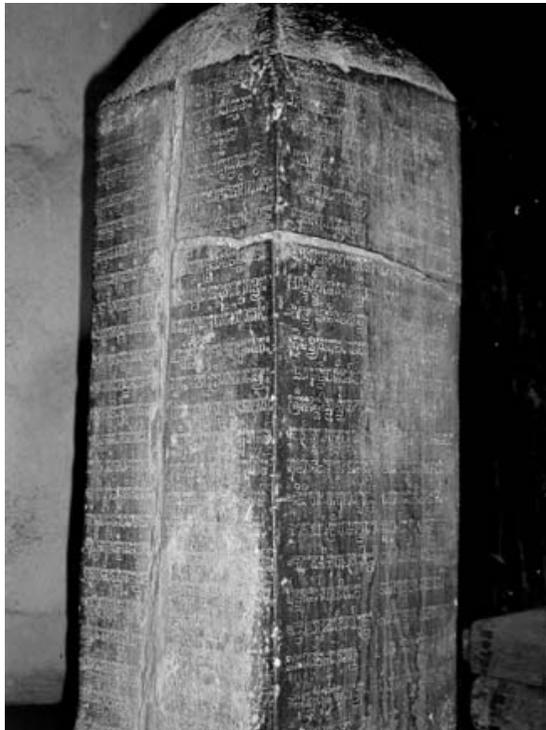


Fig. 3 Khmer inscription from the end of the twelfth century
(Vat Ho Phra Kaeo Museum, Vientiane)

Thipsimuong, a retired economist, that a Lao inscription kept in the museum of Vat Visoun, Luang Prabang, mentions a date corresponding to 1170 in the Christian era, which would make the artefact some 113 years older than the famous Rama Khamheng inscription. The impact of the story was reinforced when the Thai newspaper carried an off-the-cuff quotation from Srisakra Vallibhotama, a renowned Thai archaeologist, who said that “if Bounmy can prove that the script on the stone is older than the writings of King Rama Khamheng, it would change our understanding of our origins If it’s true, it proves one thing, that Thai people did not originate from China’s Yunnan province. Rather there was a group of ethnic Tai–Lao people who moved from somewhere near Luang Prabang across the Mekong River and to Sukhothai”.

It is easy in this case to state that the claims of Boumi Thipsimuong are entirely baseless: close observation of the Vat Visoun stele by Lao scholars, experienced in reading hundreds of other inscriptions from around the Tai world, quickly reveals errors in the retired economist’s deciphering and transcription. The inscription does not actually bear any date¹⁷⁾ and it is thus not possible—on the basis of palaeographic criteria—to place it before the sixteenth century. This incident is, however, indicative of the current fragility of scientific research on the question of the origins of Tai scripts. Dominated by politics and partisan views, it suffers above all from the difficulty that local historians still have in thinking beyond their national borders, or even outside their own immediate environment¹⁸⁾.

Partisan opinions generally only carry weight in scientific debate when they represent solutions “by default”. When research is able to oppose them through accurate argument, they tend to rapidly fade away and disappear. Historical knowledge of the Mekong valley is still largely incomplete, for a significant part of the region—that covered by modern Laos—remains untouched by any archaeological survey. It is curious to note the extent to which, for the earliest periods, history books on Southeast Asia still ignore the country, as if human activity was absent from Laos for thousands of years while substantial civilisations were developing in the adjacent lands that today form Vietnam, Cambodia and Thailand.

4. Prototypes for the Lao scripts

The study of scripts relies firstly on epigraphic research, since only this discipline considers the media of the document as much as its contents. Study of an inscription allows, in a way that the reading of a manuscript does not permit, confrontation with a text and a writing system which are both in their original state. Provided that epigraphic sources can be dated, they then supply trusty markers—from a diachronic perspective—for palaeographic analysis and linguistic study¹⁹⁾. They also have the other advantage, by no means small, of very often remaining physically fixed in the exact place where they were created. This is especially so with foundation steles, which endure even in places that have been abandoned by their populations²⁰⁾. The comparative study of epigraphic sources—when these cover a sufficiently large area—provides, by a combination of data relative to time and space, a picture (in a diachronic and synchronic dimension) of certain historic phenomena, with the spread of the script being the most important.

In 2001, eager to have a wide and precise vision of these historic phenomena that occurred in the upper part of the Lower Mekong Basin, the EFEO centre in Vientiane began a vast research programme on epigraphic sources across all provinces of Laos²¹). Though the whole of this territory has not yet been fully covered, it is already possible to draw general conclusions on the areas of influence and settlement of the different historical cultures that developed in the region²²), and to consider in particular the history of regional scripts from a new angle.

While it is true, as previously mentioned, that some Mon and Khmer inscriptions have been found on what is now Lao territory, it is totally false, in the current state of research, to claim a direct lineage between these and the first Lao inscriptions. Firstly, the chronological hiatus separating them is too great, and secondly, from a palaeographic point of view they appear too different to be related. So far 36 Khmer inscriptions have been found in Laos. They all originate from the area surrounding the sanctuary of Vat Phou in the southern province of Champassak, with the exception of the famous Say Fong stele, which was discovered near Vientiane but is strongly suspected to have been brought there²³). The Khmer steles of Laos date from the fifth to the twelfth centuries. Many Mon remains can also be identified today in what is now Laos, particularly on the plains of Vientiane and Savannakhet. In addition to the already-mentioned Ban Thalut inscription, a second stele has been recently discovered and is yet to be deciphered. These vestiges date from the second half of the first millennium. While it is certain that the Lao knew of these remains, and that in some cases they reused them²⁴), no evidence of direct transmission between these two cultures can be advanced.

The oldest Lao texts are perhaps the two very similar red ochre inscriptions found in two caves, Tham Nang An and Tham Ting (Pak Ou), both near Luang Prabang (Fig. 4). The writing is close to the Sukhothai script used in the fourteenth century. We know that the stele of Rama Khamheng mentions Muang Swa—which is the old name of Luang Prabang—and it is thus possible that the realm of this famous king reached the Mekong, 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. The text of the inscriptions is very short—it is a sort of autograph—and the form of the script could in fact be a late local survivor of a type of writing that elsewhere had already evolved (Ferlus 1995: 110–114)²⁵).

The oldest dated examples of Thai language inscriptions found on current Lao territory provide evidence of the quasi-exclusive cultural influence of the ancient kingdom of Lan Na (northern Thailand), an influence that probably arrived through successive waves starting from the beginning of the second half of the fifteenth century, and which reached the Lao settlements further downstream very quickly, along the artery of the Mekong.

It is of course the northern and western provinces of modern Laos, formerly directly dependent on Lan Na, which best reflect the cultural imprint of that kingdom. A number of ancient inscriptions have been discovered in Bo Kaeo, Luang Nam Tha and Sayaboury provinces, all carved in the “Fak Kham” script, which is directly derived from the Sukhothai script²⁶) and which was used extensively in the territories controlled by the kings of Chiang Mai between the beginning of the fifteenth and the end of the sixteenth centuries. A fragment

of slate found recently in Muang Sing (Luang Nam Tha Province) provides one of the most beautiful specimens of this script²⁷⁾ (Fig. 5).

From a palaeographic point of view, the Fak Kham script can surely be considered the prototype for Lao script²⁸⁾. It is, however, interesting to remark that the earliest examples of the latter are already noticeably different to their model. For instance, the inscribed stele of Tha Khaek, dated 1494, attests not only to the extensive geographical influence of the Lan Na culture²⁹⁾, but also and above all to the independent development of the Lao script



Fig. 4 Tham Nang An inscription in Luang Prabang province



Fig. 5 Fak Kham script in Muang Sing (Northern Laos), 1569



Fig. 6 Lao script of a Luang Prabang inscription (Museum of the Royal Palace), 1530

at this time. The astonishing graphic type of an inscription from Luang Prabang, dated to 1530, may moreover bear witness to a radical intention to deviate from the northern Thai model. It presents, in any case, an example of deliberate stylisation (Fig. 6).

5. Developments of the religious and secular scripts in Lan Xang

From the beginning of the second quarter of the sixteenth century, and in particular during the reign of King Setthathirat (1548–1572), it is possible, however, to find various royal steles around Vientiane whose writing still follows the Fak Kham model. As I explained in another paper (Lorrillard 2003–2004), it is very likely that these steles were engraved by scribes from the Chiang Mai area. 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 fifteenth and at the beginning of the sixteenth centuries.

The best proof for the development of Buddhism in Lan Xang, starting from the second quarter of the sixteenth century, is the sudden appearance of a great number of steles marking the foundation of temples, and also the appearance of a new script, the Tham script, which was used in particular for recording religious texts in Pali language is further confirmation. The *Jinakâlamâli*, 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 (Cœdès 1925: 72, 139 ; Buddhadatta (ed.) 1962: 127; Jayawickrama (tr.) 1978: 183). This data fits perfectly with the Lao evidence, since in 1527, King Phothisarath 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 Pali in this era is attested to by another inscription in Tham script, that of the That Luang, dated to 1566 (Fig. 7). The first ten lines of this stele

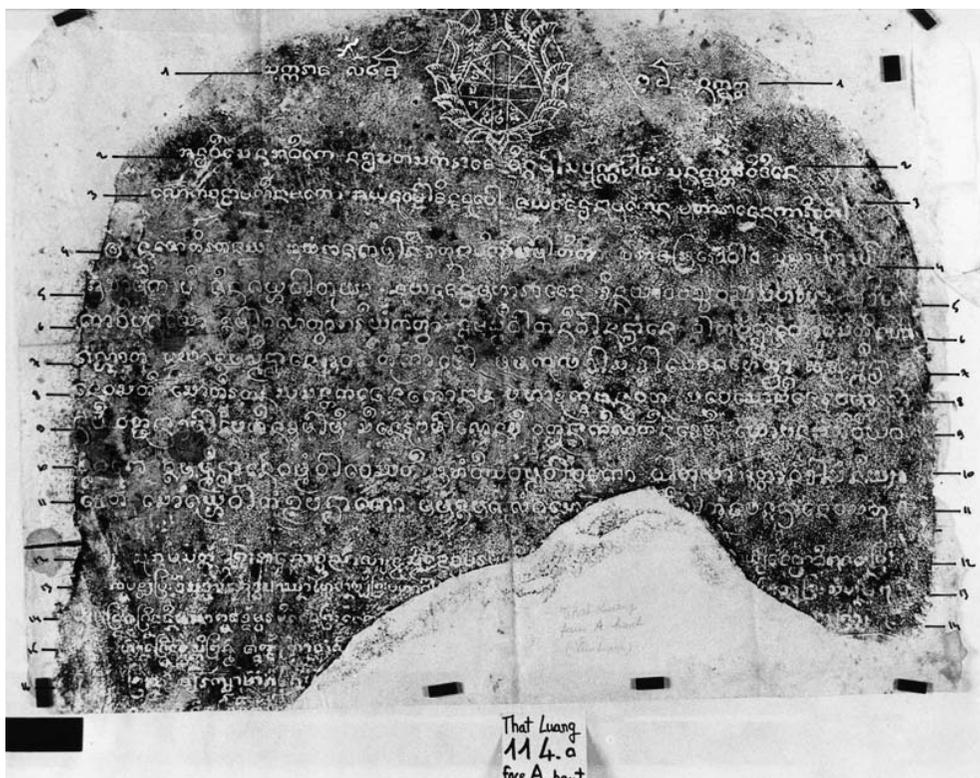


Fig. 7 Tham script of the That Luang stele, Vientiane, 1566

are actually in Pali. 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 sixteenth and seventeenth 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 *muang* around Luang Prabang and Vientiane. The more distant regions along the great river, including the whole of southern Laos but also the former Lao territories of the Khorat Plateau, were not reached by a written culture until a later period, around the eighteenth century³⁰.

In contrast to the religious Tham–Lao script, which still today remains relatively close to the Tham Yuan script and to its Lue variant (the “eastern Shan script” of Louis Finot), the secular Lao script clearly diverges from its original model, the Sukhothai script of the fourteenth century, becoming a style of writing that is both specific and characteristic (Fig. 8). The reasons for this distinction are various. Firstly the intermediary type between the Sukhothai and the Lao scripts—the Fak Kham—disappeared from Lan Na after several

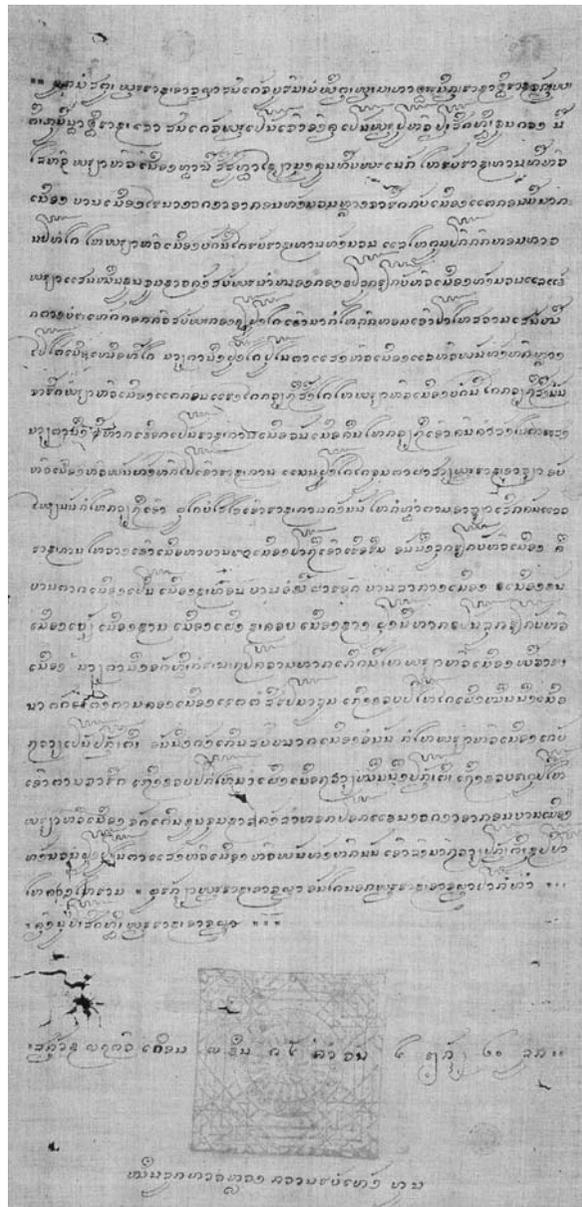


Fig. 8 Lao royal ordinance (National Library, Bangkok), 1735

centuries of intensive use. It was replaced by the Tham Yuan script, which then gave way to Thai script. The Sukhothai model, in addition, followed an independent development in a more southern region, that of the lower basin of the Mae Nam Chao Phraya (Ayuthya, Thonburi, Bangkok), and eventually became a script that the early use of paper probably

helped to refine³¹). The sources also show that what is known as the Siamese script was better able than Lao script to preserve the notation of distinctive phonetic signs not only because of greater exposure to Indian cultural heritage³², but also due to a more pronounced adequacy in the richness of the Thai language. While modern Lao script has only 26 consonants, Thai counts 44, 18 more. The Lao script is not, however, the most radical example of this impoverishment of notation systems inherited from the first great coastal civilisations of continental Southeast Asia, whether they were Khmer, Cham, Pyu or Mon. It is merely one manifestation of the limits that met indianisation as it progressively penetrated into the hinterlands and moved further away from the original cradles of the culture. Before it collided with the wall of Chinese civilisation, it is likely that it reached, through a last wave, the Tai people of the northern parts of Laos and Vietnam. The alphabetic script was probably the ultimate mark of indianisation in this region: it arrived in a “degenerated” state in Finot’s phrase, for the languages, beliefs and literary traditions that it had carried for so long had been left behind *en route*, largely on the banks of the Mekong. Can this be seen as opportune for anthropological research? Possibly, for adopted in its most simple form by the Tai of the northern regions, the script perhaps allowed them to preserve the oldest and most original characteristics of their culture.

Notes

- 1) The translations of Father Schmitt are included in Auguste Pavie’s *Mission Pavie Indochine (1879–1895)—Études diverses II: Recherches sur l’histoire du Cambodge, du Laos et du Siam* (Pavie 1898: 167–491) (see (Pavie 1898: 343–385) for the Luang Prabang inscriptions).
- 2) He did observe however that in a very particular case—the famous digraphic stele of Dan Xai—the Khmer script was used for an inscription relating to the Lan Xang kingdom. This script is the medium for a text for which the engraving is attributable to the lapicists of Ayuthya.
- 3) L. Finot does not even seem to have had access to the rubbings made thirty years earlier by E. Aymonier. These had been given to the library of the *École des Langues Orientales* at the end of the nineteenth century. Their present location, if they still exist, is unknown. It seems that they have never been used for a study.
- 4) It is true that at the beginning of the twentieth century, in the colonial era, it was common practice to speak of a western (“occidental”) Laos and an eastern (“oriental”) Laos.
- 5) The authenticity of the Rama Khamheng inscription—the “first inscription in Thai script”—has been called into doubt (wrongly, we think). But the script on this inscription is in every way very close to that used in the other earliest inscriptions from Sukhothai (first half of the fourteenth century).
- 6) *700 Pi Lai Seu Thai*, Krom Silapakorn, Bangkok, 2536 E.B., p. 30.
- 7) At certain conferences (“The Wat Kan Thom inscriptions and the Development of Thai Letters”, Chiang Mai Teacher Training College, January 1985; “On the History of Thai Scripts”, Siam Society, Bangkok, 10 juillet 1986), and in some little-known writings (cf. Hans Penth 1986), Hans Penth proposed the hypothesis that the Mon script (in its different variants) lies at the origin of “Tham” scripts (Yuan, Lao, Lue, etc.), but also and above all at the origin of the Thai scripts of Sukhothai and Lan Na (known as “Fak Kham”). He thus rejects the idea of derivation from Khmer

script and adopts a point of view close to that of Louis Finot. His conclusions are attractive, but are not based on any really proven elements. While remaining cautious in his approach, Hans Penth (1996) elsewhere defends the idea that a Thai inscription from the Phrae region could date from 1219, and thus predate the Rama Khamhaeng inscription by over 70 years. His arguments are hardly persuasive, but should not, however, be dismissed.

- 8) In a linguistic approach to the question, Michel Ferlus (“Sur l’ancienneté des écritures thai d’origine indo-khmère”, Colloque *George Cœdès aujourd’hui*, Bangkok, 1999), concludes that the first model of a Thai script was created during the pre-Angkorian period, or was in any case based on an example of a pre-Angkorian Khmer script.
- 9) In Lao the terminology is ambiguous and it is very easy to confuse “script” and “language”. It’s usual to find mentions of the “Sanskrit script”, the “Pali script”, and the “Tham language”.
- 10) The historical theories of Maha Sila Viravong appeared in 1957, with the publication of *Phongsavadan Lao* (Ministry of Education, Vientiane), which was soon translated into English [Maha Sila Viravong 1959&1964]. His history of the script is merely a development of ideas already expressed in this work. The publication in 2000 of *Pavatsat Lao* (Ministry of Information and Culture, Vientiane) is the outcome of a long-standing project designed to equip the Lao People’s Democratic Republic with its own analysis of national history.
- 11) The first, known as the Thalat stele, is in Mon language and script (cf. Guillon 1974). The second is the famous Say Fong stele, commemorating the foundation of a hospital by Jayavarman VII (cf. Finot 1903b: 18–33). On the question of the origins of this stele, see Lorrillard 2001.
- 12) “*nangseu lao deum*” The term “lao” here is generic and absent of any connotation of ethnic specificity, as intended for use in contemporary Lao official terminology to denote all the peoples who have settled and live in Laos.
- 13) As examples of this script of the “Lao groups”, the first to be presented is the ancient inscription found on the wall of Nang An cave near Luang Prabang. This script is undeniably archaic, but a pre-fourteenth century origin cannot be seriously argued for it. The next example is the stele of Rama Khamheng, sovereign of Sukhothai, who is depicted as a Tai–Lao potentate.
- 14) For example, the Mon and Khmer remains found in central Laos bear witness to the northern and eastern expansion of the spheres of influence of two great civilisations. Lao historians, however, merely use these remains to affirm the previous existence of different cultures on what is now Lao territory: those of Sikhotabong and Say Fong (Lorrillard 2006a).
- 15) “*An Silachareuk 835 Pi*” (Reading of an 835-year-old inscription), *Thio Muang Lao*, July–September 2005; “Phoum Chai ... Akson Lao” (Proud of the Lao Script), *Vientiane Mai*, 23 November 2005.
- 16) Supalak Ganjanakhundee, “Retired economist cracks code”, *The Nation*, Dec. 21, 2005.
- 17) The inscription bears certain passages which are difficult to read. However, it is clear that the characters Bounmi Thipsimang interprets as the number 532 in fact say “lae”, an exclamation used at the end of a phrase. His reading of “culla sangkhat” from the preceding phrase appears absolutely forced.
- 18) The extent of the controversy which followed the questioning of the authenticity of the Rama Khamheng stele showed the importance that this artefact occupies in Thai national consciousness. The origin of the Tham script is just as poorly understood as that of the Sukhothai model, but it has not given rise to such discussion. It is interesting, however, to note that this script was, at

the beginning of the twentieth century, perceived as being very close to the Burmese model (which was derived from Mon script) but today is officially declared to be a direct development of the Mon script of Haripunchai–Lamphoun, an ancient Mon city that just happens to be located on Thai territory. The cultural influences of Burma on Lan Na are generally ignored and still offer a field potentially very rich for research.

- 19) As each scribe had his own handwriting, the reproduction of a text on a palm leaf or on mulberry paper naturally leads to an “actualisation” of the script. This phenomenon is in particular marked by the disappearance of the notation of subscript consonants in contemporary manuscripts. The language of the recopied documents is subject to even more modifications (errors, reinterpretation, additions and so on), but it can also preserve archaisms, whether the text be holy or verse. In contrast, stylistic analysis and palaeographic study allow the dating of inscriptions even if they contain no explicit chronological references.
- 20) Lao stele inscriptions have rarely been removed, except to be placed in museums. There are only three such institutions for this kind of artefact in Laos (Ho Phra Keo museum in Vientiane, and those at Vat Visoun and Vat Saen in Luang Prabang). Some provincial offices concerned with cultural affairs also conserve a few inscriptions. There are nevertheless examples of earlier removal of steles, with the case of the Vat Ho Phra Keo stele (now in Thailand) being the most interesting. Inscriptions on the Buddha must be studied with much more care, as such images tend to be well travelled, and were rarely produced in the place where they now reside.
- 21) For details of this programme, see M. Lorrillard 2005.
- 22) One of the first results of this countrywide survey of epigraphic sources has been to shed light on the question of the introduction and spread of Buddhism in the Mekong valley: cf. M. Lorrillard 2006b, 2006c and “The Spread of Buddhism in Southeast Asia: Insights from Lao Archaeology”, proceedings of the international conference *Exploring Theravada Studies: Intellectual Trends and the Future of a Field of Study*, Singapore, ARI, 12–14 August 2004 (to be published). This phenomenon clearly has parallels with the spread of scripts.
- 23) Say Fong and its counterpart on the opposite side of the Mekong, Vieng Khuk, were at the terminus of the most important trade route during the time of the Lao kingdom of Lan Xang. The stele of the hospitals is of small size, and no Khmer architectural structure has been found nearby. However, hospital sanctuaries have been located in the nearby Thai provinces of Udon Thani (Ku Kaeng Ban Chit) and Sakhon Nakhon (Ku Phan Na), and at neither of these has the foundation stele been discovered. Various Khmer steles found in Champassak are today kept in Cambodia.
- 24) There are several examples of Mon remains that probably date back to the eighth century—some *bai sema* with a stylised image, typically of a stupa—that were reused in the sixteenth century, when a Lao inscription was carved on them.
- 25) The rock inscription of Pak Ou cave, with a text very similar to that in the Nang An cave, was discovered more recently. 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 in red ochre. 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.
- 26) Thai history books record that the Wat Phra Yeun inscription (1370) from Lamphoun still belongs to the Sukhothai type, for it was carved by a monk who came from that kingdom. The second

- inscription in the earliest secular script of Lan Na (1411) would be in Fak Kham type (cf. Sarassawadee Ongsakul 2005:1).
- 27) This inscription is rather late, since it has been dated to 1569. The Ban Huay Say inscription (1468, Bo Kaeo province) is the oldest Thai language inscription associated with current Lao territory. It is, however, very probable that it was brought from a neighbouring site on the right hand bank of the Mekong, that is to say in Thailand. The stele found recently at Muang Khop (1520) could attest to the former domination of part of the contemporary Lao province of Sayabouri by the Lan Na kingdom.
 - 28) The chronological classification of inscriptions from Sukhothai, Lan Na and Lan Xang allows us to chart the historical process that led to the development of these three different corpora. The historical sources and the archaeological evidence confirm moreover the successive character of the roles that these three politically distinct entities played on the regional scale.
 - 29) This inscription has now been linked to That Sikhot (its origin?), in the *muang kao* of Tha Khaek, that is to say in the southern territory of the old *muang* of Kabong/Lakhon/Nakhon, which was for a long time the most powerful city of Lan Xang after Vientiane and Luang Prabang. One of the most significant marks of the influence of the northern Thai culture on this inscription is the presence of a horoscopic disc, a feature imported from Burma.
 - 30) Interestingly, those territories that were reached relatively late by written Lao culture are also those which have left the earliest material evidence of Khmer written culture, with inscriptions in Pallava script, still identical to the Indian model.
 - 31) The sole media for Lao literature remained, until the beginning of the twentieth century, the palm leaf, on which the characters of the script were etched.
 - 32) The simultaneous usage of the Thai script and the Khmer script among the Thai of the Mae Nam Chao Phraya is probably one of the factors that allowed conservation of an extremely exact notation of the vocabulary derived from the Sanskrit and Pali languages. The sources show moreover that the level of knowledge of these languages was still relatively weak in the distant Lao territories.

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