

**Preliminary Report on the First Archaeological Investigations in 2018
at the Old City, near Thakhek
Khammouane Province, the Lao PDR**

ラオス・カムワン県タケーク近郊旧都における 2018 年の考古学調査

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要旨：ラオス中部の地方都市 Thakhek タケークは、メコン東岸に位置し、先史古代より東南アジア大陸部を横断するいわゆる「東西回廊」と南北に流れるメコンの河運とが交差する、半島内交易の要衝として機能してきた。当地に関しては欧州人による旅行記など僅かな史料が遺るものの、ラオ族による記録は皆無に近い。またこれまで考古学的調査が実施されたことはなく、その歴史的環境や近代以前の都市景観に関する情報は極めて乏しい。2018年11～12月、アジア開発銀行(ADB)による観光開発支援プロジェクトとして、メコン河畔の旧都 Thakhek Muang Kao において、はじめての考古学的な調査が実施された。本稿では、調査の概要とともに貿易陶磁を主体とする表採資料に関して報告する。

Keywords: Thakhek (muang kao). Lakhon, Mekong River, Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Lane Xang Kingdom, International Tradeware (Trade Ceramics), Blue and white porcelain, Hizen (Arita), Jingdezhen, Zhangzhou, Vat Sikhottabong

Introduction

The Lao Peoples Democratic Republic is a small, land-locked country, which shares common borders with China, Myanmar, Vietnam, Thailand and Cambodia. While its neighbors have received some archaeological investigation, Laos is one of the least archaeologically explored countries not only in the region, but also in the world. Since the mid-1990s, as the country began to open its doors, it gradually became possible to undertake archaeological excavation and survey. Today, as a result of recently collected archaeological data, Laos' vital historical links to other countries are now becoming progressively clearer. In particular, the analyses of production, trade, and distribution of ceramics are revealing new information on inter-regional exchange of the middle Mekong region with the wider world during the Early Modern Period.

Thakhek is a small city along the Mekong River in central Laos. Five kilometers to its south is a historical “old city” area, a so-called “muang kao”. Historical documents show that the city, called Lakhon, had functioned as a major trading and commercial hub located on important trading routes up and down the Mekong River as well as to Vietnam and the interior of the Khorat Plateau and beyond (Fig. 1; Feldborg 2010). This city, however, appears to have been destroyed and abandoned before the early 20th century when the ruins were visited in 1911 by Henri Parmentier. The site has not subsequently been investigated by archaeologists.

As part of the Asian Development Bank-funded project entitled *Greater Mekong Subregion Tourism Infrastructure for Inclusive Growth - Lao PDR*, an exploratory archaeological survey was conducted over about 4 weeks in November and December 2018 at Vat Sikhottabong and its surrounding area (Fig. 2). The objective of the survey was to quickly map above ground features of the old city near the Vat and identify the extent of the old city's remains. This brief paper outlines the field survey results and makes preliminary observations of the ceramic specimens collected from several surface locations of the old city.

1. Historical Background of the Old City

The city appears in European records in a 17th century publication on the travels of the Dutch merchant explorer Gerrit van Wuysthoff. He wrote that the city was a thriving commercial hub with 20-25 gold-covered temples. Lakhon was one of only two major trading cities he saw along the Mekong River north of Cambodia. In landlocked Laos, the shortest route from the Mekong River to the ocean is east from Thakhek to ports such as Vinh on the Vietnamese coast. Van Wuysthoff noted that Vietnamese traders came by oxcart across the mountains of the Annamite Cordillera three times a year to buy silks and rhinoceros horn, perhaps through a pass today called “Mu Gia”.

During the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the middle Mekong River was the scene of regional strife (Ngaosyvathn and Ngaosyvathn 1998). Wars among numerous lords, kings, and their kingdoms stretched from Burma to Vietnam. Cities, towns, and villages were sacked and whole regions depopulated. Parmentier noted that few intact structures remained among the widespread ruins (Parmentier 1954). Nevertheless, his drawing of the still standing stupa, today's That Sikhottabong, revealed the classical lines of Lane

Xang period stupas. The extensive brick architecture of Lane Xang style found over about 10 square kilometers and portions of large Buddha sculptures indicate a major city existed here, not just a trading entrepot.

2. Objectives, Procedures, and Results of the Survey in 2018

There were two goals of the 2018 rapid survey of the old city south of Thakhek: first, to produce a digital map of the historic temple complex at Vat Sikhottabong, and second, to map the extent of the abandoned city surrounding the temple.

Phase 1 of the survey used local knowledge and a phone app to place features of the old city on a Google satellite map. Archaeologists worked with local heritage managers who knew the locations of remains of stupas, sculpture, and other above ground features (Fig. 4). The archaeologists recorded the features using a smart phone with an app configured to record GPS coordinates for photographs. The most common finds were brick features including stupas (Fig. 3) and raised platforms that were probably parts of temple complexes as well as more modest remains with unknown functions. The team documented more than 140 above ground features in 10 square kilometers over the course of about a week. This record provided the data to create the map showing the location and extent of the old city (Fig. 5). The team also collected about 130 ceramics from exposed surfaces and gullies. These sherds provide evidence of dating (the ages during which the site was used) and of ancient trade networks.

Phase 2 of the survey used drones and a special kind of GPS device to collect data for a 3D model of the main temple complex. To quickly create a contemporary map of the temple compound, the team used these new technologies and digital cameras to get the positional data and images needed for the 3D model of the vat and its compound. Drone pilots flew DJI Mavic 2 Pro drones up to 75 meters over the site's surface. Photogrammetry software can then determine the location of millions of points on the ground by comparing the photographs, thus constructing a 3D model of the surface overlain with a photographic texture.

3. Overview of the Recovered Ceramics---Origins, Categories, and Dating

The ceramic collection comprised an unexpectedly wide range of types. Classes of ceramics include sherds (pottery fragments of local earthenwares, regional stonewares, and international tradewares), bricks, and roofing tiles. Earthenwares (Fig. 9) were made locally, including at one location the survey team found in the old city (Fig. 4). Regional stonewares (Figs. 6~8) were mainly made within the middle Mekong region and traded among local communities⁽¹⁾. The production periods of Lao stoneware and earthenware can be dated to the Lane Xang Kingdom era between the 14th and 18th centuries.

The (second) author assessed the collection of international tradewares and found they originated from four main regions: Vietnam, Thailand, southeastern China, and Japan. The key characteristics of the recovered tradewares are explained below⁽²⁾.

Vietnamese Ceramics

Recovered Vietnamese sherds fell into four groups: ash-glazed stoneware (Fig. 10), celadon glazed stoneware (Fig. 11), blue and white ware and glazed stoneware with under-glaze iron-oxide black painting décor. They were produced possibly in northern or central Vietnam. Ash-glazed and celadon glazed wares could be dated to the 14th century, while blue and white wares as well as glazed stoneware with black painting were produced during the period between the 15th and the first half of the 17th centuries.

Thai Ceramics

Of the few Thai ceramic sherds found, most are celadon glazed stoneware (Fig. 11), possibly produced at the Sawankhalok kiln complex. One sherd is glazed stoneware with under-glaze iron-oxide black painting décor (Fig. 12), which could have been produced in San Kampeang or Kalong kiln in northern Thailand. Both products date to circa 15th~16th centuries.

Chinese Ceramics

Among varied types and origins of trade ceramics recovered, Chinese blue and white porcelain is the most major category, with more than 50 sherds. Three production kilns (or a region) were identified:

1. Jingdezhen kiln complex in Jiangxi Province, the first half of the 16th to the first half of 17th centuries (Figs. 13,14 and 15).
2. Zhangzhou kiln complex in Fujian Province, the end of the 16th to first half of the 17th centuries (Fig. 16).
3. Dehua kiln complex or other kilns in Fujian Province, circa 18th century (Fig. 17).

Japanese Ceramics

There are three confirmed sherds of Japanese ware. Two are blue and white porcelains (Fig. 18), and another is white porcelain with over-glaze red enamel painting décor (Fig. 19). All were produced in Hizen kiln complex located in the present Saga prefecture, Kyushu Island, Southern Japan. They can be dated to 1655~1680s, or in the second half of the 17th century⁽³⁾.

The production periods for the recovered ceramics extend over five centuries from the 14th through to the 18th centuries. The findings show the extent of ancient trade networks as well as when those networks were active. In the Lao PDR, through several archaeological investigations and excavations, a large amount of trade ceramics have now been recovered from various sites and areas, not only from well-known World Heritage Sites such as Luang Prabang and Vat Phu in Champasak, but also from the old city area of Vientiane (Shimizu 2010, 2017 and 2019), historical temples in Xieng Khouang Province (Shimizu 2014), Sepon Mining Tenement site in Savannakhet Province (Shimizu et al. 2016) and now here, the old city near Thakhek. This survey is the first opportunity to recover and confirm the existence of international tradewares in Khammouane Province. Now, it is becoming possible to demonstrate Laos' links to the vigorous international trade networks of the post-Angkorian Early Modern Period.

Concluding Remarks

The 2018 survey of the old city south of Thakhek strongly supports that it comprises the remnants of the Lane Xang Period city of Lakhon visited by Van Wuysthoff in 1641. Next steps for scholarship and development of the site include the following: 1) compile epigraphic and historical evidence (Lorrillard 2019); 2) conduct excavations and associated multi-disciplinary archaeological research beginning in occupation areas (best for evidence from ceramics, city destruction, and industrial and commercial activities); 3) mapping of features by localities by architectural historians to delineate temple complexes; 4) slow selective development and conservation of a few areas for an archaeological park in order to responsibly enhance the site for Lao heritage tourism, research, and education. Continued recovery of ceramics and other artifacts from excavations and surface collections will expand our knowledge of the historical connections of the old city with Southeast Asia and the wider world.

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Notes

1. Little is known about the historic stoneware of this region. Through recent studies, however, it is generally understood that Lane Xang stoneware includes three kinds; iron-brown glazed ware (Fig. 6), ash-green glazed ware (Fig. 7), and ware with no glaze (Fig. 8). Production kilns are unknown or unclear at this moment, but they should be produced within the territory of Lane Xang Kingdom.
2. As regards identification and dating of Chinese, Japanese, and other trade ceramics in this paper, the second author sought advice (based on photographic images of recovered specimens) mainly from the Japanese expert, Dr. Koji Oohashi.
3. The production of Japanese porcelain developed rapidly at the beginning of the 17th century and export began in the 1640s. In the latter half of the 17th century, Japanese porcelain products were exported all over the world, especially to Southeast Asia including to Laos. For instance, during the excavation in the old city of Capital Vientiane that was conducted in 2006-2007, there were recovered 241 pieces of Hizen's blue and white ware and 82 pieces of Hizen's white porcelain with over-glaze enamels painting décor in total (Shimizu 2017 and 2019).

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Fig. 1 Location of Lakhon muang kao on Lane Xang trade routes



Fig. 2 That and sim at Vat Sikhottabong, photo taken from drone



Fig. 3 Stupa from muang kao



Fig. 4 Dr. Peter Cobb next to kiln in muang kao



Fig. 5 Google map showing features from the muang kao



Fig. 6 Iron-glazed Lao Stoneware



Fig. 8 Unglazed Lao Stoneware



Fig. 7 Ash-glazed Lao Stoneware



Fig. 9 Local Earthenware

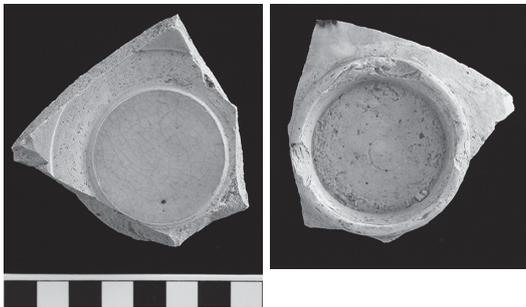


Fig. 10 Vietnamese Ash-glazed Stoneware, circa 14th century



Fig. 11 Right: Thai Celadon, Left: Vietnamese Celadon Glazed Stoneware



Fig. 12 Thai Glazed Stoneware

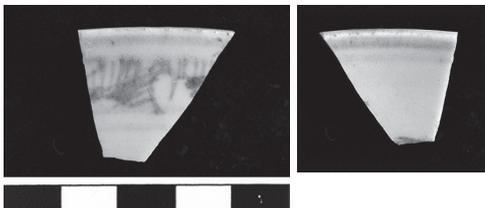


Fig. 13 Jingdezhen Blue and White, First half of the 16th Century



Fig. 15 Jingdezhen B&W, First half of the 17th Century

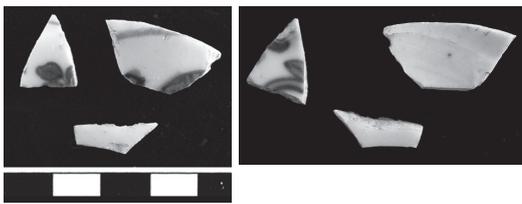


Fig. 14 Jingdezhen B&W, Latter half of the 16th Century

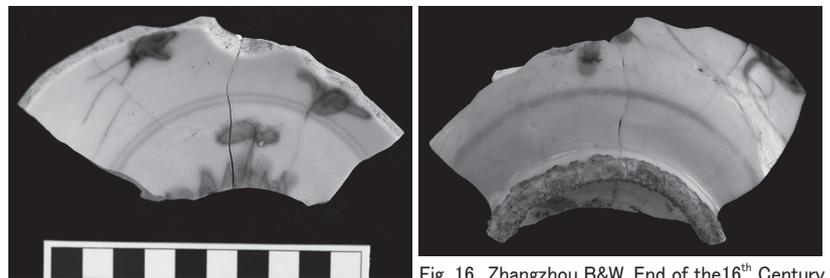


Fig. 16 Zhangzhou B&W, End of the 16th Century



Fig. 17 Chinese B&W Porcelain, Fujian Prov. Circa 18th Century

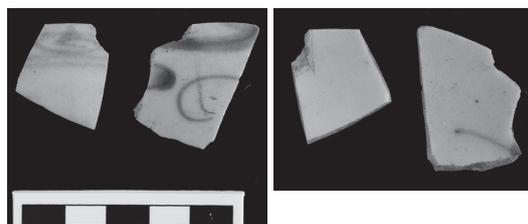


Fig. 18 Japanese Hizen B&W Porcelain, 1655~1680s

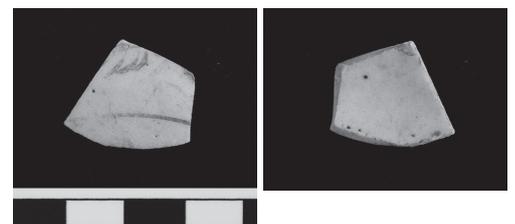


Fig. 19 Hizen White Porcelain with Enamel Décor

