

Case report

Rock art at the cave of a thousand Buddhas, Luang Prabang, Lao PDR

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ABSTRACT

The rock art of the Pak Ou Caves in Luang Prabang, Lao PDR has been known for over 20 years, but to date a complete record of the site has not been made. This paper presents an inventory of the rock art found at site also known as the Cave of a Thousand Buddhas. Over 50 rock art elements, mostly paintings, have been found in the upper cave and on the cliff face overlooking the junction of the Mekong and Ou Rivers. The oldest red paintings depict domesticated buffalo, human figures and hand prints and bear similarities with other cliff-side rock art sites in highland Southeast Asia. Other paintings are associated with the conversion of the cave into a Buddhist shrine, which according to folk tradition was home to a powerful river spirit. The most recent paintings can be comfortably dated to the 20th century. The Pak Ou Caves are a significant Buddhist site today, but the variety of rock art suggests its significance predates the Buddhist period that began in the 15th century. The layered history of the site and its rock art attests to multiple episodes of site use and re-use, from possibly the Neolithic until today.

1. Introduction

The Pak Ou Caves are a famous tourist attraction near the Unesco World Heritage town of Luang Prabang in the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR, henceforth referred to as Laos). The name Pak Ou means 'mouth of the Ou River', and the caves are situated at the junction of the Mekong, which originates from Tibetan Plateau, and the Ou River that begins from Phongsali province in northernmost Laos (Fig. 1). Even today, this mountainous region of northern Laos is hard to access, and thus these two rivers would have been important communication channels from ancient times until now.

To tourists, the site is romantically known as "The Cave of a Thousand Buddhas" on account of the many statues deposited in the cave as offerings. The caves were significant in the royal ceremonies of Luang Prabang, and most research on the site (summarized in Egloff and Kelly, 2015) focuses on the Lan Xang period and conservation efforts at the site during the 1990s. Aspects of the rock art have been previously discussed (Tan and Taçon, 2014; Tan and Walker-Vadillo, 2015) but a complete record of the rock art has never been undertaken. This paper presents the inventory of rock art located at the Pak Ou Caves at the upper cave of Tham Phum and on the cliff face of the lower cave, Tham Ting, based on my dissertation research at the Australian National University (Tan, 2014b, 2014c). Considered with the historical, ethnological and mythological knowledge of the site, the variety of rock art indicates a pattern of site use and re-use even before its

transformation as a Buddhist cave with the rock art possibly stretching back to the little-known prehistoric period of Laos.

2. Archaeology of Laos and the history of Lan Xang and Luang Prabang

Compared to the rest of Southeast Asia, the knowledge of Laos' past before the French is relatively poor. Laos is a landlocked nation-state with no access to the sea; the main waterway, the Mekong, also traverses parts of Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam. The former French colony gained independence in 1953, but later experienced civil war in the 1970s and hence has experienced relative isolation compared to its neighbors in Southeast Asia. Luang Prabang Province, the area under discussion, has had very few archaeological excavations, notably from between the 1930s and 1980s (Fromaget, 1936; Arambourg and Fromaget, 1938; Fromaget 1940a,b; Sayavongkhamdy, 1993; White and Bouasisengpaseuth, 2008). More recent archaeological work is still nascent and dependent on foreign researchers (e.g., White and Bouasisengpaseuth, 2008; Demeter et al., 2009; Demeter et al., 2012; Zeitoun et al., 2012; Singthong et al., 2016).

The city of Luang Prabang was the first capital of the Lan Xang Kingdom which became a major power in Mainland Southeast Asia in the 14th–18th centuries. The earliest known name for the settlement was Muang Sewa (also Sua or Xewa, 'Muang' denoting the presence of a polity), and the area was probably inhabited from further back in time,

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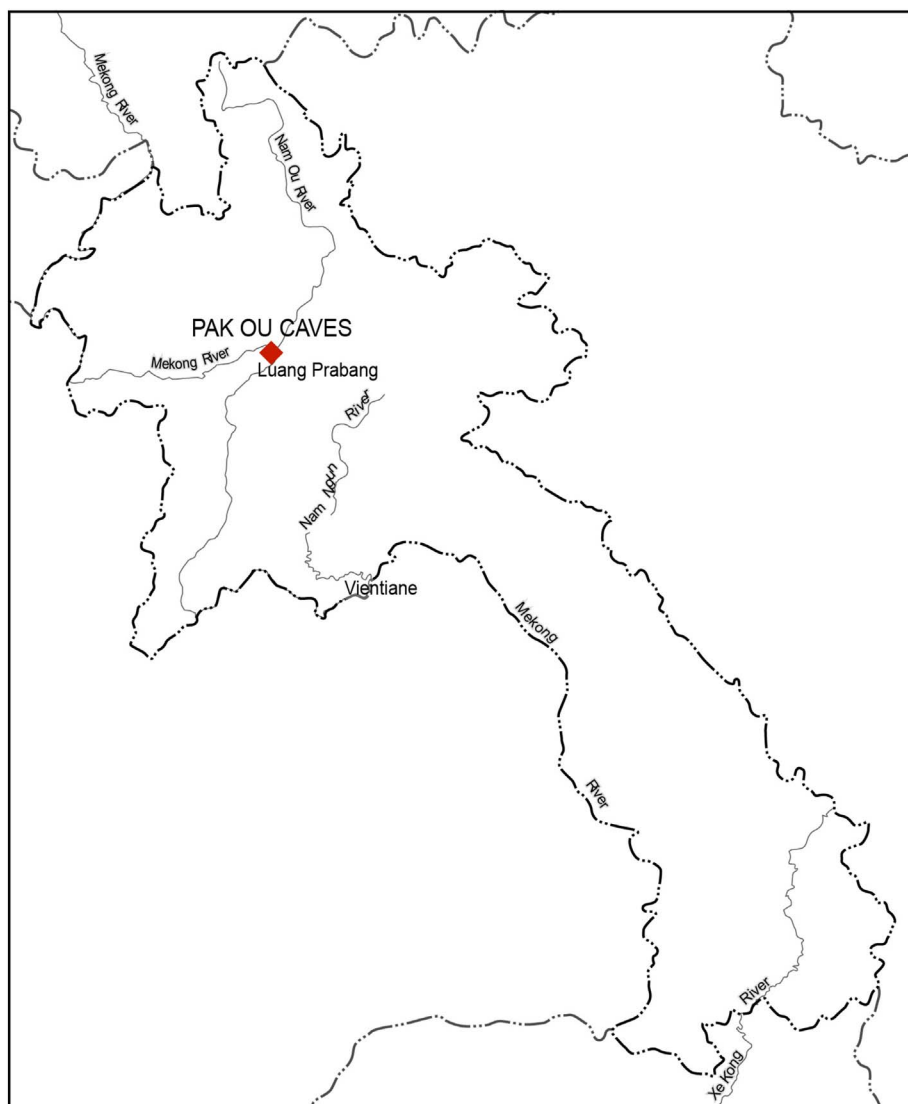


Fig. 1. Map of the Pak Ou Caves in Luang Prabang Province, Lao PDR.

Source: Noel Hidalgo Tan.

as archaeological remains such as polished stone tools and bronzes have been recovered in the vicinity by [Massie \(1904\)](#) and [Mansuy \(1920\)](#). According to the 16th century Laotian Chronicles, Lan Xang was founded by Fa Ngum, a 14th century prince of Muang Sewa who was exiled to Angkor (Cambodia) in his youth. After marrying a Khmer princess, he returned with an army and founded his kingdom of Lan Xang Hom Khao (see [Viravong, 1964](#); [Manich, 1967](#); [Stuart-Fox, 1997, 1998](#)).

While local tradition holds that Fa Ngum brought Buddhism to Laos, some form of Buddhism was already known long before Fa Ngum evidenced by a number of Mon and Khmer-style Buddhist sculptures, artifacts and inscriptions found in Lao territory that predate the 14th century ([Lorrillard, 2008](#)). However, physical evidence for Buddhism practiced around the locale of Luang Prabang only goes as far back as the 15th century. The promulgation of Buddhism in the Lan Xang period can be tied to the reign of two later kings, Phottisarath I (1520–1548 CE) and his son Setthitharat (1548–1571 CE) through evidence from inscriptions. Notably, Phottisarath established Buddhism as the state religion during his reign and unsuccessfully attempted to abolish the worship of animist spirit cults.

As with other part of Southeast Asia animist beliefs were prevalent before the arrival of the Indic religions, and even after the introduction of Buddhism the belief in nature spirits were syncretized into the Buddhist worldview (see [Ames, 1964](#); [Tambiah, 1970](#); [Ang, 1988](#);

[Hayashi, 2003](#); [Hashimoto, 2008](#)). The scarcity of evidence for Buddhism in the early days of Luang Prabang has led [Evans \(2002\)](#) to describe Lan Xang as culturally closer to the animist traditions of the mountain highlands, despite being described a Buddhist kingdom, and noted the centrality of ritual sacrifices to the territorial spirits as well as the lack of Buddhist influence in early state laws. The emergent view is that while riverine communities along the Mekong were exposed to Buddhism by the 14th century, evidence for the development of a religious Theravada Buddhist culture only appears in the later part of the 15th century ([Lorrillard, 2017](#)). Theravada Buddhism probably reached northern Laos relatively late compared to the rest of Mainland Southeast Asia.

3. The rock art of Laos and highland Southeast Asia

Laos has a few rock art sites reported in the form of Hindu-Buddhist carvings, inscriptions and red paintings, the last of which are probably some of the earliest and typical forms of prehistoric art in Southeast Asia ([Taçon et al., 2014](#); [Tan, 2014a](#); [Tan and Taçon, 2014](#)). Of the Hindu-Buddhist carvings, we have the Buddhist site of Tham Vang Sang in Vientiane province ([Batteur, 1925](#); [Karpelès, 1949](#)) and the Brahmanic carvings of Khan Mak Houk, near Vat Phou ([Santoni et al., 2008](#)). Another relatively recent site was reported by [Watanabe et al. \(1985\)](#), of black and white images from caves in Thakhek. Several sites

containing mostly black paintings have been found in the karsts of Khammoune province (Mouret, 2005; Ostermann and Mouret, 2004). Other sites have only been noted, but not formally described: an unnamed petroglyph site in Xayabouri province consisting of pecked designs (Tan, 2014a), and several red painting sites at Luang Namtha, Xiengkouang and Attapeu provinces (Singthong et al., 2016; Tan, 2014a; Phaboudy, 2009).

Luang Prabang Province contains at least five rock art sites. Srisuchat (1996) noted the site of Pha Nang Aen, which Lorrillard (2009) and Ferlus (1995) describe as writing similar to Sukhothai script. Surveys from the Middle Mekong Archaeological Project made brief mentions of red paintings at Dragon Cliff Cave and white Buddhist paintings at Tham An Mah (Bouasisengpaseuth and White, 2014; Lewis et al., 2015). Another rock art site, Pha Taem, is located along the Ou river (Bouaxaythip, 2011) which contain distinct similarities with the rock art at the Pak Ou Caves (Tan, 2018).

Despite the fact that the mountainous area of northern Laos impedes accessibility for archaeological research, rock art research from the surrounding highland regions suggests that red rock paintings are often linked to prehistoric contexts and go as far back as the late Palaeolithic into the Holocene (Fig. 2). In Northeast Thailand, sites of the Phu Phra Bat Historical Park in Udon Thani province display an inter-mixture of prehistoric rock art and later Khmer and Lan Xang elements (Khemnak, 1990; Wichakana, 1994; Tan and Taçon, 2014; Tan et al., 2016). Elsewhere on the Mekong valley, sites can be found in Mukdahan Province (Pha Mu Daeng, Kerr, 1924) and Ubon Ratchathani Province (Pha Taem National Park, Srisuchat and Mukmikha, 1989; Fine Arts Department, 1992). These paintings are thought to be prehistoric, estimated between 2000 and 5000 years, with occasional surface finds but no direct dates have been derived. (See Fig. 2.)

Along the same latitude of Luang Prabang, painted rock art has been found in the mountainous regions of northern Thailand and in the Shan state of Myanmar. In Lampang Province, the rock paintings of Phratu Pha is spread on a cliff face 150 m wide with burials dating to 3000 BP (Srongsir and Sangchan, 1997; Winayalai, 1998; Winalayai, 1999). Other cliff-face rock art sites have been found in Lampang more recently at Ban Tha Si and Doi Pha Kan, with associated burials dating to 7000 BP and 11,000–13,000 BP respectively (Zeitoun et al., 2013; Surinlert et al., 2018). Further west, the Ban Rai rockshelter in Mae Hong Song province is a log coffin site that contains two periods of

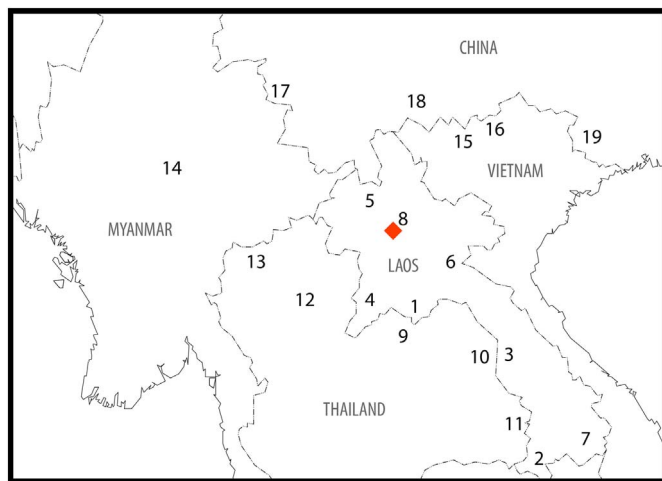


Fig. 2. Rock art sites in Laos and Highland Southeast Asia mentioned in text. 1. Tham Vang Sang; 2. Khan Mak Houk; 3. Khammoune province sites; 4. Xayabouri petroglyphs; 5. Luang Namtha (?); 6. Xiengkouang (?); 7. Attapeu (?); 8. Luang Prabang sites; 9. Phu Phra Bat; 10. Pha Mu Daeng; 11. Pha Taem (Thailand); 12. Phratu Pha, Ban Tha Si, Doi Pha Kan; 13. Mae Hong Son sites (including the Ban Rai Rockshelter); 14. Padalin Caves and Gabarni; 15. Sa Pa Rock field; 16. Xin Man petroglyphs, Kho My cave; 17. Cangyuan sites; 18. Ta Ke village; 19. Huashan Mountain and Zuojiang River sites. Source: Noel Hidalgo Tan.



Fig. 3. (a) The entrance of the upper cave, Tham Phum. On the right sits a large-bellied Buddha image named Thong Phum. (b) The main shrine of the upper cave, incorporating a 16th century stupa (which has been restored at least once) as well as a set of sema stones in the foreground. Source: Noel Hidalgo Tan.

habitation: a late-Pleistocene - early Holocene period and a later log coffin period. Red paintings of humans and animal figures were found in one area of the rock shelter, and in the same area, a red-stained limestone crucible was found dating to the early Holocene which could indicate a connection with the rock paintings (Treerayapiwat, 2005). Mae Hong Son is also home to a number of red rock art sites, mostly undated but considered prehistoric (Sidisunthorn et al., 2006: 94–101). On the western edge of the Shan Highlands, two rock art sites are known in Myanmar. The Padalin Caves has yielded dates of between 7000 and 12,000 BP and contains red paintings of animals, stylized hands and cupules (U Aung Thaw, 1971; Taçon et al., 2004). Another site, Gabarni, was found some 10 km south of the Padalin Caves in 2015. The most prominent paintings were found on a large wall containing hand prints, as well as a depiction of elephant domestication (Tan and Aung Aung Kyaw & Myanmar Department Of Archaeology, 2015). To the east of Luang Prabang, painted rock art is extremely rare. Rock carving sites are found in the northern parts of Vietnam, at Sa Pa and Ha Giang provinces (Goloubew, 1925; Trinh, 2007) but they are unlike the rock paintings discussed so far. Recently, red paintings have been found for the very first time in Vietnam at Kho My Cave in Ha Giang, but little else is known besides its discovery (Viet Nam Net, 2013).

To the north, the southern Chinese provinces of Yunnan and Guangxi province contain several notable rock art sites. In Cangyuan, near the border between eastern Myanmar and Yunnan, 10 rock art sites were discovered by Wang (1985) on vertical cliffs, with radiocarbon dates from flowstone laminate yielding dates of approximately 3000 BP (Bednarik and Li, 1991). In central Yunnan, rock art was found near Ta Ke Village, Yuan Jiang County (Yang, 1987). In neighboring Guanxi Province, the rock art from the Zuojiang River Valley consists of

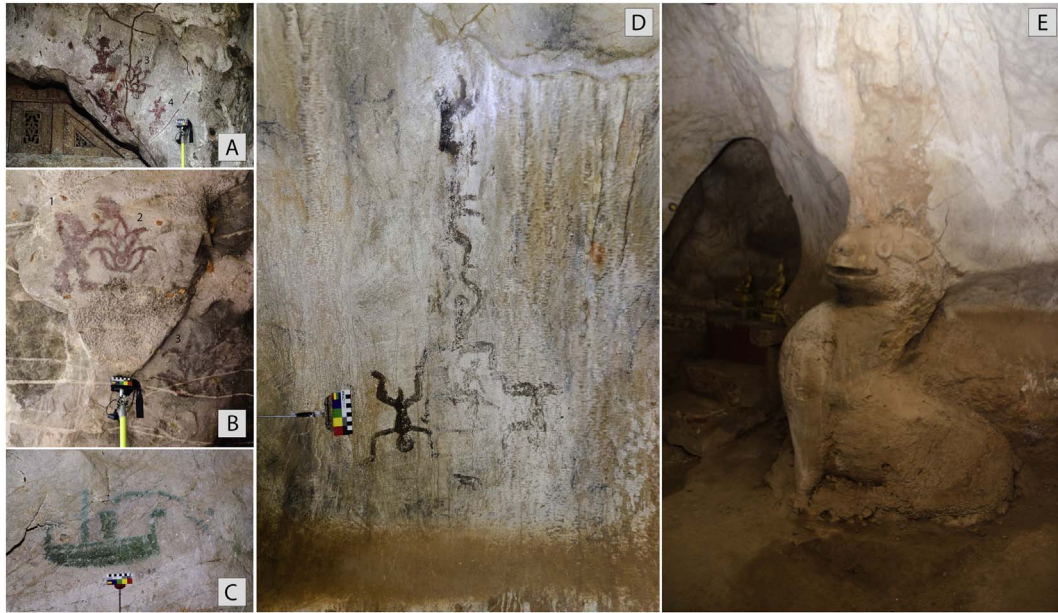


Fig. 4. The rock art of the upper cave, Tham Phum. Panels A–E.

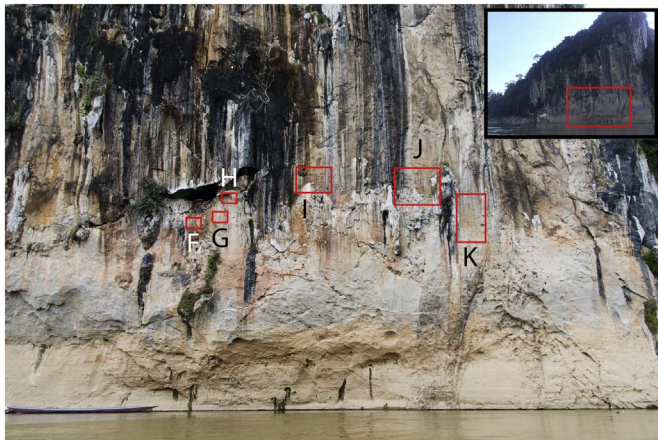


Fig. 5. Pak Ou Caves cliff and locations of rock art. The height difference between Panels I and F is approximately 3 m.
Source: Noel Hidalgo Tan.

38 sites, the most famous of which is the Huashan Mountain paintings dated to around 2nd–3rd centuries CE (Shao et al., 2017; Gao, 2013). Notably, these Guangxi sites are also located on cliff faces overlooking the river.

4. History of the Pak Ou Caves

Western accounts of the Pak Ou Caves began with the French Mekong Exploration Commission (1866–68) (Delaporte and Garnier, 2006/1873), which noted that numerous Buddhas had been placed in the caves. The Buddhist caves were also mentioned in other accounts from the colonial period including Neis (1997/1884), Raquez (2012/1902), and Deydier (1952, 1954). The caves played a prominent role in the royal rituals of Luang Prabang, particularly the coronation ceremony and the New Year ceremonies (Evans, 2009; Osborne, 2000; Trankel, 1999; Egloff, 1998). During the New Year in April, many devotees visit the caves to bathe the Buddha images housed there and thereafter reuse the cleansing water blessing rituals at home.

Much like the Lao Chronicles, the early history of the Pak Ou caves is unclear. Egloff and Kelly (2015) write that the discovery of the caves is ascribed to King Seththitharat (1548–1571) in the 16th century.

However, Egloff (1998) also noted earlier that there was another local tradition associating the Pak Ou Caves with *phi*, in this case a river spirit who takes the form of a large fish, whereas Deydier (1952, 1954) reported that the spirit was a *naga* or serpent. The story related to me by a tour guide during my visit in May 2012 was that Fa Ngum discovered the caves following his return to Muang Sewa. These contradictory stories represent an overlapping religious history of the site caught between local animist traditions and a state-imposed ‘national’ religion. We can infer that the Pak Ou Cave complex was regarded as the residence of a guardian spirit (*phi*) in the form a serpentine river deity, before it became a Buddhist pilgrimage site from at least the 16th century and received royal patronage from the court of Luang Prabang up until the abolition of the monarchy in 1975.

Archaeological work at the caves began in the mid-1990s as part of a Lao-Australian cooperation which included an infrastructural review, cleaning and repairs to both structures and Buddha images, excavations in the upper cave which led to the restoration of the stupa and the development of a conservation master plan (Egloff, 1998, 2003; Johnson, 1997). Rock art was noted in the investigation (Egloff and Kelly, 2015; Johnson, 1997) but not studied in detail.

5. Description of the Pak Ou Caves

The Pak Ou caves are located approximately 23 km upstream from Luang Prabang, in a limestone massif on the western side of the Mekong at the confluence of the Ou River. The lower cave, Tham Ting, commonly known as “The Cave of 1000 Buddhas”, is a shallow but steep cave with a high ceiling and terraces carved into the rock to house several thousand Buddha statues. Previous accounts have suggested that as many as 6000 Buddha images were housed in the cave but many have since been stolen (Egloff, 2003, Egloff and Sayavongkhamedy, 2011). The upper cave, Tham Phum, is named after the big-bellied Buddha image (Thong Phum) who sits at the mouth of the cave. The two caves were once connected, but at some time in the past, the upper cave was filled in with river stones and silt in order to create an artificial surface on which the altars inside were constructed (Egloff, 1998; Egloff and Kelly, 2015).

Tham Phum is the deeper of the two cave systems. A restored 16th century wooden gate covers the mouth of the cave and the culminates in a large cathedral-like chamber housing an arrangement of Buddhist *sema* boundary stones and a 3 m-tall stupa, which was erected by King

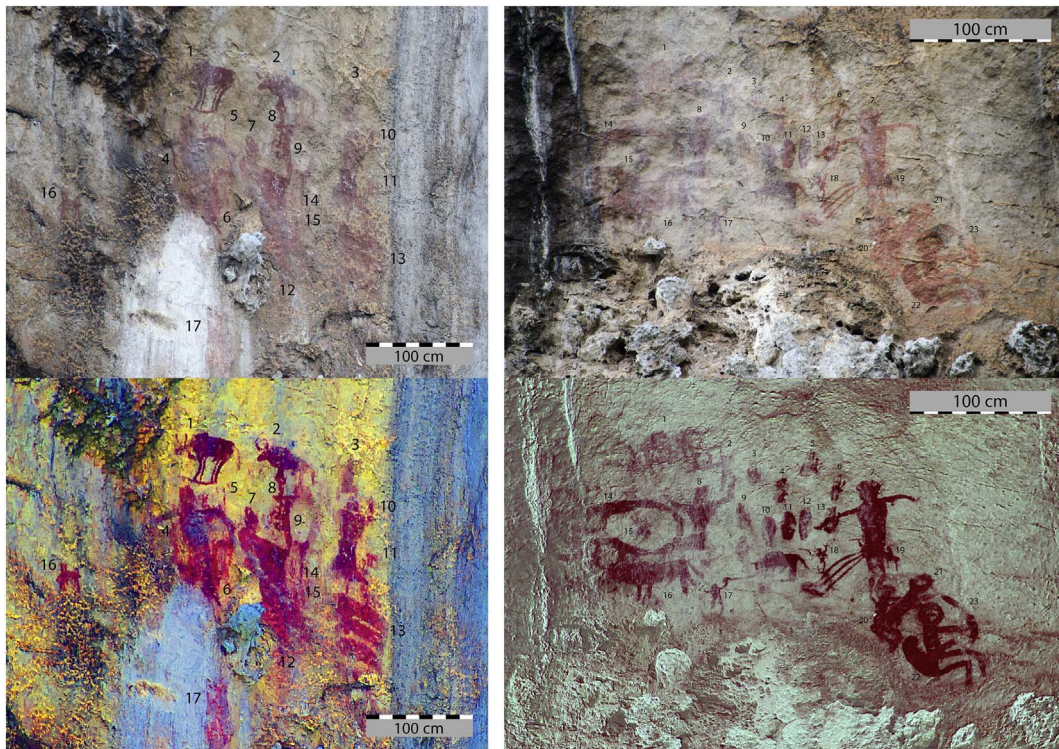


Fig. 6. (Left) Panel I, with DStretch LDS filter. (Right) Panel J, with DStretch YRE filter. Source: Noel Hidalgo Tan.

Setthathirat around 1560 CE (Fig. 3).

6. Description of rock art

The rock art of the Pak Ou Caves can be divided into two groups: those in the upper cave of Tham Phum (Panels A–E, Fig. 4) and the paintings on the cliff face (Panels F–K, Fig. 5) overlooking Baan Pak Ou (Pak Ou Village) and the river confluence. Except for Panel E, the rock art of the Pak Ou Caves are mainly pictograms, i.e. paintings or drawings created by applying material onto the rock surface. Most pictograms are red, with the notable exception of the green ‘steamship’ (Panel C) and the acrobatic scene (Panel D). As the paintings of the upper cave have been discussed elsewhere (Tan and Walker-Vadillo, 2015; Tan and Taçon, 2014) more emphasis is placed on the paintings of the cliff face, particularly Panels I and J (Fig. 6). A complete inventory of the rock art and images of each panel is available in the supplementary online material attached to this paper.

The panels of the cliff face (F–K) were difficult to record because of their location (Fig. 5), but they have been known to several other scholars (Egloff pers. comm. 2011; Lorrillard pers. comm. 2017). The cliff-face rock art appears to be a mix of presumably prehistoric paintings, indicated by its faded condition and water wash by rain, while the some of the newer markings are visibly fresher and include

writing. During the initial recording in January 2013, the rock art was recorded from a boat with a telephoto lens. During a second survey in December 2016 I was able to use an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) to survey the cliff face with the telemetry from the UAV indicated that the ‘prehistoric’ Panels I and J were located 28 m above the dry season water level.

On Panel I, the lower half of the panel is considerably more deteriorated and in some parts the white patina has turned into an opaque crust, completely obscuring the rock art. Where the mineral accretions have not encroached on the rock art, the paintings have smeared so badly as a result of water wash that it is impossible to make out the form of the motifs even with digital enhancement. The least damaged paintings are on the top of the panel, where two ‘buffaloes’ (I01 and I02) can be clearly seen with curved horns; I01 is depicted as if it was standing on the ground or perhaps on a raft. After digital enhancement, more human figures can be discerned: I04, I03 and I10; the latter two appear to be in a ‘climbing’ pose. A single hand print (I07) can also be seen. The panel has at two layers of painting, the older being darker, maroon paintings (I01, I02, I04, I09) while light red paintings (I05 and I08) applied later.

Panel J, the second panel of complex motifs, suffers from the same kind of mineral accretion but digital enhancement has been able to recover the images with much greater clarity. Two layers of paintings



Fig. 7. Panels F, G and K. Rock art on the Pak Ou cliff face with writing. Noel Hidalgo Tan.



Fig. 8. Location of modern rock art on the cliffs north of Baan Pak Ou. Source: Dan Morris Photography/Tandem Stock; Inset: Rock paintings of the northern cliff, which were made by the villagers of Baan Pak Ou during a great flood in 1966. Source: Will Hair.

can be discerned; the older maroon paintings are on the left covered by a patina, while the later orange-red paintings are to the right. The superimposition of anthropomorphic figures on the lower right side (J20–23) confirms this relative chronology, and additionally the newer anthropomorphs share a stylistic similarity in that they are painted in profile and have a curved character to the body lines. The scene contains a variety of motifs including ‘buffalo’ with curved horns (J16), hand prints (J03–06) and diverse human figures. The more faded human figures, which are older, are depicted in frontal view with up-raised arms, while those in fresher pigment—presumed from a later painting event—are depicted in profile. The paintings of a human figure leading a ‘buffalo’ on a ‘leash’ (J17) can be interpreted as an animal husbandry scene.

The remaining panels, F, G, H and K are contain fewer elements. Panel H is heavily weathered and possible hand prints was detected after digital enhancements. Panels F, G and K contain some sort of writing, probably Lao, but have yet to be deciphered (Fig. 7). The writing on Panel K is in modern Lao and contains numbers and part of a date (Lorrillard, pers. comm. 2017).

7. Discussion

With a partial archaeological record of the site that goes back to the 16th century, some inferences from iconography, and the available ethnography and information from the residents of Baan Pak Ou, some of the rock art can be placed in a relative chronology. On the far end of the time scale, the relative deterioration of Panels I and J, their obscurity from mineral buildup as well as their general similarity to other prehistoric cliff-side rock art sites in Thailand, Myanmar and China suggest a great antiquity for these particular two panels. Late Palaeolithic/early Holocene dates can be effectively ruled out by the depiction of domesticated ‘buffalo’ as water buffaloes (*Bubalus bubalis*) have only been found to be exploited and domesticated in Southeast Asia from around 5000 years ago (Barker et al., 1997; Higham, 2014) which give us a *terminus post quem* for the paintings.

As noted by Egloff and Kelly (2015) the creation date of the artificial surface in the upper cave is unknown, but given the date of the stupa inside the deep cave such renovations were likely to have been around the 14–16th century. Some of the writing found in Tham Ting also represent some of the oldest known Lao texts and is similar to the Sukhothai script used in the 14th century (Lorrillard, 2009; Ferlus, 1995).



Fig. 9. (Inset) Marking of flood levels at the mouth of Tham Ting, indicating that in 1966 the Mekong level almost covered the entire mouth of the cave. The 1966 level corresponds with the elevation of Panels F, G and K (black box), but Panels I and J (red box), which are thought to be older, are still some 3–5 m higher. (For interpretation of the references to color in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)

Thus, most of the rock art located inside the caves is likely associated with the Lan Xang period and no older than 600 years.

Additionally, some rock art can be traced to more specifically to the last century. The most interesting example is the green steamship (Panel C) found in upper cave, which can be comfortably dated to the first half of the 20th century during French colonial advances up the Mekong and has been discussed elsewhere (Tan and Walker-Vadillo, 2015). Inscriptions in the upper cave also carry dates pertaining to the first half of the 20th century (Egloff and Kelly, 2015).

It is interesting to note that the 'prehistoric' rock art in Panels I and J are very similar in the type of motifs depicted and in the landscape context to the Pha Taem site some 70 km away along the Ou River (Tan, 2018) and may indicate a riverine rock art style along the Mekong and its tributaries. In addition, these older panels are located higher up on the cliff than the remaining panels (F–H and K) which may indicate a separate painting episode. I was informed by Mr. Will Hair of Salt Lake City, who had gone to Luang Prabang in 1999 to set up rock climbing routes near the Pak Ou Caves, that red paintings are also found on the cliff face north of Baan Pak Ou, but they were made by the villagers of Baan Pak Ou during a great flood in 1966 (Fig. 8). It is highly likely that the panels with writing (F, G and K) were made during the same time. The 1966 flood level was marked on an overhang at the Tham Ting entrance, and its elevation corresponds with the height of the modern panels (Fig. 9).

That the water levels reached those heights in recorded memory possibly answers how the cliff face was accessed in order to be painted on. Besides extreme floods, Hair also noted the presence of bamboo pegs on the northern Baan Pak Ou cliffs, and theorized that the pegs could have formed part of a ladder (Hair, 1999). At other sites in Southeast Asia, I have also observed that cliff faces can be scaled by skilled climbers using similar bamboo pegs, in order to harvest products like honey or birds' nests (Valli and Summers, 1990; Tan, 2010), which opens the possibility that people may have scaled the cliff face in order to make the paintings.

8. Conclusion

The rock art of the Pak Ou Caves adds a degree of complexity to the history of the famous Buddhist caves as an indication of people interacting with their landscape. The creation of rock art as a commemorative act is highlighted in the story of the steamship, or in the great flood event of 1966 which enabled people to leave their mark high up on the cliff face. The older rock art indicates an ancient significance attached to this landscape at the junction of the Mekong and Ou Rivers. Even before the arrival of Buddhism, the caves had a great spiritual significance as the dwelling of a guardian river spirit; the presence of possibly prehistoric rock art, older than living memory and similar to other cliff-side rock art sites in the region, extend the site's history by hundreds or perhaps even thousands of years.

The layered chronology of the rock art at the Pak Ou Caves highlights the potential for understanding the human past in highland Southeast Asia; early populations must have followed the waterways such as the Mekong in their migration to the lowlands, which eventually gave rise to the great cities and civilizations. Multi-layered sites such as the Pak Ou Caves underscore the need for greater archaeological work in this part of the world in order to better understand such movements of people and ideas.

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Statement of competing interests

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