

Laos: an archaeological blank page

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While humans probably settled in Laos at least 20,000 years ago, centuries of geopolitical instability and remoteness have meant Laos has not been scientifically studied or culturally investigated to the same degree as its larger and more populous neighbours.

Biologists consider Laos a biodiversity "hotspot" and regularly announce the discovery of a new plant or animal species. Now archaeologists from the Department of Heritage of the Ministry of Information and Culture and international experts are beginning to believe that Laos may be an important focus of prehistoric human settlement in the Mekong subregion, according to a public talk on Friday given by leaders of the Middle Mekong Archaeological Project (MMAP).

Dr Joyce White, from the University of Pennsylvania Museum, and Deputy Director of the Lao National Museum Mr Bounheuang Bouasisengpaseuth presented recent discoveries at the talk.

Dr White said she believes the Luang Prabang region "could represent the heartland of human settlement in the Mekong region".

Dr White and Mr Bounheuang have been collaborating since 2001, mapping and undertaking preliminary surveys first in the Vientiane region and then in Luang Prabang province.

This northern province has been particularly rich with nearly 60 sites now identified as having important artefacts with thousands of pottery shards, stone tools, bones and other signs of human habitation collected for study.

The findings are showing that the Mekong has been an ancient highway for peoples, technologies and cultures for at least 6,000 years.

The most significant discovery has been a 2,000 year old example of a secondary burial from the Iron Age in Tham An Cave.

Skulls and long bones from three people were found in a mortuary pot which had been reburied after the initial interment. This is the first example of this burial ritual in the region and links it to sites in Vietnam and Thailand.

MMAP has been an important collaboration between the Lao National Museum and a range of international experts, who have brought skills and techniques to Laos which did not exist here previously.

Experts from the USA, the

United Kingdom and Ireland together with geologists from the Lao Department of Mines have been assisting in the project and training young Lao in the skills they need to undertake the investigations.

Another aspect of the project has been the study of paleoclimatology by Kathleen Johnston from the University of California - Irvine. She is training Lao students how to determine ancient climates through the analysis of patterns in stalagmites found in caves.

The work of the project has also been greatly assisted by officials from the Luang Prabang district Office of Information and Culture.



Tham An Mah Cave where the Middle Mekong Archeological Project team found a mortuary pot, the first example of a secondary burial custom in the region, which is an important link with discoveries in other Mekong regions. —Photo University of Pennsylvania Museum