

# *The Curious Case of the Steamship on the Mekong*



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## INTRODUCTION

EXAMINING THE ROCK ART OF THE PAK OU CAVES IN LUANG PRABANG PROVINCE contributes to the archaeological knowledge of Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR, henceforth referred to as Laos).<sup>1</sup> This article focuses on the curious case of a green-colored "steamship" rock painting that offers unique insights into the history and archaeology of the region. The history of Laos' peoples within the larger South-east Asian context remains uncertain. Lorillard (2006) notes that Laotian history is still very much in its infancy, as scholars are struggling with uncritical readings of royal histories and only a small number of archaeological finds within the country's borders. A former French colony, the nation-state of Laos only gained independence in 1953. A civil war left the country relatively isolated within Mainland Southeast Asia. This isolation hindered studies in Laotian archaeology, which have only recently resumed. No archaeological excavations were conducted in Luang Prabang Province, the area under discussion here, between the 1940s and 1980s (White and Bouasisengpaseuth 2008). More recent archaeological work is still nascent and only done in collaboration with foreign researchers (e.g., Demeter et al. 2009; White and Bouasisengpaseuth 2008; Zeitoun et al. 2012).

Rock art has received very little attention in Laos. Rock art sites are usually mentioned without substantive presentation or interpretation (Bouxaythip 2011; Srisuchat 1996; Tan 2014a). Luang Prabang Province contains at least four rock art sites, mostly located along the Ou River. Srisuchat (1996) noted the existence of a painted cliff face named Pha Nang Aen located in the vicinity of Pak Ou Village—hence near the Pak Ou caves discussed in this article—but no further information was provided about the site. An additional site, Pha Taem (lit. "Painted Cliff") is located in the same vicinity near the village of Huoay Kuong; red paintings and handprints can be seen on the cliff face overlooking the Ou River (Bouxaythip 2011). Recent research presented by the Middle Mekong Archaeological Project noted red paintings at Dragon Cliff Cave (a log coffin site) and white Buddhist paintings at Tham Pa Ling (a looted prehistoric site) (Bouasisengpaseuth and White 2014; White 2015).

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Here we focus on a rock painting resembling a green steamship found in one of the Pak Ou caves. The use of green pigment is rare in rock art. The unusual color and our interpretation of the drawing as a steamship suggest that the painting is of recent age, probably made within the last 100 years. The location of the rock painting this far up the Mekong River is also curious, as the topography of the Mekong normally prevents such ships from moving that far north (Fig. 1). Our closer look at the maritime history of the river reveals that steamships may not have been so out of place.

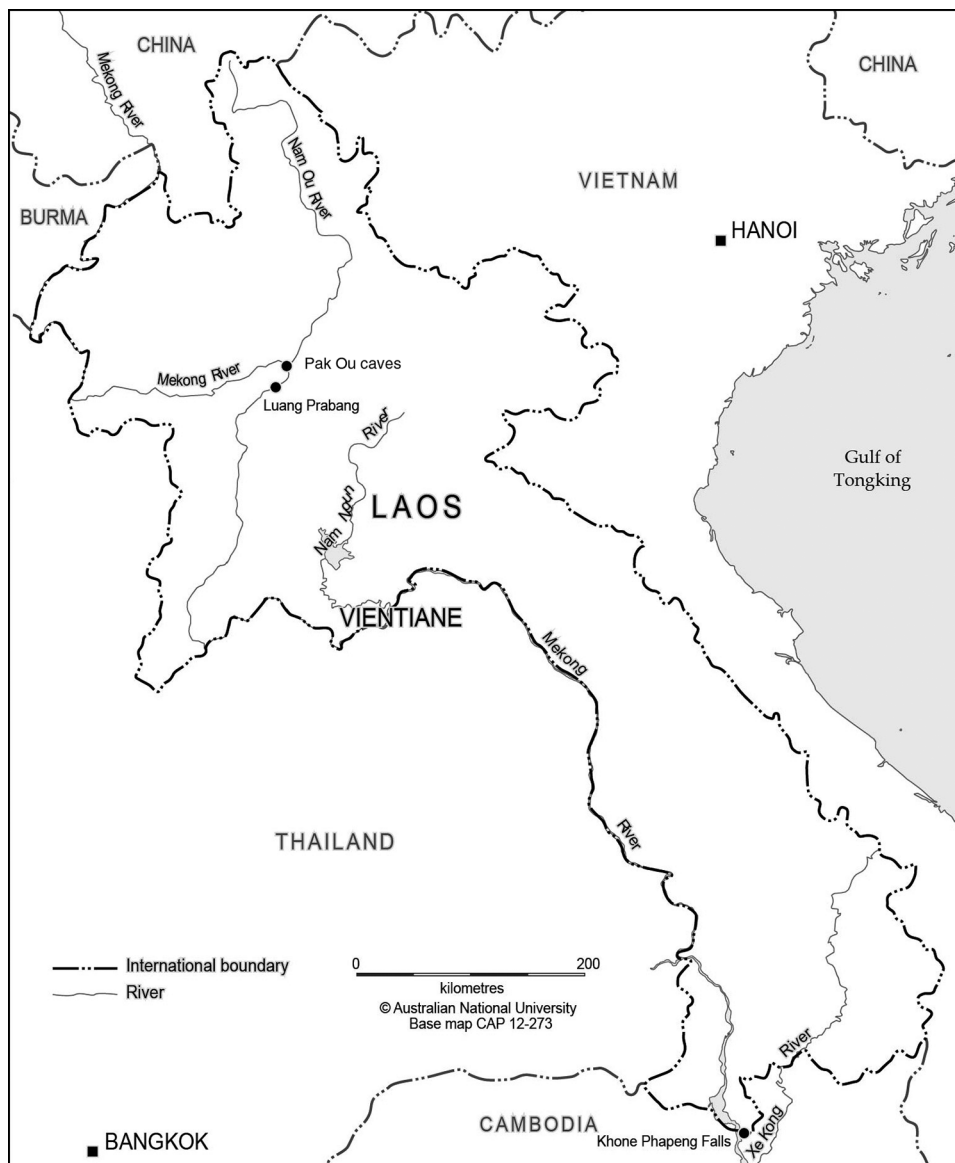


Fig. 1. Map of Laos showing locations mentioned in text: Mekong River, Luang Prabang, Pak Ou caves, and Khone Phapeng Falls. Source base map 12-273: CartoGIS, College of Asia and the Pacific (CAP), Australian National University.

## HISTORY OF THE PAK OU CAVES

Located within Luang Prabang, the capital of the province of the same name and the first capital of the Lan Xang Kingdom (fourteenth to eighteenth centuries A.D.), the Pak Ou caves are a significant site for the Lao people (Fig. 2). The city was built in the mid-fourteenth century over the Muang Sewa settlement at the junction of the Khong (Mekong) and Khan Rivers; it remained the capital until 1560 A.D. The city's older name of Muang Sewa suggests that people had settled there for a long period of time, perhaps as far back as prehistoric times. This has been reinforced by archaeological evidence in the form of polished stone tools and bronzes in the vicinity of the town (Mansuy 1920; Massie 1904). Luang Prabang was traditionally the seat of royalty up until 1975, when the monarchy was abolished by the communist government. The first king, Fa Ngum (1316–1393 C.E.), was banished from Muang Sewa by his grandfather and raised in the court of Angkor in Cambodia. After marrying a Khmer princess, Fa Ngum returned to Luang Prabang with an army of 10,000 soldiers, conquered his former home, and established it as the royal city of the kingdom of Lan Xang, the precursor state to modern Lao PDR. At its peak of influence, the kingdom's territories encompassed the modern boundaries of Laos and parts of northeast Thailand.

From Luang Prabang, Fa Ngum continued to pacify the local areas, including Pak Ou. A legend related to us by a tour guide describes how Fa Ngum, having become a devout Buddhist during his time in Angkor, was searching for a place to meditate when he discovered the caves of Pak Ou. The king then asked local hermits for permission to build a shrine there. From then on, people began depositing Buddha images at the site as a devotional practice that continues today. Pak Ou is thought to



Fig. 2. Exterior of Pak Ou caves. Staircase leads to the upper cave, Tham Phum; entrance to Tham Ting visible at lower right. Photograph by Noel Hidalgo Tan.

be where Fa Ngum first introduced Buddhism into his kingdom. Tradition holds that Fa Ngum received the gift of a Buddha image named Pra Bang from Angkor; the statue was supposedly cast in Sri Lanka, then offered as a gift to the rulers of Angkor, before being presented to Lan Xang. This image now lends its name to the city itself; Luang Pra Bang literally translates to capital city (Luang) of the Buddha image (Pra Bang) (Heywood 2006: 17).

Buddhism became a state religion in Laos during the reign of King Photisarath (1520–1550 C.E.), who unsuccessfully attempted to abolish the worship of spirit cults. Animist beliefs are prevalent throughout Southeast Asia and have often been syncretized into the Buddhist worldview (Ames 1964; Ang 1988; Hayashi 2003; Tambiah 1970). Even the Pra Bang statue embodied a belief in the spirit world, as it was thought to be inhabited by a “vigorous and lively” *phi*, a type of nature spirit still venerated in Laos (Gosling 1996: 13). Egloff (1998) notes another local tradition associating the Pak Ou with *phi*, in this case a river spirit who takes the form of a large fish (possibly the giant Mekong catfish, *Pangasianodon gigas*). These stories may not represent contradictions to the religious history of the site but rather an extension of early folk traditions or even an attempt to facilitate coexistence between two religious traditions. In either case, they demonstrate that Pak Ou has a long and significant history in Laos. Since the establishment of the Lan Xang Kingdom, the cave complex has been a pilgrimage site and has received continuous royal patronage. The caves had a political function as well as a religious one in the past. Coronation ceremonies were formerly conducted at the royal palace, the temple mountain of Wat Phu Si, and the Pak Ou caves (Egloff 1998). Today, the caves see the most activity during Laotian New Year’s celebrations, which occur every April. Many local devotees visit the caves to bathe the Buddha images at the New Year; they keep the water to use thereafter in cleansing and blessing rituals.

The earliest written description of the Pak Ou caves by westerners comes by way of Delaporte and Garnier’s 1873 (2006) account of travel on the Mekong to southern China as part of the Mekong Exploration Commission under the French Ministry of the Navy. After having spent a month in Luang Prabang, the expedition arrived at the Ou River on the evening of 25 May 1867. They noted a sheer cliff face along the banks of the river and a cave that had been converted into a sanctuary. Delaporte and Garnier noted that numerous Buddhas had been placed in the caves. They also saw many monks and pilgrims traveling to the caves from Ban Pak Ou, the village on the opposite bank. If any rock art was observed, it was not noted in their account. However, they did mention that the locals drew a red line on the walls of the rock to indicate the water rise of a particularly heavy flood in 1856 (Delaporte and Garnier [1873] 2006: plates 82 and 167). Subsequently, we have very little writing about the caves, until the mid 1990s when archaeological work was carried out at the site as part of a conservation management program to preserve the site from looting and tourist traffic (Egloff 1998, 2003; Johnson 1997). Almost 6000 Buddha images were recorded at the caves in 1997. However, a recent count in 2011 indicate that over 600 Buddha images are now missing, probably stolen or broken as tourism and public traffic to the caves increased (Egloff and Sayavongkhamedy 2014).

### *Description*

The Pak Ou caves are located approximately 20 km north of the city of Luang Prabang. The caves can only be reached by boat. Visitors either take a slow, two-hour ride



Fig. 3. Buddha images deposited on ledges built on the interior slope of Tham Ting. Photograph by Noel Hidalgo Tan.

upstream from Luang Prabang or drive an hour to Ban Pak Ou (Pak Ou Village), and then cross the river by ferry. Located on a cliff at the confluence of the Mekong and Ou Rivers, the Pak Ou complex consists of an upper cave, called Tham Phum, and a lower cave, Tham Ting. Today, Tham Ting is better known as the “Cave of a Thousand Buddhas” because of the many Buddha images that have been deposited there. Both caves contain Buddhist images and shrines, however.

Visitors to the site arrive first at Tham Ting, which is fronted by a jetty and staircases. The lower cave is quite shallow, some 20 m deep, but the floor ascends steeply at a gradient of approximate  $50^\circ$ . On this slope, ledge platforms have been built to hold Buddha images, which are then venerated (Fig. 3). As a result of recent archaeological work, signs in English and Lao now inform tourists about the heritage value of the site (Egloff 1998, 2003).

Tham Phum, the upper cave, is a five-minute climb from Tham Ting and is the deeper of the two cave systems, reaching 80 m inward (Figs. 4 and 5). Egloff (1998) notes that the floor of the upper cave has been leveled off by the deposition of a significant quantity of limestone and sand-silt fill. Despite the lack of natural light sources, Buddha images, sacred boundary stones (*sema*), and altars have been constructed in various chambers of the cave. The upper cave was the focus of archaeological and conservation work carried out by an Australian and Laotian team between 1992 and 1998 (Egloff 2003). The doors were repaired and stabilized during this period. Another objective of the program was the reconstruction of the main stupa at the rear of the cave, which had collapsed in living memory. The stupa was said to have been erected in 1559–1560 by one of the Lan Xang kings, Sai Setthathirat, in commemoration of his father. Radiocarbon dates taken from the brickwork of the stupa support this date (Egloff 1998).

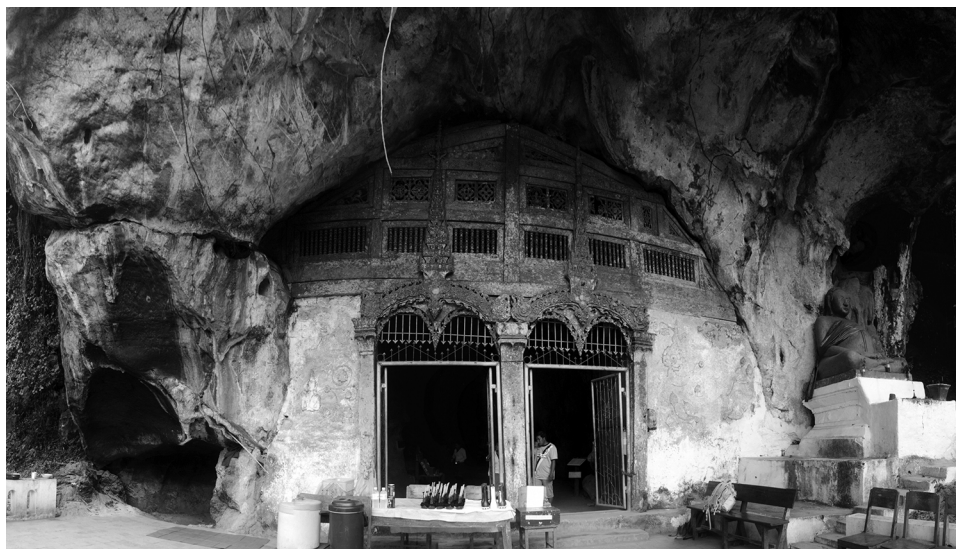


Fig. 4. Entrance to Tham Phum, with rock art visible on upper right section of the gate. Photograph by Noel Hidalgo Tan.

#### *The Rock Art of the Pak Ou Caves*

In the 1990s, Johnson (1997) noted the presence of rock art at Pak Ou in the form of painted or stenciled gilt images, resin applied in low relief, and writing in the upper cave that appears to be associated with Buddhist use of the site. Red paintings of stylized anthropomorphs and flowers can be seen at the entrance beside the wooden gate.<sup>2</sup> Other forms of rock art can be found in Tham Phum (Tan 2014b; Tan and Tacon 2014). A carving halfway through the cave was identified as a representation of the *phi* residing in the cave (Johnson 1997); it also resembles a *singha* or mythical lion, images of which are often placed in front of Hindu-Buddhist spaces in Southeast Asia. Perhaps not coincidentally, the carved zoomorph is facing a Buddhist shrine and an arrangement of *sema* stones (Tan 2014b).

In the interior near the mouth of the upper cave are two more sets of paintings, including the green “steamship” painting discussed here in detail, and a series of black anthropomorphic figures (Fig. 6). The black and red paintings of anthropomorphs do not appear to be similar to each other and may not have been part of the same painting episode. However, the black paintings are reminiscent of rock paintings in Huashan Mountain in Guangxi Province, China, and Gua Batu Cincin in Kelantan, Malaysia.

The green “steamship” is found on the north wall of the upper cave, about 10 m from the entrance (Fig. 7). It measures approximately 60 cm long by 30 cm high. It is unusual for rock art to be green as most rock paintings tend to be black or red; the composition of the pigment has yet to be tested. Deposits of a similar color have been noted running down the wall adjacent to the steamship and we presume the creator of this painting used this deposit as a convenient source of pigment.

Some of the art, including the gilt Buddhas on the walls and the carving of the *phi*, is associated with religious activity. Other art, such as the paintings on the cliff face, is similar to what is often described as “prehistoric” art—typically, red paintings

# Tham Phum (Upper Cave) The Pak Ou Caves Luang Prabang, Lao PDR

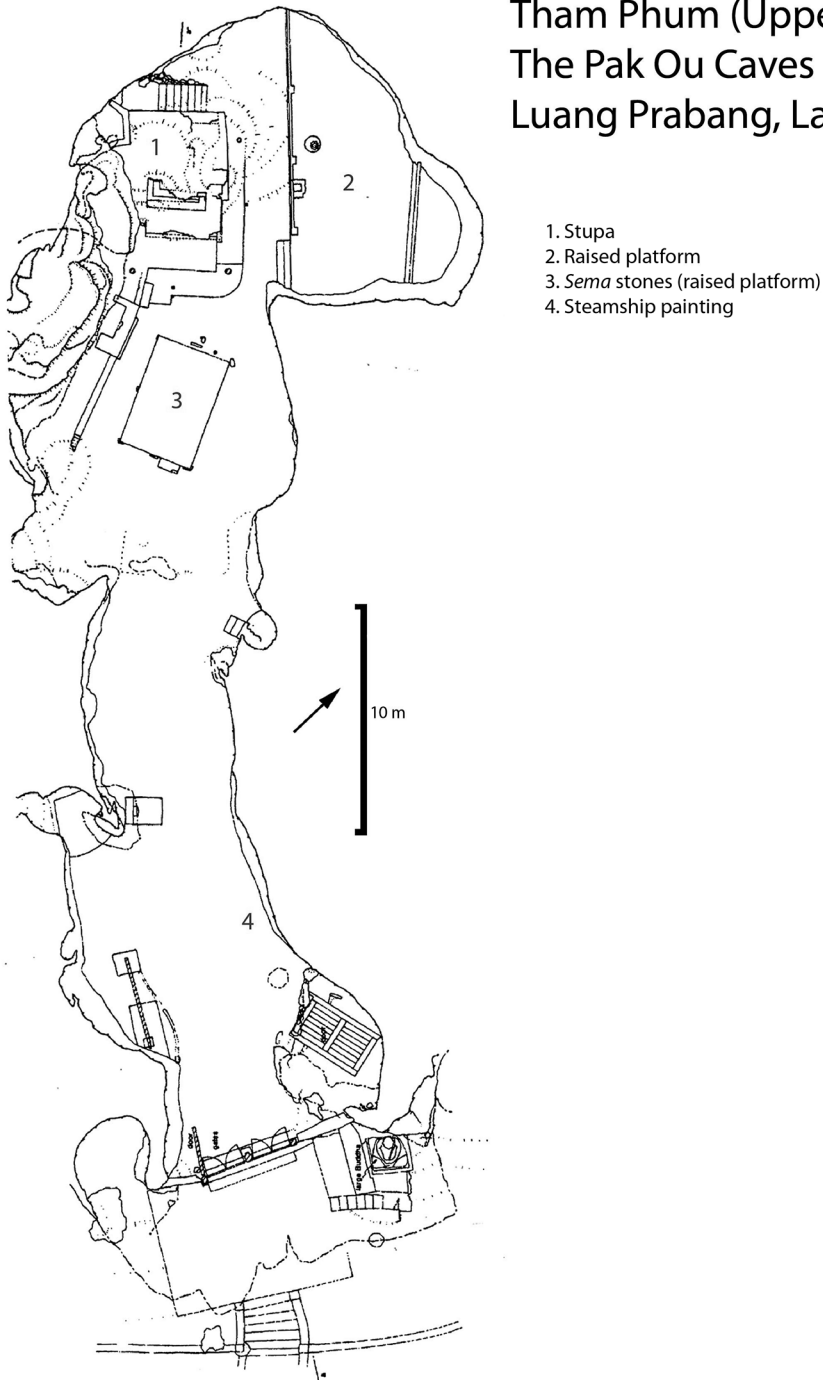


Fig. 5. Map of Tham Phum. Number 4 marks the location of the green steamship painting. Map re-drawn after Egloff 1998:167, fig. 7.

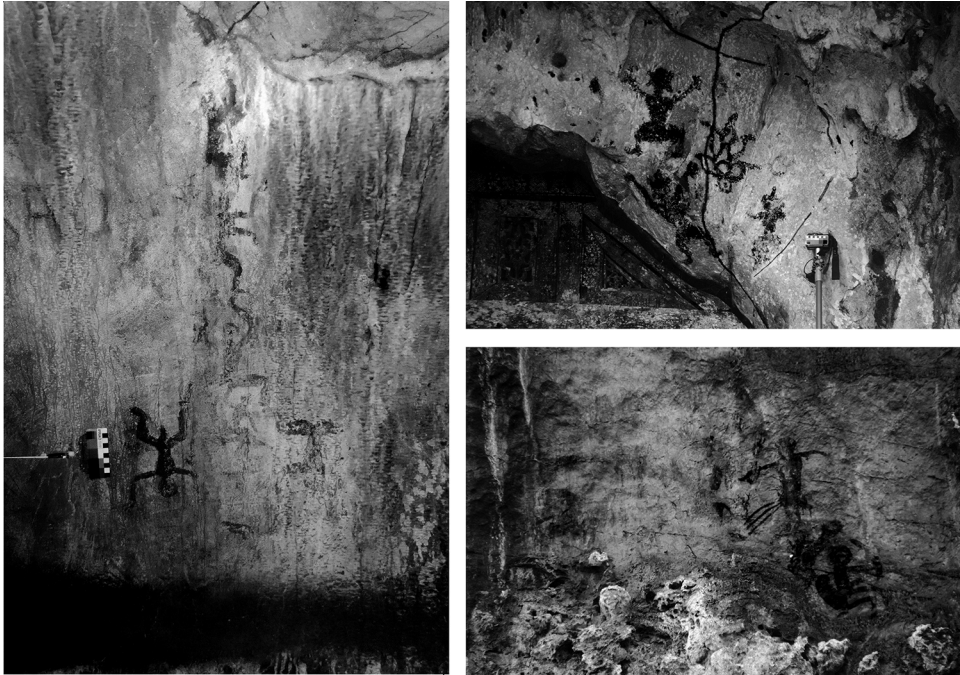


Fig. 6. Other rock paintings at Pak Ou caves. Photographs by Noel Hidalgo Tan.



Fig. 7. First chamber of Tham Phum. Photograph by Noel Hidalgo Tan.



depicting animals and agricultural scenes—in the region; however, secure dates for such rock art have not been determined for Mainland Southeast Asia (see discussion of Southeast Asian rock art dates in Taçon et al. 2014; Tan 2014a: 93). Other rock art at the Pak Ou caves could constitute graffiti—writings, drawings, or carvings left at a period after the original development of the sacred space. Graffiti is often perceived as undesirable or unimportant in the contemporary world, but it still qualifies as an anthropogenic marking of the landscape and in this case as a form of rock art.<sup>3</sup> Such art activities have intent and meaning embedded in them, making them valuable to researchers, especially when found in richly layered contexts such as the Pak Ou caves. For example, undeciphered Pali words painted on the cliff face may be graffiti, but may also have had a religious purpose since Pali is the liturgical language of Theravada Buddhism. The green “steamship” painting under discussion may also be graffiti, given the suggested date of the painting and the convenient presence of a source of pigment.

The age of the rock art at the caves is uncertain. When asked, locals did not know the origin or antiquity of the paintings. This suggests that they are at least older than living memory. A tour guide felt confident that the images inside the upper cave were created as part of offerings left behind by devotees, yet many of these paintings do not appear to fit with any artistic conventions of Buddhist worship. The carving of a “seated lion” (*singha*) deeper inside the cave is associated with the worship of the *phi*, but may also represent syncretic animist and Buddhist beliefs (Egloff 1998; Tan 2014b; Tan and Taçon 2014). Besides the “steamship,” few iconographic markers can be ascertained, although the paintings at the entrance of Tham Phum resemble lotus flowers and may thus be associated with the Buddhist period. The black paintings deeper in the upper cave depict a man on a horse and a painting on the cliff face depicts a man with a bullock on a leash. These paintings suggest some level of animal domestication had developed by the time of their creation. Overall, the rock art corpus at the Pak Ou caves is a hodgepodge, and speaks potentially to the many functions of the art and also to a long period of human interaction with the site, going back at least 500 years.

#### THE “CURIOUS” DEPICTION OF A STEAMSHIP

Depictions of vehicles are rare in Southeast Asian rock art, although Orang Asli (aboriginal) rock art from Peninsular Malaysia depicts bicycles and buggies (Mokhtar and Taçon 2011). A more recent example from Gua Cerita in Langkawi depicts a car (Fig. 8). Boat paintings can be found throughout eastern Island Southeast Asia: Gua Kain Hitam in the Niah caves of Sarawak (Harrison 1959; Szabo et al. 2008); in East Timor (Lape et al. 2007; O’Connor 2003); and on several Indonesian islands (Ballard 1988; Ballard et al. 2003; Marschall and Wäfler 2012). The most spectacular collection of boat rock art is found in Tham Phrayanak, known as the Viking Cave, in southern Thailand. The rock art features watercraft from several time periods and cultures, indicative of the cave’s position near the maritime trade routes of the region (Blake 1996; Chaimongkhon and Phikpen 1990; Sukkham et al. 2011) (Fig. 9).

The ship depicted in the upper Pak Ou cave has a rather flat bottom and straight bow and stern (Fig. 10). A square block can be seen amidships (at the central section of the boat) (Fig. 10: 1). A curved line seems to originate from the upper section. A vertical line painted to the fore of the square block is linked to another vertical line at



Fig. 8. Drawing of an automobile at Gua Cerita, Langkawi Island, Malaysia. Photograph by Noel Hidalgo Tan.



Fig. 9. Boat rock art, Tham Phrayanak (Viking Cave), Krabi Province, Thailand. Photograph by Noel Hidalgo Tan.

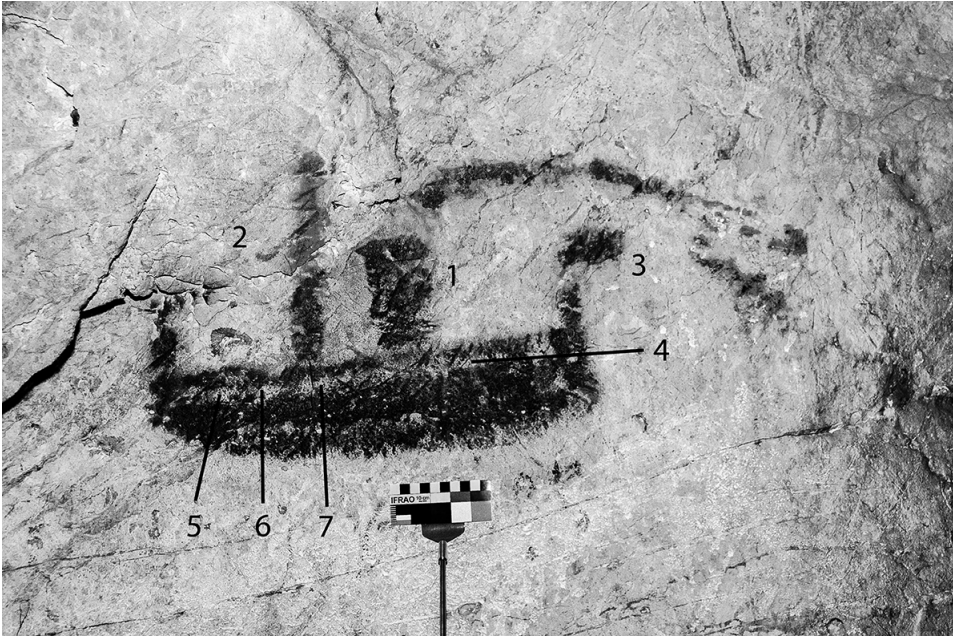


Fig. 10. The curious depiction of the “steamship”: 1) square block amidships; 2) line linking the forward section of the boat to the bow; 3) thick horizontal line at the stern; 4) cabin; 5–7) cabin sections. Photograph by Noel Hidalgo Tan.

the bow by an almost horizontal line (Fig. 10:2). At the stern, a vertical line is topped by another thick horizontal line (Fig. 10:3). Beneath these elements, the hull seems to be split horizontally (Fig. 10:4) into what appears to be a cabin separated into sections by several perpendicular lines (Fig. 10:5,6,7). During initial attempts at identification, we determined that the elements of the upper section of the green boat painting strongly resemble a steamship. In order to counteract any observer bias, we then made a comparative analysis with local boats.

The traditional Laotian boat is a narrow, shallow longboat with a slightly elevated bow and stern (Curtis 1903:156; Preston n.d.). Larger boats seem to be an expanded version of this type of boat, but often have tall cabins placed on top of the hull. The standard Ou River boat has two cabins—one for passengers and one for the pilot—while freight boats have a single high cabin that runs along the hull. The presence of high cabins is not new to the Mekong River and its tributaries above Khone Phapeng Falls. For example, a carving from the Angkor era currently displayed at the Phimai National Museum depicts a decorated barge with a cabin that runs from bow to stern (Fig. 11). Other boat representations from the Angkor Archaeological Park show identical boats to the one in Phimai, but all of them have only central cabins. This seems to suggest that the long cabin is a regional variation of the Mekong River and some of its tributaries above Khone Phapeng Falls. Photographs from the early twentieth century show freight boats from Laos with long cabins (albeit seldom running all the way from bow to stern) with rounded roofs, so the form of the cabin has probably varied over time (Curtis 1903:26) (Figs. 12 and 13). However, although a cabin seems to be depicted in the hull of the green boat, elements above the hull bear little resemblance to traditional Laotian boats.



Fig. 11. Relief carving of an Angkorian-era watercraft, Phimai National Museum. The cabin runs the length of the boat. Photograph by Noel Hidalgo Tan.



Fig. 12. Laotian boat with long cabin. Photograph by G. E. Simon, dated 1893–1896. Source: Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Société de Géographie, SG XCM-269, available at: <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b5968216b>.



Fig. 13. Local canoes on the Mekong River in Stung Treng Province, Cambodia, just south of Laos. “Laos 22, Départ d’un convoi de pirogues à Stung Treng” by P. Barthélemy, dated 1894–1896. Source: Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Société de Géographie, SG XCM-279, available at: <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b5968226q>.

Could the green boat represent a sailboat? Even though one of the vertical lines on the green boat painting could be identified as a mast, there are no lines indicative of yard spars that would suggest a folded sail. Furthermore, the line at the aft is too short to be a mast. Even though the central square shape could be interpreted as a square sail, there are no indications of spars or masts that would corroborate this interpretation. We argue that the identifying features of the green boat painting show far more similarity to the steamships of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries than to either sailboats or traditional Laotian poled boats. The key element for interpretation is the central square block and the line that emerges from it toward the right end of the image. These elements strongly resemble a smokestack with steam coming out of it. The direction of the line toward the right suggests that the stern is on the right side while the bow is on the left. At the stern, the thick line can be identified as the escape pipe used for venting steam from the engines. The line toward the bow could be a jackstaff (a pole used to hang a flag or the boom of a winch). Another one can be seen at the forefront of the bow. These elements are rather thick for poles, but the line connecting them both is similar to jackstaffs in photographs from contemporary steamships, lending strength to this interpretation. The horizontal line that appears to indicate the presence of a cabin is similar to the cabin used on steamships. In many such ships, cabins did not have walls and simple canvas roofs were created using mounting poles attached to the sides of the ships.

These elements, especially the smokestack, are indications that the vessel depicted is very likely a steamship. The identification of the green boat as a steamship suggests that the painting itself is of relatively recent age, probably made in the last 120 years. The proportions and location of the smokestack are similar to known French gunboats—armed steamships that were used by the French in Indochina in the late nineteenth century. Thus, we suggest that the lone green vessel represents a steamship, a reminder of a crucial moment in the history of Laos marked by the French obsession with the Mekong.

The location of the rock painting this far upriver in the Mekong may at first be puzzling. The Mekong River acts as a main communication system in Laos; it forms part of a network that includes navigable tributary rivers such as the Ou River (Laos) and the Mun River (Thailand). The remains of Angkorian temples along the banks of the Mun River valley suggest that the Mekong was used for communication (Hendrickson 2010:451–452). However, the geography of the river does not allow for easy transport. The variations between the dry season and the rainy season are very drastic, both in water levels and currents. It also has imposing rapids like those at Sambor (Cambodia) and Kemerat (Laos), but the biggest obstacle for direct navigation to the sea is the massive Khone Phapeng Falls in the Sipandon region of Champassak Province near the border with Cambodia. This nine-kilometer stretch of rapids includes the largest waterfall in Mainland Southeast Asia—21 m in height—and effectively disrupts communication between the two sides of the river. How then did the steamships arrive in Laos?

#### *History of Steamships on the Mekong*

The arrival of steamships on the Mekong was the direct result of the French colonial desire to acquire a direct route to China and obtain access to its precious goods (Key 2005a, 2005b; Osborne 2000). In the mid-nineteenth century, European imperial powers were seeking to expand their territorial reach by establishing colonies across Southeast Asia. The favorable positions obtained by the British Empire in Burma, Malaya, and Siam (Thailand) worried French officials who supported colonial expansion in Asia; a race to control the Mekong followed.

By 1863, the French established a protectorate over Cambodia and secured Cochinchina, the area around the Mekong delta. Attention was then focused on the Mekong. In 1866 an expedition led by Captain Doudart de Lagrée was launched from Saigon. Its mission was to explore the Mekong and find a navigable passage to Yunnan in China. Prior to this expedition, several explorers had pointed out the difficulties of navigating the river (Osborne 1975, 2000). While the rapids at Sambor and Khemerat were deemed difficult to traverse, Khone Phapeng Falls were considered an impassable obstacle. Disregarding these opinions, the French made their way upriver, a perilous journey that included Vientiane and Luang Prabang in Laos and eventually reached Yunnan. Doudart de Lagrée's death in Yunnan did nothing to diminish France's aspirations to continue using the Mekong as a passageway to Yunnan. In 1893, worried about British advances in Burma and connections to Siam, the French government decided to adopt the British policy of gunboat diplomacy in Laos (Osborne 2000:143–144). To enforce this policy, they transported armed steamships to Laos, quite a difficult feat with Khone Phapeng Falls to pass through. The Messageries Fluviales de Cochinchine (River Shipping Company of Cochinchina) acquired the license to exploit water transport in the Mekong.

The French also decided to build a railway to transport the steamships overland, bypassing Khone Phapeng Falls. Transporting ships overland was no minor effort. Two gunboats with shallow drafts, named *Le Vây le Massie* and *La Grandière* (which was eventually replaced by *Ham Luong*), were ordered from France and shipped in pieces to Saigon in 1894, where they were reassembled. In September, under the command of Lieutenant Georges Simon, the steamships arrived at the bottom of Khone Phapeng Falls. The French planned to again dismantle the ships and carry the parts overland on a carriage that ran along rail lines. The first team only had material to build three kilometers of rail, but they needed to cover five (Osborne 2000: 144). After transporting the ships the first three kilometers, they had to dismantle the tracks and reuse them to build another two. Vietnamese laborers were burdened with this exhausting work (Fig. 14). The transport of the vessels started on 15 October 1894 and lasted for two weeks. The *Ham Luong* and *Le Vây le Massie* made it to the other side of Khone Phapeng Falls by the first of November. In the following months, *La Grandière* was sent upriver and transported on the railway, circumventing the falls. Other ships followed, namely *Le Colombert*, *Argus*, *La Garcerie*, *Trentinian*, and *Haiphong*. The temporary railway was eventually expanded into the seven-kilometer-long Don Det–Don Khon Railway (named after the two islands it spanned), establishing a link between Luang Prabang, Khone Phapeng Falls, and Saigon that lasted until the 1940s (Keay 2005a).

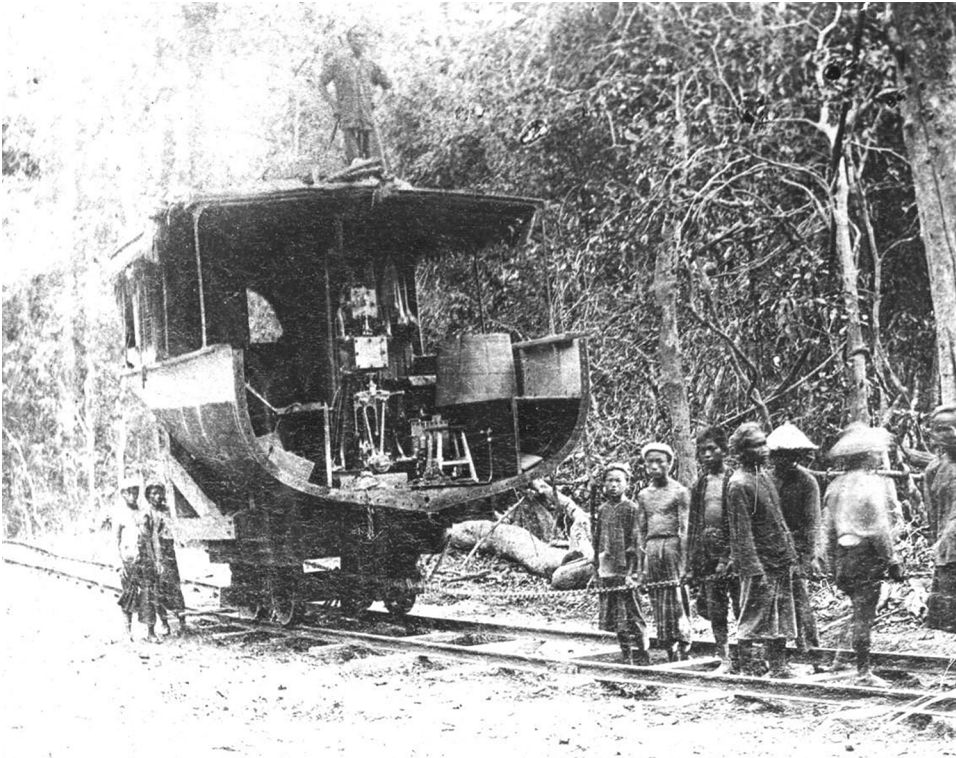


Fig. 14. The steamship *Ham Luong* negotiating overland route at Khone Phapeng Falls. “Mekong 3” by G. E. Simon, dated 1893–1896. Source: Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Société de Géographie, SG XCM-274, available at: <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b59682222>.

*Two Possible Identities of the Green Boat*

If the green boat painting does not represent a steamship the painter saw elsewhere (such as Saigon), then it would have been painted after the advent of steamships in the Mekong area. The earliest likely date would be November 1893, when the first three ships (i.e., *Ham Luong*, *Le Vay le Massie*, and *La Grandière*) were partially dismantled for transport around Khone Phapeng Falls. Even though nothing in the painting points to a specific steamship, if we look at the history of steamships in Laos, there are two that may have made a big enough impression on people in the Luang Prabang area to justify being painted in the Pak Ou caves: *La Grandière* and *Trentinian*.

*La Grandière* was named after Admiral Pierre de la Grandière. This mid-size steamship was constructed in Bouguenais, France and shipped in pieces to Saigon, where it was reassembled. Together with *Le Vay le Massie*, it navigated upstream as far as Khone Phapeng Falls, where it was dismantled and transported via rail to the other side of Don Khon. *Ham Luong* briefly substituted for *La Grandière* when the latter needed repairs, but eventually *La Grandière* made it past Khone Phapeng Falls by rail (Osborne 2000) (Fig. 15). *La Grandière* was used to explore the Mekong north as far as the Tang Ho rapids on the stretch of river between Ubon Ratchathani Province in Thailand and Savannakhet Province in Laos. The following decade, *La Grandière* regularly navigated the route connecting Khone Phapeng Falls with Luang

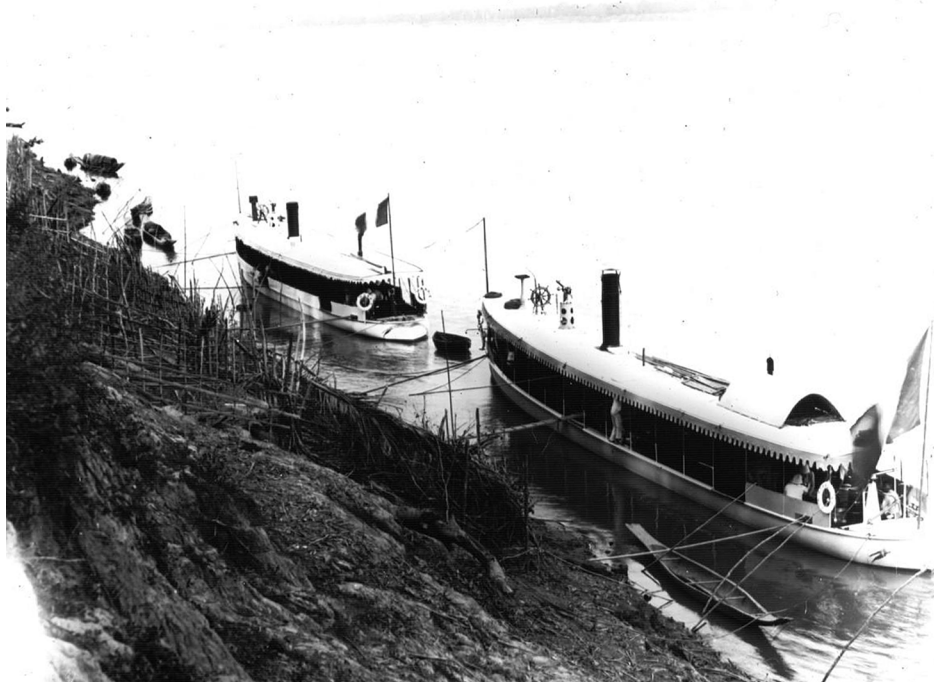


Fig. 15. 1894 photograph of *La Grandière* and *Le Massie* at Thakhek. Note central stack and jackstays. "Mekong 15" by G. E. Simon, dated 1894. Source: Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Société de Géographie, SG XCM-274, available at: <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b59682118>.



Prabang. On 15 July 1910, while en route to the falls, the boat hit a rock or a tree (contemporary accounts differ) and sank 80 km south of Luang Prabang, killing five men.<sup>4</sup>

One of the deceased, General Leon de Baylié, was a known avid collector of art objects. He had published several books on the art of Mesopotamia, Burma (now Myanmar), and the Far East. It is said that the *La Grandière* was carrying precious art objects from Laos for an exhibition in Paris when it sank (Osborne 2000: 150). Given Baylié's passion for history and archaeology, and the prevailing practice of obtaining prized art objects for exhibitions and world fairs in the Western world, it seems likely that Baylié was indeed carrying some art objects with him. If any of these objects were connected to Laotian religious practices, the sinking of the steamship may have had a strong impact on the people in the region. The steamship may even have been depicted in a Buddhist cave as a remembrance of something such as an image of Buddha that was lost when the ship sunk.

*La Grandière* was not the only steamship to meet a tragic end. At six a.m. on 4 February 1928, there was a large explosion on the *Trentinian* 6 km upstream from the port city of Thakhek in Laos. The ship was carrying 155 passengers and crew; the final death toll was 43. The death of so many people had such an emotional impact on the region that a stupa and plaque were erected at the immigration checkpoint at Thakhek to memorialize the event.<sup>5</sup> Little else is known about the *Trentinian*, but images of the ship show that it had a similar outline to *La Grandière*. An image posted on the online newsletter *Le Souvenir Français de Chine* claims to be a 1897 photograph of the *Trentinian* (Nivelle 2010). If it is, the steamship would have been iconographically consistent with the steamship depicted in the cave, since it had two jackstays along with a smokestack and a vertical scape pipe for venting steam.

#### CONCLUSION

Specific examples of rock art can rarely be traced to their sources of inspiration. Steamships originated in Europe; they were not present in Southeast Asia until they were introduced to the region during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. We may never know the precise identity of the “steamship” rock art of the Pak Ou caves, or the motivation for painting it there. However, we do know that steamships could not ordinarily travel this far upriver and that the only agency with the ability to bring steamships past Khone Phapeng Falls was the French, the colonial power in this region. Thus, we are fairly confident that the green boat painting is of a steamship and that it dates to sometime between the end of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. It can probably be associated with Messageries Fluviales de Cochinchine's fleet of steamships, which were brought up the Mekong as part of the French effort to establish a buffer zone between British Burma and Anglo-friendly Siam. The French enacted gunboat diplomacy along the Mekong and established riverine trade routes through Lao kingdoms.

The depiction of the steamship in Tham Phum, a sacred cave with a long religious tradition and connections with the royal court in Luang Prabang, suggests the painting had some sort of commemorative function. We speculate that it may have been painted to memorialize the sinking of *La Grandière* in 1910 or the *Trentinian* in 1928. Since *La Grandière* may have been carrying sacred images for exhibition in Paris, the steamship (if indeed intended to depict *La Grandière*) could have been painted as a

votive offering and to commemorate the Buddha images lost in the tragedy. The placement of the painting supports this supposition. However, the painting could simply mark the arrival of the first steamship to Luang Prabang, a ship that could have represented a technological wonder to the local people or the ominous arrival of a foreign power into the region.

Analysis of Southeast Asian rock art has been neglected, possibly because such material is not easily dated. It is often assumed to be evidence of prehistoric hunter-gatherer cultures or disregarded as modern graffiti (Tan 2014a). The green “steamship” challenges us to rethink such assumptions about rock art and invites us to consider that even relatively recent rock art, as a form of marking the landscape, deserves to be examined in all its varied contexts.

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#### NOTES

1. This work is based on a survey and recording program conducted as part of Tan’s doctoral research at the Australian National University. An early version of this article was presented by Noel H. Tan and V. Walker at the Second International Contact Rock Art Symposium held 13–15 September 2013 at the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory in Darwin, Australia. The presentation, including color images, can be viewed online at: [https://www.academia.edu/4523409/The\\_Curious\\_Case\\_of\\_the\\_Steamship\\_on\\_the\\_Mekong](https://www.academia.edu/4523409/The_Curious_Case_of_the_Steamship_on_the_Mekong).
2. Brian Egloff informed Tan that there were red paintings on the cliff face near the entrance to Tham Tin (pers. comm. 2011). They were subsequently documented by Tan during his doctoral research.
3. For discussions of rock art and graffiti, see Baird and Taylor (2012); Frederick and Clarke (2014); and Taçon and Chippindale (1998).
4. For an illustration and brief description of the accident, see Noyés dans les rapides du Mékong [Drowned in the rapids of the Mekong], *Le Petit Journal: Supplément Illustré* 31 July 1910, 21(1028):n.p., 242. <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k716915b>. For another account of the accident, see Dans les rapides du Mekong [The rapids of the Mekong], *L’Illustration* 23 July 1910, 68(3517):1.
5. They are still standing to this day. For a photograph of the plaque, see Nivelles (2010).

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#### ABSTRACT

Painted and engraved rock art appear at the Pak Ou caves, a complex of caverns containing Buddhist offerings and shrines located at the confluence of two rivers in Luang Prabang Province, Lao PDR. Faded red paintings and writing can be found on the cliff face housing the lower cave, colloquially known as the “Cave of a Thousand Buddhas,” while in the upper cave, red anthropomorphs and flowers along with black anthropomorphic figures are painted on the walls. This red and black rock art may predate the Buddhist use of the cave. However, one painting found in the upper cave 10 m from the entrance is unusual as it utilizes a green pigment, and resembles modern steamships that might have transited the upper Mekong. This article considers the historic context of the cave and significance of this Laotian rock art site, which has received little attention in academic literature thus far. Because boat imagery in rock art is not unheard of in Southeast Asia, we hope to highlight the potential for this art to illuminate episodes from the recent past. **KEYWORDS:** Laos, rock art, maritime archaeology, steamship, Pak Ou caves, Luang Prabang.