Landscape, Settlement, and Architecture along the Pao River, 1695–1927

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Abstract

This paper reconstructs settlement history and architectural continuity in the Pao River valley after 1695 through a multi-scalar methodology that integrates GIS mapping, longitudinal field surveys, and analysis of vernacular texts and oral traditions. Focusing on *sim* architecture within Buddhist temple compounds, it identifies a coherent regional style rooted in local practices of memory and spatial organization. By correlating mapped data with narrative sources, the study reveals how communities adapted to migration and political change while sustaining cultural forms.

Keywords: Middle Mekong region; Pao River; Architectural heritage; Settlement; Kalasin

This paper focuses on a small river valley, the Lam Pao (ลำ[river]ปาว), in Kalasin Province, Northeast Thailand. It is the main river in western Kalasin Province; it runs down from Nong Han Yai in the north on a southeastwardly course to ultimately merge with the Chi River near Roi Et (see Map 1).

The work draws upon a small part of a larger research project involving in-person, on-site surveys and photographic documentation of Buddhist wats[1] in the middle Mekong basin covering communities in modern-day Laos and Northeast Thailand. The research has been conducted by the authors over a 25-year period and is ongoing. In recent years, the research collection has been progressively reorganized and integrated into a geodatabase indexed with a Geographic Information System (GIS), specifically ArcGIS Pro.[2]

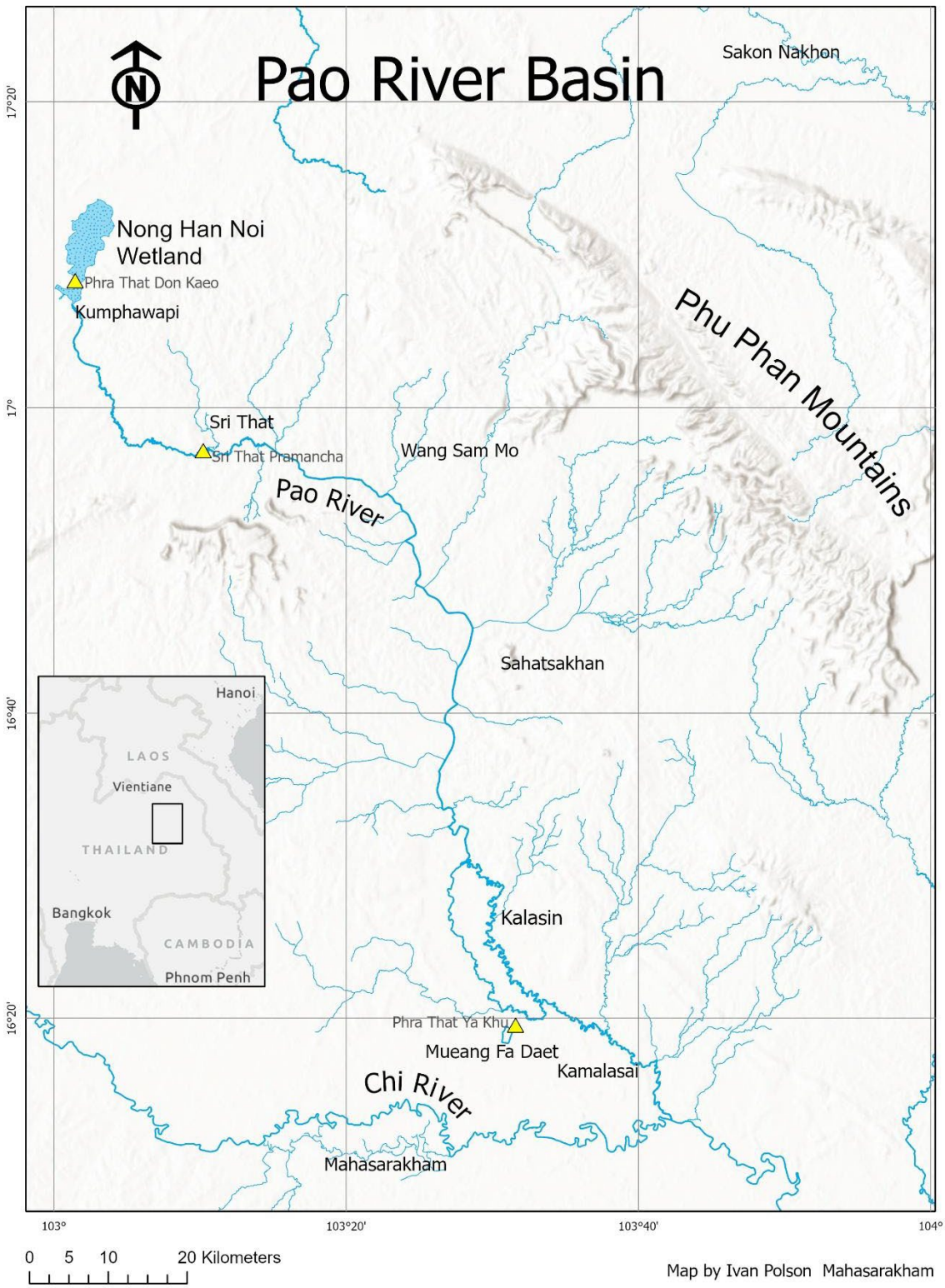
The data within the GIS is organized in a variety of ways. Hard data, such as locations, anchor places within a geographical context. Calendrical data and founding and *Wisukhamsima* (วิสุงคามสีมา)[3] dates, help establish sites in their temporal contexts. Additional data groups, including the recording of significant buildings and structures on

[1] *Wat* in the middle Mekong region, while similar to wat in central Thailand, are described with a different vocabulary. There are two main elements: a meeting/preaching hall called a *ho chaek* (หอแจก) [hall to distribute, to give out], known in central Thai as *sala kan parian* (ศาลาการเปรียญ), and a residence for monks. There may also be an ordination hall called a *sim* (สิม in the Thai Isan region, ສີມ in Lao), known as *ubosot* (อุโบสถ) in central Thai.

[2] As of July 2025, almost 2,300 sites have been surveyed and documented, with 983 logged into the GIS so far.

[3] *Wisukhamsima* is the title given through a royal grant that yields sovereignty over a sacred space. For the lands in the middle Mekong region, this practice was developed in the Rattanakosin era, relating to *wat* within territories under the control of Thai kings (Kieffer-Pulz 1997, 147-149). In the frontier regions discussed in this paper, there was little royal control. Many settlements were, in fact, a result of repudiation of royal authority. In later times, dealing with these wats and sims created beyond royal control, now called *badotsima* wat (บ่าดทสีมา) [places with a sim that do not own a written document], the presumption is that they received their original grant from some past ruler (Wells 1960, 28).

a site, the presence or absence of murals, and URL links to the photographic collection, provide a comprehensive description.



Map 1: The Pao River Basin, location and physical geography before modification to river systems in the modern era. Sites of ancient population centres are indicated with yellow triangles. All maps and photographs by Ivan Polson unless otherwise credited.

This paper is divided into two parts. In the first part, we establish the geographical context by documenting and mapping spatial continuities. Our goal is to identify clusters of places where evidence on the ground suggests a shared architectural tradition. In the second part, we focus on the temporal context by collecting the stories that people from places within the cluster tell about themselves. These local histories are positioned as autonomous accounts that may intersect with, diverge from, or reframe broader historical understandings, privileging local narratives as generative sites of historical meaning.

Part One: The Geographic Context.

In any large-scale survey, patterns soon emerge, as the identification of descriptive characteristics enables the linking of places that share common features. If multiple places sharing common characteristics correlate with a geographic space, they can be identified as place-specific clusters. These clusters sketch boundaries and suggest centers. From the descriptive discernments of the GIS, in the Pao River valley in Kalasin Province, Thailand, a cluster of a specific 'architectural style' emerged, and it is the focus of this paper.

Style in art and architectural history

The concept of style is a cornerstone in the study of art and architectural history. In 1888, Heinrich Wölfflin emphasized the historical embeddedness of visual form, writing, "To explain a style, then, can mean nothing other than to place it in its general historical context and to verify that it speaks in harmony with the other organs of its age" (Gombrich 1968, 358).

Ernst Gombrich elaborated on this in his 1968 essay, 'Style':

> The distinctive character of styles clearly rests on the adoption of certain conventions which are learned and absorbed by those who carry on the tradition. These may be codified in the movements learned by the craftsman taught to carve a ritual mask, in the way a painter learns to prime his canvas and arrange his palette, or in the rules of harmony, which the composer is asked to observe. While certain of these features are easily recognizable (e.g., the Gothic pointed arch, the cubist facet, Wagnerian chromaticism), others are more elusive, since they are found to consist not in the presence of individual, specifiable elements but in the regular occurrence of certain clusters of features and in the exclusion of certain elements (Gombrich 1968, 359-360).

Styles are thus linked to places and people. The stylistic conventions that a group of people develop and maintain is fixed in a vocabulary of the style. This encompasses the forms of buildings, the features that are deployed, the presence of individual, specifiable elements, and the regular recurrence of certain clusters of features in specific places. Styles arise and are reproduced in the traditions of a certain group of people. It is a signature which asserts a commonality and furnishes an artifact from which they can be recognized.

Because of this link between style, people, and place, the focus in this paper is not so much on the architectural types or even the styles but rather seeks to explore the timing and location of the decisions to build in a particular style as a way to uncover evidence-based historical narratives.

Identifying distinct architectural styles and mapping clusters

Kalasin Province spans approximately 6,947 km^2 and contains 955 wats, according to the National Office of Buddhism (ONAB) [4] (สำนักงานพระพุทธศาสนาแห่งชาติ). It is administratively divided into 18 *amphoe* (อำเภอ) [districts], comprising 134 *tambon* (ตำบล) [sub-districts]. These tambons form the backbone of local administration and community organization, and many retain boundaries predating the formation of the Thai nation-state.

To manage our survey work, we bypass the larger, later divisions and work at the level of the tambon, aiming to survey at least 80% of wats within each tambon.

In our initial prospecting in Tambon Lup, Amphoe Mueang Kalasin, at Wat Pho Chai Lup Nai (วัดโพธิ์ชัยหลุบใน) (see Fig. 1 and Map 2), we came across an example of a distinctive style of sim, which we recognized as similar to several others in the immediate region documented by Wirot Sisuro in his 1993 research, *Isan Sim: Northeast Buddhist Holy Temples* (วิโรฒ ศรีสุโร) (Wirot 2536 (1993)). This was the style we were to come to identify as the Pao River/Kalasin style.

[4] ONAB only records wats in Thailand.

The Pao River /Kalasin style

Figure 1: Pao River/Kalasin style in its simplest form, the sim at Wat Pho Chai Lup Nai (วัดโพธิ์ชัยหลุบใน), Tambon Lup, Amphoe Mueang, Kalasin Province. Restored by the Fine Arts Department in 2017.

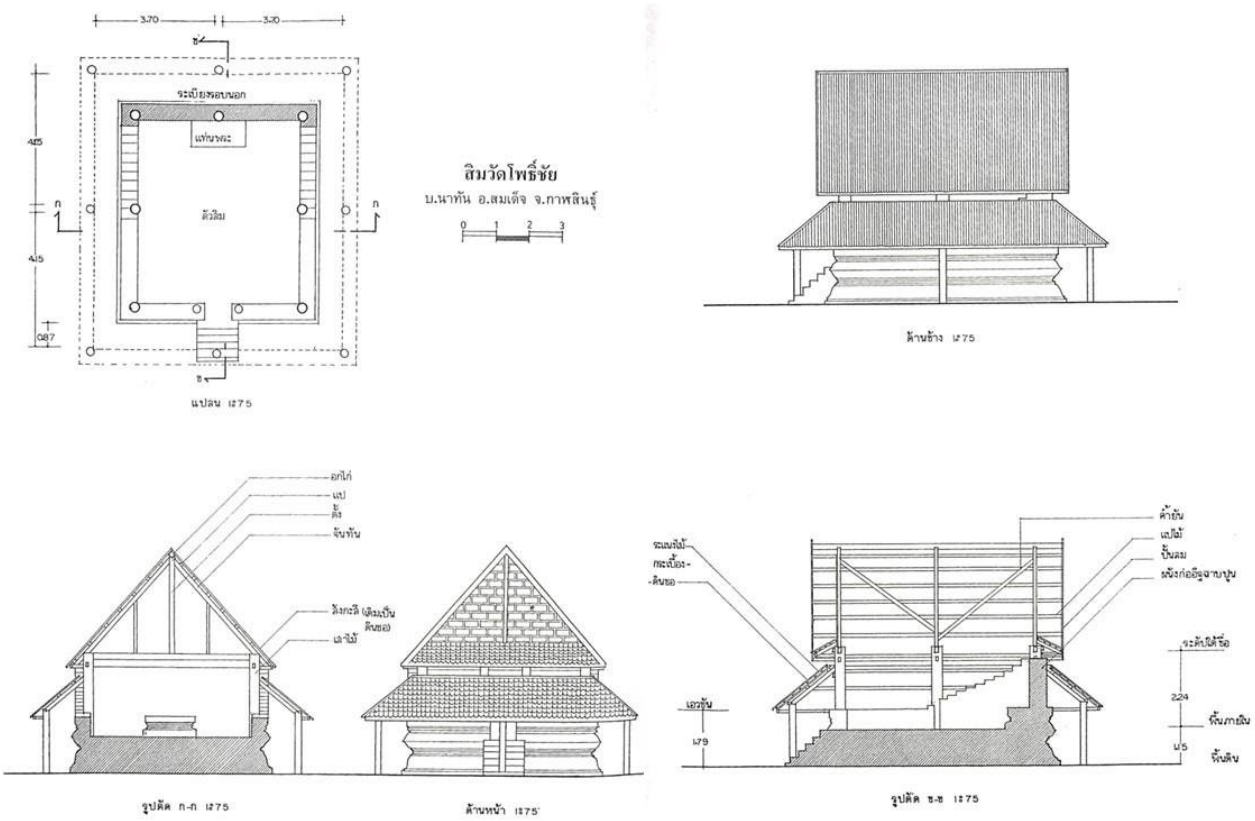


Figure 2: Left: The essential stylistic elements of the Pao River style are shown in architectural drawings of the old sim at Wat Pho Chai (วัดโพธิ์ชัย), Ban Natan, Amphoe Somdet, Kalasin Province. The sim was demolished and replaced in 1991. From: Isan Sim: Northeast Buddhist Holy Temples (Wirot 2536,130-133).

The Pao River/Kalasin style described here features a simple rectangular structure with low side walls. Sturdy wooden posts, embedded directly into the ground, support a load-bearing wooden framework. The shorter ends of the rectangle—typically spanning 4 to 5 metres—are generally constructed as single spans, each anchored by a post at either end. The longer sides consist of two or three similar-length spans, supported by additional posts positioned along the building's length. Together, these elements form two or three interior bays. At the top, the posts are joined by a network of wooden crossbeams that extend beyond the main structural line, creating generous eaves. A triangular wooden frame, set atop these beams, supports a simple saddle roof.

The space between and around the vertical posts is infilled with brickwork, often half a meter thick or more, and sealed with a mortar render. At the base, the bricks and mortar are sculpted into a decorative plinth, while the interior floor is elevated through infilling, rising a meter or more above ground level. Above this base, the brickwork may extend only partially up the surrounding walls. Typically, the wall opposite the entry—sheltering the raised altar platform—is constructed to reach up to, or near, the roofline. The adjacent walls of this rear bay, which also enclose the altar area, are similarly built. By contrast, the walls at the front and forward sides of the structure rarely extend beyond one third the height of the rear wall.

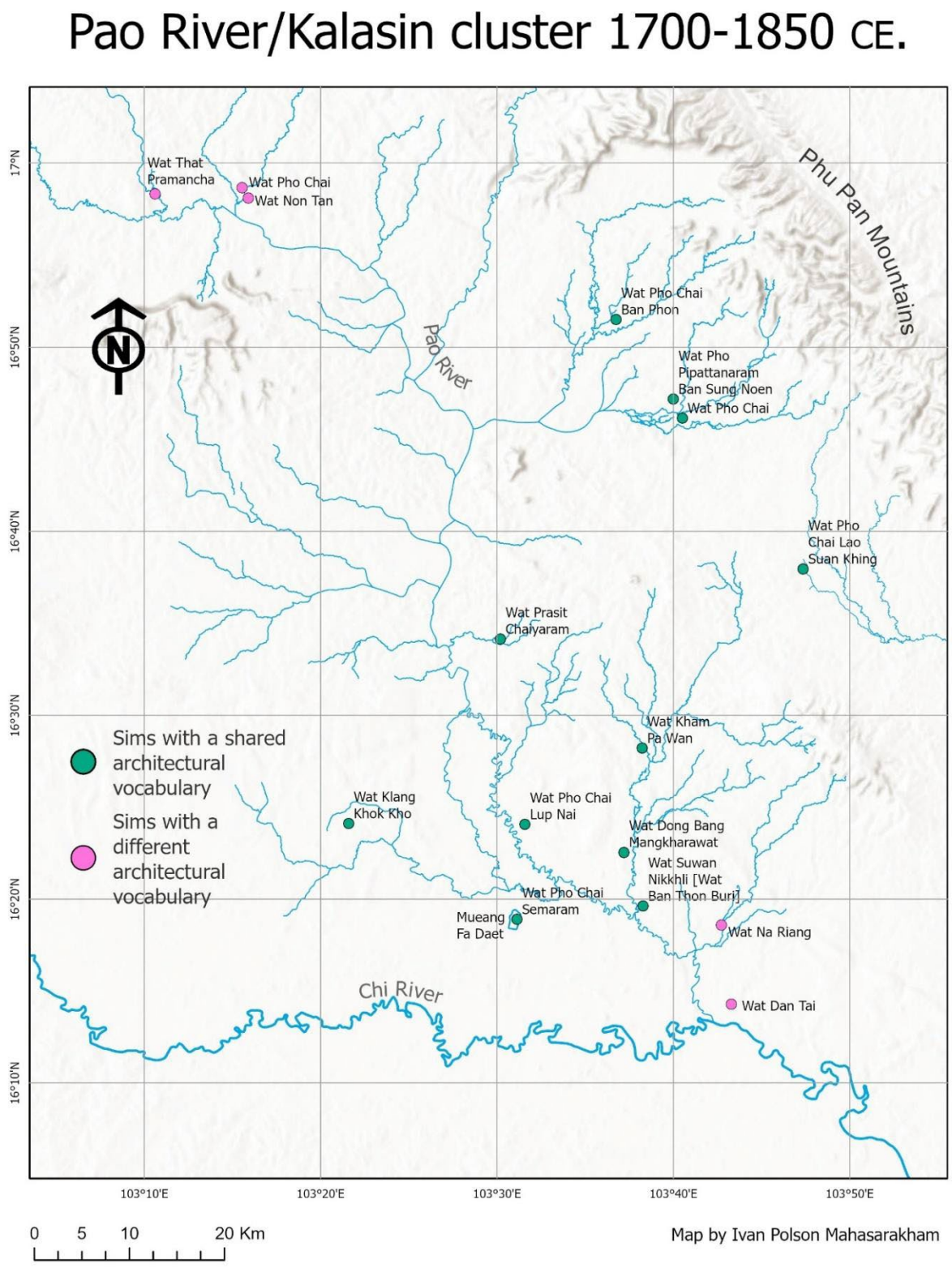
This architectural style is not exclusive to the Pao River valley; it occurs frequently in many locations across the middle Mekong region. Following Wirot's groundbreaking work, it is described in contemporary analyses as an example of Isan folk architecture (Wirot 2536 (1993), 99). Henri Parmentier, head of the archaeological department of the École française d'Extrême-Orient from 1904 until 1932, summarised all French research

on Lao religious architecture and devised a system of classification in his posthumously published book, *L'art du Laos* (Parmentier 1954, 183-192). The Pao River type would be classified as the simple type (based on the roof), Parmentier A, with one or two naves. This style was found in 81 of the 110 sites Parmentier documented. However, that must be qualified by the types he describes as open form (those with incomplete walls) and closed form (with full walls), choices he ascribes to the demands of the weather.

Expanding the Survey

Having identified a distinctive feature in Tambon Lub, the survey was expanded out to all the wats in the neighboring tambons and as needed, those further beyond. The task was to map continuities and find boundaries.

For the work presented in this paper, we drew upon surveys from seventy-three tambons, mostly in the Lam Pao Valley, and we identified a cluster of Pao River/Kalasin–style sim along part of the river valley.



Map 2: Pao River Valley, showing surviving historical wat architecture indexed by architectural style. Wats shown with green points constitute the Pao River cluster of a shared style, while those shown with pink dots indicate places following different architectural traditions. Rivers are overlaid to reflect the pre-1963 landscape, before the building of the Lam Pao Dam.

Unsurprisingly, greater concentrations of early settlement sites were found along the rivers, places naturally suited to rice growing. As the river terraces give way to uplands, which in the past would have been have dense and dangerous forests, settlements, and their wats, generally dated from later times.

These uplands form the natural eastern and western boundaries of the cluster (see Map 2). From the bank of the Lam Pao, moving east, the undulating upland beyond the river terraces soon gives way to the severe terrain of the Phu Pan Mountains, which limits easy settlement The land on the western bank of the Lam Pao is also predominantly undulating upland, though the Lam Pao Reservoir, completed in 1968, now inundates what was once good settled farmland.

Along the river valley itself cultural rather than natural transitions emerge. Upriver from Tambon Lub, into the Sri That area (see Map 2), the prevailing architectural style changes, with a quite different style, indicating an alternate local tradition (see Map 2 and Fig. 3).

Figure 3: Style transition into the Sri That region**.** Top: Wat Si That Pramancha (วัดศรีธาตุประมัญชา), Tambon Champi, Amphoe Si That, Udon Thani. Below: Wat Non Tan (วัดโนนตาล), Tambon Na Yung, Amphoe Si That, Udon Thani; and Wat Pho Cha (วัดโพธิ์ชัย), Tambon Na Yung, Amphoe Si That, Udon Thani.

Similarly downstream, approaching the Lam Pao's confluence with the Chi River (see Map 2) another style emerged, recognisable as related more to places in the Roi Et area (see Map 2 and Fig 4).

Figure 4: Style transition approaching the Lam Pao's confluence with the Chi River. Wat Umangkhala Na Riang (วัดอุมังคละนาเรียง) Tambon Samakkhi, Amphoe Rong Kham, Kalasin.

Between these localities of other traditions to the north and south, the area that this paper focuses on is a section of the river valley approximately 130 km in length. It lies between uplands to the east and west, and encompasses arable lands, extending to a width of approximately 30 to 40 km, although in some places it is much less.

The Lam Pao/Kalasin cluster

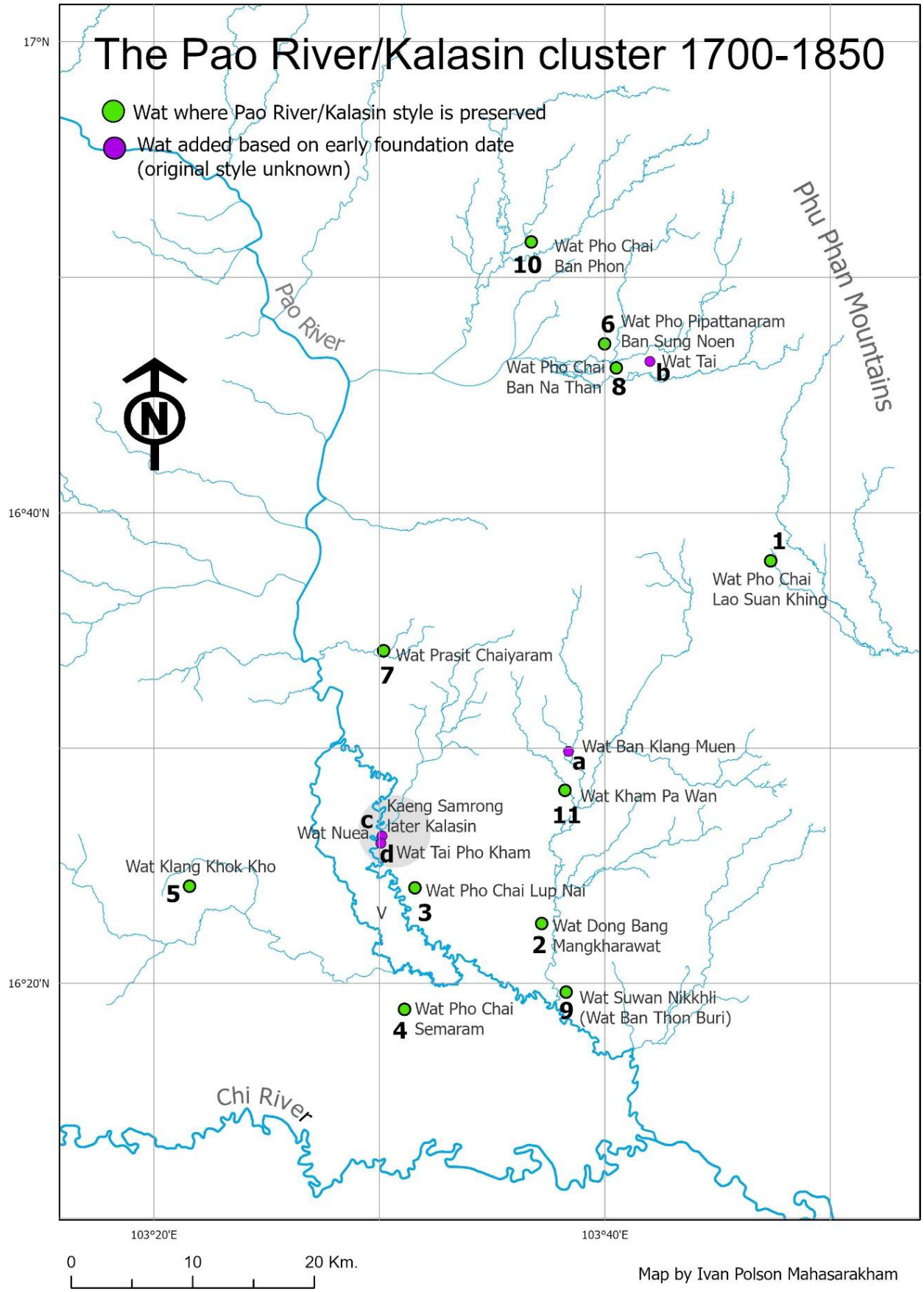
Within the area identified above, one hundred thirty-one wats were surveyed. Thirty-six of these were established in the modern era, post-1957CE (2500 BE),[5] when the government in Bangkok supported and sought to centralize wat architectural styles. A further seventy-five wats were logged as unknown; based on the recorded foundation dates, these must have had premodern era buildings, but we could find no evidence of their style. Most importantly, we were able to map and date nine locations within our defined area where early architecture with a shared architectural vocabulary survived. From the work of earlier researchers, based on reliable photographic evidence of style,

[5] 2500 BE (1956–57 CE) marked the 2500th anniversary of the Buddha's passing (*Mahaparinirvana*), widely commemorated across Buddhist countries with events emphasizing heritage, pilgrimage, and religious identity.

two additional locations were added.[6] These are shown as sites 1-11 on the map and table below.

Furthermore, to help connect these findings to extant historical narratives, four additional wats, known from historical records, but logged in our 'unknown' category have been added to the map and table. The validity of including these sites is further confirmed by their early foundation dates recorded in the wat registration database of the National Office of Buddhism. It should be noted that wat foundation dates are not necessarily the same as the dates when buildings were constructed.

[6] From: Wirot 2536 (1993).



Map 3: Dating places identified in the survey. See key Table 1 below.

Site	Wat name and location	Founded	Image
1	**Wat Pho Chai Lao Suan Khing (วัดโพธิ์ชัยเหล่าสวนขิง),** now **Wat Pho Chai Wanaram (วัดโพธิ์ชัยวนาราม)**: Tambon Song Pluea Amphoe Namon, Kalasin	*11th–16th centuries CE	See Fig. 5 below
a	**Wat Ban Klang Muen (วัดบ้านกลางหมื่น)**, now **Wat Pathom Patimakorn (วัดปฐมปฏิมากร)** (original style unknown): Tambon Klang Muen, Amphoe Mueang, Kalasin	1715	
b	**Wat Pho Wararam (วัดโพธิ์วราราม)**, known locally as Wat Tai (วัดใต้ [south wat]) (original style unknown): Tambon Mu Mon, Amphoe Somdet, Kalasin	1759	
2	**Wat Dong Bang Mangkharawat (วัดดงบังมังคลาวาส)**: Known locally as Wat Dong Bang Kao (วัดดงบังเก่า), Tambon Huai Pho, Amphoe Mueang, Kalasin	1757	See Fig. 7 below
3	**Wat Pho Chai Lup Nai (วัดโพธิ์ชัยหลุบใน)**: Tambon Lup, Amphoe Mueang Kalasin	1757	See Fig. 1
4	**Wat Pho Chai Simaran (วัดโพธิ์ชัยเสมาราม)** identified from photographs; old sim demolished in 1977: Tambon Non Sila, Amphoe Khong Chai, Kalasin	1793	Wirot 2536 pp. 101-103
c	**Wat Nuea (วัดเหนือ)** (original type unknown): Tambon Kalasin, Amphoe Mueang, Kalasin	1793	
5	**Wat Klang Khok Kho (วัดกลางโคกค้อ)**: Tambon Yang Talat, Amphoe Yang Talat, Kalasin	1792	See Fig. 9 below
6	**Wat Pho Pipattanaram Ban Sung Noen (วัดโพธิ์พิพัฒนารามบ้านสูงเนิน)**: Tambon Noen Yang, Amphoe Kham Muang, Kalasin	1797	See Fig. 6 below
d	**Wat Tai Pho Kham (วัดใต้โพธิ์ค้ำ)** (original type unknown): Tambon Kalasin, Amphoe Mueang, Kalasin	1798	
7	**Wat Nong So (วัดหนองสอ)** now **Wat Prasit Chaiyaram (วัดประสิทธิ์ไชยาราม):** Tambon Bueng Wichai, Amphoe Mueang, Kalasin	1845	See Fig. 8 below
8	**Wat Pho Chai [Ban Na Tan] (วัดโพธิ์ชัย),** old sim demolished 1991. Identified from architectural drawings and photographs (Wirot 2536, 130-133): Tambon Mu Mon, Amphoe Somdet, Kalasin	1897	See Fig 2
9	**Wat Suwan Nikkhli (วัดสุวรรณนิคคลี),** also known as Wat Ban Thon Buri (วัดบ้านธนบุรี): Tambon Phon Ngam, Amphoe Kamalasai, Kalasin	1913	See Fig 11 below
10	**Wat Pho Chai [Ban Phon] (วัดโพธิ์ชัย)**: Tambon Phon, Amphoe Kham Muang, Kalasin	1914	See Fig 10 below
11	**Wat Kham Pa Wan (วัดป่าคำหว่าน)**: Tambon Muang Na, Amphoe Don Chan, Kalasin	1927	See Fig 12 below

*Date from the history of the wat published onsite, official designation with ONAB registration as a wat in 2013.

Part 2: Places in Time — Background

Michel Lorrillard, in *Lao History Revisited*, argues "any attempt to write a solid history of the Middle Mekong Region remains premature" (Lorrillard 2006, 401). He points to difficulties with sources and methodologies.

Lao history, Lorrillard argues, has primarily been approached through manuscript sources, which are often treated as historically authentic despite lacking rigorous critique. The Lao chronicles, and we would add Isan Chronicles,[7] that form the basis for much of this history do not stem from a unified historiographic tradition but instead reflect fragmented and often disparate accounts. Accordingly, he argues for a minimalist approach—one that explicitly acknowledges the limitations of our documentation from the very start (Lorrillard 2006, 390-392).[8]

Furthermore, considering archaeological sources, he comments on the work of Henri Parmentier (1954), who conducted a broad survey of wat architecture:

> While Lao religious architecture has been described by Henri Parmentier, this was done with a singular lack of historical perspective, and his two-volume *Art du Laos* is a work whose true value has yet to be exploited. Parmentier's study was made at a time when knowledge of regional architectural models was minimal, and comparative analysis – notably with the architecture of neighbouring Thailand – was not yet possible due to the lack of references.
>
> There has never been any follow-up to Parmentier's work, and to this day the perception that we have of Lao religious monuments remains totally timeless, as if these structures had appeared from nowhere without undergoing any form of broader evolution, so that they are, in a sense, without any history. (Lorrillard 2006, 389)

This guided us to conduct our research at the most granular level and to engage broader historical narratives through close attention to specific places and times. By privileging the local, individual sites, architectural details, and community memory, we aimed to reconstruct historical processes from the ground up. This minimalist approach, rooted in micro-level observation, allowed us to challenge generalized accounts and instead foreground the contingent, layered nature of regional history.

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[7] *Chronicles of the Northeastern Provinces* (often referred to as the *Isan Chronicles*): In 1900, Prince Sapphasitthiprasong (พระเจ้าบรมวงศ์เธอ กรมหลวงสรรพสิทธิประสงค์), then governing Ubon Ratchathani, commissioned the collection of palm-leaf manuscripts and official documents from provincial towns across Isan. This collection, supplemented by oral histories and recollections from local informants, were compiled by Mom Amon Wongwichit (Mom Rajawongse Pathom) (หม่อมอมรวงษ์วิจิตร์ (หม่อมราชวงศ์ปฐม)), provincial secretary of Ubon Ratchathani, into the 25-volume Chronicles of the Northeastern Provinces (Toem Wiphakpotjanakit เติม วิภาคย์พจนกิจ 1956, 12-13). This collection also forms a basis for Toem's own work. Breazeale, echoing concerns similar to those voiced by Lorillard, warns that while rich in detail on mid-nineteenth century affairs, the semi-historical accounts prior to 1827 must be treated with caution (Breazeale 1975, 79-80).

[8] From the mid-19th century, scholars began distinguishing between two types of chronicles: *Tamnan* (ตำนาน) [legends or stories] and *Phongsawadan* (พงศาวดาร) [formal annals]. Both are chronological records with minimal analysis, but they differ in purpose, authorship, and scope (David K Wyatt 1976, 109). The Thai term *Prawattisat* (ประวัติศาสตร์) for history was formally introduced by Rama VI in the early 20th century. He wanted a Thai equivalent for the English word "history" that would be broader and more scholarly than the older term phongsawadan, which focused mainly on royal lineages.

Such an approach resonates with broader historiographical shifts. Local history emerged as an important consideration at the end of the last century, though Thongchai Winichakul describes it as a "Contested Domain" (Thongchai Winichakul 1995, 110), where local narratives were often pushed into moulds shaped by the perceived necessities of national history and the logic of the emerging nation. He highlights Srisakra Vallibhotama's work since 1966, which foregrounds the local "as a way to construct a polycentric or non-centric, and non-linear but contemporaneous history of Siam" (Thongchai Winichakul 1995, 107-110).[9]

The Pao River, 1695 to 1850

Establishing the temporal framework

With the space, the locations, and the dates defined, it is time to explore the stories the people of these places tell of their past, and to consider how those local understandings fit within broader historical narratives. Our analysis draws upon the chronicle traditions, recognizing that for our period, the late 1700s and beyond, there are multiple overlapping chronicle traditions. This plurality lends confidence to the broad outlines of the events they describe and provides a historical texture that helps anchor our inquiry.

The first observation is that these eleven places, sharing a common architectural style, have foundation dates that fit broadly into three identifiable time periods identified in the chronicle tradition.

The first group, from before 1700 to 1757 (sites 1–3 plus a–b), represents a time coming into the modern period but prior to the subjugation of the independent city kingdoms of the Middle Mekong in 1778 and 1779 by the invading armies of the Thonburi, later Rattanakosin (Bangkok), kingdom.

The second group, from 1792 to 1798 (sites 4–7 plus c–d), reflects some of the changes wrought after the region was forced to reorganize itself under the suzerainty of the Bangkok king.

The third group, from 1897 through to 1927 (sites 8–11), echoes the time when the Bangkok government took an increasingly firm and direct hand in the affairs of the Middle Mekong region, leading ultimately to the creation of the modern nation-state of Siam, later known as Thailand.

Forces Shaping Migration and Settlement

The earliest reliably recorded wat foundation date in our mapped cluster is Wat Ban Klang Muen (see Map 3 Site *a*), established in 1715. The presence of a settlement at Ban Klang Muen is corroborated by later documentary evidence related to the founding

[9] For Northeast Thailand see: Srisakra Vallibhotama (ศรีศักร วัลลิโภดม) (1990). แอ่งอารยธรรมอีสาน: แฉหลักฐานโบราณคดี พลิกโฉมหน้าประวัติศาสตร์ไทย (*The Isan Civilizational Basin: Exposing Ancient Case Evidence That Transforms the Face of Thai History*). Bangkok, Matichon.

of the town of Kalasin (Toem 2546 (2003), 140-203). Places like Ban Klang Muen are memorialised in chronicles because of the role they play in various dynastic history narratives important to political power then and now.

However, other sites, such as Wat Pho Chai Lao Suan Khing (see Map 3, Site 1), are understood to have predated these documented locations yet they are absent from the historical record. This is likely because they emerged from different circumstances, quiet organic processes of settlement. Such places and people were not pertinent to the chroniclers' task of documenting royal activities.

a) Quiet Currents of Settlement: Sites 1, 6, and 8 with Additional Locations by Foundation Date

The establishment of Wat Pho Chai Lao Suan Khing, at the site now known as Wat Pho Chai Wanaram, likely exemplifies the slow and peaceful migration of Lao people into the region. This migration was an osmotic process, known as *ha na di* (หานาดี) [looking for good farmland]. It is described by Hayao Fukui as a process in which times of peace and security fosters population growth in agricultural communities, which, in turn, exerts pressure on available land (Fukui 1993, 352-369). This pressure was resolved by the rising generation emigrating in search of new farmland. Over many centuries, this process drove the gradual diffusion of Lao communities along the valleys of the Mekong River and its tributaries and continued into quite recent times (Angel 1988, 251-256).

This progression can be glimpsed through the signboards at Wat Pho Chai Wanaram, where the village recounts its history:

> Wat Pho Chai Wanaram was originally called Wat Pho Chai Lao Suan Khing. There is no evidence of when it was first built, but it is assumed that it was a temple built in the Dvaravati period, during the 12th-16th Buddhist centuries.[10] This was the era in which this community had the highest prosperity. This place used to be a city called Mueang Kapilavastu. The people of the community worked in agriculture. Most of them liked to grow chilies and ginger, so the name of this village was Ban Suan Phrik, Suan Khing (บ้านสวนพริกสวนขิง).

For reasons unknown the site was abandoned. Local historians recount tales of a ferocious tiger and the sudden appearance of a deep chasm that isolated the old village.[11] In later times, people in a newer village, Ban Hua Ngua (บ้านหัวงัว) [Ban Bullock Head],[12] located just five hundred meters away…

> …saw that this place has been important since ancient times. During the Songkran Festival celebration, the villagers came out each year to bring water to the Buddha image that was enshrined inside this ancient temple. Later, the people from Ban Hua Ngua came out to renovate the temple. They made a place of worship, and it became the residence of monks and novices. Therefore, it is called a monk's residence, Wat Pho Chai Wanaram Lao Suwan Khing.

It was registered as a temple on August 30, 2013, with the name Wat Pho Chai Wanaram.

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[10] Unsurprisingly, as a place outside of a chronicle tradition, this dating has problems. However, the dates can be interpreted to mean 'long ago' or 'deep in the past', by referencing common contemporary understandings of ways to describe the past. The Dvaravati period is usually understood as the 6th to the 11th century or approximately the 12th-16th Buddhist centuries.

[11] Interview with Mr. Khi Ketsanchai, aged 80, and Mrs. Rawiwan Kuawong, aged 58, conducted at Wat Sri Sum Ang Khlaram Hua Ngua on October 5, 2024, with Dr. Payong Moonvapee.

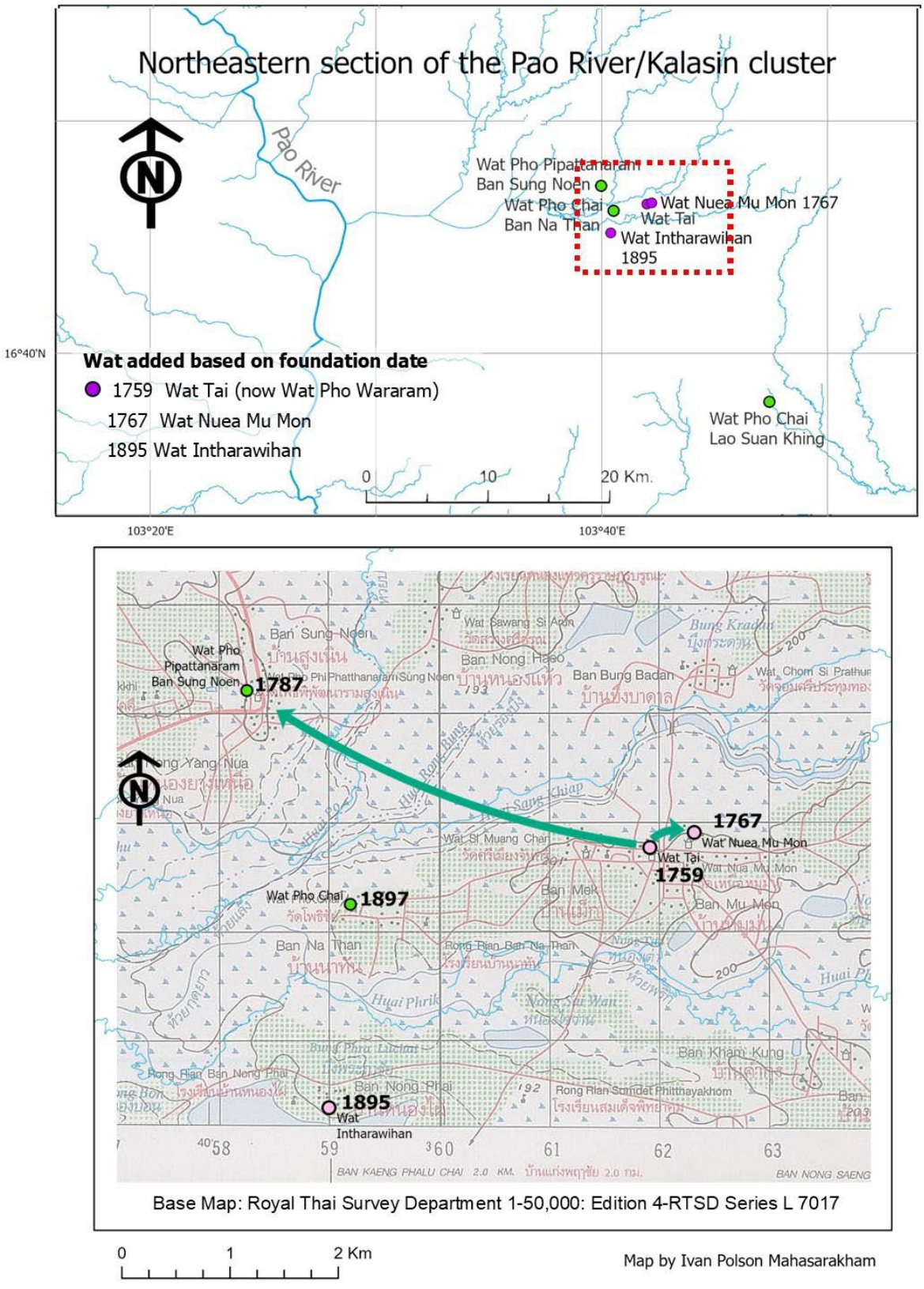
[12] The naming Ban Hua Ngua [bullock head village] again references the ferocious tiger which took cattle and left the skulls, the only part it could not eat, there in the forest.

Figure 5: Old sim at Wat Pho Chai Lao Suan Khing, now protected within a new sala [pavilion].

We can further investigate this ongoing process of migration by examining sites 6, 8, and b (see Map 4) in the northern segment of the Pao River/Kalasin cluster. This group is situated along the Huai Kut Yao tributary system.

The earliest recorded foundation date among this group of wats is 1759, for Wat Tai (วัดใต้หมู่ม่น) [south Mu Mon], now known as Wat Pho Wararam (วัดโพธิ์วราราม), located in Mu Mon. The settlement occupies flood-safe elevated terrain at the margin of the cultivable terraces along the Sang Khiap River (see Map 4 below). Within eight years, Mu Mon had extended approximately 400 meters to the north, with Wat Nuea Mu Mon (วัดเหนือหมู่ม่น) [North Wat] founded in 1767.

Within thirty years, scarcely a generation later, a new settlement emerged across the river terraces, where Wat Pho Pipattanaram Ban Sung Noen was established in 1787 (Site 6) (see Map 4 and Fig. 6).



Map 4: Top**:** Detail from Map 3 showing the northeastern part of the Pao River/Kalasin cluster, centring on the Huai Kut Yao riparian system. Below**:** Dramatically expands inset box upper map and incorporates topographic base map, showing settlement and village formation patterns utilizing higher, flood-safe land for dwellings, with immediately adjacent flooding river terraces that could be easily developed into paddy fields.

Wat Pho Pipattanaram Ban Sung Noen (site 6)

Figure 6: Wat Pho Pipattanaram Ban Sung Noen

According to the National Office of Buddhism database, Wat Pho Pipattanaram Ban Sung Noen was established in 1787 [13]; however, the only recorded Wisukhamsima pertains to a new sim constructed in 2011. The 1994 first edition of *History of temples throughout the kingdom* (*ประวัติวัดทั่วราชอาณาจักร*) agrees with the founding date but records the granting of a Royal Wisukhamsima on 1 April 1877 (Department of Religious Affairs 2537 (1994), 135). However, based on the story of the sim displayed at the wat, these discrepancies may be the result of bureaucratic tidying up.

Phonchai Thesarin (พรชัย เทศารินทร์), writing the wat signage on August 12, 2018, stated that the sim was constructed in 1797 as a brick building with local clay plaster. It has been renovated many times, most recently in 2018, in that instance at a cost of 131,933 baht.

When we first photographed the sim in 2009, it was in a simpler earlier form but needed some repair work. During the 2018 renovation, posts were added just beyond the outer wall to support the roof structure, a new floor was poured, and it was repainted.

Wat Pho Chai (Ban Na Tan) (site 8)

Through the following one hundred years, further outlying settlements founded wats. At Ban Na Tan, in 1897, Wat Pho Chai was founded (see Map. 3 Site 8 and Fig. 2).

[13] http://binfo.onab.go.th/Temple/Temple-Detail-View.aspx?search=&pagesize=20&pageno=1&sortexpr=&sortorder=&NameTemp=&TypeTemp=&Sect=&Province=46&District=4610&SubDistrict=461009&action=view&tid=35901&from=Temple-List-View.aspx accessed 06/02/2023.

The date of building the sim is unknown, but before it was demolished in 1991, it was photographed and documented (Wirot 2536 (1993), 130-133).

Similarly, in 1895, less than 2 km south of Wat Pho Chai, Wat Intharawihan (วัดอินทรวิหาร) (see Map 5) was founded, although there is no evidence or record of what was built there at the time.

b) Conflict and Upheaval as Drivers of Migration and Settlement

In addition to the gradual diffusion, major traumatic events also uprooted and dispersed populations. Beyond the recurring wars and conflicts that swept across mainland Southeast Asian kingdoms, dynastic uncertainty in the Middle Mekong Kingdoms frequently triggered factional competition within royal courts. Failure in these political contests was perilous: those on the losing side, especially surviving rivals, posed significant threats to the victorious faction. As a result, unsuccessful leaders and their retinues often departed the royal city to reestablish themselves elsewhere. This pattern of disruption was particularly pronounced in the Kingdom of Lan Xang Vieng Chan.[14]

Background: 1695-1735: Peace and Stability Give Way to War and Conflict.

According to the Lao chronicles, the mid to late-17th century marked an extended era of peace and stability for the kingdoms of the middle Mekong region, sustained by the long reign of Suriyavongsā (r. 1638–1695). His death without a strong adult heir sparked a violent succession struggle, partially resolved in 1698 when his nephew, Xai Ong Ve (r. 1698–1735), supported by a Vietnamese force, seized the throne. Raised in Tonkin, where his family had taken refuge during earlier conflicts, Xai Ong Ve ruled from Viang Chan, then nominally the capital of Lan Xang, as a vassal of Tonkin's Trịnh Lords (Stuart-Fox 1998, 100-101). Xai Ong Ve's ascension to the throne, with a tenuous hold on power, ushered in a century marked by disorder and violence for the lands of the Middle Mekong region.

The First Large Disruptive Dispersal of People

Following Xai Ong Ve's accession to the throne in Vieng Chan, Suriyavongsa's eldest daughter, Sumangkhula—pregnant at the time—was compelled to seek refuge. She fled south under the protection of the revered monk Phra Kru Pone Samet and his followers, [15] traveling with them to Mueang Sikhottabong[16] and eventually continuing down the Mekong River to Khong Island (ດອນຄອນ) (Baird 2025, 16) in the Si Phan Don (ສີ່ພັນດອນ) region, now part of present-day Laos near the Cambodian border. The refugees endured persistent pursuit and harassment by forces loyal to Vieng Chan, but finally gained safety and security in 1713, when Sumangkhula's now-adult son, Nokasat, was installed as ruler of a third independent Lao kingdom—the Kingdom of Champasak (Stuart-Fox 1998, 102-103; Baird 2025, 17).

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[14] Viang Chan, once the most populous city in the central Mekong basin, was destroyed by the armies of Bangkok between 1769 and 1828. After 1893 it was rebuilt and renamed Vientiane by the French colonial administration as the capital of Laos, the new country they created.

[15] M.L. Manich Jumsai tells us 3,333 people. Manich Jumsai, and Jotisalikorn Chamsai. 2000. *History of Laos, including the history of Lannathai and Chiangmai*. 4th Edition Fully Revised ed. Bangkok: Chalermnit, 168-169.

[16] Mueang Sikhottabong is the name of an old Lao polity centered on That Panom (Stuart-Fox 2001).

It is possible that the early-dated settlement recorded in our survey—Ban Klang Muen, 1715—was established by a group of Phra Kru Pone Samet's followers, who had separated from the main contingent and crossed the Phu Phan mountains to evade forces loyal to Vieng Chan. Although the chronology and geographic proximity are suggestive, no surviving records confirm this.[17] Furthermore, there is no extant architectural evidence at Wat Ban Klang Muen dating from this period.

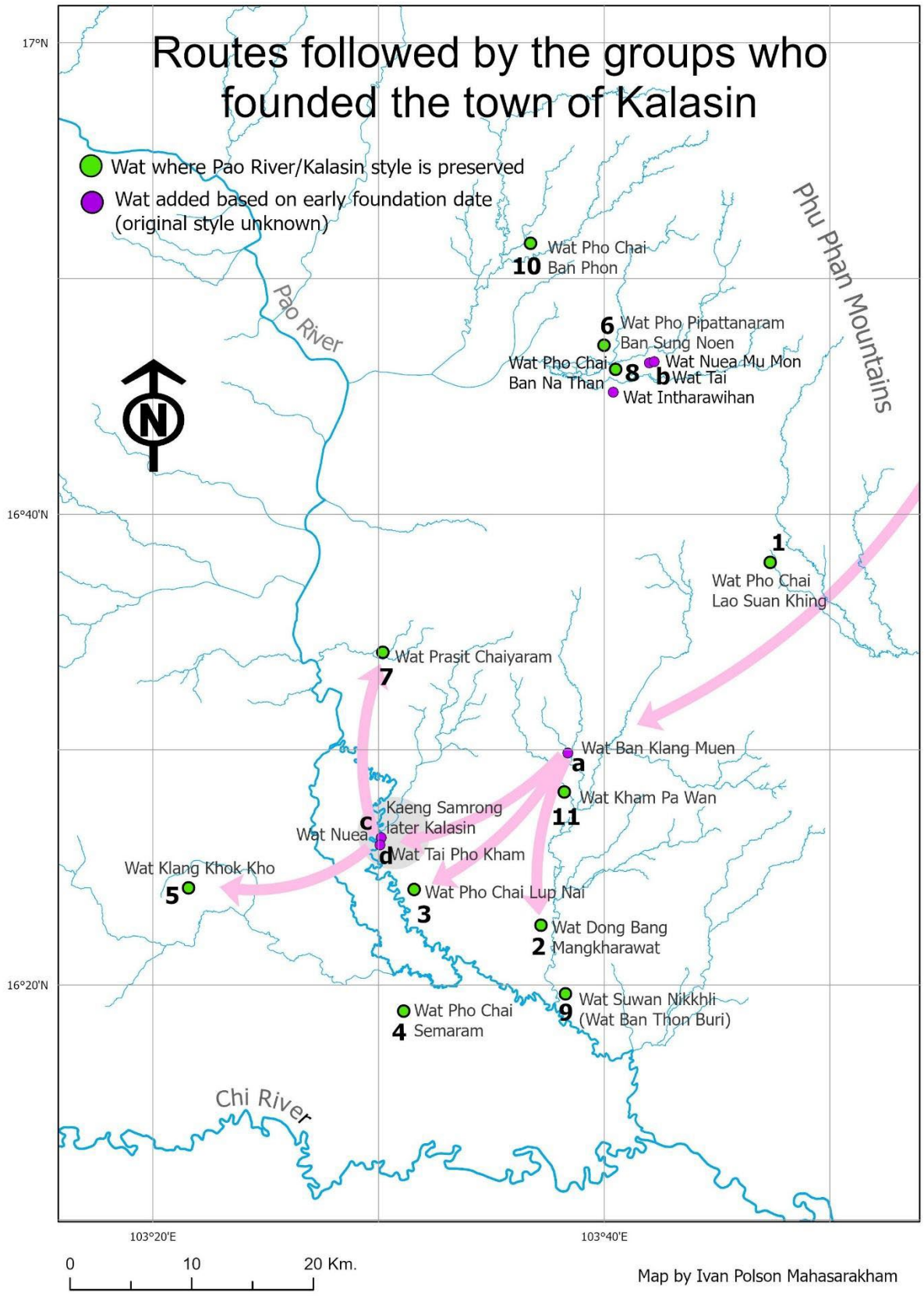
A second large disruptive dispersal of people

After Xai Ong Ve's death in 1735, his son, Siribunnyasan, did not ascend to the throne. Instead, Xai Ong Ve's half-brother, Ong Long (r. 1735-1760), assumed power. Court intrigues persisted throughout his reign, culminating in 1860 when, upon Ong Long's death, the throne returned to Xai Ong Ve's son, Siribunnyasan (r. 1760-1779) (Stuart-Fox 1998, 105-106).

Once again, court intrigue fractured the kingdom. An influential family, led by Chao Phra Ta and Chao Phra Vo, initially supported Siribunnyasan, but feeling inadequately rewarded for their loyalty, fell out with him. Leaving Vieng Chan with their followers, they established a new kingdom near Nong Bua Lamphu. Constantly harassed over three years by Siribunyasarn's forces, they dispersed, with many fleeing down the Mekong River. Eventually, they reestablished themselves at Don Mot Daeng (ดอนมดแดง), on the Mun River (now an amphoe in Ubon Province). From there, they aligned themselves with the Thonburi/Bangkok Kingdom and ultimately became the founders and ruling families of Ubon Ratchathani.

A faction from this group did not flee south down the Mekong but rather moved inland, away from the river, crossing over the Phu Phan mountains and, after some time, established the centre that became known as Kalasin Town.

[17] There is a long and mystical tamnan associated with the wat (Nongyao Thrisadee (นางสาวนงเยาว์ ทฤษฎี) 2011) but it adds only limited historical information.



Map 5: Routes of the founders of Kalasin Town.

There are several tellings of the foundation of Kalasin Town. While they agree on the central narrative, they vary in detail. For this paper, we rely on two accounts. The first is contained in Toem Wiphakpotjanakit's *History of Isan* (*ประวัติศาสตร์อีสาน*)**.** The other is an account published on signboards in Ban Klang Muen. This town, already mentioned above, was central to the story of the foundation of Kalasin Town; the local telling adds a richness of detail missing from Toem's sparse chronicle style.

During or in conjunction with the rebellion and exodus from Viang Chan led by Phra Vo and Phra Ta, Chao Pha Khao emerged as another notable figure among the dissenting clans. He had a further dispute with the ruler of Viang Chan, alleging that a son of Chao Siribunyasarn had committed adultery with, and impregnated, his niece (Toem 2546 (2003), 190-203). This child of royal blood, Chao Somphamit, would later become the founder of Kalasin.

Continuing with the story as told by Toem, Chao Pha Khao's group first found shelter at Ban Phanna (บ้านพรรณา) and Ban Pha Khao (บ้านผ้าขาว), in what is now in Sakon Nakhon Province. The defeat and dispersal of the Nong Bua Lamphu rebels left Phra Chao Khao's group directly exposed to the full vigour of the Vieng Chan forces.

Turning now to the history as conveyed in the signs at Ban Klang Muen, paraphrased here:

> Phra Chao Khao and Chao Somphamit [now a teenager or adult], fearing the armies of King Siribunyasarn of Vieng Chan, gathered their people together to migrate across the Phu Phan Mountain range. They travelled for days and months, through forests and jungles, enduring hardships and hunger. Some of the young, old, and sick died during the journey. Finally, they reached a place in the forest which Chao Somphamit felt was suitable to protect them from their enemies. He rested his troops in a large grove of *yang* trees and surveyed the remaining people, now numbering only five thousand. He determined that this area was suitable for settlement, and the place was named after the number of survivors.
>
> The name 'Ban Klang Muen' (บ้านกลางหมื่น) translates as 'half [กลาง the middle part of] the original (หมื่น) ten thousand.

It's likely that a settlement already existed at or near the location that later became Ban Klang Muen. As we noted earlier, the foundation date of Wat Ban Klang Muen is listed as 1715, preceding the estimated arrival of this group of refugees by several decades.

Returning to Toem's account, the group, now under the guidance of Chao Somphamit, stayed in Ban Klang Muen for a brief period, possibly one to two years. The small river and flood plain could not support their growing numbers, so they relocated 17 km further west to a place that would be a more sustainable environment for their community. That place, Kaeng Samrong (see Map 5),[18] offered plentiful rich agricultural land nestled between the Song Pue Forest [19]and the banks of the Pao River.

Before tracing Chao Somphamit's movement to Ban Kaeng Samrong, the foundation dates and architectural styles of wats in the vicinity of Ban Klang Muen uncovered in our research suggest a more nuanced narrative than the chronicle's simplified account of "the leader and his followers".

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[18] Kaeng (แก่ง), rapids or waterfall, provided clean aerated water good for drinking and not a stagnant mosquito pond., This pond was surrounded by Samrong trees (ต้นสำโรง), *Sterculia foetida Linn*, in the family Sterculiaceae, with stinking flowers and seeds that produce lace oil.

[19] Forest of trees trees called *Tabaek* (ต้นตะแบก) in the middle Mekong region but known as *Inotnin* (อินทนิล) in central Thailand. *Lagerstroemia floribunda* is also known as Thai crape myrtle.

Wat Dong Bang Mangkharawat (site 2)

Ban Klang Muen is on the Huai Kaeng. About 15 km south along the Huai Kaeng is Ban Dong Bang Kao (บ้านดงบังเก่า) [Old Ban Dong Bang] and its wat, Wat Dong Bang Mangkharawat (see Map 5). The wat was founded in 1757 and received the Wisukhamsima in 1842 (Department of Religious Affairs 2537 (1994), 43), suggesting that the sim, which is very much of the Pao River type, was built at or around that time (see Fig. 7). It is likely that, before the main group had left Ban Klang Muen, others had already struck out looking for land to sustain them and their families. The wat today is still very much of the forest. The road approaching from the west is through dense plantations of rubber trees (which could have been natural forest until recently). At the wat, all around and deep behind the cluster of buildings that lie along the front fence, a dense and wild forest has been preserved.

Figure 7: Old sim at Wat Dong Bang Mangkharawat, now covered by a new pavilion.

Wat Pho Chai Lup Nai (site 3)

Similarly, moving 17 km southwest from the valley of the Huai Kaeng to the Pao River valley, we find Ban Lup (บ้านหลุบ), where Wat Pho Chai Lup Nai (see Fig 1) was established in 1757 (Department of Religious Affairs 2537 (1994), 131). The old sim at the wat, as noted in the Department of Fine Arts signage on site, was built in the 18th century.[20] Such an early foundation date again suggests it was established just before or around the time Chao Somphamit's group moved to Ban Kaeng Samrong. The wat in its village certainly reflects early origins. The boundary of the wat is irregular, almost circular, curving and bowing the roads that surround it, shaping the village that evolved. The old sim was renovated by the Department of Fine Arts in 2017.

[20] Based on dating from the sima stones.

Returning now to the Kalasin Town narrative, in Ban Kaeng Samrong, Chao Somphamit and his followers found a haven that was both safe and bountiful and their community flourished. Unfortunately, due to the subsequent significance of this location as Kalasin, much of the evidence from this early period has been overlaid and the historical record reshaped to emphasize momentous events of later times.

Background: After 1767, the middle Mekong region under the suzerainty of the Thonburi, later Rattanakosin (Bangkok) kingdom.

When the Burmese destroyed Ayutthaya in 1767, a swift recovery appeared unlikely. Yet by 1771, Phra Chao Taksin (r. 1767–1782), a former regional official, had reconstituted the old Ayutthayan kingdom—relocating its center and renaming it after the new capital, Thonburi.

The new king immediately set about consolidating control over his frontiers. In 1775, the north was secured with the capture of Chiang Mai from the Burmese—a territory that remains part of the Kingdom of Thailand. Attention then shifted to the Middle Mekong region, where, in Phra Chao Taksin's assessment, Chao Siribunnyasan continued to placate his Burmese suzerains and had proven duplicitous in his support of the Thonburi Kingdom. Acting decisively, in late 1778, Taksin dispatched two armies to confront the Kingdom of Viang Chan.

The first army, led by Chao Phraya Chakri (Thong Duang) (b. 1737, later Rama I, r. 1782–1809), marched overland via Nakhon Ratchasima before advancing northward to Viang Chan. The second army, under the command of Chakri's younger brother, Chao Phraya Surasi (Bunma) (b. 1743, later Rama II, r. 1809–1824), ascended the Mekong River, subduing first the Champasak Kingdom and then a succession of smaller city-kingdoms enroute to join the assault on Viang Chan.

After a four-month siege in 1779, Viang Chan surrendered (Wyatt 1999, 142-143; Simms and Simms 1999, 122-123; Stuart-Fox 1998, 112-113). The Thonburi armies had irrevocably dismantled the long established order of the Middle Mekong region.

It was not surprising that Chao Somphamit and his followers, who had only recently fled the wrath of Chao Siribunnyasan, would readily find common cause with his adversary. The decision to align with the invaders meant that death, destruction, and probable enslavement passed quietly around the communities of the Pao River valley.

With the region fully subjugated, the conquerors faced the challenge of governing their new domains from afar. Traditional elite structures had been destroyed, discredited, or diminished, paving the way for former dissenting refugees—once in hiding or fighting for survival—to reemerge across the basin under Bangkok's patronage as a counter-elite (Ngaosyvathn and Ngaosyvathn 1998, 42-43). Loyal local leaders who could be trusted to govern became Bangkok's clients.

By 1782, Chao Phraya Chakri was the king (Rama I r 1782–1809) and the royal centre had moved across the Chao Phraya River to Rattanakosin (Bangkok). In 1793, Chao Somphamit and his deputy were present at a royal audience in Bangkok. Ban Kaeng Samrong was elevated in status to become Mueang Kalasin. Chao Somphamit was granted the name *Phraya Chaiyasunthorn* (พระไชยสุนทร) and appointed the first ruler of Mueang Kalasin, controlling a large expanse of territory that would, with some later boundary changes, become Kalasin Province (Toem 2546 (2003), 191).

The older wat in Kalasin town (sites c Wat Nuea 1793 and site d Wat Tai Pho Kham 1798)

Dating the earliest temples in Kalasin town presents several challenges. While official records state that they were founded in 1793 or later—following Kalasin's formal designation by Bangkok—evidence from Ban Klang Muen and Ban Kaeng Samrong, discussed above, suggests earlier patterns of settlement and the likely establishment of wats. Although beyond the scope of this paper, the 1793 date may reflect a bureaucratic effort to align local histories with the symbolic origins of the new order. Moreover, the dramatic elevation of Kalasin Town's status prompted extensive development and redevelopment, which has largely obscured the original architectural features of these central wats.

Sadly, for many of the people of the greater Middle Mekong region, the 19th century proved to be just as turbulent as the one that preceded it. However, communities in the Pao River Basin, now aligned with Bangkok, were largely spared from the conflicts. Our research, however, did uncover an interesting current: as Kalasin town expanded in both size and stature, many settler groups moving outward from this emerging center established wat in their new villages, which retained the architectural styles of the earlier period.

Wat Prasit Chaiyaram (site 7)

Sixteen km north of Kalasin Town is Wat Nong So, now called Wat Prasit Chaiyaram (see Fig. 8). Again, the wat community published their history in signage at the wat, this time in Thai, Lao, and a version in English, which we gloss here:

> The history of Nong So Village [the village of the wat] has been passed down from generation to generation. It is said Nong So Village was established by a group from Vieng Chan. During a time of conflict, they fled from Vieng Chan, pursued by King Siribunnyasan of Vieng Chan, as they made their way down the Mekong River.
>
> Around 1767, they settled in Klang Muen Village, which translates to "half of 10 thousand". The village was named this because it had more than 5,000 inhabitants. Two years later, they discovered new, fertile land at Kang Samrong, which is now the location of the city pillar of Kalasin in Song Pluey Village.
>
> A portion of the population then left to work in Nong So Village between 1798 and 1825. The land around Nong So Village is shaped like an upside-down pan with a brook to the west, so was suitable for agriculture and not far from Kalasin.
>
> Due to the abundance and fertility of the land in Nong So Village, people continued to move in…
>
> The name *Nong So*, which means "swamp of soft chalk", is believed to have been derived from the swamp south of the villages. According to the elders, this swamp had soft chalk that was used for writing on slates.

The wat today is a busy, beautifully maintained place. The old sim was built in 1845 and according to the sima-shaped sandstone inscription on its western side, was constructed by Mueang Saen (เมืองแสน) [local leader] and his family and relatives, Huaku Phuttha Chamanee (หัวครูพุดทาชามณี) [leader of the local monks], and Ta Saeng (ตาแสง) [headmaster].[21] However, given the need to make the bricks, bring sand from nearby

[21] http://www.qrcode.finearts.go.th/index.php/th/historic-site/hs-kalasin/item/462-hs-kalasin-011 accessed 24 May 2024.

riverbeds, and burn lime to create mortar, the job would have involved most of the villagers. The sim has been restored by the Fine Arts Department.

Figure 8: Old sim at Wat Prasit Chaiyaram

Wat Klang Khok Kho (site 5)

Another old sim built in the tradition of the Pao River communities lies sixteen kilometres west of Kalasin Town, at Wat Klang Khok Kho in Yang Talad (See fig 9). The historical records for this wat vary slightly, reflecting a borderland duality. The official narrative focuses on the role of Kalasin and dates the wat foundation as 1820. Signage installed by the local people offers a slightly more complex history.

According to this local account, around 1789. Pho Yai Phrom (พ่อใหญ่พรม) and his followers migrated from Chaiyaphum to establish a settlement at Ban Kho, seeking to remain under the authority of Vieng Chan. This would not be unexpected: the Thonburi kingdom's first incursion onto the Khorat Plateau was in 1768 to subjugate the rulers of Phimai (Wood 1924, 256-257), a precursor to the full-scale invasion of 1778. By the 1780s, numerous refugee groups were likely moving eastward to evade the expanding power of the new lords.

Close to Ban Kho, another village, Ban Khok, was established by settlers with ties to Kalasin. By 1792, under the guidance of a monk from Chaiyaphum, the two communities came together to build a shared wat. They named it Wat Klang Khok Kho, referencing its location in the middle (*klang*, กลาง) between Ban Khok and Ban Kho. The wat was modest in scale, consisting of a single teaching hall and a monks' residence. [22]

[22] Research from Khon Kaen University, Faculty of Architecture Khon Kaen University in 1996. Accessed 25/05/2024. https://cac.kku.ac.th/%E0%B8%A7%E0%B8%B1%E0%B8%94%E0%B8%81%E0%B8%A5%E0%B8%B2%E0%B8%87%E0%B9%82%E0%B8%84%E0%B8%81%E0%B8%84%E0%B9%89%E0%B8%AD/

The official record, however, dates the temple's foundation to 1820, when Phra Kru Ket (พระครูเขต)—the first documented Chao Awat—led the villagers in constructing the sim that still stands today (Department of Religious Affairs 2537 (1994), 12).

An intriguing sidelight emerges in a story linked to the construction of the sim, illustrating how, after only a few decades of peace and stability, Kalasin Town had come to be seen as both prosperous and influential. According to the account, Phra Kru Ket appealed to Mother Thongkham, a wealthy woman in Kalasin, for assistance, and many devout residents joined her in making merit. Together, they travelled to Wat Klang Khok Kho, bringing with them two jars of gold to contribute to the building of the sim. The original plan was to bury the gold in the *bu sim* (บือสิม) [Isan: the navel, or middle, of the sim], but they arrived too late and ended up burying it somewhere else. The precise location remains unknown to this day.[23]

In 1997, the Faculty of Architecture at Khon Kaen University launched a collaborative restoration project involving students, faculty, local residents, and the Fine Arts Department to rehabilitate the sim. The restoration was carried out with careful attention to the techniques of the original builders and succeeded in preserving much of the original wood carving on site, even in areas where the material could not be reused. The project was recognized with a conservation award in 2001.

Figure 9: Old sim at Wat Klang Khok Kho

Into the Era of the Nation-State: The Persistence of Local Choice (Sites 9-10–11)

Continuing the trend discussed immediately above, well into the twentieth century, Pao River valley communities continued to build sim in the older style.

[23] Ibid.

Wat Pho Chai Ban Phon (site 9)

Figure 10: The sim at Wat Pho Chai Ban Phon.

Ten kilometres upriver from Wat Pho Phi Pipattanaram Ram Sung Noen, in Ban Phon, Wat Pho Chai Ban Phon (see Fig. 10) was founded in 1914. By 1923, the wat community, despite having other new stylistic options available, chose to build a sim in the old style, which was granted its Wisukhamsima in 1924 (Department of Religious Affairs 2537 (1994), 122-123).

Wat Suwan Nikkhli (site 10)

Figure 11: The old sim at Wat Suwan Nikkhli (Wat Ban Thon Buri).

At the southern edge of our cluster, six kilometres downriver along the Huai Kaeng from Wat Dong Bang Mangkharawat, in Ban Thon Buri, Wat Suwan Nikkhli (also known as Wat Ban Thon Buri; see Fig. 10) was founded in 1913. Although there is no information on how soon after its foundation the older-style *sim* was constructed, it served the wat until it was replaced by a Bangkok-style building in 1979.

Wat Kham Pa Wan (site 11)

Finally, just three kilometers southwest of Ban Klang Muen, where this story began, stands Wat Kham Pa Wan, with its older-style sim (see Fig. 12). Located in Village No. 4 of Mueang Na Subdistrict, the temple was founded in 1927 and is affiliated with the Thammayut Sangha (Department of Religious Affairs 2537 (1994), 25).

Figure 12: The sim at Wat Kham Pa Wan.

Nai Buntham Pilekha (นายบุญธรรม ปีเลขา) moved to Mueang Na Subdistrict as a young man, explaining with a cheeky smile that it was because he had fallen in love with a beautiful woman. Now 60 years old, he shared with us the history of the wat:[24]
The wat lies within a large bow of the Huai Pho, on land that was in the past prone to deep flooding. This may be the reason why, sometime after it was first developed, the wat was abandoned. Nai Buntham said that, in the 1960s, the site was dirty and overgrown, with the old sim broken and undermined by looters searching for valuables buried beneath the floor.

Luang Phu Khammun Opaso (หลวงปู่คำมูล โอภาสา) (1916-1969) was, at the time of his death, Chao Awat at Wat Khet Taram (วัดเขตตาราม), just 5 km further along the road. By the late '60s, flood control measures had reduced the flooding risk, so Phra Khammun rallied the people to reclaim and repair the sacred site. The encroaching forest was cut back, a monks' residence was built to facilitate reoccupation, and concrete was poured into the looters' tunnels to stabilize the structure. A freestanding roofed pavilion was erected to

[24] Interview with Nai Buntham Pilekha, conducted at the wat with Dr. Payong Moonvapee, 05-05-2024.

cover the old sim, and in 1971, a principal Buddha image was installed in Phra Khammun Opaso's name.

Final Thoughts

Our effort to reconstruct regional histories led us into the layered terrain of cultural mapping and vernacular memory. Through GIS analysis, community engagement, and narrative documentation, cultural mapping revealed the lived textures of place—traditions, landmarks, and historical consciousness. Tracing patterns of cultural continuity and change also yielded insights that hinted toward the contours of the ancient muangs.

By pairing spatial insights with vernacular histories, accounts that foreground the voices of everyday people and often diverge from elite or state-centric narratives, we gained a fuller, more nuanced understanding of regional experience.

In regions marked by multilayered and sometimes antagonistic historical overlays, such as the middle Mekong region, the integration of architectural evidence and local narratives provides a valuable framework for re-examining accounts long overshadowed by competing national historiographies. This study not only underscores the historical significance of the Pao River valley but also suggests a direction for expanding similar research across the broader middle Mekong region.

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