

A Rare Stone Creation from Laos: The Luang Prabang ‘Philosopher’

In memory of Dr Thongsavongkhamdy (1954–2022), Director-General, Lao Cultural Heritage Department, whose career was devoted to the research of his country’s cultural heritage

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Abstract

This paper is inspired by an unusual stone artefact discovered in Laos in May 2011 during a salvage operation at Nam Phat – a small, Plain of Jars site in Phou Khoun district, Luang Prabang province. At the time, Nam Phat’s archaeological record was threatened by inundation from a hydropower reservoir and consisted of two jars, one disc and three rock fragments – all in sandstone. The two jars and the disc were relocated to higher ground in two separate operations. The third operation involved the relocation of the three fragments which, when assembled off-site, revealed an anthropomorphic artefact nicknamed ‘The Philosopher’ on account of its pensive pose. After an introduction to the Plain of Jars, this paper discusses the various stages of the operation – from survey to excavation, salvage operation and repositioning of the jars and disc. Insights are also offered on The Philosopher’s possible genesis, function and its placement in the Plain of Jars’ ancient funerary traditions.

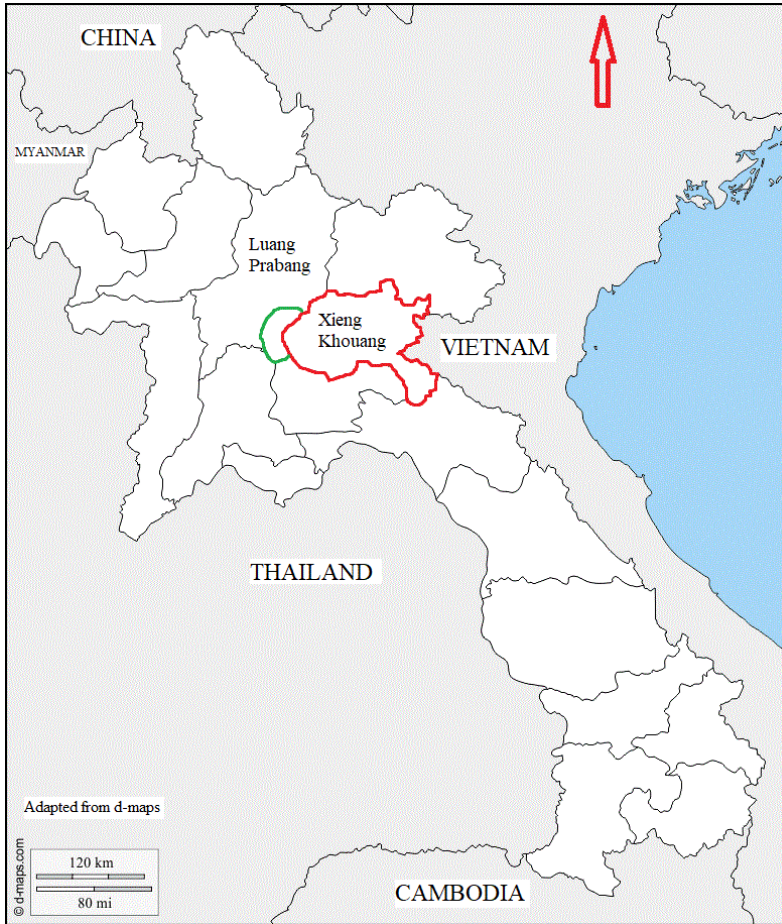
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The Plain of Jars in Laos consists of over 100 archaeological sites spanning Xieng Khouang and Luang Prabang provinces (Map 1),² located at the crossroads of the Mun-Mekong and the Red River/Gulf of Tonkin eco-cultural systems, dated to Southeast Asia’s Iron Age (BCE 400–500 CE). The latitude for all Plain of Jars sites is N19, while the longitude progresses, west-to-east, from E102 in Luang Prabang to E103 in Xieng Khouang.

Xieng Khouang is home to most of the sites, which contain anywhere from a single jar to several hundred units. Jars in five main rock types (sandstone, granite, limestone, conglomerate and breccia) have been documented at seven of Xieng Khouang’s eight districts. They appear at every stage of the carving sequence – from pre-form to partially-carved and fully-carved – at workshops and quarries, including sites with the twin functions of quarry and jar production. Quarries like Khangnongluang–Site 21 (for Ban Nao–Site 1) and Huay Luang–Site 8 (for Ban Na Kho–Site 2 and Ban Xiengdi–Site 3) in

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² Plain of Jars Archaeological Project, <https://www.plain-of-jars.org/>, accessed 31 May 2024.



Map 1: Xieng Khouang province (in red) and Luang Prabang’s Phou Khoun district (in green). Adapted from d-maps.



Figure 1: Feline-decorated sandstone domes are unique to Phou Khoun. Photo: Lia Genovese.

Xieng Khouang, were identified during a geological assessment, after decades of research (Baldock 2008).

Phou Khoun district, in Luang Prabang province, is home to approximately two dozen sites, populated with relatively modest jar quantities, frequently in single digits, but more jar groups may exist in the province beyond Phou Khoun. Sites in this district present difficult access and complex logistics, requiring moderate-to-difficult treks, all-terrain vehicles and occasionally narrow boats. Isolation has ensured the jars’ salvation if not from looting, at least from the effects of “urbanisation and farming” (Genovese 2020b: 57), which have affected some sites in Xieng Khouang.

The Phou Khoun jars are generally tubular, rarely taller than 175 cm, with their narrow apertures and shallow cavities resulting in heavy units with thick walls. By contrast, sandstone jars in Xieng Khouang can measure up to 300 cm in length, with the heaviest unit in Phoukood district, in the province’s northwest, estimated to weigh “31 tonnes” (Baldock 2008: 5), with a volume of c. 13.5 m³.

In Phou Khoun, jar rims lack the varied styles of the Xieng Khouang jars (Genovese 2015: 95–98), but the rebated rim, carved

just below a jar's lip, is common to both provinces. The fairly uniform morphology of the Phou Khoun jars is countered by variety in disc design, including plain, decorated or mushroom-shaped units. The large sandstone domes topped with feline forms (Figure 1) frequently measure 100 cm in diameter, with a thickness at the base of 30 cm or more, and are unique to Phou Khoun. Many of the discs documented in the mid-1930s are still found in the district, albeit eroded by the passage of time, unlike the granite discs in Xieng Khouang's Khun district documented in Madeleine Colani's monograph (1935, vol. 1: pl. 23/3–4), which have disappeared from view.

In both provinces, the jars were used in ancient funerary traditions. Their function as stone coffins for the decay of the body, prior to secondary burial, is weakened by "inconclusive" (O'Reilly et al. 2019) results for the presence of lipids from the interior of jars at Ban Phakèo-Site 52, the largest Plain of Jars site (106 discs and 404 jars).³ The Plain of Jars was essentially a place for secondary burials, as documented since the early 1930s. A discovery approximating a primary burial – not a complete inhumation but more substantial than most secondary burials documented to date – was found in 2016, during a ground-penetrating radar (GPR) survey, when the remains of "two individuals: an adult skull and post-cranial remains, and skull fragments and the mandible of a child" (Shewan et al. 2016) were found at Ban Nao-Site 1.

The first systematic documentation of the Plain of Jars was conducted in 1931–33 by the French archaeologist Madeleine Colani (1866–1943) through a holistic study that encompassed megalithic jars and cemeteries populated with stones in both Xieng Khouang and Luang Prabang provinces. She also studied the standing stones (menhirs) of Hua Phan, east of Xieng Khouang. Some of Colani's Phou Khoun sites have yet to be identified, a task complicated by the recent relocation of jars and discs (for reasons including economic development), which has potentially separated the stone artefacts from their associated archaeological record, impairing the site's integrity in its historical entirety.

Colani's study, centred on material culture, jar morphology and the ethnographic documentation of communities dwelling near the sites, is still a work of reference. An English-language version of her two-volume monograph (Colani 1935) has just been published (Shewan and O'Reilly 2019). She sought to identify patterns in the discs-to-jars ratio, starting with a premise of several jars for one disc. This hypothesis holds true for large Xieng Khouang sites like Ban Nao-Site 1 (30 discs and 334 jars), but it cannot be applied to Ban Namlam, a remote site with one large disc and two jars in Xieng Khouang's Khun district (Genovese 2020b: 68), or to Nam Phat, the site under discussion, also hosting one large disc and two jars. Another peculiarity involves the unusual parity of 21 jars and an equal number of discs at Phu Da Pho (Figure 2) in Phou Khoun district (Genovese 2023: 141).

³ Primary burial refers to a "single stage funeral" for the disposal of the dead, including interment, while secondary burial implies the transformation of the body through "cremation or the exhumation and manipulation of the skeletal remains" (Lloyd-Smith 2013: 112), followed by a final, secondary burial.



Figure 2: Phu Da Pho, in Phou Khoun, is one of the least accessible sites at the Plain of Jars. Photo: Lia Genovese.

From jar sites in both provinces, Colani collected a rich assemblage of objects, including gold and bronze, documented as “an inventory of all artifacts” (Genovese 2020a). The majority of grave goods at the Plain of Jars consists of objects for domestic or farming use: spindle whorls, knives, utensils, pots, agricultural implements, fishnet weights and so on. We cannot discern if personal or prestige items like jewellery or bronze bells were manufactured with different techniques from those used to create everyday items like pots and knives, which are found in the same funerary context at larger sites (Colani 1935, vol. 2: 34, fig. 157). In archaeological contexts, objects cannot readily be identified as ritual items, since quotidian items assume ceremonial status when placed in a funerary setting.⁴

The presence of unexploded ordnance (UXO) interrupted archaeological research at the Plain of Jars for several decades, after more than a quarter of the two million tons of bombs dropped on Laos during the Second Indochina War (1964–73) failed to detonate.⁵ Research and test excavations resumed in 1994, with separate missions led by Eiji Nitta (Nitta 1996) and Thongsa Sayavongkhamdy (Sayavongkhamdy & Bellwood 2000), followed by UNESCO-led projects and international teams of experts focused on Xieng Khouang sites.

The national heritage of Laos is protected by Presidential Decree No. 08/NA of 9 November 2005 (Law on National Heritage), with Article 3(5) defining archaeological objects as human creations “evidencing the historical evolution of mankind’s society”, while Article 3(6) defines archaeological sources as “the places where the archaeological objects and historical evidence are found in a homogeneous group”. Laos is also a signatory to the Vientiane Declaration (2016) aimed at protecting the cultural heritage of the ten-nation Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), of which Lao PDR is a member state.

In July 2019, eleven Xieng Khouang Plain of Jars sites were listed as World Heritage Properties, in recognition of their outstanding universal value (OUV), the guiding principle for an inscription.⁶ The sites’ integrity and authenticity, based on form, design, materials and locations, were also recognised, as was “the sheer number of extant jars” (Genovese 2021: 141), which stands at over 2,000 units for both provinces. Under the conditions governing a World Heritage listing, inscribed sites must be safe to visit, with Laos confirming that “all components are now clear” (ICOMOS 2019: 158).

The survey, excavation and salvage operations at Nam Phat were conducted in the context of potential damage from the reservoir of a hydropower project. Bordered by Thailand, Myanmar, China, Vietnam and Cambodia, from northwest to southeast landlocked Laos is traversed by the Mekong for most of its 4,350 km journey, before it

⁴ A reverse tradition exists among the Wayana of Brazil’s northern Amazon state of Pará, for the creation of basket-shaped primordial beings. Although “the creators’ intentions” (Van Velthem 2001: 198) are incorporated into the fibre-plaiting process, including internal organs plaited into the basket’s sides, the effigies are deemed to lack the predatory capacity of an animal’s spirit. Whereas an everyday item is elevated to ritual status when it enters a funerary context, in the Wayana tradition, basket-weaving, however skilled, cannot emulate the innate qualities of the ‘original’ predatory beast and is relegated to quotidian use.

⁵ The National Regulatory Authority (NRA) is an institution of the Lao PDR, responsible for the regulation, coordination and facilitation of demining operations in Laos, including bombs, artillery shells, grenades, landmines and other items. <http://nra.gov.la/uxoProblem.php> (accessed 5 May 2024).

⁶ Megalithic Jar Sites in Xiengkhuang – Plain of Jars, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1587>, accessed 31 July 2024.

drains into the South China Sea. The Mekong's waters, and those of its tributaries, feed Laos' energy production, with "90 hydropower plants" by the end of 2020 (ADB 2020). Laos, a country of 7.5 million people, has adopted hydropower generation as one of its development paths, supplying energy to neighbouring countries like Thailand and Vietnam in its new guise as 'the battery of Southeast Asia'.

Nam Phat: Survey and Excavation

In 2010, members of the Lao Department of Cultural Heritage identified and surveyed five sites in Phou Khoun, with their report, issued in November of the same year, expressing concern for Nam Phat, one of the five sites. Aside from potential damage to the site's archaeological artefacts, other possible impacts from the reservoir inundation included the submerging of grassland shared by numerous villages for their cattle grazing, disruptions to reservoir aquaculture (due to fluctuations of the reservoir itself), and villagers' inability to reach the forest to harvest non-timber products (Johnston 2009: 7).

Nam Phat is a flat terrace, roughly 50 m wide and 2 km long. From the main access road, a steep, 1 km-long pedestrian track leads to the jar site (N19.384083 and E102.564278), set 1 km from the road and connecting with Route 7 and the Nam Ngum 5 (NN5) Hydropower Project (MICT 2011). Spread along a river of the same name, Nam Phat is surrounded by hills. The Nam Phat and Nam Sout rivers flow into the Nam Ting, which is 35–40 m wide. At the time of French explorations of the region, led by the army officer, explorer and diplomat Auguste Pavie (1847–1925), the Nam Ting was navigable by small boats and could be "crossed on a bamboo bridge" (Cupet 1900: 96). The NN5 reservoir, which borders the jar site, was constructed on the Nam Ting, the main collector that feeds the NN5 basin. Construction of the hydropower plant began in April 2008, at an estimated cost of \$196 million and an economic life of "50 years" (Johnston 2009: 4).

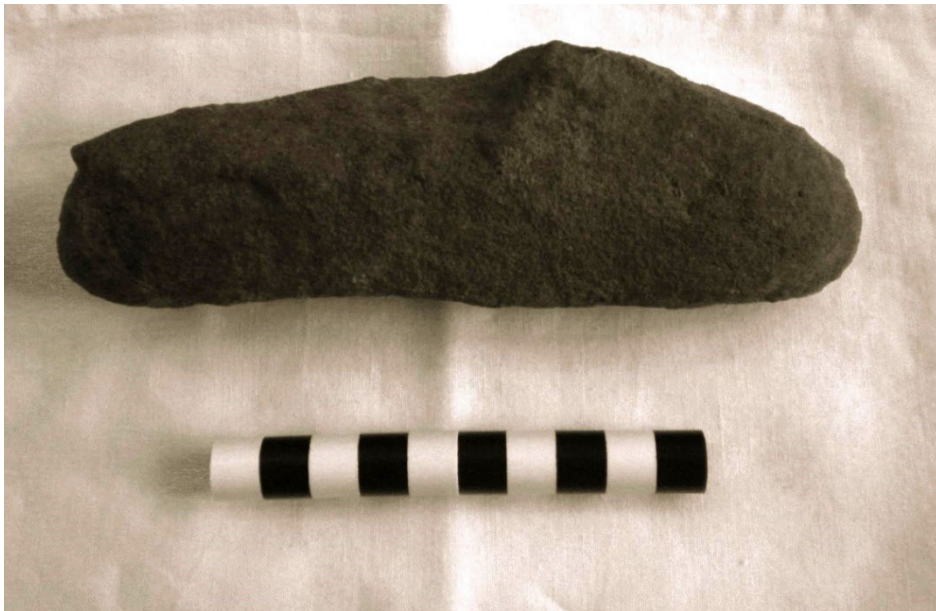


Figure 3: Stone hammer from an area close to the Nam Phat jar site. Photo: Lia Genovese.



Figure 4: Plain and glazed potsherds found close to the Nam Phat jar site. Photo: Lia Genovese.

completion like the mushroom-shaped disc. Centuries of riverine erosion have created a layer of sedimentation 80 cm thick, causing the two jars to become engulfed in soil, although intentional burial cannot be discounted. For centuries, only the jars' upper sections were exposed to the elements, their dark tone contrasting with the buried sections' light pink (Figure 5).

Two trenches measuring 2 x 4 m were set up for the duration of the excavation.

Trench no. 1

Figure 5: One of the two buried jars at Nam Phat. Photo: Viengkéo Souksavatdy.



The stone inventory of Nam Phat consists of two jars, one disc and three stone fragments (the latter now known as The Philosopher). Surface finds collected from a section of Nam Phat close to the jar site include a stone hammer (Figure 3), as well as plain and glazed potsherds (Figure 4). Nam Phat may have been the site for manufacturing activities and the production of jars cannot be excluded. The two jars, set 4 m apart, are small in size and sculpted with a flat rim, carved to

This trench hosted a jar 150 cm high, of which 20 cm was exposed, with a 100 cm diameter and a cavity 50 cm deep. The jar's mouth is 40 cm wide and the walls 30 cm thick. In the trench's east section was found the mushroom-shaped disc, 70 cm high and with a diameter of 100 cm at the base, decreasing to 40 cm at the top. The cultural layer at this trench was populated with potsherds and some clay beads.

Stone chips, ranging from pebble-size to 3–10 cm, were also found, some resembling polished river pebbles but others of sharp or angular contour, possibly debitage. Some conglomerate fragments were also found, an unusual occurrence in Phou Khoun, where jars and discs are almost invariably in sandstone. The debris was positioned to the side of the jar and appears not to have had an assigned function, unlike the granite fragments that stabilise small granite jars buried in Xieng Khouang's Khun district, with only the mouth "visible" (Colani 1935, vol. 1: 211) above ground.

The three fragments, assembled into The Philosopher, were found at this trench and are discussed later.

Trench no. 2

Trench no. 2, with sedimentation broadly similar to Trench no. 1, hosted a jar 130 cm high, of which only the upper portion was exposed, carved to a depth of 40 cm and with a 100 cm diameter. Together with a small quantity of stone fragments, other findings included some porous earthenware sherds and four clay fishnet weights (Figure 6), their worn and damaged appearance suggesting domestic use.



Figure 6: Clay fishnet weights from Nam Phat. Photo: Viengkéo Souksavatdy.

Although not as pervasive as spindle whorls in Southeast Asian burials, fishnet weights, also known as net sinkers, have been found in a variety of shapes and materials. In the Philippines' Masbate province, incised round stones "to weigh down a fishnet" (Kato et al. 2016: 164) have been found at Ticao, but "clay net weights" have also been collected in Vietnam from some Late-Neolithic to Early-Bronze-Age sites of the Phùng

Nguyễn culture (Higham 2004: 48). In the cemetery assembly of Sa-huỳnh, Colani (1937: 10) collected some “*pesons de quenouilles*” (cattail sinkers) and wondered whether there were some weavers among the ancient inhabitants of this central Vietnam location, since these objects might also be classified as spindle whorls. Among the rich grave goods at Xieng Khouang’s Ban Nao–Site 1, Colani (1935, vol. 1: 208) documented “biconical weights”, which could have functioned as spindle whorls or used as garment accessories as buttons or necklace beads.

Trench no. 1 hosted the larger jar, the disc, The Philosopher and the clay beads, but it is difficult to ascribe superior status to this trench due to the debris documented among the artefacts.



Figure 7: Survey under armed escort at Phu Da Pho, Phou Khoun. Lia Genovese is shown together with members of the Luang Prabang branch of the Lao Cultural Heritage Department. Photo: Lia Genovese.

Salvage and Relocation

The reservoir inundation was scheduled for late 2011, prompting the excavation and salvage operations to avert potential damage to Nam Phat’s archaeological record. Funded by the NN5 administration, from excavation to relocation the mission required three stages spread over two years, owing to factors like seasonality, designing or hiring of machinery suitable for the area’s difficult access, and funding (fees for experts, archaeologists, provincial/district authorities and porters). A budget was also required for an armed escort, as district officials dictated that surveys to densely forested areas must be conducted under armed escort, as experienced by Lia Genovese over more than a decade of visiting Phou Khoun sites (Figure 7), due to sporadic incidents of unrest recorded over the years.

The first two stages, conducted in May 2011 before the onset of the monsoon season, concerned the excavation and relocation of the disc from Nam Phat (altitude 1088 m) to Ban Nanan (altitude 1103 m), a small Hmong village 100 m from Nam Phat, and the relocation of The Philosopher. Both operations were managed by the Lao Cultural Heritage Department, under the leadership of Director-General Thongsá

Sayavongkhamdy (1954–2022) and Viengkéo Souksavatdy (Figure 8), his Deputy and the co-author of this paper, with assistance from provincial officials and a security guard.



Figure 8: Viengkéo Souksavatdy (first from right), co-leader of the May 2011 salvage operation at Nam Phat. Photo: Viengkéo Souksavatdy.

The Nam Phat community was not consulted about the relocation, nor was the Lao Cultural Heritage Department invited to participate in the environmental and social impact assessments (ESIA), which dealt chiefly with air and water quality, worker safety, malaria control and biodiversity conservation (Sinohydro Corporation 2007). Environmental impacts from dust, noise and vibrations were studied, as were concerns for stakeholder consultations and water flows “for domestic and conservation purposes” (CDM 2006: 27). There was limited intervention to prevent soil erosion caused by road building from the main highway to the dam site, including the sedimentation of local tributaries that intersect the road. No surveys were undertaken for “terrestrial biodiversity or habitat” (Johnston 2009: 5).

The relocation of the disc, the first operation, entailed technical, logistical and practical challenges, including the presence of bloodsucking parasites in the makeshift



Figure 9: The specially-built contraption to relocate the disc from Nam Phat to Ban Nanan. Photo: Viengkéo Souksavatdy.

tent-camp erected for the operation. Isolated Nam Phat lacks motorised tracks and the team built a contraption (Figure 9) with a payload of 500 kg, barely adequate for the disc, and designed with a low centre of gravity, to resist sliding on sloping ground and to be capable of being drawn over Nam Phat's uneven terrain. Engineered with steel rails and operated by human power without the assistance of mechanical or motorised devices, it included three transversal rollers driven by chain block, to facilitate the raising and lowering of a heavy load. The absence of large and stable trees in the area also necessitated a steel post planted in the soil, on

which was strapped the chain block, to facilitate hoisting and traction. Despite careful handling, fragmentation of the disc could not be averted during the removal process.

Having relocated the disc, the second stage of the mission entailed the transfer of The Philosopher. After documenting its status and location, the team transported its component fragments to the offices of the Lao Cultural Heritage Department in the capital for a comprehensive analysis, a decision guided by the markings on the oval-shaped fragment, which hinted at human intervention.

The third and final operation, managed and implemented by the NN5 administration, was conducted at the end of 2013 to relocate the two jars and join the now fragmented disc at Ban Nanan (N19.384839 and E102.564915). At the time of her February 2014 visit to Ban Nanan, Lia Genovese noticed scrape marks on both jars (Figure 10), caused by the chains, cranes and other heavy machinery used for the relocation from Nam Phat.



Figure 10: The two jars and the disc in their new site at Ban Nanan. The disc broke in transport and the jars bear scrape marks from chains used during the relocation from Nam Phat. Photo: Lia Genovese.

The Philosopher and other Anthropomorphic Objects from the Plain of Jars

This account offers hypotheses on the genesis and purpose of The Philosopher, recalling the words of Bruno Latour (2005: 136–137), that no scholar “should find humiliating the task of sticking to description”. What we convey about this unusual artefact is a form of ontology guided by our experience from years of research at the Plain of Jars and close observation of this unique artefact. It is one perspective from several possible viewpoints.



Figure 11: The oval-shaped fragment depicting The Philosopher’s head. Photo: Viengkéo Souksavatdy.

the left one by a few millimetres. A cut immediately below each eye gives an appearance of puffiness. The forehead is smooth and broad. The groove that runs from the top of the forehead between the eyes and over the nose dissects the face and continues into what may have been the mouth, obliterated by erosion. The nose, flat with a wide base and a low bridge, is centred between the eyes, but the left nostril appears fleshier than the right nostril, where sandstone has eroded.

The other two fragments form the arms. Their upward extension (Figure 12) hints at hands, cupped as if to support the chin, in a display of playfulness that contrasts with the effigy’s serene but sombre demeanour. The shoulders are well-defined, particularly the left blade, which displays a robust and smooth contour.

Discounting human representations documented to date on jars and discs in both provinces, The Philosopher is the third *buried* anthropomorphic artefact discovered at the Plain of

What may have been the mason’s intention in transforming blocks of sandstone into this unique artefact that we now call The Philosopher? Missing zygomatic contours, ears, eyebrows and neck, the oval-shaped fragment (Figure 11) depicts a male of advanced years, with curved head and flat cheeks, recalling a Northern Asian rather than a Southeast Asian person. The closed eyes are sculpted as narrow openings, as if in eternal sleep, but the right eye is lower than

Figure 12: The three sandstone fragments that form The Philosopher. Photo: Lia Genovese.





Figure 13: Bronze statuette from Thao Kham, Luang Prabang province. (Colani 1935, vol. 1: pl. 63).

Jars. The first *buried*, human-shaped object consisted of a bronze statuette, decorated with spirals and with sexual organs in full display (Figure 13), collected from Luang Prabang's Thao Kham, a field of funerary stones along the main road heading west, excavated by Colani (1935, vol. 1: 201) in May 1932. Colani's excavations revealed artefacts similar to those found at jar sites in both Xieng Khouang and Luang Prabang but also artefacts unique to Luang Prabang, like the mouth-to-mouth burial pots found at Thao Kham and Phu Da Pho (Colani 1935, vol. 2: 34, fig. 157).⁷ In contrast with the spread-eagled images on jars and discs in both provinces, The Philosopher and Thao Kham Man are depicted frontally, the only two known human effigies created in the round at the Plain of Jars.

The second *buried*, anthropomorphic artefact was discovered in Xieng Khouang in 1994 during the late Thongsá Sayavongkhamdy's doctoral fieldwork. In a test pit at Ban Nao-Site 1, he found a stone slab etched with male and female figures locked in an amorous embrace, set on a background of interlaced curved lines intercut with straight lines. The anthropomorphic carving from Ban Nao-Site 1 recalls a lidded, bronze sarcophagus (known as a *thap*) found in 1961 at Đạo-thịnh, in Vietnam's Yên Bái province, and currently on display in the capital's National Museum of History.⁸ The lid is fashioned like a truncated cone, with handles consisting of four copulating couples "in the round" (Bezacier 1972: 156-157, fig. 77), with the male figures wearing loincloths and daggers around their hips. Thongsá's camera malfunctioned on the day of his survey and no photographic record exists of his

⁷ To date, no field of jars in Xieng Khouang has revealed mouth-to-mouth burial pots, where human remains are encased within two clay vessels touching at the rim.

⁸ Dao Thinh bronze jar, Museum of Anthropology, <https://ma.ussh.vnu.edu.vn/vi/nghien-cuu/thap-dong/thap-dong-dao-thinh-52.html>, accessed 31 July 2024.

remarkable discovery.⁹ The amorous couple on the stone slab is also important as a unique find of double images, in contrast to the single representations, human or animal, encountered to date at the Plain of Jars.¹⁰

Among the three *buried* representations in Table 1, The Philosopher's amorphous physiognomy contrasts with the overt sexuality of Thao Kham Man and the amorous couple, the latter's feminine form possibly the first female representation from the Plain of Jars. The reproductive symbolism of the Thao Kham statuette and the copulating couple on the stone slab may be viewed as manifestations of a concern for the afterlife and the wish to return to the world of the living. It is possible to discern different ontologies of image creation, visible in the frontal depiction of The Philosopher and the Thao Kham statuette, and in the reproductive symbolism of the latter and the copulating couple.

The Philosopher's serene demeanour and semi-closed eyes convey end-of-life visions and otherworldliness, an anthropomorphic effigy to accompany human remains on their journey to the afterlife. The Thao Kham artefact and the copulating couple, along with similar spiral-decorated statuettes collected from Vietnam,¹¹ recall energy and vitality, as well as notions of fertility, reproduction and forward-looking aspirations of continuity and future generations, in contrast to The Philosopher's static pose.



Figure 14: Frog carving on sandstone jar at Ban Pha Tai, Xieng Khouang. Photo: Lia Genovese.

⁹ Personal communication of 1 January 2019 from Thongsay Sayavongkhamdy.

¹⁰ The first aquatic depiction at the Plain of Jars may have been carved on a jar at Ban Pha Tai-Site 67, a small site visited by Lia Genovese in February 2019. Set in a Tai Dam community in Xieng Khouang's Phaxay district, Ban Pha Tai is home to a few jars, one of which is decorated with a frog (Figure 14) with an enlarged stomach, suggesting associations with pregnancy and fertility (Genovese 2020b: 62–63). Fieldwork at Ban Pha Tai in 2022 by an international team also documented iron implements and glass beads, and they interpreted the carving as an anthropomorphic representation, rather than a frog (O'Reilly et al. 2022).

¹¹ Bronze seated male figure, Metropolitan Museum, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/60025251>, accessed 1 July 2024.

Table 1 - Three buried anthropomorphic artefacts from the Plain of Jars

	The Philosopher	Thao Kham Man	Couple on stone slab
Static	✓		
Northern Asian 'aspect'	✓		
End of life visions	✓		
Contemplative	✓		
Serene or playful demeanour	✓		
Male attributes	✓	✓	
Male and female attributes			✓
Departed human being/ancestor	?	?	?
Frontal depiction	✓	✓	?
Similar artefacts documented in the region	?	✓	✓
Created 'in the round'	✓	✓	
Overt sexuality		✓	✓
Energy & vitality		✓	✓
Reproductive symbolism/fertility		✓	✓
Concern with afterlife/continuity		✓	✓
Forward-looking aspirations		✓	✓
Compiled by Lia Genovese from various sources			

While the designation of the Thao Kham statuette unequivocally belongs to the rich grave furniture buried at the site, which included the mouth-to-mouth pots mentioned earlier – as well as plain and decorated sherds, beads, rings, iron knives and charcoal (Colani 1935, vol. 2: 34, fig. 157) – less clear is the intended attribution at Nam Phat based on The Philosopher's Northern Asian 'aspect'. Was it created on demand for a departed member of the ancient Nam Phat community? Or was it conceived as an anthropomorphic, generic representation by itinerant craftsmen who could create only what they *knew*, ignoring the physiognomy of a Southeast Asian man? According to Lindsay Lloyd-Smith, who has researched burial traditions in Island Southeast Asia, in ethnographically documented instances of secondary burials, the primary burial most often takes place somewhere else other than the final cemetery site.¹² So, The Philosopher may also represent a man from a distant land, buried elsewhere, whose ethnic background was immortalised in stone.

Like the Thao Kham Man and the amorous couple, The Philosopher lacks the key diagnostics of human depictions, including the basic countenance of the spread-eagled forms documented on jars and discs in both provinces. According to Monica Janowski (2020: 120), in Island Southeast Asia, carving spread-eagled human figures may also have been intended "to introduce an ancestral spirit into a stone" and has been widely documented at megalithic sites in Indonesia and Insular Malaysia, and woven on textiles in the region. It has been interpreted as a way of affording protection to a departed person, to ward off evil spirits or to establish a relationship with the underworld. The

¹² Personal communication of February 2013 from Lindsay Lloyd-Smith.

Philosopher's pensive pose is a departure from the Plain of Jars' wider imagery of spread-eagled representations.

It is unclear if The Philosopher was abandoned or if the area's ancient communities deemed it necessary to bury this stone creation (consistent with the recent practice observed in both provinces of overturning a disc to conceal its decorated side). The Philosopher may have been fully carved and deposited at Nam Phat for later dedication in a funerary ceremony. If at the fully-carved stage, perhaps it was offered as the lithic representation of a human being, whose implied playfulness in the cupped hands supporting the chin hints at a last opportunity to contemplate the gift of life. And yet, the effigy's playful demeanour is at odds with its 'aged' aspect, particularly the eyes, which would be depicted as open in wonderment in a person in the fullness of youth.

The Philosopher may have been abandoned, perhaps on account of flaws that developed during the sculpting stage. Communities are often reluctant to discard stones that no longer serve their original purpose. In Sabah's megalithic tradition, stones that featured prominently in rituals as recently as the early 2000s, are still treated with reverence. For example, in Tenom district, boulders installed in rice fields in ancient times "to promote crop fertility" (Genovese 2019: 67) are left *in situ* years after modern forms of income-generation replaced farming and rice cultivation.

We may be in the presence of a hybrid being, a chimera – the "classical figure of analogical ontology" (Gallay 2022: 57) – a metonym to trigger a contemplative view of the world closely associated with The Philosopher's appearance. Through the lens of analogical ontology, we can study The Philosopher as a composite creation of elements from different species – but with distinct consistency at the anatomical level, an artefact with twin guises of human effigy and lithic representation of a departed human being or ancestor. But, as Edward Swenson (2015: 679) writes, identifying and interpreting past ontologies from the archaeological record presents "methodological challenges."

Discussion and Preliminary Conclusions

The identity or original purpose of the Nam Phat archaeological site is unclear. The stone chips point to a workshop or final destination for the artefact, albeit where evidence of a secondary burial is missing, as documented at numerous Plain of Jars' sites in both Xieng Khouang and Luang Prabang provinces.

As a stone creation, The Philosopher offers limited scope for assessing the animistic ontologies of Nam Phat's ancient communities. This unusual stone creation bears no resemblance to other objects discovered at the Plain of Jars, where similarities in some of the grave goods are juxtaposed against differences exemplified by Luang Prabang's mushroom-shaped discs, mouth-to-mouth burial pots and feline-decorated sandstone domes not encountered in Xieng Khouang.

The Philosopher's unique appearance shares few features with other anthropomorphic creations from the Plain of Jars. It may represent a fully-sculpted image or a fragmented creation damaged in production. In its current state, it is an incomplete anthropomorphic creation, missing most of the body parts; and our analysis is limited to the extant sections. Although The Philosopher's attribution is unclear as a human effigy, its aspect suggests a stone creation for a ritual or funerary purpose.

The archaeological discoveries (including The Philosopher) at the three very small sites of Nam Phat, Ban Pha Tai and Ban Namlam demonstrate the imprudence of focusing research on major sites or sites in large clusters. These three sites are certainly outliers, but they have revealed unusual patterns or exceptional findings. Other small sites, with jars and discs in the single digits, await to be discovered in Phou Khoun district – including Sop Nam Miang, visited by Colani in April-May 1933. Sop Nam Miang hosted two isolated jars, with the tallest one, 130 cm high, “buried into the ground almost up to the neck” (Colani 1935, vol. 1: 223–224). The jar was accompanied by a disc and six stone fragments, a description that mirrors the conditions revealed at Nam Phat, where three stone fragments amounted to The Philosopher.

While Xieng Khouang province continues to be the focus of Plain of Jars research, it is hoped that Phou Khoun district can be geologically explored and comprehensively documented. We might learn from Wesley Clarke (2018: 26), a scholar advocating for renewed analysis to rectify the traditional top-down scholarship for the study of the early historic phenomenon of central Thailand’s Dvāravatī, to reveal “details of shared behaviour as well as local variations that are not apparent at broader scales of observation”. Phou Khoun district may yet disclose more secrets when the research focus shifts towards a bottom-up approach and casts new light on our preliminary conclusions.

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