

# THE PLAIN OF JARS: MYSTERIOUS AND IMPERILLED

by Lia Genovese<sup>1</sup>

## 1.0 ABSTRACT

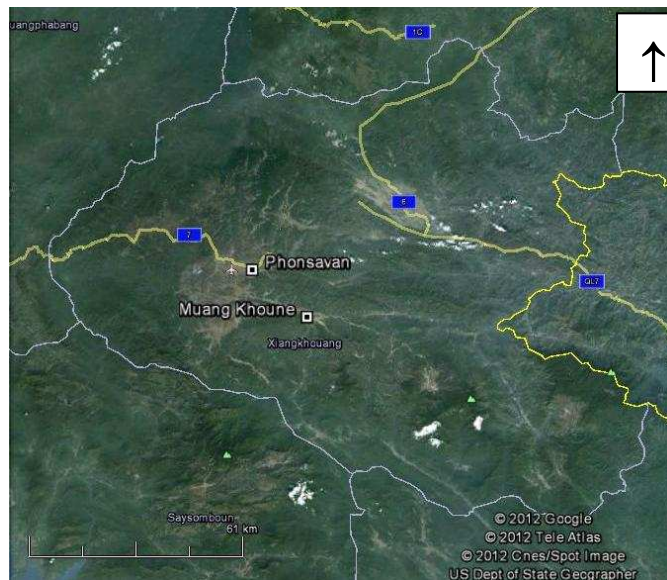
Xieng Khouang province is home to the Plain of Jars, a series of archaeological sites containing from one single jar to several hundred urns carved mainly from sandstone, granite or limestone. The jars were part of the ancient inhabitants' funerary customs, whose occupation of the area spanned "from the fifth century BCE to the beginning of the Christian era".<sup>2</sup> The French archaeologist Madeleine Colani (1866-1943) remains the only scholar to have enjoyed unfettered access to the Plain of Jars and to have published a systematic documentation of some of the sites. At the same time as international efforts and tourism rise, new and very different local challenges are emerging, as communities and ethnic minorities employ the jars in a variety of ways, infusing new meaning into the notions of value and heritage and hampering conservation efforts. This paper will explore the competing notions of heritage and the implications for conservation. Through personal accounts, it will become apparent that the lives of the people at the Plain of Jars have been, and are, closely associated with the jars, which have often acted as custodians for their most treasured possessions. This paper will advocate that the important work of documentation should be extended to the newly-discovered sites and that exploring diversity at the Plain of Jars is crucial towards an understanding of its complexity as an under-researched area of significant archaeological interest. Town and village names have changed since Colani's times. For the sake of clarity, in this essay, jar sites will be identified by their numerical appellation rather than by the village name, which can give rise to confusion.

## 2.0 THE PLAIN OF JARS, THEN AND NOW

After 14 years at the Geological Survey of Indochina (GSI), in January 1929 Madeleine Colani became a correspondent for the École Française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO),<sup>3</sup> to research the prehistory of Indochina. In addition to exploring the Plain of Jars, for which she is best known, in north Laos she also surveyed the fields of standing stones in Hua-phan province and fields of funerary stones to the west of Xieng Khouang<sup>4</sup> (Map 1). Her two-volume monograph *Mégalithes du Haut-Laos*, though "dating back to the 1930s! [original emphasis]"<sup>5</sup> is available only in French and remains the only systematic documentation on the topic and a point of departure for the study of this archaeological treasure. At the time of Colani's visits, the former provincial capital, since renamed Muang Khoune, served as the base for most of Colani's explorations but visits to the Plain of Jars now are based in the new provincial capital of Phonsavan, located 32 km to the north (Map 2).



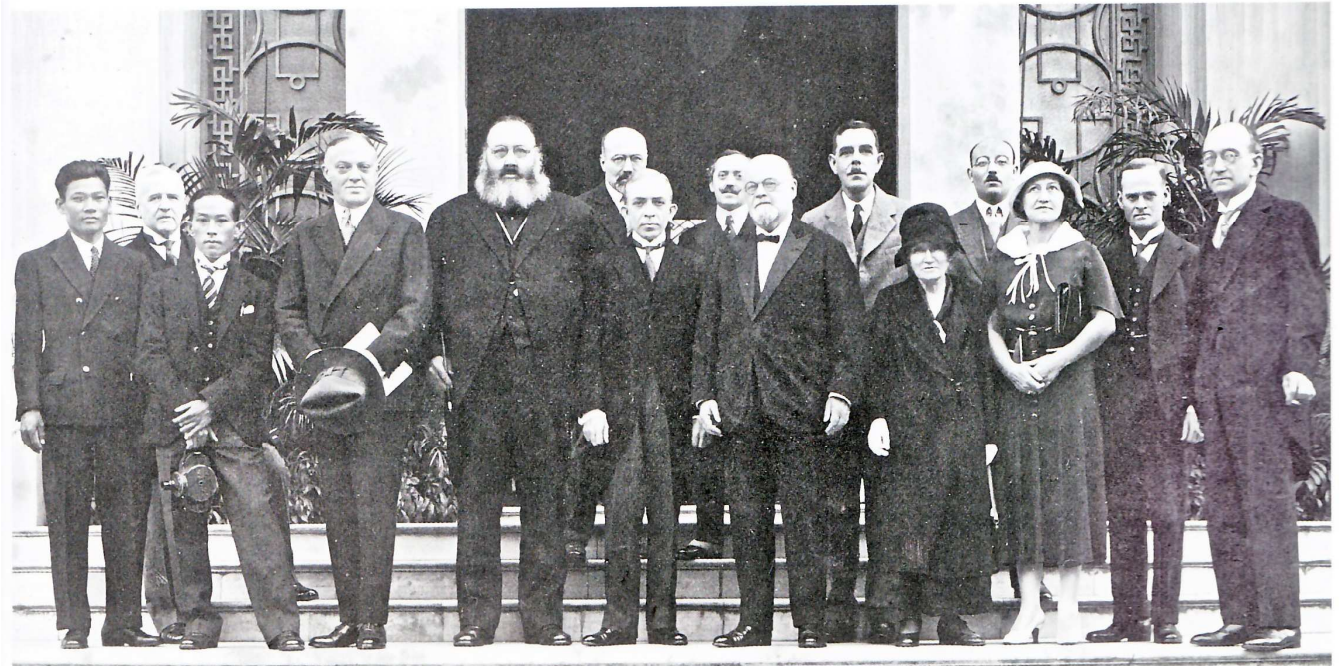
**Map 1** - Lao PDR with Vientiane capital city. The country has a total of 17 provinces. *Maps of World.com*



**Map 2** - Xieng Khouang province, with Phonsavan, the present capital, and Muang Khoune, the former capital. *Google Earth (adapted)*

<sup>1</sup> Lia Genovese, PhD Candidate, Dept. of Art & Archaeology, School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London - 164823@soas.ac.uk ; trinacria\_1955@yahoo.co.uk  
<sup>2</sup> Sayavongkhamdy 1996: 104. Thongsa Sayavongkhamdy is Director General at the Ministry of Information & Culture, Department of National Heritage, Lao PDR.  
<sup>3</sup> Established on 15 December 1898 by order of Paul Doumer (1857-1932), Governor-General of French Indochina, as an institution for the study and research of French Indochina.  
<sup>4</sup> Most of the jar sites surveyed by Colani have been identified to their modern-day equivalent.  
<sup>5</sup> Bizot 1996: 72.

The reasons for EFEO's late involvement in the research of the Plain of Jars are still a matter of debate. In the late 1920s, the institution's focus shifted from the study of epigraphy and religious structures towards scientific archaeology and the prehistory of French Indochina. This shift coincided with the First International Congress of Far Eastern Prehistorians, held in Hanoi in January 1932 (Fig. 1). As EFEO's representative for Indochina, Colani presented a total of four papers, including a lengthy discussion on the Plain of Jars,<sup>6</sup> the first of its kind in a public forum, centred on her first two seasons of fieldwork.



**Fig. 1** - Group photo, First International Congress of Far Eastern Prehistorians, Hanoi, 25-31 January 1932. Madeleine Colani is in the front row, fourth from the right, in her customary black attire. To her left, Eléonore, her younger sister and explorations companion. *Clémentin-Ojha & Manguin 2007: 117*

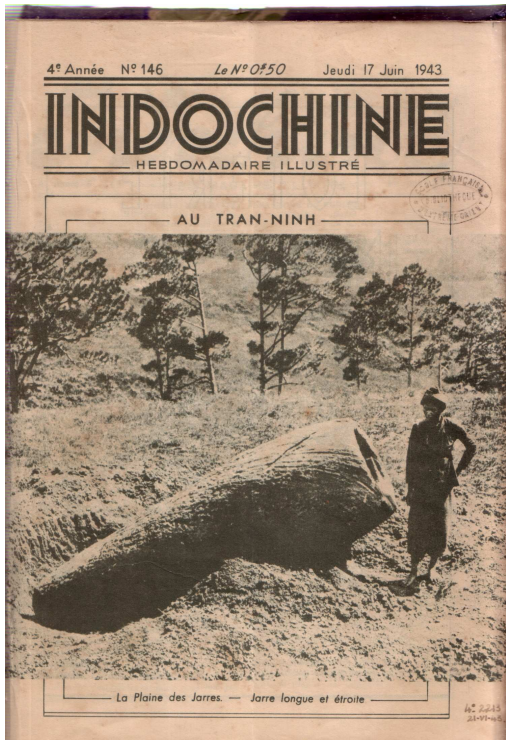
The first sketch map of the main jar sites was produced in 1903 by Pierre Morin, a French government official, but was made available to Colani only in December 1931, after she had surveyed Ban Ang (Site 1, May-June 1931), Lat Sen (Site 2, October-November 1931) and Ban Soua (Site 3, November-December 1931) (Map 3). Subsequent field trips were undertaken from February to June 1932, to survey jar sites to the northeast and northwest of the province, and again in the spring-summer of 1933 to inspect fields to the south and southwest.



**Map 3** - Sites 1, 2 and 3 surveyed by Colani in 1931. Also shown are Quarry Site 21, the source of rock for Site 1 jars, and Quarry Site 8, for jars at Sites 2 and 3. *Google Earth (adapted)*

<sup>6</sup> Colani 1933.

In the summer of 1940, aged 74, Colani made her last visit to the Plain of Jars, to explore the granite jars of Song Meng in the south of the province, a field she had already documented in 1933. Shortly after, she hung up her archaeological boots but continued to write articles on archaeology and ethnography, until her demise in Hanoi on 2 June 1943 (Figs. 2a-b).



**Figs. 2a-b** - Colani's final article (far left) printed two weeks after her death, together with an obituary (left) by George Cœdès, Director of EFEO. *Indochine magazine, Hanoi, 17 June 1943*

## 2.1 Laos: a deadly world record

Laos is the most heavily bombed country in the world, *per capita*. In the Second Indochina war (1964-73), the U.S. Air Force conducted over 580,000 bombing missions, dropping two million tons of ordnance, of which an estimated 30 percent failed to detonate, turning into unexploded ordnance (UXO): "The situation today is that all 17 provinces of the country and approximately 25% of villages suffer from various degrees of UXO contamination. Their legacy is one of continuous death and injury, disenabled communities, and disrupted socio-economic development. Tragically, UXO accidents still injure and maim approximately 300 people every year".<sup>7</sup> Forty-one out of the 46 poorest districts in Laos have UXO contamination.<sup>8</sup>

There is no age discrimination in an impoverished area with millions of UXO trapped underground. Children collecting bomb shells, to sell as scrap metal, are just as likely as an adult to be maimed or killed by a silent, invisible UXO, dormant for decades but suddenly coming alive to claim one more life. Above ground, the war testimony is visible in bullet-riddled jars (Fig. 3). The painstaking and costly clearing process (Fig. 4) is slowly allowing villagers to return to normality.



**Fig. 3** - Bullet-riddled jar at Ban San, Plain of Jars, Kham district, northeast of Phonsavan. © Lia Genovese (June 2011)



**Fig. 4** - UXO-Lao personnel sweeping one of the contaminated hills at Site 4, south of Phonsavan. © Lia Genovese (June 2011)

<sup>7</sup> www.nra.gov.la (accessed February 2012). National Regulatory Authority for the UXO/Mine Action Sector in the Lao PDR.

<sup>8</sup> www.uxolao.org (accessed February 2012).

## 2.2 UNESCO and the Plain of Jars

A multi-year phased programme was initiated in 1998, conducted by Xieng Khouang Province, UNESCO-Lao and the Government of Lao PDR. The stated aims were “to put mechanisms in place that ensure ongoing protection of the heritage resources linked to bringing socio-economic benefits for the local communities”.<sup>9</sup> The programme’s four phases entailed data collection and GIS mapping; design of inventory methodology, training and survey; community-based methodologies to preserve the area’s cultural heritage; and UXO Clearance, pro-poor tourism and sustainable resource management.<sup>10</sup>

UNESCO has played a vital role in rehabilitating the Plain of Jars as an area of outstanding universal value, by monitoring and mitigating the impact of current and emerging threats, including the adverse impact of tourism developments. Operations are aimed at protecting and managing the area’s archaeological record, to facilitate an application for inscribing the Plain of Jars onto the World Heritage list and to provide experts and consultants to train World Heritage teams for the future. Village guidelines for the protection of heritage have been drawn up and distributed to selected sites. Aid money has ensured ground decontamination and poverty alleviation, reclaiming land for schools and agriculture.<sup>11</sup>

## 2.3 Field archaeology resumes

After Colani’s surveys, conflict and the associated dangers from UXO prevented archaeological research. Limited fieldwork resumed in the mid-1990s, with separate teams led by Eiji Nitta and jointly by Peter Bellwood and Thongsa Sayavongkhamdy.<sup>12</sup> Fieldwork in north Laos continues to present some of the logistical and organisational challenges inherent in surveying and documenting an archaeological area spread over c. 5,500 sq. km. This significant area is being inventoried and 26 new sites have been added to the existing list, taking the total to 85, including a new site in Mokmai district, an area not previously associated with stone jars. Documentation for these new sites is minimal and we should be concerned that the archaeological record may be undergoing irreversible damage or even destruction in the years ahead, while waiting for the necessary resources to set in motion urgent conservation work.

Ground decontamination has brought to light some chance finds: human bones, implements, ceramic urns and iron knives.

Over the decades, jars have afforded protection to precious artefacts or have been removed from their original location to grace a temple or institution, or because of their value as ancient stone artefacts, as the author will detail in the next section.

## 3.0 PRIZED ARTEFACTS

A few instances will illustrate how researchers and villagers have interacted with jars and discs over the decades.

### 3.1 Sanctuary in a jar

The personal testimonies of people who dwell near jar sites provide insights into the role of jars during the Second Indochina war. As a 14-year old novice monk, Bouapha Douangsouliya, a native of Ban Boua Tai (Site 17), remembers distinctly the day in April 1968, when he collected ten Buddha statues from his temple and placed them in a jar (Fig. 5), to prevent their destruction and to ensure that the villagers could behold their treasured relics at the end of the hostilities. After completing this important task, Bouapha and his family were evacuated to safe houses in Vientiane, to escape the relentless bombings. In 1975 the community returned to a virtually obliterated village but the jar and its precious contents had survived the raids. A ceremony was held when the Buddha statues were retrieved from the jar and reinstated in the temple (Fig. 6).

### 3.2 Unique granite artefacts

In 1933, Colani visited Site 13 (former Na Nong), a granite site where she documented 34 jars and a disc (Fig. 7), the latter weighing an estimated 200 kg and decorated with an anthropomorphic figure. The disc was sketched (Fig. 8), photographed and strapped to a frame of bamboo poles to be transported to the French representative’s residence, c. 6 km away, in the former capital of Xieng Khouang province,<sup>13</sup> a journey of several days. The disc’s present whereabouts are unknown.

From Song Meng, in the same granitic area, in 1940 Colani also removed a number of discs decorated with zoomorphic figures, which she transported to Hanoi, where she was based as a correspondent for EFEO.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>9</sup> [www.unescobkk.org](http://www.unescobkk.org) (accessed February 2012).

<sup>10</sup> The four phases are discussed in detail in Julie van Den Bergh’s 2008 paper, listed in the Bibliography.

<sup>11</sup> For a list of recent donors, visit [www.nra.gov.la](http://www.nra.gov.la)

<sup>12</sup> Related papers were published in 1996 (Nitta) and 2000 (Sayavongkhamdy & Bellwood). Sayavongkhamdy conducted archaeological explorations at Sites 1, 2 and 3 as part of his doctoral fieldwork, under Prof. Bellwood’s supervision.

<sup>13</sup> Colani 1935 v1: 184.

<sup>14</sup> Bulletin de l’ École Française d’Extrême-Orient 1940: 495.



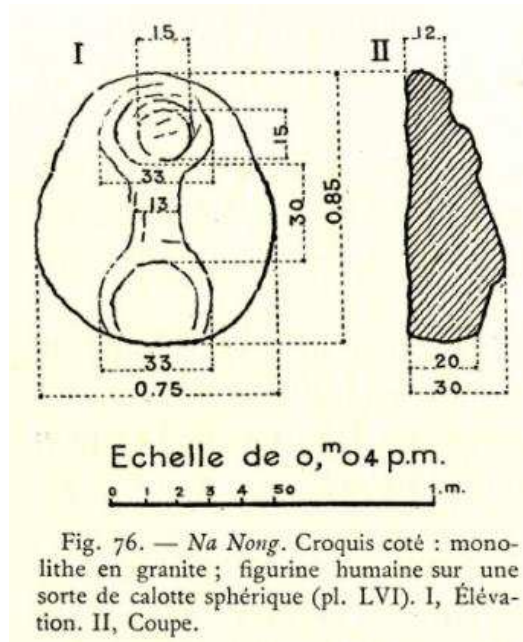
**Fig. 5** - Bouapha Douangsouliya standing over the jar that protected the village's Buddha statues, Site 17.  
© Lia Genovese (December 2011)



**Fig. 6** - The temple in Ban Boua Tai where the Buddha statues were reinstated in 1975, at the end of the hostilities.  
© Lia Genovese (June 2011)



**Fig. 7** - Anthropomorphic granite disc strapped to bamboo poles, ready for removal from Site 13.  
Colani 1935 v1, pl. LVI



**Fig. 8** - From Colani's sketch a cement replica was cast, for display at the museum in Hanoi.  
Colani 1935, v1, Fig. 76, p. 164

### 3.3 Jars at cultural or religious institutions

Over a period of 20 years, until 1992, several jars were moved from Site 1 to various locations. The jar currently in the Smithsonian Institution, USA, was presented by the Hmong general Vang Pao (1929-2011) to the CIA in the late 1970s.<sup>15</sup> The museum's records give the accession date as April 1978. This sandstone jar is 139 cm tall, weighs around 800 kg and is in good condition but it has not been on display in recent years and remains in the museum's storage facilities.<sup>16</sup>

According to Souta Nasedone, a Lao pilot who flew MI-8 helicopters until 1985, the jars were transported from Site 1 because this field offered the only viable road connections with the old airport in Phonsavan.<sup>17</sup> Some of the jars were airlifted to Vientiane by MI-6 helicopter. One jar is on display at the National Museum (Fig. 9) and one can be viewed at Ho

<sup>15</sup> UNESCO 2009: 38. The late General Vang Pao and his Hmong army sided with the CIA during the Indochinese conflict.

<sup>16</sup> Various communications in January and February 2012.

<sup>17</sup> Private communication of 3 June 2011.

Phra Kaew temple, both institutions in Vientiane. The jar at Ho Phra Kaew is badly fragmented (Fig. 10), possibly as a result of damage sustained in transport or during installation. Visitors are known to drop coins and banknotes into the jar, in contrast with the food wrappers and other debris dropped into the urns at the Plain of Jars.



**Fig. 9** - Jar at the Lao National Museum, sourced from Site 1.  
© Lia Genovese (November 2008)



**Fig. 10** - Jar at Ho Phra Kaew temple museum, sourced from Site 1.  
© Lia Genovese (December 2011)

### 3.4 Priceless gifts for a temple

The following story was recently recounted to the author by two villagers at Site 17. In 1999 or 2000, two jars were moved from their original location to be presented as gifts to the temple in the village. The jars - identified as 'male' and 'female' on account of their size - were individually chained to an elephant and dragged over a distance of several hundred metres from the archaeological site to the village. The perilous journey caused the 'male' jar (Fig. 11) to split in half widthwise, while the 'female' jar fared slightly better with just a fracture along the rim (Fig. 12). Both urns were patched up with cement. The jars are now engulfed by the village and waste is routinely dropped into their cavities (Fig. 13).

The villagers had set their sights on an even larger 'male' jar. In readiness for its removal, the ground around the jar was softened first, to ease the lifting, but the relocation was aborted when the elephant's best efforts could not move it from the spot where it had stood for centuries. The deep grooves in the soil are still visible (Fig. 14).

Colani did not visit Ban Boua Tai but she may well feel vindicated from beyond the grave. In her 1935 monograph she suggested notions of gender in the megaliths of north Laos, with standing and reclining *menhirs* representing respectively "male" and "female" elements in fertility rites.<sup>18</sup>

The open setting of the Plain of Jars is accelerating the weathering process, compounded by damage inflicted by human and cattle traffic, as will be detailed in the next section.

## 4.0 CHALLENGES, OLD AND NEW

The challenges affecting the fragile heritage of the Plain of Jars are many and varied, ranging from the elements - temperature extremes and tropical climate - to urban sprawl.

### 4.1 Surviving the elements

Most sites are set on mountain slopes in wind-prone areas, in a region characterised by hot daytime temperatures and cold nights, with abundant summer rainfall. By way of example, a temperature of minus five degrees Celsius (23 Fahrenheit) was recorded in Xieng Khouang city in January 1932, followed by 40 degrees in May (104 Fahrenheit).<sup>19</sup>

Cattle roam freely among the jars, a source of damage when cows rub their horns against the urns. Erosion is a major problem and limestone jars, found mainly in Kham district, northeast of Phonsavan, have fared particularly badly (Fig. 15).

<sup>18</sup> Colani 1935 v1: 91.

<sup>19</sup> Colani 1943: V Note 3.



**Fig. 11** - Broken and patched up 'male' jar, relocated from Site 17, to grace the temple shown in the top left-hand corner.  
© Lia Genovese (March 2011)



**Fig. 12** - The 'female' jar suffered a fracture along the rim and was patched up with cement, like the 'male' jar in Fig. 11.  
© Lia Genovese (March 2011)



**Fig. 13** - Debris is regularly dropped into jars, as shown in this image from Ban Boua Tai, Site 17.  
© Lia Genovese (March 2011)

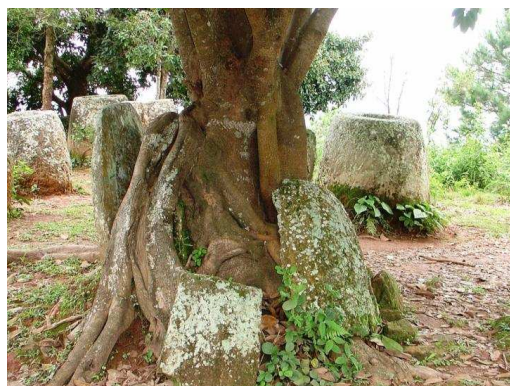


**Fig. 14** - Grooves in the soil around the jar during the aborted relocation from Site 17 to the village.  
© Lia Genovese (March 2011)

Vegetation can split a jar in half (Fig. 16), although this is inevitable with the passage of time, as already observed by Colani: "The strong roots grow to the point of splitting the jar in half, helped by the emission of vegetable acids. The negative influences of these agents work together, and in the not too distant future only ruins of monolithic urns will remain".<sup>20</sup>



**Fig. 15** - Eroded limestone jar, Site 41.  
© Lia Genovese (March 2011)



**Fig. 16** - Jar split by vegetation, Site 2.  
© Lia Genovese (August 2009)

<sup>20</sup> Colani 1935 v1: 113.

Jars along a country path are being used as whetstone, to sharpen knives or other utensils (Figs. 17 & 18). Illegal excavations and looting have also been reported.



**Fig. 17** - Jars along a country path, as this one at Site 22, are routinely used as whetstone.

© Lia Genovese (April 2011)



**Fig. 18** - Deep groove on the rim of a sandstone jar, caused by knife sharpening, Site 17.

© Lia Genovese (March 2011)

#### 4.2 Expansion of human activity

In a region with limited manufacturing opportunities, pastoralism is often the only source of income. Ground decontamination is slowing allowing farmers in Xieng Khouang to till the land without fear of injury or death from UXO. This is giving rise to conservation issues, however, when the land around the jars is planted (Fig. 19) and the urns themselves are used as containers for farming debris (Fig. 20). Very few jar sites are now wholly isolated from urban settings. Intense heat and smoke from slash and burn are causing damage to the fabric of the stone (Figs. 21, 22 & 23).

According to Daifuku, industrialisation can contribute to the destruction of heritage, when societies, in an effort to discard “the dead weight of the past ... deliberately or unthinkingly destroy much of what is valuable of old traditions”.<sup>21</sup> A different process is under way at the Plain of Jars, with communities engaging in a pernicious variant of ‘recycling’, where jars are being used to support house pillars (Fig. 24), or transformed into “animal troughs and chicken coops”.<sup>22</sup> Other imaginative but equally detrimental uses have been recorded among some ethnic minorities at the Plain of Jars, such as boring holes into the soft sandstone urns to make nests for fighting cocks.<sup>23</sup>



**Fig. 19** - Jar enveloped by a villager’s farm, Site 13, where Colani documented 34 granite urns in the 1930s.

© Lia Genovese (April 2011)



**Fig. 20** - Jar used as container for farming debris, Site 32, surrounded by corn plants.

© Lia Genovese (June 2011)

<sup>21</sup> Daifuku 1968: 21.

<sup>22</sup> Bergh 2008: 68.

<sup>23</sup> ‘At last we know more about the mysterious jars in Laos’ (original title in Danish: ‘Nu vet vi äntligen mer om de mystiska krukorna i Laos’), by Flemming Kaul, 1998, *Illustrerad Vetenskap*, 14/98, pp48-51, quoted in Källén 2004: 60-61.





**Fig. 21** - Slash and burn in close proximity of jars at Site 1.  
© Lia Genovese (December 2011)



**Fig. 22** - Jar enveloped by heat and smoke, Site 2.  
© Lia Genovese (December 2011)



**Fig. 23** - Slash and burn near a jar, Site 23.  
© Lia Genovese (April 2011)



**Fig. 24** - Jar used as foundation for pillars, Site 38.  
© Lia Genovese (June 2011)

Road construction causes displacement and damage to jars but this is not a new phenomenon. It is well documented that countless stone artefacts were ground up and used as ballast during the construction of Highway 7, which connects the central coast of Vietnam with north Laos, towards Luang Prabang, the former royal capital of Laos. Colani documented several examples of stone artefacts “broken and used as ballast to build the road”.<sup>24</sup> An important field of funerary stones to the west of the Plain of Jars, near the Thao Kham rest house, was “partially destroyed by the road construction works”.<sup>25</sup>

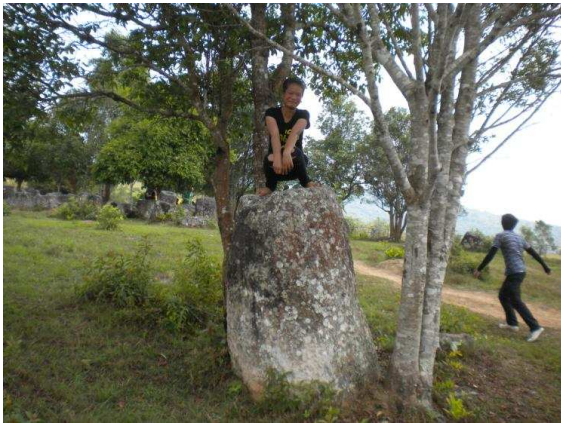
Larger jars are being smashed, in the erroneous belief that they contain precious metals embedded in their bases by the stonemasons during the carving process, a myth no doubt connected to the legend that the jars are made not from rock quarried from a mountain, but by a boiled mixture of buffalo hide, sugar, sand and gravel.

#### 4.3 Local leisure activities

In areas with few means of entertainment, the archaeological sites serve the leisure needs of the local population. At weekends and festivals, the jars offer photo opportunities (Fig. 25) and local visitors leave propitiatory donations or light candles near or inside the jars (Fig. 26). As illustrated in Fig. 13, food wrappers, bottles and assorted debris are unsightly and can affect the jar’s fabric when combined with the elements, although, in a local context, debris is not particularly harmful if it can be controlled.

<sup>24</sup> Colani 1935 v1: 261, 265-266.

<sup>25</sup> Colani 1933: 362.



**Fig. 25** - Photo opportunity, Site 3.  
© Lia Genovese (April 2011)



**Fig. 26** - Lao New Year offerings left on a jar, Site 1.  
© Lia Genovese (April 2011)

#### 4.4 Tourism-led development

In north Laos, the Plain of Jars competes with Luang Prabang, a World Heritage-listed city. Xieng Khouang province is being developed to maximise its potential and to attract higher tourist numbers. Visits to the province increased from 5,062 (2003) to 21,631 (2010).<sup>26</sup> By 2020, tourist arrivals for the whole of Laos are forecast at 4 million (2003 data: 636,000) with projected revenues of 620 million US dollars (2003 data: 87 million US dollars).<sup>27</sup>

All jar sites so far decontaminated are open to visitors but Sites 1, 2 and 3 remain the most visited, on account of their proximity to the tourist infrastructure in Phonsavan.<sup>28</sup> These three sites collectively contain several hundred urns, with a potential to impress visitors, but are not representative of the Plain of Jars as a whole, as I will argue later in this paper.

Some remote sites, such as Site 52, known as the Ban Phakeo group (Map 4), can only be reached by a three-hour trek and require an overnight stay in basic accommodation with a local family. Visitors, however, can feast their eyes on several hundred sandstone jars and a unique disc decorated with a zoomorphic representation (Fig. 27). Some of these pink sandstone jars are as fresh today (Fig. 28) as the day they were created many centuries ago.

As part of Visit Laos Year 2012, Site 21 has become accessible to tourist traffic.<sup>29</sup> This quarry has been identified as the source of rock for the jars at nearby Site 1. A stairway has been built with red bricks and cement and the 1,000, easily-negotiable steps lead visitors to a wartime bunker, with ample opportunities to photograph the surrounding countryside. The quarry contains finished and unfinished jars (Fig. 29) at various stages of the carving process and offers significant opportunities for study and research. Even before the official opening, the author documented a large quantity of discarded water bottles and food wrappers littering the site (Fig. 30). It has also become apparent that the staircase is providing the means of access to the mountain's higher slopes, unwittingly enabling villagers to harvest profitable aromatic wood and resin from the trees (Figs. 31 a-b). There should be a concern that the focus on Site 21 as a tourist attraction may be diverting attention and appreciation from its research value as an archaeological quarry site.

#### 4.5 Revival by ethnic minorities

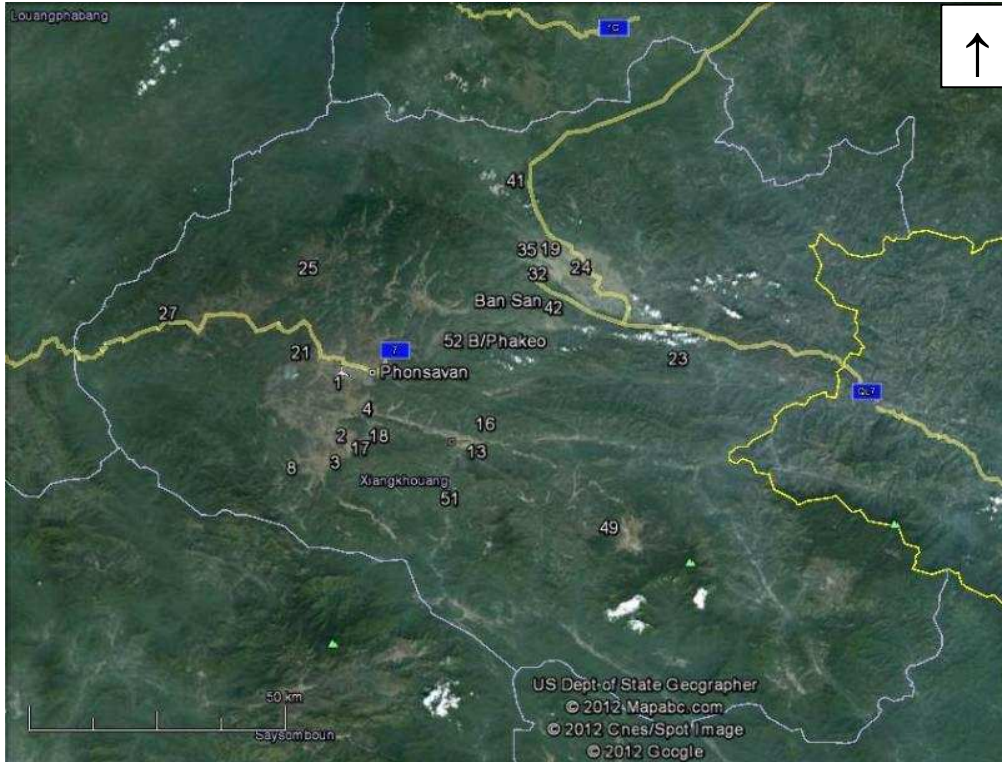
The hills of Xieng Khouang are home to ethnic minorities who practice agriculture and animal husbandry. There is a belief that burial must take place in a good spot to enable the souls of the deceased to grow good crops and to be rich in the afterlife, to prevent a return to their living relatives, causing sickness or death. It is documented that stone cairns are being assembled with fragments from jars or discs. Fragments are frequently found close to the artefact from which they were broken off and a good match in reconstruction (Figs. 32a-c) is often possible, convincing the author that most of these incidents could be classed as vandalism. The author has observed that the method of choice at Ban Phakeo appears to be a sharp, direct hit to the pommel, as illustrated by the single fracture on the discs in Fig. 32 and Fig. 50.

<sup>26</sup> 2010 Statistical Report on Tourism in Lao PDR, Table 12 page 15, Lao National Tourism Administration (LNTA).

<sup>27</sup> 2010 Statistical Report on Tourism in Lao PDR, Table 21 page 22, Lao National Tourism Administration (LNTA).

<sup>28</sup> To date (February 2012), the cleared sites open to tourist visits are numbers 1, 2, 3, 16, 21, 23, 25, 27 and 52.

<sup>29</sup> Chandara 2012.



**Map 4** - Location (preliminary) of some jar sites in Xieng Khouang province.  
 Source: Google Earth (adapted)



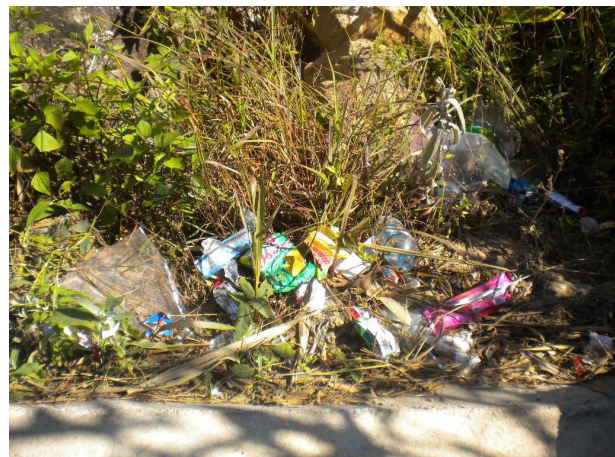
**Fig. 27** - Zoomorphic disc, Ban Phakeo group.  
 © Lia Genovesi (April 2011)



**Fig. 28** - Pink sandstone jar, Ban Phakeo group.  
 © Lia Genovesi (April 2011)



**Fig. 29** - Unfinished jar with partially carved aperture, Site 21.  
 © Lia Genovesi (March 2011)



**Fig. 30** - Litter at newly-opened Site 21.  
 © Lia Genovesi (December 2011)



**Fig. 31a** - Burnt tree trunk, Site 21.  
© Lia Genovese (December 2011)



**Fig. 31b** - Staircase at newly-opened Site 21 quarry, with tree cut down along the path.  
© Lia Genovese (December 2011)



**Figs. 32a-c** - Fragmented disc (above left), with broken off pommel (above-centre), reconstructed (above-right), Ban Phakeo group.  
© Lia Genovese (April 2011)

What are the implications for heritage conservation? Can legislation alone guarantee that the Plain of Jars receives the protection it needs, as an area that testifies to the ancient inhabitants' genius in carving skills?

## 5.0 LEGISLATION, CULTURAL PROPERTY, STAKEHOLDERS AND THE SPIRIT WORLD

Monitoring and protecting the sites, spread over a wide area in outlying and remote areas, is a significant challenge, compounded by scarce resources and challenging means of transport.

### 5.1 Legislation

Legislation is an essential step in the conservation and protection of heritage in any country, particularly where the artefacts are exposed to the forces of nature. On 13 December 1993, by virtue of Ministerial Decree no. 174, the Plain of Jars was included in the list of national heritage sites of the Lao PDR.<sup>30</sup>

Article 5 'Obligations of Citizens' of Presidential Decree 138/PDR, of 9 November 2005 (pp. 3-4), states: "Lao citizens, aliens, and apatrids<sup>31</sup> residing in the territory of the Lao PDR shall have the obligation to participate in the protection, conservation, restoration and rehabilitation of the national heritage. Foreigners, [and] [sic] tourists entering the Lao PDR shall have the same obligation to participate in the protection and conservation of the national heritage".

### 5.2 Cultural property and stakeholders

Some Plain of Jars villages have been briefed about the importance of the ancient artefacts, but most have grown used to seeing the jars in domestic settings surrounded by sprawling communities. The notion of 'cultural heritage' undergoes a

<sup>30</sup> Engelmann 1996: 13.

<sup>31</sup> The document defines *apatrids* as persons unable to certify their nationality.

drastic transformation when viewed by a Western researcher or by a community practicing subsistence farming in the hills of Xieng Khouang: "Attitudes towards objects which come under the term cultural property can differ widely. Something which is considered to be of great value to someone or to a particular age may be considered later as worthless".<sup>32</sup>

Damage caused by nature pales in comparison with destruction meted out by man. Educational programmes, public interest and support are all effective means in conservation programmes and in the fight against vandalism (Fig. 33 & Fig. 34). The author has witnessed the effects of urbanisation in the immediate vicinity of artefacts at the Plain of Jars but has also documented the villagers' desire for their heritage to be visited and appreciated. Strong as this desire may be, it is likely to remain unfulfilled until the necessary infrastructure is built.

Stakeholder identification is a crucial process in heritage conservation, and an effective way to counteract the impact of urban communities living in close proximity to archaeological sites: "Stakeholder participation and effective stakeholder organization are critical to the success of the management process. In the past there have been a number of tourism development projects in Luang Prabang that have not met their objectives because not all stakeholders were included or consulted in a comprehensive and appropriate manner".<sup>33</sup>

Cultural tourism generates revenue and is a source of pride for a country to showcase its heritage. There are significant implications, however, when the tourist industry acts like a commercial enterprise largely driven by profit. There is a real danger that this approach will promote only lucrative cultural activities or those heritage destinations with consumer appeal.



**Fig. 33** - Graffiti defacing a jar, Site 2.  
© Lia Genovese (August 2009)



**Fig. 34** - Graffiti sprayed on a jar, Site 17.  
© Lia Genovese (December 2011)

Surin Pitsuwan argues that the owners of cultural heritage in rural areas often have little or no control in the selection process of which of their cultural treasures are to become tourism commodities: "All is decided, or not decided, by being left to the free-for-all, open market competition. [...] Local community involvement helps to guarantee artistic and cultural distinctiveness and the uniqueness of the various cultural treasures that form part of their lives and existence".<sup>34</sup>

Notwithstanding the instances of neglect and damage, the stone jars are a source of pride for the people of Xieng Khouang province. Images of the urns are used in a variety of settings, from exercise books and water bottles (Figs. 35a-b), to key rings, advertising billboards, hotel names and community health messages (Fig. 36).

If stakeholder participation is still being developed in many archaeological sites, a few instances demonstrate that heritage conservation at the Plain of Jars is already being implemented, with encouraging results.

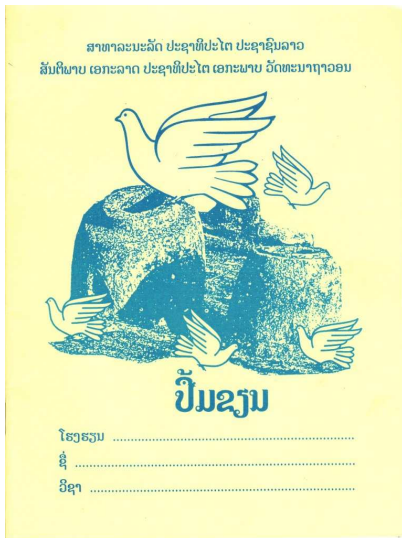
### 5.3 A model site, abode of the spirits

Site 25 is a well-managed site with 40 sandstone jars. Cutting wood or disturbing the jars can awaken the spirits and this has resulted in little damage to the site in recent years. There is a belief that spirits inhabit the jar field and for this reason children are not allowed to play in it. When farming duties allow, villagers collectively clean the site, which on a recent visit was found clean and the jars free from food wrappers, plastic bottles and other debris found at other sites.

<sup>32</sup> Daifuku 1968: 19.

<sup>33</sup> UNESCO 2004: 80.

<sup>34</sup> Pitsuwan 2012. Dr. Pitsuwan is Secretary-General of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.



**Figs. 35a-c** - The jars of Xieng Khouang on exercise books (above left), water bottles (centre) and key rings (above right).  
© Lia Genovese



**Fig. 36** - Jars in the background of an AIDS-related community message in Phonsavan.  
© Lia Genovese (August 2009)

In June 2011, the author spoke to Mr Thitkhamphane, one of the village elders. As a ten-year old boy, in 1958 he started playing in the field with other children, eventually managing to overturn a jar. A snake emerged from the soil, soon the sky grew dark and there was thunder in the air. Terrified, the children put the jar back in its standing position and ran home.

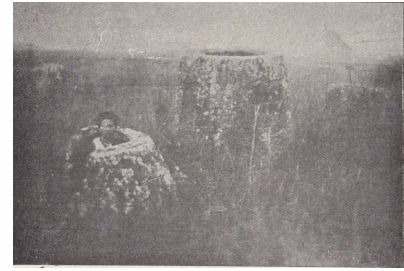
Several jars in the village are said to be endowed with special qualities. To cure a sick child, candles are burned and offerings are made while water is collected from a large stone jar (Fig. 37). The water is boiled and the child bathed in it, a remedy which the villagers believe derives from the jar's supernatural qualities.

Another jar is said to have caused illness in the village when some monks moved it to their temple to use for water storage. Sickness in the village stopped when the jar was returned to its original location. This story bears a parallel with an account by the French explorer Alfred Raquez (1865-1907), who surveyed north Laos and the Plain of Jars (Figs. 38a-b) from January to July 1900, seven years after Laos became the fifth province of French Indochina. Raquez recounts that on

Sunday 3 June 1900, a village chief in Ban Ang, present-day Site 1, informed him that one of the villagers took the smallest jar to his home but returned it to the field after one of his children died soon after the jar entered the house.<sup>35</sup>



**Fig. 37** - Water collected from this jar at Site 25 is said to cure sick children.  
© Lia Genovese (April 2011)



**Figs. 38a-b** - Some of the earliest images from the Plain of Jars, from the travel account of Alfred Raquez, a French explorer.  
Raquez 1902

#### 5.4 Current initiatives

As mentioned earlier, in recent years the drive to take stock of the Plain of Jars' archaeological record has increased the number of known sites to 85, although most of the new sites are at an early stage of documentation.

In compliance with conservation requirements issued by UNESCO, a few jars have been returned to their original location. In 2010, a jar was returned to Site 1, after adorning the premises of a restaurant in Phonsavan for several decades (Figs. 39a-b). Another jar that had stood in the town for decades was also returned to Site 1 and is distinctive by the flowers that have been planted in it (Fig. 40).



**Figs. 39a-b** - A jar, originally from Site 1, on display at a restaurant (above left) in Phonsavan in August 2009 and (above-right) the empty stand in April 2011.  
© Lia Genovese



**Fig. 40** - One of two jars returned to Site 1 in 2010, planted with flowers.  
© Lia Genovese (June 2011)

In 2008, a poster (Fig. 41) was distributed to jar sites that are open to visitors and to tourist establishments in Phonsavan. The poster appears to stereotype vandals as misguided foreign visitors and an equally misguided local guide, defacing the jars with their culturally-insensitive antics. Well-intentioned though this poster may be and without wishing to condone the many documented instances of foreign visitors climbing into the jars for photo opportunities (Fig. 42), it should be stated that conservation efforts are being largely hampered by other factors, such as rapid urbanisation, farming activities, looting and neglect. Identifying foreigners as the source of damage is useful and probably goes some way to fulfilling donors' requirements but, in the author's opinion, it diverts attention from the real source of the problem.

<sup>35</sup> Raquez 1902: 379.



**Fig. 41** - A poster depicting visitors to the Plain of Jars as culturally-insensitive foreign visitors.



**Fig. 42** - Culturally-insensitive visitors climbing onto the largest jar at Site 1, affectionately called 'the King's Cup' by the locals.

Diversity at the Plain of Jars has only been documented in part. Conscious of having undertaken the first attempt at systematic documentation, Colani hoped that future researchers would continue to delve into its mysteries. Her legacy, the 1935 monograph mentioned earlier, covers only a small number of the 85 archaeological sites known to date.

**6.0 DIVERSITY AT THE PLAIN OF JARS**

Due to the limited research and sparse publications, there is a tendency to think of the Plain of Jars as an area of uniform jar size and shapes, with broadly similar features. In reality, there is much undocumented diversity. As advocated earlier, in the author's view, Sites 1, 2 and 3 are scarcely representative of the archaeological record of the Plain of Jars as a whole, as the following examples will try to illustrate.

**6.1 Rim**

Jars are mostly barrel-shaped but variety is encountered in the rim. A flat rim prevails at most sites (Fig. 43), but an inner rim (Fig. 44) is found only at a few sites. Colani debated whether the inner rim was intended to support a lid but could not conclusively state that it was intended for this use.<sup>36</sup> Even in a large field, this type of rim is rare and is found only on a few units out of several dozen jars. By way of illustration, none of the 334 extant jars at Site 1 have an inner rim. However, at this site, twin urns are endowed with an exceptionally long neck, measuring 30 cm, which the author has not encountered anywhere else (Figs. 45a-b).

**6.2 Massive stone artefacts with small aperture**

Some jars in Phoukood district, northwest of Phonsavan, can reach a height of 3 metres but the interior has been carved only to a depth of 0.5 metres, leaving 2.5 metres of solid rock (Fig. 46). Also in Phoukood district are found some highly polished stones with a very small opening (Fig. 47), distinctive because they are exceptionally round. It is still a matter of debate whether these highly polished stones can be classed as 'jars', due to their minimal aperture which would preclude a practical function in a funerary context, except for monumental or commemorative purposes. More investigations are needed to help us understand the function of these unusually round stones with very limited internal volume.

<sup>36</sup> Colani 1935 v1: 160, 167.

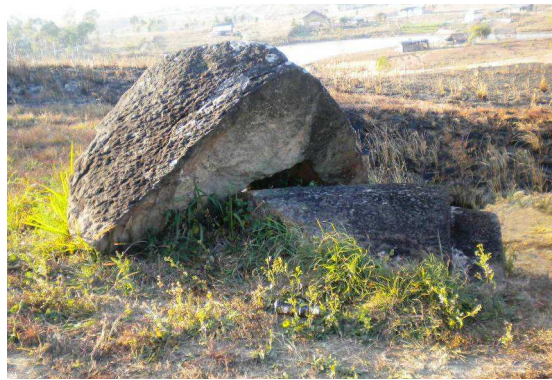




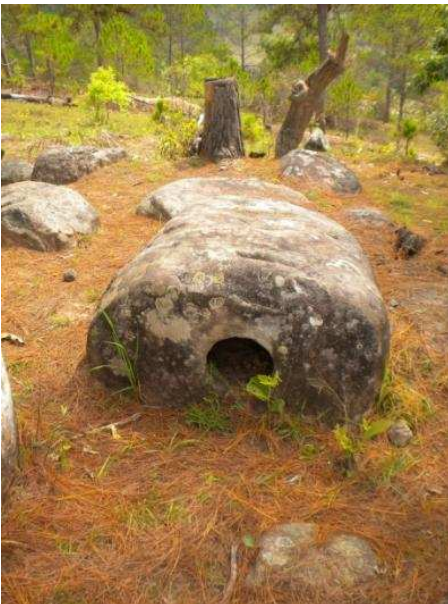
**Fig. 43** - Jar with flat rim, Site 1.  
© Lia Genovese (August 2009)



**Fig. 44** - A jar with inner rim, Site 27.  
© Lia Genovese (March 2011)



**Figs. 45a-b** - Twin jars no. 21 (above-left) and no. 20 (above-right), with exceptionally long neck, measuring 30cm. Jar no. 20 is badly fragmented. The ground around the jars was recently subjected to slash and burn.  
© Lia Genovese (December 2011)



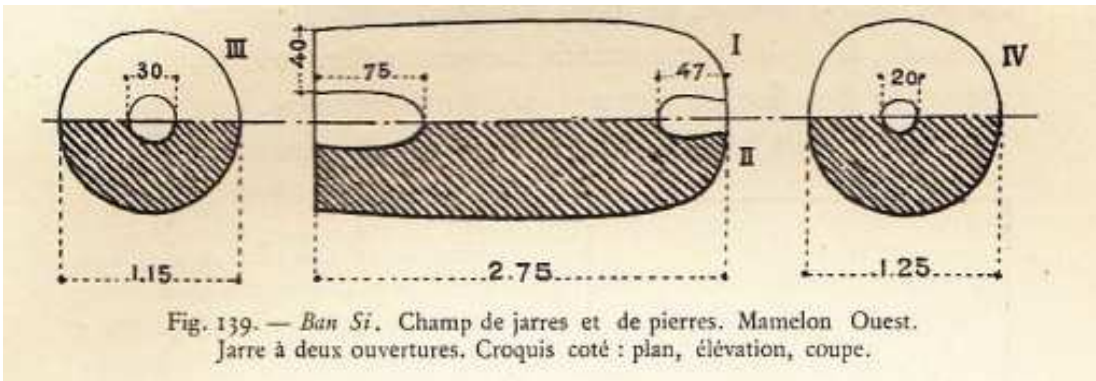
**Fig. 46** - Massive jar with minimal aperture and internal volume, Site 27.  
© Lia Genovese (March 2011)



**Fig. 47** - Highly polished, round stone with minimal aperture cut into the side, Site 27.  
© Lia Genovese (March 2011)

### 6.3 Double-ended jars

Colani commented on the double-ended jars at Ban Si (Fig. 48),<sup>37</sup> which may correspond to present-day Site 46 or 31, in Phoukood district, northwest of Phonsavan. The largest double-ended jar at Ban Si has a height of 2.75 metres and is located in the field, suggesting that the carving process had been completed prior to transport from the quarry and that the urn was not an 'experiment'. Attempts to carve both ends of a jar have also been documented at Site 44.



**Fig. 48** - Double-ended jar at Ban Si, Phoukood district, northwest of Phonsavan.  
Colani 1935 v1, Fig. 139, p. 255

### 6.4 Lids or grave markers?

A stone disc is often found in the immediate vicinity of a jar (Fig. 49). Discs can be plain, as shown in Fig. 49, decorated with a pommel (Fig. 50), or, more rare, with an anthropomorphic (Fig. 51) or zoomorphic representation (Fig. 52). Colani was perplexed about their meaning and arranged for two such stone monoliths to be placed on two jars, one at Site 1 (Fig. 53) and one at Site 22 (Fig. 54), the latter no longer visible. With their ill-fitting match, she sought to demonstrate that these discs were not intended as lids for the jars.



**Fig. 49** - Plain disc near a jar, Site 3.  
© Lia Genovese (April 2011)

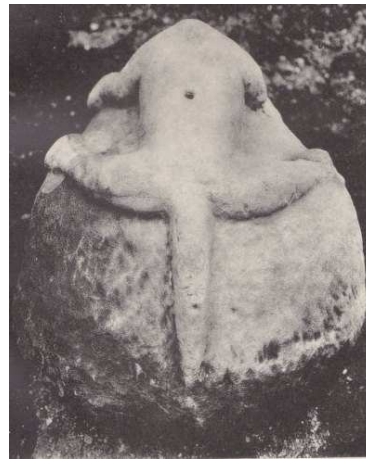


**Fig. 50** - Disc decorated with pommel, Ban Phakeo group. The disc appears to have suffered a deliberate fracture to the pommel.  
© Lia Genovese (April 2011)

<sup>37</sup> Colani 1935 v1: 131, 147, 149.



**Fig. 51** - Anthropomorphic figure, Site 2.  
© Lia Genovese (December 2011)



**Fig. 52** - Zoomorphic figure, Kéo Tane, southwest of Phonsavan  
Source: Colani 1935, v1, pl. XLIX



**Fig. 53** - Disc decorated with concentric circles, arranged by Colani on top of jar, Site 1, in the 1930s.  
© Lia Genovese (December 2011)



**Fig. 54** - Disc arranged by Colani on a sandstone jar, Site 22, in the 1930s.  
Colani 1935, v1, pl. XXXIII

## 6.5 Field of jars, workshop, or ...?

Non-local rocks are present at some sites. Blocks of sandstone, for instance, are found at Site 15, a potential quarry for the granite jars in Khoune district. Scattered among the sandstone jars at Site 25, blocks of andesite (Fig. 55) are found, sourced from several kilometres away but abandoned, possibly because this rock today requires diamond or tungsten tipped tools. Well documented are also the numerous blocks of quartz at Site 1 (Fig. 56), which are believed to have been brought to the site from a short distance away.

## 6.6 Undocumented zoomorphic image

At Site 2, the author discovered a previously undocumented carving on a jar. The zoomorphic representation, with two orbits in an oval-shaped face topped by a feathered headdress, bears a very close similarity to an image on the foot of a bronze bowl (Figs. 57a-b) recently excavated at Nhan Nghia, Quang Ngai Province, central Vietnam.<sup>38</sup> Close ups of the two images are illustrated in Figs. 58a-b.

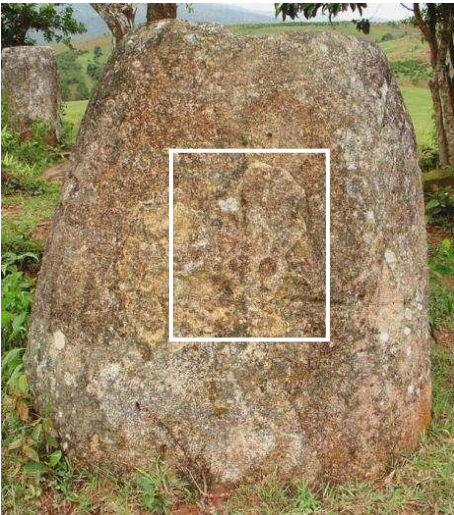
<sup>38</sup> The author acknowledges the assistance of Dr Nguyen Viet, founder of the Center for Southeast Asian Prehistory (CESEAP), Hanoi, for information on the bronze bowl.



**Fig. 55** - Andesite block, Site 25.  
© Lia Genovese (June 2011)



**Fig. 56** - Quartz among sandstone jars, Site 1.  
© Lia Genovese (December 2011)



**Figs. 57a-b** - Previously undocumented zoomorphic carving on a jar (above left), at Site 2, discovered by the author in August 2009. Bronze bowl (above right) excavated at Nhan Nghia, Quang Ngai Province, central Vietnam.  
Stone jar at Site 2: © Lia Genovese (August 2009); Photo of bronze bowl: Courtesy of Dr Nguyen Viet, CESEAP, Hanoi



**Figs. 58a-b** - Detail of the carving on the jar at Site 2, Plain of Jars, (above left) and close up (above right) of image on the pedestal of the bronze bowl excavated in central Vietnam.

## 7.0 PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS

Colani's monograph is the lasting legacy for stone artefacts damaged or destroyed at the Plain of Jars, but it covers fewer than 20 sites. There is a tendency for the sites near Phonsavan to function as showcases. The exposed nature of the sites is contributing to damage from the elements. Farming and other human activities carried out near the artefacts are a source of damage. Loss of relevance may be a factor for today's inhabitants of Xieng Khouang. An additional source of damage is reported when ethnic minorities revive the ancient ritual value of jars and discs in contemporary burials. Though legislation is in place to protect the stone artefacts, conservation efforts must address the irreversible damage caused by human expansion and related activities such as farming. At Site 25, the jars are protected by an imagined connection to the spirit world, rather than by an appreciation of their inherent antiquity. Documenting the archaeological record of the Plain of Jars should be extended to cover the newly-discovered sites. Damaged jars and discs offer little for research and will greatly complicate researchers' efforts to understand the culture of the Plain of Jars.

Lia Genovese  
PhD Candidate  
School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London  
Art & Archaeology Department  
Arts & Humanities Faculty  
164823@soas.ac.uk ; trinacria\_1955@yahoo.co.uk

February 2012

## 8.0 BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bergh, van Den, J. 2008. Safeguarding the Plain of Jars, an overview, in *Recherches Nouvelles sur Le Laos/New Research on Laos* (Y. Goudineau & M. Lorrillard eds.), Silkworm Books, pp. 65-80.

Bizot, F. 1996. La conservation du patrimoine, *LAOS Restaurer et préserver le patrimoine national*, Colloque EFEO 1996, Éditions des Cahiers de France, Vientiane, Lao PDR, pp. 71-75.

Bulletin de l' École Française d'Extrême-Orient. 1940. 40/40-2, p. 495.

Chandara, P. 2012. Xieng Khuang reveals new tourist attractions, *Vientiane Times*, Vientiane, Lao PDR, 12 January 2012.

Clémentin-Ojha, C. & Manguin, P-Y. 2007. *A century in Asia: The history of the École Française d'Extrême-Orient 1898-2006* (Helen Reid tr.), Editions Didier Millet, Singapore.

Cœdès, G. 1943. MADELEINE COLANI 1866-1943, *Indochine*, no. 146, 17 June 1943, Hanoi, Vietnam, pp. 1-2.

Colani, M. 1933. Champs de jarres monolithiques et de pierres funéraires du Tràn-Ninh (Haut-Laos), *Bulletin de l' École Française d'Extrême-Orient*, XXXIII/1, pp. 355-366.

Colani, M. 1935. Mégalithes du Haut-Laos (Hua Pan, Tran Ninh), *EFEO*, XXXV, Paris, 2 vols.

Colani, M. 1943. Les jarres du Tran Ninh, *Indochine*, no. 146, 17 June 1943, Hanoi, Vietnam, pp. III-V.

Daifuku, H. 1968. The significance of cultural property, *The conservation of cultural property*, Museums and Monuments series, UNESCO, Paris, 3rd impression, pp. 19-26.

Engelmann, F. 1996. Le cadre institutionnel de la préservation du patrimoine, *LAOS Restaurer et préserver le patrimoine national*, Colloque EFEO 1996, Éditions des Cahiers de France, Vientiane, Lao PDR, pp. 137-147.

Källén, A. 2004. *And Through Flows the River - archaeology and the past of Lao Pako*, Global Studies in Archaeology 6, PhD thesis, Uppsala University, Sweden.

Nitta, E. 1996. *Comparative study on the jar burial traditions in Vietnam, Thailand and Laos*, Historical Science Reports of Kagoshima University, Kagashima University, vol. 43, pp. 1-19.

Pitsuwan, S. 2012. Keeping heritage above the race for tourist dollars, *Bangkok Post*, Thailand, 04 February 2012.

Raquez, A. 1902. *Pages laotiennes*, F. H. Schneider, Hanoi, (reprinted in 2000).

Sayavongkhamdy, T. 1996. Mise en valeur du patrimoine culturel national, *LAOS Restaurer et préserver le patrimoine national*, Colloque EFEO 1996, Éditions des Cahiers de France, Vientiane, Lao PDR, pp. 99-111.

Sayavongkhamdy, T. & Bellwood, P. 2000. Recent archaeological research in Laos, *IPPA Bulletin 19* (Melaka Papers vol. 3), pp. 101-110.

UNESCO, 2004. *The effects of tourism on culture and the environment in Asia and the Pacific: Tourism and Heritage Site Management in Luang Prabang*, Lao PDR, Office of the Regional Advisor for Culture in Asia and the Pacific, UNESCO Bangkok, and School of Travel Industry Management University of Hawai'i, USA.

UNESCO. 2009. A training manual for UNESCO-LNTA Department of Information and Culture Guide Training Workshop at the Plain of Jars Archaeological Landscape, Lao PDR, UNESCO Bangkok, May 2009.

### Other sources

Maps of World.com

[www.nra.gov.la](http://www.nra.gov.la) (NRA = National Regulatory Authority)

[www.unescobkk.org](http://www.unescobkk.org)

[www.uxolao.org](http://www.uxolao.org)

[jmasvte.yolasite.com](http://jmasvte.yolasite.com) (JMAS = Japan Mine Action Service)

[www.maginternational.org](http://www.maginternational.org) (MAG = Mines Advisory Group)