

CENTER FOR KHMER STUDIES AND ÉCOLE FRANÇAISE D'EXTREME-ORIENT WORKSHOP

Transborder Archaeologies: Vat Phou and Angkor

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The case of Vat Phou – Champasak
International cooperation, Institutional and management issues

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PLAN

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1. Geographical & administrative situation

The monument of Vat Phou is located about fifty kilometres south of Pakse, the regional capital of Southern Laos. It is positioned at the centre of a vast area of 400 km², and was classified by UNESCO in 2001 (delineated by the red line on the map below). From an administrative point of view, the classified site is situated in a rural area and spans the two rural districts of Champasak and Pathoumphon (the district boundaries are shown in white on the map). This is an important difference from the classified site of Luang Prabang, which is located in an urban district in the heart of the provincial capital. The office of the World Heritage of Luang Prabang has the status of a provincial executive, while that of Vat Phou is a rural subdivision. A practical consequence is that rural districts have fewer administrative skills and limited financial resources, and the salaries of the local staff are significantly lower than of those in the urban province. Not only are rural areas poor in human skills, but for the reasons mentioned above, it is also extremely difficult to bring in executives from Pakse and Vientiane. The only agents who stay permanently at the site of Vat Phou are those whose families live in nearby villages.

This institutional problem was raised by the French cooperation, early in the first draft of the Priority Solidarity Fund (“*Fonds de solidarité prioritaire*”: FSP). The capacity of the Vat Phou office to intervene in a transversal way and at the right level would suggest that this office should get the rank of a provincial executive, with interdepartmental competence. Practically, with the continued support of the French cooperation, the Vat Phou office manages to play this role unofficially. But this remains fragile and ephemeral, because it has never been recognised institutionally nor fiscally¹.

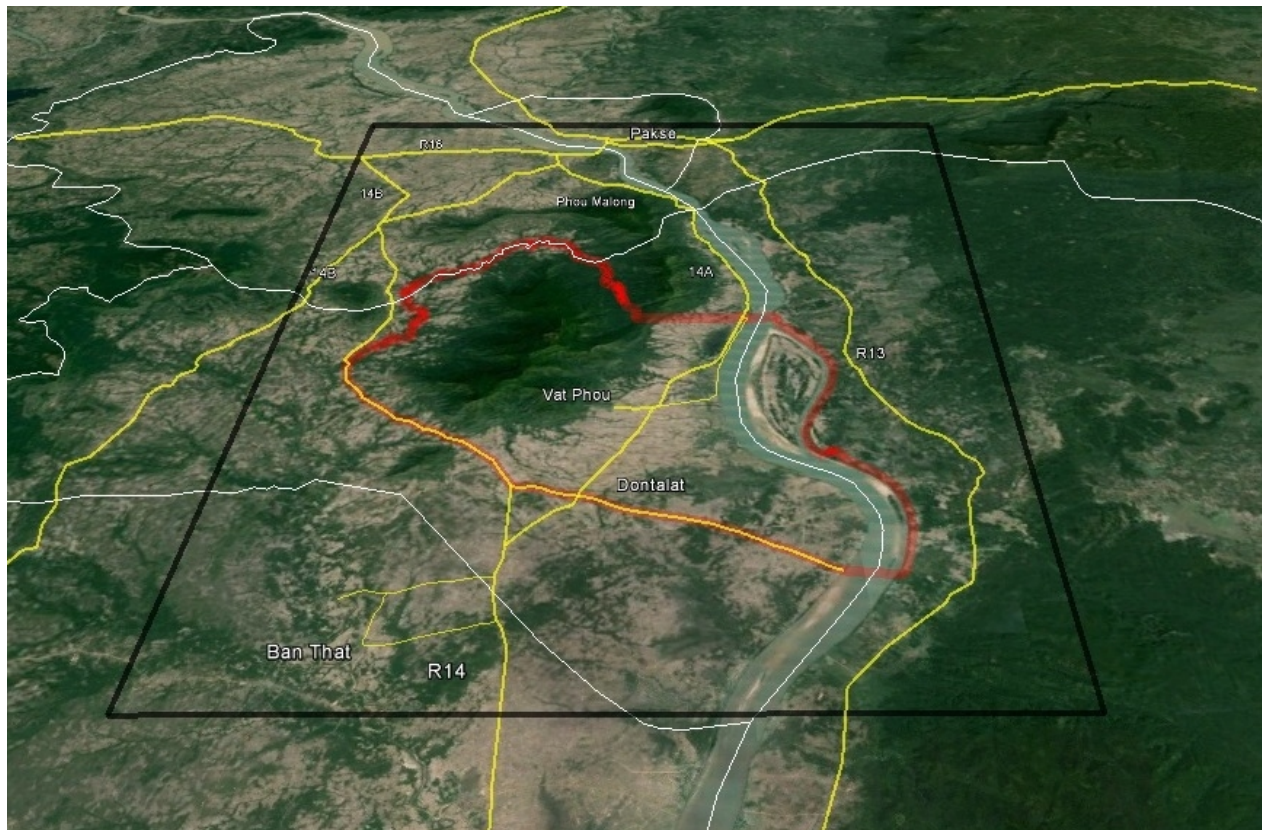


Fig. 1 : Geographical and administrative situation of the classified site of Vat Phou. Image : © 2015 Google Image © 2015 Digital Globe

2. Institutional organisation

In Laos’ administrative organisation, the services of the district and province reproduce, at their level, the same division as the ministries. Thus, the cultural office of the district corresponds with that of the provincial department of culture, which in turn corresponds with the ministry of the same name. For this reason, the empowerment of the local levels is categorised by the Laotian authorities as “deconcentration” rather than “decentralisation”. Nevertheless, strengthening the local levels is tangible for several years. The advantage is that interdepartmental issues are

¹ The Vat Phou office was elevated to the rank of a provincial department between 2010 and 2012, without this being confirmed in an update of its statutes. Then it was demoted by the province at the end of 2012, with the aim of budget savings.

addressed more quickly at local and national level. The system has become more responsive. The downside is that local authorities may not have the necessary skills, which is particularly true in archaeology.

When the site was classified fifteen years ago, the case was directly managed by the Directorate General of Heritage of the Ministry of Culture in Vientiane. Local authorities have been little involved. It could even be said that their opinion was not taken into account, as evidenced by the decree of the provincial government of October 11, 1988, which opted for a classified perimeter of about 50 km², a lot smaller than the site which was finally approved by the central government. At that time, the Ministry of Culture had a full and direct authority over the office of the Vat Phou World Heritage. Today, this authority is a principle of scientific authority and guardianship. But in fact, the Vat Phou office now depends on provincial funding and manages all the decisions directly with the devolved authorities. Besides, the central departments of Vientiane no longer take the risk to endorse decisions, ensuring it has received the prior approval of the governor.

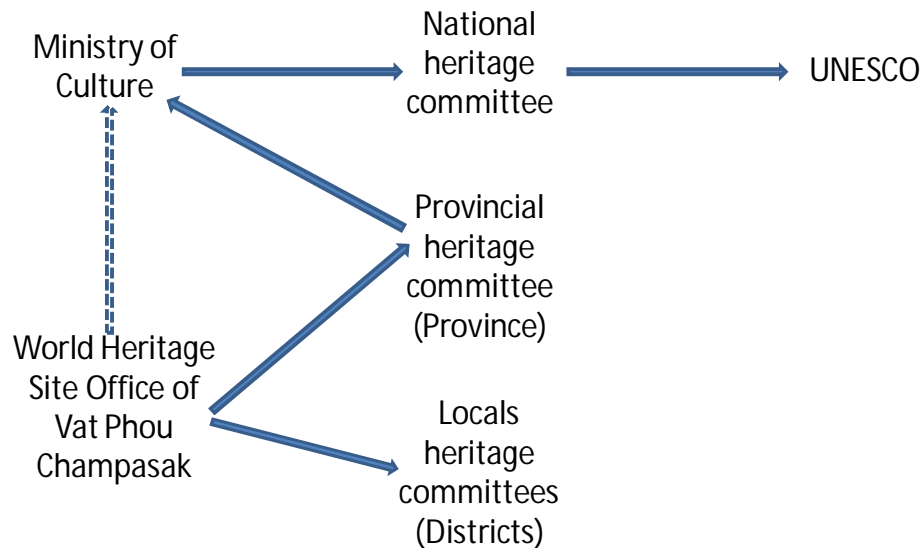


Fig. 2 : Institutional diagram showing the organisational relations with UNESCO

The close relations with the UNESCO office in Bangkok have adapted to the evolution of this functioning closer to the terrain. However, the official exchanges between headquarters did not change, and they suffer from the immensity of the administrative hierarchy, which prevents good communication with local actors. In Paris, the World Heritage Centre officially recognises only one interlocutor: the secretariat of the National Commission for UNESCO, reporting to the deputy prime minister of the National Heritage Committee.

This interministerial body operates at provincial level with a “Provincial Heritage Committee” and, in each district, a “Local Heritage Committee”. Theoretically the communication of vertical management problems concerning the classified site must be ensured by the back and forth between these three levels. But, no arrow is presented in the diagram above between these three levels, because they have no real existence as an organisation. They are not endowed with staff nor means. There are no institutions, but simple meetings are held twice a year, theoretically.

In the case of the classified Vat Phou site, the diagram above shows that it is actually the Vat Phou office handling the exchanges between these different levels. The goal of the Vat Phou office is that the problems it's facing and solving does not only include the participation of the Ministry of Culture, but also that of other departments, starting with the Ministry of Works and Transport, but also that of Environment, Agriculture, ... Having no official legitimacy outside the strict field of culture, the Vat Phou office, by getting involved in supporting the organisation of local and provincial heritage committees, finds a way to validate the interdepartmental decisions needed to manage the classified site. The Vat Phou office is therefore a body at the bottom of the hierarchy with limited administrative skills, which nevertheless manages to overcome this barrier. It helps to manage problems at a higher level that go beyond its official powers (such as urban planning, drinking water supply, waste management...), thanks to the technical and financial support of France. But in the absence of an appropriate institutional status and own resources, the office might stop functioning as soon as the French aid comes to an end.

3. Management issues

This third point focuses on the economic dimension of the management of the site. The green graph shows the evolution of the Vat Phou office's own funds dedicated to the running costs. The first FSP evaluation report noted with optimism the gradual rise in WHSO means and even concluded that the FSP would end in 2012, when the service began to be able to demonstrate sufficient financial autonomy, to compensate for the end of the FSP. This situation has since been reversed.

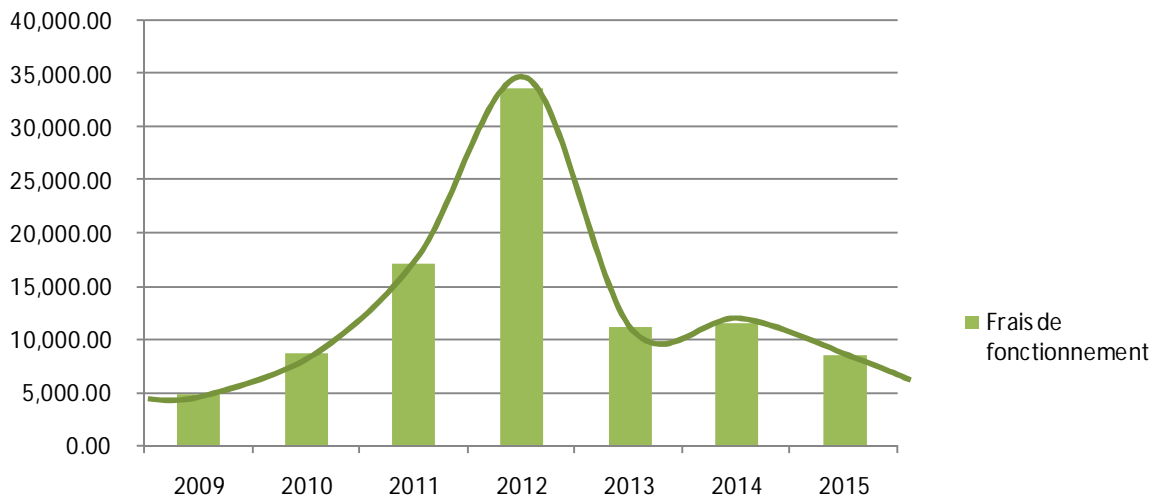


Fig. 3 : Changes in the Vat Phou office's own funds since 2008 (in USD)

The management capabilities of the classified site have been recently limited by a worrying decline in equity. The budget for the current year - October 2014 to October 2015- has an operating budget reduced for the second consecutive year. With \$8,540 for the year, it is down by -26.10% over last year and has reached its lowest level since 2010. This decrease primarily relates to office administration costs, which totalled more than \$3,125 for the year, a decrease of -47.68% over the past year, that is to say, almost one half less. This budget is equivalent to only

\$5 per month per agent and does not even cover basic operating needs (water, electricity, telephone).

The current WHSO economic model is unsustainable and relies increasingly on foreign aid to finance even its most basic needs. It is possible that the massive influx of money from abroad does not encourage public services to make the necessary organizational efforts.

The situation is all the more unacceptable when the ticketing of Vat Phou records at least 200,000 USD per year, excluding the festival, and about double this amount when the festival days are included. In theory, the classified site should not need foreign aid to finance its operations.

4. International cooperation

The landscape of the international cooperation concerning the classified site is constantly changing. The first involved donor was Japan, early on the project. Then, Italy became the first partner, until France took over in 2010. During recent years, international aid has been strengthened with the support of India and South Korea. It would be logical that Korea, which officially began its cooperation in 2013 and became the biggest financial partner of the classified site, gradually emerges as the new foreign leader when the French FSP will be terminated. For now, the Korean team only focuses its objectives on the restoration of one monument.

The diagram below shows that the site is involved with about twenty collaborations, but not all have the same weight nor the same continuity. At the bottom of the diagram, the donors directly involved with the restoration of the monuments are shown. Around, there are numerous exchanges with universities and research and training institutes. The third perimeter (in yellow on the diagram) shows the cooperation across the entire listed site, the most significant support coming from the French Development Agency (AFD) with a support programme in place until 2018. The fourth perimeter (in green) mentions the cooperation undertaken across the province of Champasak with an impact on the classified site, particularly supporting the touristic development of the area. In addition there is the research of the EFEO on ancient Khmer heritage of the five provinces in southern Laos.

Although not the biggest donor in financial terms, France occupies a special position as it is the only permanent collaborator, supporting the management of the Vat Phou office and providing assistance to the institutional operations, and investing regularly in the coordination of international donors. France is also the only country with coordinated support (FSP + AFD + EFEO) taking into account all issues concerning the classified site: archaeology, landscape, urban planning, touristic development, infrastructure, urban development regulations...

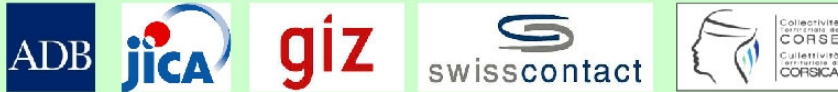
For these reasons, we can only hope that the assistance provided by other donors is also developing in the same direction, to further develop a comprehensive approach, after the completion of the current programmes supported by France.

SOUTHERN LAOS HERITAGE (5 PROVINCES)



Angkorian & preangkorian heritage Inventory & protection

PROVINCE OF CHAMPASAK



Urban planning & environment

Tourism strategy & development

Environment & waste management

HERITAGE AND CULTURAL LANDSCAPE PROTECTION ZONE (WORLD HERITAGE SITE)



Building restoration

Urban planning

Preventive archaeology

Architectural inventory



Expertise & training programmes

ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES (MONUMENT ZONE)



Archaeological restoration

World Heritage Site Office of Vat Phou Champasak – Updated 2014-12-31

Fig. 4 : International coordination involved in the Champasak heritage protection and urban development