

That Luang: proud keeper of an old Laotian secret

story and pictures by Peter d'Abbs







The central stupa at That Luang is surrounded by three graduated terraces. Along the outer terrace, at the middle of each of the four walls, is a 'ho vay' or pavilion for offerings.

"Herewith is buried a relic on the date of the full moon of the eldest month of the year Chounlasakrat, 928.

This That is named Loukachoulamani. It is the That of Buddha. It was built by King Xaya Setthatirat."

The inscription, part of which is translated here, stands at That Luang, the greatest and most revered monument in Laos. Unfortunately, the inscription probably raises as many questions as it answers; in particular, it helps to deepen the mystery surrounding the hidden relic. But it does, nonetheless, tell us something about the strange history of That Luang.

The stone pinnacles that combine to form That Luang are located on the outskirts of Vientiane, administrative capital of the modern state of Laos. Like the city of which it is a part — and for that matter like the rest of Laos — it has endured over the centuries more than its share of desecration and destruction, yet somehow That Luang survives. The name literally means 'great stupa'. 'That' is the Lao word for 'stupa', i.e. an edifice sheltering a relic of the Buddha, and 'luang' means 'public'

The inscription tells us that That Luang was built in 928 saka, or 1566 A.D., by King Setthatirat, who some nineteen years earlier had succeeded his father to the throne of the

then powerful Lao kingdom of Lan Chang.

It was not a peaceful period. The 200-year old kingdom was frequently engaged in conflicts with its Burmese, Annamese and Siamese neighbours. The kingdom owed its establishment to Fa Ngum, who in 1353 managed to unite the various small Lao states in the upper Mekong region under his command and have himself proclaimed king in what is now the city of Luang Prabang. Four years earlier the new Siamese capital of Ayuthya had been founded, and the subsequent decline of Sukothai was an important factor in Fa Ngum's success in the north. Besides establishing the first strong Lao kingdom, Fa Ngum played a big part in introducing Theravada Buddhism to the area. He himself, prior to setting out on his conquests in the upper Mekong, had spent many years at Angkor, at the court of the Khmer king Jayavarmadi Paramesvara, and had married one of the king's daughters. While at Angkor, Fa Ngum studied under a Buddhist monk, with whom he continued to maintain close contact after his rise to power. But although it was Fa Ngum (or possibly his wife) who played the major role in spreading Theravada Buddhism throughout Laos, he was by no means the first to bring Indian ideas to the area. As in many other parts of Southeast Asia, Brahmano-Buddhist influences from India date back to the beginning

of the Christian era, and possibly earlier. They are, in fact, an integral part of the various legends surrounding the founding of the original That Luang

For King Setthatirat was not the first to build a stupa on this particular spot; rather, he is believed to have built on the site of an existing stupa. Evidence to back this belief came to light earlier this century when, during restoration work at That Luang, it was found that the central spire contained remnants of an earlier, primitive stupa. Unfortunately, it has not been possible to date the earlier monument. So we are left with the legends. According to one of these, the original stupa was built in about the 11th century AD to shelter a hair of the Buddha. Another legend traces the original date of construction back to the time of the Emperor Asoka, who reigned in India in the 3rd century BC. According to this account, Buddha Gautama was travelling one day when he stopped at the spot where That Luang exists today and smiled. Asked why he was smiling, he replied: "Later, after my death, the Emperor Asoka will erect a commemorative building here, to protect my mortal remains; the monument will be venerated, and Buddhism will radiate from this centre." Thereupon Queen Purichanda, wife of King Sumitadhamma of Sattaganahuta, accompanied by eight Brahmins, marked the



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Around the base of the central stupa are thirty smaller stupa, or that. These are thought to represent the thirty parami, or perfections. Lower down, the wall surrounding the second terrace is carved in lotus leaves. The lowest terrace is hidden from view by the monks' quarters which enclose That Luang.

spot with a stone and built a chapel. Subsequently, Emperor Asoka brought a relic of the Buddha to the spot and had it enclosed in a stupa which he built there.

There are a few problems associated with the story. Firstly, neither the Emperor Asoka nor the Buddha (who preceded Asoka by 3 centuries) ever visited Laos. Secondly, the kingdom of Sattanaganahuta is something of a mystery. Possibly it was a part of the early kingdoms of Nan-Tchao or Fou-Nan, but we cannot be sure. Chinese records dating from the 3rd century A.D. refer to a kingdom of Fou-Nan, the capital of which was located in the southeast of present-day Cambodia. The following centuries were marked by increasing Khmer influence over the area of modern Laos. In the 6th century AD the Khmer state of Chen La broke away from Fou-Nan and established dominion over Southern Laos, subsequently extending its power into central and upper Laos. Right up until the 12th century Khmer influence remained dominant. Then, in the 13th century, following Mongol annexations in the north, a massive migration of Thais into Indo-China took place.

The long-standing Khmer influence may



account for the resemblances many people have noted between That Luang and the magnificent Javanese monument of Borobudur, for the structure of Angkor Wat is believed to have been influenced by the design of Borobudur, and That Luang is thought to have been influenced by Khmer Angkor styles. This is somewhat speculative, however. It has also been suggested that the art of Pagan, with which King Setthatirat would have come into contact through his conflicts with the Burmese, may have provided inspiration for That Luang.

The inscription tells us that the stupa is called 'Loukachoulamani' — 'Crest of the World' — and that it is erected over a relic called 'Jinaguyhadhatu' — secret or mysterious relic of the Buddha'. Like Borobudur, That Luang is thought by many to symbolize the universe. The central stupa rests on three gradated terraces. According to the 'world-symbolism' interpretation, the first, or lowest, of these represents *Kamadhatu*, the sensual and material world; the second level, *Rupadhatu*, represents the period of appearances and illusions while the upper level, which forms the base of the stupa itself, represents *Arupadhatu*



— the world without form, the limitless Void. The walls surrounding the first two terraces are surmounted by several hundred niches for Buddha images, while the second wall is carved as a series of large lotus petals. Around the base of the main spire, or *that*, are thirty smaller *that*, thought to represent the thirty *Parami*, or perfections. Finally, adorning the base of the central *that* and representing the third stage, is a further series of twelve, large, half-opened lotus petals. Out of these petals the central *that* rises, rectangular at its foot, narrowing to culminate in a *settasat*, or series of tiered umbrellas. The entire monument is set in a flat square enclosed by cloisters and monks' quarters.

While this interpretation of the structure of That Luang may accord with prevailing ideas about this kind of architecture of Southeast Asia, its correctness cannot be proved, and recently it has been questioned by a Lao scholar. Writing in the "Bulletin des Amis du Royaume Lao", Phagna Bong Souvannavong rejects the "world-symbolism" view as nothing more than a charming legend, and instead draws attention to other aspects of the monument. Firstly, he notes repeated references in

the inscription cited to "the mysterious organ" enclosed within the stupa. Secondly, he draws our attention to a statue of a divinity to be found standing against a cloister wall in the north-east corner of That Luang. The statue has an enlarged genital organ, which the faithful "misunderstanding the teaching of the Buddha.....have veiledwith a square of yellow cloth, because they consider such exposure to the public gaze indecent and immodest". The author continues:

"But, in the Brahmanic temples of India, we have found enlarged representations of the genital organs with no covering whatsoever. These are respected and venerated, which leaves us thinking that in the birthplace of the Buddha such things as we consider immodest are much better understood."

Phagna Bong Souvannavong believes that That Luang is basically a monument intended to symbolize the procreation of human life. He points out that at festival time, the faithful gather at That Luang, where they murmur (usually without fully understanding the words) the following prayer:

Pourimasaming dhisabhakhe xinakhouy-



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Of course, she is a Thai.
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her own way;
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even the way she smiles.

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hatsa thapanang lokachoulamaning nama ahang vandhami sabhada.

Translated, this means: "I venerate Phra That named Lokachoulamani, which is the place enclosing the pubic bone sheltering the genital organ of Phra Sina (Buddha) situated in the East, forever." The phrase is then repeated three times, with a new direction being substituted each time for 'east'.

The assumption that That Luang actually contains the genital organs of the Buddha would probably be about as historically sound as the earlier legend concerning King Asoka, but the theory that the symbolism of That Luang is concerned mainly with the principle of procreation (and therefore, presumably, with forms of ancestor worship prevalent in Laos before the advent of Buddhism) is worthy of consideration. Phagna Bong Souvannavong believes that in the architecture of That Luang, the female reproductive organ is represented by the large lotus petals of the second terrace, which are open to allow the birth of children—i.e., the thirty smaller that called *Parami*. The central stupa represents the male genital organ, the father, who in turn is born of the mother-lotus, i.e., the twelve lotus petals open at the third stage. At the same time, it is the father who has brought about the birth of the children — the thirty *Parami*.

There is perhaps a third possible interpretation, which Phagna Bong Souvannavong does not advance: namely, that in the process of establishing itself in an area where animism and ancestor worship were common, Buddhism absorbed and utilized existing symbols, and That Luang therefore represents a syncretic merging of Buddhist and ancestor-worship symbolism. If this were the case, both interpretations of That Luang could be correct. One would not necessarily exclude the other; it would simply depend on the viewpoint from which you started.

Shortly after the completion of That Luang, Vientiane was invaded by the Burmese. Although it regained its independence late in the 16th century, dynastic disputes continued to wrack the kingdom until, in 1637, Souligna-Vongsa succeeded once again in uniting the various states under firm rule, and inaugurating a period of relative peace and prosperity which lasted until his death some fifty years later. Around this time European powers were beginning to establish firm footholds in Southeast Asia, and it was during Souligna-Vongsa's reign that the first recorded visit of Europeans to That Luang took place. In 1641, General Van Diemen, Governor of the Netherlands East Indies, sent a delegation of three Dutchmen to Laos to investigate potential sources of gumlac and

benzoin. The account written by their leader, von Wusthof, of the reception accorded the party by the Lao king at Vientiane provides an intriguing glimpse of the kingdom in its heyday:

"On the 16th (November, 1641) in the morning six elephants arrived to carry the General's letter, which was placed on one of them in a *doulangh* (platform used for carrying offerings and meals) of gold. Each of us mounted one of the five other elephants. Thus we passed behind the courtyard between two rows of soldiers, and arrived at the city gate. We saw then that the city was surrounded by a red wall, made of stones, each half the height of a man, taller than us on our elephants. At the foot of the wall was a trench full of grass and stagnant water, able to carry cannon.

"The place where we would find the king and present the letter to him was a quarter of a mile from the town. We dismounted and went to await the arrival of the king in the tents prepared for the occasion. All around us were camped soldiers, elephants and horses of the nobles of the kingdom; so great was the noise and movement that we were able to imagine ourselves in a camp of the Prince of Orange. After an hour of waiting, the king arrived on an elephant. We left our tents and knelt during his passing to show our respect. The king is a young man of 23 years. He is most refined and surrounded by adept counsellors known as *Tevinias*, of whom one

is in charge of the police, another of religious affairs; the others direct commercial and military matters etc.

"Before the king marched 300 soldiers armed with lances and guns, then came elephants ridden by armed men, then musicians followed by 200 soldiers; finally, 16 elephants carrying the king's wives closed the procession. After this was over, we re-entered our tents and sat down. Almost immediately the king sent us a meal served on eight large *doulanghs*.

"At approximately 4.00 p.m. we were summoned before the king. We crossed an esplanade, in the centre of which was a tall pyramid surrounded by a stone wall in which were numerous loopholes. The pyramid was entirely covered with gold leaf; it was said that the gold there weighed 1,000 pounds. All the Laotians who visited the spot passed it with lighted candles in their hands to pay homage to its sanctity."

Sadly, the splendour of Lan Chang did not last long after the death of Souligna-Vongsa. Dynastic disputes over the succession led in 1707 to the partition of the kingdom into two states, based respectively on Luang Prabang and Vientiane, and these two, by means of various alliances with their more powerful Annamese, Siamese and Burmese neighbours, devoted most of their energies to fighting each other. In 1778 the Siamese invaded Vientiane and established suzerainty over it. The monarchy, however, remained based in Vientiane, until in 1805 Chou-Anou came to the throne. In order to free his kingdom from its tributary status he decided to march on Bangkok. The expedition was a total failure; worse, it led the angry Thais into invading and sacking the city of Vientiane. The kingdom collapsed.

Although That Luang was spared by the invaders, the rest of the city quickly decayed. L.M. de Carné, who visited Vientiane in 1867, commented: "The wall which led onto the river has been submerged by bamboos, with only a few edges protruding. In various places one sees heaps of bricks, which were probably bastions...." That Luang, it seems, was the only remaining building worthy of praise: ".....one must express pleasure with the total shape of this edifice, its graceful peaks and fine bell-turrets, which stand out from the moving background of the palm trees which shelter several wooden huts."

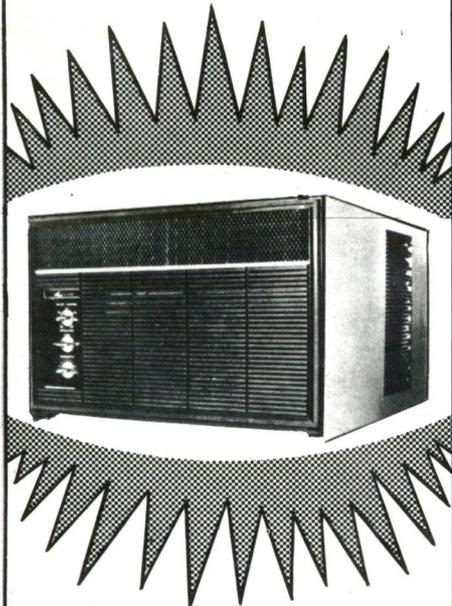
But even That Luang was soon to suffer. In 1873 Yunnanese vandals made a further attack on Vientiane and destroyed much of the old monument. It was not until the arrival of the French, who around the turn of the century incorporated Laos into their colonial Indo-China empire, that restoration work began. A few half-hearted attempts at resto-



Incense smoulders quietly in one of the pavilions at That Luang.

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ABOVE: The wall enclosing the lowest terrace is surmounted by hundreds of 'bay sima', or niches for storing Buddha images. In the background at right can be seen part of the monks' quarters which enclose the monument, while rising over the niches is the framework of a new temple currently under construction.

LEFT: A still-incomplete Garuda bird -- part of the new temple which can be seen in the picture above.

One side represents 'the authorities' and the other 'the people'. The game consists of three matches, of which it customary for the people to win two. Originally 'ti-khi' was played on horseback. The Burmese are believed to have adopted it from the Laotians, and from there, according to the theory, it was taken up by early representatives of the British Raj.

As well as being a significant monument in its own right, That Luang is the most important of the thousands of smaller, humbler *that* which dot the Laotian countryside. One can only hope that the old monument will still be there, fulfilling its role, on that happy day when the most warlike event in Laos will be the annual 'ti-khi' game at That Luang. ■



The main entrance to That Luang which today, following restoration, faces west. Originally, the main entrance is thought to have been located on the eastern side.

ration were made in the early years of the century, and finally, between 1929 and 1935, a thorough reconstruction was carried out under the direction of Leon Fombertaux, Curator of Laotian Historical Monuments. Unfortunately, the enthusiasm of the restorers seems to have got the better of their knowledge of Buddhist traditions, for whereas originally the main facade of That Luang, like most such monuments, pointed east, the reconstructed version has its main entrance gate facing the city of Vientiane, i.e. west. According to the traditional cosmology the east is the zone of light or illumination; the west, that of obscurity and ignorance.

Today That Luang continues to provide a focus for religious occasions in Laos. Each year, around October in our calendar, the That Luang festival takes place. The King of Laos comes from Luang Prabang; people stream in from the countryside. Religious ceremonies including an almsgiving service and candle-lit processions, blend with more worldly activities. Fair stalls are set up. Nowadays, foreign embassies join in by mounting trade displays. Games and dancing are also held. One of the games, the traditional 'ti-khi', may be the original source of the English game of polo. 'Ti-khi' is played by two sides using a ball kept exclusively for the purpose.



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