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THE MYSTERIOUS MEGALITHIC JARS OF CENTRAL LAOS

Dougald O'Reilly and Louise Shewan

Xiang Khouang Province in Central Laos, even today, is a remote location dominated by verdant rolling hills, towering karst formations and meandering rivers. Early European visitors to this part of Laos were astonished to find evidence of apparent ancient human occupation in the form of massive jars carved from stone. The megaliths were first described by James McCarthy in the late 1800s. McCarthy wrote: '... we were astonished to find ... gigantic stone jars; some were erect, some were on their sides, others broken ... Some of the people with me, who formerly lived in this beautiful country, say they were made by angels to drink liquors from.' (Genovese 2014)

It was not until the 1930s that any serious research was undertaken to shed light on the purpose or origin of these jars. Madeleine Colani, an intrepid French researcher, led the first archaeological mission to the so-called 'Plain of Jars'. The name is rather a misnomer as most of the known sites are found in mountain top locations and vary in size, some hosting over 400 jars and others just one or two. Colani focused her efforts on what is now known as Jar Site 1 near the provincial capital of Phonsavan. She excavated around several of the megaliths and inside the cavernous limestone cave that dominates the site. Colani concluded that the cave was, in fact, a huge crematorium and the jars were used to hold the remains of the dead. She also found evidence of burials around the stone jars (Colani, 1935).

Since Colani's time there has been little research undertaken at these enigmatic sites. Laos became embroiled in the conflict that engulfed much of Southeast Asia during the 1970s and Xieng Khouang province was the target of sustained aerial bombardment. According to the Mine Action Group the equivalent of a planeload of bombs was dropped over Laos every eight minutes, 24-hours a day for nine years. It is estimated that 80 million unexploded cluster bombs (UXO) litter the landscape (<http://www.uxolao.org/index.php/en/the-uxo-problem>). This contamination remains a continued threat to lives and profoundly hinders economic development in the region. Although Site 1 has been cleared of UXO, evidence of war is clearly evident in the form of massive bomb craters and systems of military entrenchments and bomb-damaged jars.

AN AERIAL VIEW OF SITE 1 PLAIN OF JARS, PHONSAVAN. PHOTO: KASPER HANLUS



A renewed effort to solve the enigma of the megaliths of Laos has been launched through an Australian Research Council funded project. A collaborative Lao-Australian team recently undertook archaeological research at Site 1 as part of a multi-year effort to investigate several of the 85+ known jar sites. The first stage of research, conducted in February 2016, comprised traditional excavation, mapping and drone photography of the site and the surrounding area. Located about 12 km from Phonsavan, Site 1 contains five distinct groups of megalithics totaling

384 jars, 16 sandstone discs (though 12 await positive identification) and 308 siliceous quartz breccia boulders.

Excavation was conducted in three units; selection of each determined by proximity to jars, discs and boulders and subsurface anomalies identified by ground penetrating radar (GPR). At Unit 1, situated between several of the stone jars, a disc and quartz-rich boulders revealed the remains of three mortuary contexts. Human remains were recovered from beneath the large sandstone disc and were associated with pure-



DR DOUGALD O'REILLY CATCHING UP ON COMPUTER WORK AMONG THE MEGALITHIC JARS. PHOTO: THONGLITH LUANGKOTH

DR LOUISE SHEWAN AND COLLEAGUE EXCAVATE THE PRIMARY BURIAL AT SITE 1. PHOTO: THONGLITH LUANGKOTH



white limestone boulders. Another burial in the unit was marked by a quartz-rich boulder and a third had no related surface marker, but was associated with limestone boulders. The human remains were secondary burials, essentially incomplete bundles of human bone, which are currently undergoing analysis.

The GPR detected a large subsurface anomaly near Unit 1 and another excavation trench was set up to investigate this. The effort was well rewarded by the discovery of a primary burial of an adult in a flexed position with the remains of a child atop it (only the child's skull was recovered). This is the first fully exposed primary internment discovered at any jar site and what made it even more interesting, was the positioning of a triangular slab of limestone with a large perforation in it placed atop the grave. It appeared as though the hole in the limestone was positioned over the skull so that the individual would have been peering through it at time of the burial.

A third excavation was established around a unique sandstone disc, smaller than the one in the first unit, but decorated with a central pommel on either side. Upon completion of the excavation four ceramic jars were revealed, some of which contained human remains, again, secondary burials. Two of the jars contained the remains of infants interred alone.

Surprisingly, given the amount of effort put into the creation of the huge stone jars the site revealed very little in terms of material culture with only a few agate, carnelian and glass beads found along with more quotidian items such as clay ear-plugs and spindle whorls.

A recurring find comprised small clay pots that resemble the large stone jars, almost as if they were made in miniature. Whether the megaliths are contemporary to the secondary and primary burials remains an enigma but it is likely that they are contemporaneous.

The source material for the creation of the megalithic jars at Site 1 has been identified some 10km from where they now sit, representing an astonishing logistical investment. The quarry sites for several other jar sites have also been identified and unfinished jars can be found near rock outcrops deep in the jungle. It is hoped that aerial lidar (light detection and ranging) technology will be able to identify the paths along which the jars were carried to their final resting places. Lidar, a laser scanning technology, has been used to great effect in neighbouring Cambodia and has the ability to strip away forest canopy to create maps accurate to the centimetre of the ground surface.

The next step in the research involves exploring another jar site located near the mountain-top village of Ban Phakeo where nearly 400 jars are perched on a razor-back ridge surrounded by thick jungle. A comparative analysis will be interesting as the jars are morphologically distinct and the geography is much different to that of Site 1 which is located on a broad lowland plain. The research will involve excavation and extensive mapping of the site and the creation of a detailed inventory of each jar. The team will also be undertaking extensive survey in the hope of locating habitation sites that are contemporaneous to the megalithic sites as none have yet been discovered.

THE UNIQUE LIMESTONE BLOCK PLACED OVER THE PRIMARY BURIAL AT SITE 1. PHOTO: DOUGALD O'REILLY



Another avenue of research involves trying to discern connections between these sites and similar sites outside of Laos. One of the most intriguing connections is between the Plain of Jars and similar jars that are found nearly 1200 kms away in Assam, Northeast India. Morphologically the jars of the two locations are very alike and are located in similar environments and there is a potential linguistic connection as speakers of Austroasiatic languages are found in both locations. Another location with comparable jars can be found in Central Sulawesi although these do not bear as much resemblance to the Laotian jars as those of Assam.

For updates on the research please visit: <https://www.facebook.com/Plain-of-Jars-Archaeological-Project-1032083466834899/>

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