

MMAP 2009

by Beth Van Horn (BH),
Elizabeth Hamilton (EH),
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JW: The Luce-funded MMAP 2009 season in Laos wasn't intended as an excavation season. The primary aim was to train thirteen Lao and two Thais in basic non-excavation archaeological techniques. When you say "archaeology," everyone thinks of digging, but of course most of the information comes from a protracted and often tedious process of analysis.

EH: Over the six weeks

of the season, a rotating cast of teachers lectured and trained the students in computer care, databases, artifact drawing, raw material analysis, rock identification, GIS, survey, and exhibit preparation.

EH: But first the team had to get from Vientiane to Luang Prabang. Joyce rented a minibus to take ten of us on the spectacular 8-hour ride up the ominously named Route 13. A few years ago the drive would have been too dangerous because of bandits; now it's just dangerous because there's no guardrail. Luang Prabang is in the mountains, and most of the drive was spent careening around hairpin turns and observing tiny clusters of wood and bamboo thatched houses, usually built by villages of Hmong or Khamu, which clung to the narrow cliff

A File Maker Pro page taken from our database of images.

site (<http://seasia.museum.upenn.edu/>). Anyone can view images, photomicrographs, provenience and other data from hundreds of metal pieces and crucibles fragments, and even download the data for comparison with other sites!

In his five-year strategic plan, Richard Hodges, the Director of the Penn Museum, named Ban Chiang as one of five Penn Museum "key long-term research locations." He would like to see all of data and records put online, thus becoming part of the Museum's "Digital Spine." While the Ban Chiang Project has a head start in digitizing its artifacts in databases during the 1970s, much work remains to be done to digitize and migrate other classes of data and records to a current online for-

mat. Paper records need to be scanned and added to the artifact database and, as you can read in Elizabeth's previous article, scanning of images is ongoing.

The new Luce Grant will greatly assist in the digitization and study effort, particularly in year 3 when the loaned collection of Ban Chiang pottery will be the focus of study. Chet Gorman would have been amazed at the current use of computers in archaeology. Today all archaeological digs are computerized in various ways, but few have as long a pedigree as Ban Chiang.❖

John Hastings, Ban
Chiang Volunteer



side of the road, and frequently half off. The inhabitants survive by slash and burn farming on slopes so steep I couldn't see how they could stand upright on them, much less farm.

BH: Although a challenge for the carsick-prone, Route 13 is the only way to get to Luang Prabang by road, not just for us, but for huge Chinese industrial trucks and tour buses. The mountains were like no others that I've seen before—dramatic towers of tall limestone “karst” that are the product of hundreds of thousands of years of erosion.

BH: Of course one of the draws of being an MMAP volunteer is living in Luang Prabang, a UNESCO World Heritage Site in its own right. Attractions include staying in guest houses steps from the Mekong, getting around

town via the motorcycle-driven or small-truck “tuk-tuks” (named for the sound of a 2-stroke engine that typically powers the gaily painted smaller ones), watching whole families ride by on a single motorbike while we eat sticky rice at a roadside stall, all while Philadelphia was under 8 inches of snow!

BH: MMAP 2009 was the biggest MMAP team in the project's 5-year history—a diverse bunch of archaeologists, museum workers, anthropologists, cultural heritage workers, IT specialists, a geologist, a geographer, and a Penn Museum volunteer (me). Twenty-two people—Lao, British, Thai and American—participated in all or part of the 6-week intensive training in post-excavation archaeolo-

EH: Our trainees worked hard, six days a week. I hope we taught them well, because they will be the future of Lao archaeology. One immediate result was the formation of the first countrywide professional network of museum workers and archaeologists in Laos. The trainees came from museums and offices of culture and information from all over the country that are normally so separated and polar-

ized that very little contact takes place. The six weeks they spent with the MMAP training forged a professional network that can only improve interagency communication and cooperation in the future.

EH: Every day a team of trainees and staff went out to survey, asking villagers if they had seen artifacts and frequently having to climb far up to reach remote caves. We added 12 new sites to the 57 found in 2005. I quite enjoyed crawling around on my stomach in

the tunnels, but when they got too narrow, I sent in young slender Lao to take over, much to their amusement.

JW: Our headquarters in Luang Prabang was in an old French colonial bank building, complete with chickens and a goat with kid.

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Left: Beth Van Horn and Elizabeth Hamilton taking a rare day off to enjoy an elephant ride in the Khan river. Photo by Katherine Arrell



Right: Later that day, Katherine Arrell scrubbing an elephant. Photo by Beth Van Horn.

gy disciplines. The main focus was on helping to build Lao “human capital” for Lao archaeological projects. Laos has no formal training for archaeologists, yet it is becoming apparent that it has a rich archaeological heritage that is in urgent need of study and preservation.



Trainee Phousavanh (Phou) Vorasing explains to Lao school children the shell key he developed for the MMAP 2009 analysis and exhibit.

While the survey teams were out having fun, other trainees and trainers struggled with computer tasks, endured periodic power outages, organized the artifacts from past and current MMAP seasons, and got lots of practice with digital data. After numerous virus outbreaks of the computer kind, MMAP trainer Shawn Hyla from Penn Museum IT found out we could get wireless at our lab!! Being able to send the person at the next table computer files by email (via Philadelphia, Thailand, Australia and more) in seconds—which for someone like me of the carbon paper generation was a magical experience—brought that problem under control.

BH: In addition to my general volunteer duties, I was the instructor for Public Communication, based on my career background in marketing and corporate communications. Not only did I teach basic concepts, but I worked with the MMAP team to create and prepare MMAP exhibits for Luang Prabang and Vientiane National Museum. Occasionally there was a day off...

EH: One highlight of my off-time was the elephant-riding trip. Several of us went to an elephant rescue camp, where elephants retired from logging work give rides to earn their sugarcane and vet care. We first rode on a seat with a *ma-hout*, feeling very imperial. Then we rode bare-back. Elephants, it turns out, are bristly and very tall, and they don't have much to hold on to. They sway as they walk, and I felt certain my elephant would fall off the narrow path. We rode them into the river and scrubbed them with brushes, the elephants having a great time ducking and trying to have us float off their necks. Elephants have a great sense of humor. *Ha-ha*.

BH: We wrapped up this season with an ambitious exhibit in Luang Prabang that summarized 5 years of MMAP work in Laos. Much prep work was involved, from class assignments on communicating archaeology to the public, to evaluating what appealed to Lao versus western audiences, to massive translations for this bilingual exhibit. At the

"Grand Opening" on March 12th, potted plants appeared to spruce up the entrance, two elaborately-dressed and made-up young Lao ladies showed up just to hold the ceremonial ribbon, and dignitaries gave formal speeches. In addition, a huge contingent of school children came and were fascinated by the exhibit, as well as a few westerners who were drawn by the banner posted nearby. Food and wine were enjoyed by all, and Lao dancing wrapped up the day for the stragglers into the evening. It was a very gratifying day for the weary MMAP team.

JW: After the formal training season, we spent a few days in Vientiane. On one day, Elizabeth, Beth, and I, along with 27 staff members of the Lao National Museum, took a road trip across the Mekong into Thailand to visit Ban Chiang and its spectacular site museum. New buildings and displays had been added since my last visit a few years ago. The Lao got to see what an up-to-date archaeological museum could look like, and I got to see that in one part of the Museum, the Smithsonian exhibition I curated 27 years ago is still intact. The visit demonstrated how archaeology can transform a village into a thriving town. Guards in the Museum told me that they remembered me from when they were students at the primary school across from my house when I lived in Ban Chiang in 1979-1981. I asked are they and the people of Ban Chiang now happy? "Oh YES!!" was the reply. ❖



Beth Van Horn, Ban Chiang Volunteer