

FROM THE FIELD



Two intact adult skulls, one female and one male, were found in a jar that probably dates to the Iron Age.

Penn Museum in Laos

BY ELIZABETH
HAMILTON

THE MIDDLE MEKONG ARCHAEOLOGICAL Project (MMAP), a pioneering archaeological project led by Penn Museum staff member Dr. Joyce White, wrapped up its ninth year in Laos in the winter of 2009–2010. MMAP is one of the very few

Western archaeological projects operating in Laos, whose pre-history is barely beginning to be known. The Luce Foundation has generously funded MMAP from 2009–2012, so MMAP has been able to accomplish much work in the last two years in survey, excavation, and training Lao members of museum

and culture heritage government departments in all aspects of archaeological research.

In January 2010, Joyce White, MMAP co-director Bounheuang Bouasisengpaseuth, and other scholars from the United States, Italy, Ireland, Australia, England, Thailand, the Philippines, and Laos conducted a short but intensive excavation at a rock shelter site named Tham An Mah (Horse Saddle Cave). This site had been used in historic times as a temple. Paintings of seated Buddas remained on the walls. Human and animal bones were found scattered on the ground and in niches in the rock. Not far below the surface the excavators found a large, nearly intact jar, extensively decorated and probably dating to the Iron

Age (ca. 600 BC–AD 300). It contained bones from three individuals: two adults and a small child. Bones from another adult and other long bones were found beneath the pot. This burial appears to be unique in Southeast Asian archaeology. It was a multiple secondary burial, i.e. the bones from the four individuals were gathered together after the flesh had largely decomposed and placed in and under the pot. Inside the pot, the two adult skulls, belonging to a woman and a man, were intact, and looked as though they had been arranged so they could look up at the sky.

The excavation was by no means the only activity of the winter. Survey in the riverine areas near Luang Prabang, which had begun in 2001, continued. In 2010, we concentrated on the area around Tham An Mah, attempting to fine-tune our knowledge of settlement patterns around the site. Although we had only four weeks to conduct our survey this season, 15 new sites were recorded for a total of more than 80 sites found by MMAP in Luang Prabang so far. Dr. Gillian Thompson of the University of Bradford in England conducted flotation and seed analysis. She and the Lao team floated 28 samples from Tham An Mah for a total of 44 samples from MMAP excavations of four sites.

In addition, Dr. Kathleen Johnson, of the University of California at Irvine, and Michael Griffiths, of the University of Newcastle, Australia, conducted speleothem research in the deep caves around Luang Prabang. *Speleothem* is the technical term for what non-geologists call stalagmites, stalactites, or flowstone. Armed with headlamps, cave suits, and hard hats, they explored far into caves with long meandering galleries, taking samples and encountering pythons. Back in the lab at Irvine, they will measure the oxygen isotope ratios of the individual layers in an attempt to reconstruct thousands of years of Holocene climate and climate change data.

MMAP's efforts at public outreach were taken to a new level when Amy Ellsworth, the Digital Media Developer at the Penn Museum, arrived at the beginning of January to document the season. See her entertaining blog at <http://middle-mekong.wordpress.com/> and YouTube videos at http://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=middle+mekong&aq=f. 🏠

DR. ELIZABETH HAMILTON is a Research Assistant in the Asian Section, working on the Ban Chiang Project.

Top, Elizabeth Hamilton and a group of Lao schoolgirls look on as Lao team member Souliya Bounxaythip carefully excavates the burial pot.

Middle, MMAP team member Stephanie Howden of Australia emerges from a narrow gallery.

Bottom, Michael Griffiths, Kathleen Johnson, and Michael DeWald investigate a stalagmite.





An Early Ivory Bracelet from Central Thailand

This carved ivory bracelet was excavated at Promptin Tai, Thailand.

BY THANIK
LERTCHARNRIT

A PIECE OF AN ANCIENT ivory bracelet was recently discovered during the fourth excavation season at the Late Prehistoric/Early Historic site of Promptin Tai in the Lopburi region of central Thailand. It is one-of-a-kind and a distinctive Iron Age

(500 BC–AD 500) artifact in unusually good condition.

The fragment was found in an undisturbed occupational layer together with other classes of cultural remains including beads, potsherds, animal bones, and spindle whorls. Right below the occupational layer were human burials where a number of skeletal remains were recovered. Each burial contained a variety of grave goods ranging from beads of agate, carnelian, glass, and shell, to ceramic vessels, iron tools, precious stone bracelets, bronze bracelets, bronze toe rings, bronze finger rings, and a zoomorphic stone bead. Simple, plain ivory bracelets were found intact, adorning the arms of the dead. However, no other carved ivory bracelets like the piece shown above were recovered.

The carefully carved bracelet, about 6 cm in diameter and 0.3 cm thick, is decorated with a series of punched holes arranged in rows demar-

cated by evenly spaced horizontal lines. The design is clearly discernable: rows of incised dots extend for some length in the middle registers of the bracelet. Additional rows of more widely spaced dots were carved in the upper and lower registers. The meaning of the patterns of dots is unknown. Of all the bracelets excavated from this site, those made from ivory are comparatively rare. Most are made of stone. Some are made from clay, shell, or bronze.

Promptin Tai has yielded significant evidence about the lifestyles, mortuary rites, and ancient metallurgy practiced during the Iron Age in central Thailand. Ivory bracelets may represent a unique set of ornaments associated with this period. The piece illustrated here may provide us with new insight into the significance of bodily ornamentation and how these adornments were worn and valued in the past. 🏠

THANIK LERTCHARNRIT (formerly Sawang Lertrit) earned his Ph.D. at Washington State University, Pullman. He has done research in central Thailand for almost a decade, and now is a member of the faculty in the Department of Archaeology at Silpakorn University in Bangkok, Thailand.



A human burial at the site included a white stone earring in the right ear and stone beads around the neck.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank Bangkok Insurance Foundation for financial support of fieldwork in 2008, and Matthew Liebmann for comments and other assistance.

For Further Reading

Higham, Charles. *Early Cultures of Mainland Southeast Asia*. Bangkok: River Books, 2002.

Lertcharnrit, Thanik. "The Moated Site of Promptin Tai and the Transition from Late Prehistory to Early History in Central Thailand." In *Uncovering Southeast Asia's Past: Selected Papers from the 10th International Conference of the European Association of Southeast Asian Archaeologists*, edited by Elisabeth Bacus, Ian Glover, and Vincent Pigott, pp. 258-65. Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2006.