

## Vat Phou (Laos)

No 481rev

### Identification

<i>Nomination</i>	Vat Phou and Associated Ancient Settlements within the Champasak Cultural Landscape
<i>Location</i>	(mainly) Champasak District, (entirely) Champasak Province
<i>State Party</i>	Lao People's Democratic Republic
<i>Date</i>	29 June 2000

### Justification by State Party

The site was planned during the second half of the 1st millennium AD to represent on the ground the Khmer symbolic universe, itself the Hindu view of the world. It is focused on, to the west, the natural features of Phou Kao Mountain and, on the east, the Mekong River, used to represent respectively the sacred mountain dwelling of the god Shiva and the Ganges River or the Universal Ocean. The plain between, containing the main extent of temples and associated works, formed Kurukshetra, the Holy Land.

The degree of survival of the overall topography of the Khmer landscape (*c* AD 600 onwards), and of many archaeological remains above and below ground, has resulted in the continued existence of evidence of the planning and utilization of the landscape over some 400km<sup>2</sup> during nearly a thousand years (*c* 5th–15th centuries AD). This is the only place in south-east Asia where such a landscape has been recognized to survive in all its essential parts.

Some of the individual buildings are of major architectural and historical significance. The Vat Phou Temple Complex itself is one of the major buildings of the pre-Angkorian and Angkorian periods, and is an example of a relatively rare form of hilltop Khmer temple planning. Much of its sculpture exemplifies high artistic standards and creativity of both the formative and classical periods of Khmer civilization.

The nominated property includes Shrestrapura, one of the earliest known urban settlements in south-east Asia, and its 9th century successor. Early social organization is evidenced by road systems and water management. The city is significant as the cradle of the culture and birthplace of the state of Chenla, which dominated much of south-east Asia for several centuries before its incorporation into the Khmer Empire. The archaeological potential of the urban sites, including the area around Hong Nang Sida which became the urban centre in Angkorian times, is very high.

Overall, the Champasak landscape is a very early cultural landscape, demonstrating the beginnings of urbanism in south-east Asia as well as the way in which the Khmers moulded their landscape to reflect their symbolic universe.

**Note** The State Party does not make any proposals in the nomination dossier concerning the criteria under which it considers this property should be inscribed on the World Heritage List.

### Category of property

In terms of the categories of cultural property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this is a *site*. It is a *cultural landscape* as defined in paragraph 39 of the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*.

### History and Description

#### History

The nomination dossier provides no history of the site before its abandonment in the 13th century. The origins of the site nevertheless lie before AD 600, at least at the city of Shrestrapura, where archaeological research has produced evidence of pre-Angkorian times (up to *c* AD 900). The development of the site as a whole, however, was intimately bound up with the origin, development, and zenith of the Khmer Empire between the 7th and 12th centuries. A new line of kings probably centred in the Champasak region expanded its authority from its capital at Isanapura from the 10th century onwards until it encompassed not only most of modern Cambodia but also considerable parts of what is now eastern Thailand. The *floruit* of the elaborate landscape at Vat Phou probably occurred during these centuries. Its historical significance lies in its role as an imperial centre and its demonstration of Indian rather than Chinese influence in the clear evidence of Hindu religious belief.

The last major developments to the Champasak cultural landscape were in the 13th century, just before the collapse of the Khmer Empire. There is no evidence of any maintenance of the monumental buildings since then, although various other occupations and events have occurred on the site. Vat Phou itself, in contrast to what it represented in the first millennium, was converted to Theravada Buddhism and remains a local centre of worship today. Essentially, however, the area reverted to secondary forest, which covered most of it when the first European arrived in the 19th century. An annual Vat Phou Festival demonstrates the continuing place of the site in the lives of the local community.

#### Description

Champasak District lies 500km south-east of the capital, Vientiane, on the west bank of the Mekong River. It contains the Vat Phou temple complex, a major example of both early and classic Khmer architecture of the 7th–12th centuries AD. Recent research has shown that this complex is the focal point of a sophisticated cultural landscape centred on the Champasak Plain, taking in the Phou Kao (mountain) to the west and the banks of the Mekong River to the east. Between them are temples, shrines, water tanks, water channels,

quarries, historic field systems, settlement sites, and an ancient road to Angkor. A planned pre-Angkorian ancient city (4 ha) on the banks of the Mekong appears to have been replaced as the urban centre by another planned city immediately south of Vat Phou itself in the Angkor period. A probably contemporary road leads southwards from it, past quarries and other industrial works.

Many of these features exist in a carefully planned landscape laid out to reflect its sacred character as perceived by the builders of Vat Phou. The terraced Temple Complex lies at the foot of Phou Kao, stretching west-east to a freshwater spring on a rock terrace where the shrine was built. An axial line from the natural *linga* (phallic-like point) on the mountain summit through the shrine was used as the basis for the layout of the temple complex: it is 1400m long, with lakes as well as buildings to either side, bisected by an axial processional way. The use of a natural mountain-top eye-catcher (elevation 1416m) and the relatively high degree of survival of landscape and its structural components assist present-day appreciation of the grand concept of the original design of what was always intended to be what would now be known as a cultural landscape. Much of it continues in use now as shallow paddy-fields for rice.

## Management and Protection

### *Legal status*

The Government, through the provincial and district authorities, is the principal landowner of the entire property.

The Vat Phou area is protected by the Provincial Decree on the Regulations for the Preservation of the Historical Site of Vat Phou and the Areas related to Vat Phou No 38/88 (October 1988). This defined a large Protection Zone, not just the main monuments; within it are three Preservation Areas, essentially the three main temple complexes. A national legal framework for heritage preservation was adopted by a Presidential Decree of June 1997.

Other plans have a direct bearing on the status and management of the site: eg the National Master Plan for Tourism for Champasak Province 1995 and the Provincial Development Plan for Transportation, Post and Construction 1996–2000.

### *Management*

Management responsibility is currently distributed through five different Ministries: Finance (land title and tax collection), Agriculture and Forestry (land-use), Industry and Handicrafts (industrial development and minerals), Information and Culture (monitoring of historic landscape), and Communication, Transportation, Post, and Construction (road and urban development). The Government has established a National Inter-Ministerial Co-ordinating Committee to oversee the management of the Protection Zone and to co-ordinate the activities of the various Government Departments at national, provincial, and district levels.

The Champasak Heritage Management Plan was officially adopted by the Government in September

1998 to put the 1997 Presidential Decree into effect. The Plan defines the boundaries of the Protection Zone and the three Areas within it, and contains regulations for the management of the entire nominated World Heritage site. These cover archaeological work, conservation, and development control.

The Plan implements the policies of the Government for the sustainable development of cultural tourism while making pre-eminent the maintenance of the character and integrity of this cultural landscape and its component monuments. Policies for presentation of the Champasak Cultural Landscape are set out in Chapter 8 of the Plan. Development controls as set out in the Management Plan need to be actively enforced, especially in the ancient city of Shrestrapura.

Policies in the Management Plan envisage sustainable growth of tourism with improved facilities and housekeeping at the sites currently open, plus the development of access to new monuments, the further production of educational materials, and the involvement of the local communities both as guides and as providers of services to visitors. Currently a staff of twelve look after the site. A Site Management and Training Centre is being set up, handicapped by inadequate staffing, training, and skills.

A local site management office has been funded by central Government since 1989. Since 1995, Italian and Japanese funding has enabled UNESCO and the Government to develop a new, more holistic, and non-interventionist approach to the management of the cultural landscape (as evidenced in the voluminous professional and academic annexes to the nomination). Otherwise, funding comes mainly from the Provincial Government (with site revenue going to the District). At the time of the nomination, external funding of some US\$ 5 million was being sought for training and conservation in 2000–2005. Meanwhile visitor numbers have more than doubled since 1997 to 14,000 (7322 of them foreigners); this figure does not take account of the c 100,000 who arrive during the three-day Vat Phou festival.

Overall, management now needs to learn to work more closely with the Plan, perhaps revising it after nearly two years' experience. Systematic monitoring using the site's good existing database is essential, while dealing with the main factors affecting the site: development pressures, environmental pressures (mainly flooding, run-off, and erosion), visitor/tourism pressures including those of the Festival each February, and the growing population with higher lifestyle expectations within the Protected Zone itself (no permanent inhabitants live in Zones 2 or 4 but almost 28,000 live in Zones 1 and 3).

## Conservation and Authenticity

### *Conservation history*

There has been minimal conservation work to any part of the site. The process by which the Champasak landscape has survived in its present state is essentially one of benign neglect and natural damage and decay. Water is now in some sense the most serious problem, for the original drainage system no longer works and in the rainy season water cascades

down the terraces and causes erosion both there and elsewhere through the site. The central processional road was restored in the 1960s, when a large pavilion was also built. Some stone robbing has occurred but, largely because of the site's little-known existence and difficulty of access until recently, looting has been minimal. Perhaps the worst damage is at Tomo Temple, where the principal brick shrines have been almost totally demolished. The site has also been spared the sort of archaeological work which has damaged so many sites in the name of excavation but provided scant information. The clearance of forest only began in the 1950s, but now there is a great need for regular maintenance to stop regrowth and further root damage. The lack of modern threats has continued until the present but now the situation is changing. The basically non-damaging nature of traditional agriculture (shallow paddy-fields) is changing under pressures to intensify and has recently caused considerable damage. The main road through the Ancient City is attracting constant new building and improvement of existing ones.

A good site conservation assessment has been carried out. As a result, the great and urgent need now has been identified as at the Vat Phou Temple Complex itself, where most of the major structures are in danger of imminent collapse. Repair of the ancient water system is also a high priority.

#### *Authenticity*

Evaluation of authenticity involves in this case five main elements:

##### 1. The landscape setting of the whole

The river and the mountain, the frame of the man-made complex, remain in place and little altered; the plain in between is probably more wooded and less coherent in appearance than it was a thousand years ago. Overall, however, authenticity in this respect is high.

##### 2. The association of the various elements and the evidence for deliberate planning

The various elements comprising the landscape survive well as archaeological sites or standing ruins. It is therefore relatively easy to see how the elements were articulated with one another and to understand their relationships. The axial arrangement of structures in relation to the Lingaparvata of Phou Kao is clearly visible.

##### 3. Buried archaeological sites

The general depth of archaeological stratigraphy is no more than 0.5m in the urban sites, but neither natural nor human disturbance has so far been significant. The archaeological integrity is therefore high.

##### 4. Archaeological sites surviving as visible earthworks

Of former structures now earthworks, the most notable are the ramparts around the two cities. Some damage has been caused by cuts through them (eg for modern roads), but the most serious damage has been erosion of the second and third walls of the Ancient City by a stream. Other upstanding earthworks include the roads, canals, and *baray* (reservoir), and mounds where buildings or other structures have collapsed and become overgrown. Again erosion, and some robbing and

digging, have affected these features but generally they are in good condition.

#### 5. Standing structures

While no ancient buildings are now intact, most survive to the tops of their walls. No large-scale restoration has occurred. The standing structures are therefore still entirely authentic with a high level of integrity despite partial collapse.

Most of the present population live away from the main archaeological complexes. Many of the inhabited houses are traditional in form, but developmental pressures are mounting. Nevertheless, overall, with little vegetational or other natural changes and almost no archaeological or restorative activity, the integrity and authenticity of the site of this nomination are remarkably high.

### **Evaluation**

#### *Action by ICOMOS*

An ICOMOS expert mission visited the property in February 2001.

#### *Qualities*

The site is remarkably well preserved, although now in great need of careful conservation and firm management. It promises a great time-depth of considerable research interest, from within the first half of the 1st millennium AD, bearing on at least one of the main issues, urban origins, concerning developments in south-east Asia. It exhibits a remarkable spread of monuments and other structures over an extensive area between river and mountain, some of outstanding architecture, many containing great works of art, notably sculpture. Above all, the whole was created within a geometric framework linking such man-made works with natural phenomena, notably the distinctive pointed summit of Phou Kao. This landscape planning on the grand scale in the second half of the 1st millennium AD was carried out not merely to make a pleasure garden but to express a relationship between the gods, nature, and humanity as believed in Hindu religion. The sanctity of the mountain is still observed today by the people of Champasak, who continue to respect and preserve the natural environment of this mountain abode of ancient gods, whilst across the Mekong the riverside temple of Tomo continues to bear witness to the cosmological template used to plan the site.

#### *Comparative analysis*

Many Khmer-period monumental buildings survive, primarily in Cambodia but also in other countries. In terms of architectural magnificence, and also of its significance in terms of its spatial composition, the complex at Angkor, the capital of the Khmer Empire from the 10th to 14th centuries AD, is without peer. Indeed, the Khmer culture is in general better represented in Cambodia than in Lao. Angkor was justifiably inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1992, and continues to be the subject of much international attention.

The Vat Phou Temple Complex, however, is on a par with the most important Khmer sites found outside modern Cambodia in terms of its plan, decoration, and survival. It is also one of the major building complexes of the pre-Angkorian and Angkorian periods.

The Champasak cultural landscape is the only known early cultural landscape in south-east Asia, preserving both good and relatively undamaged evidence for the beginnings of urbanism and for the ways in which the Khmers engineered their landscape to meet both their practical and spiritual needs. The particular topography of the area makes it relatively easy to demonstrate to local people, visitors, and scholars the symbolic constructs which underlay the Khmer use of the landscape. This is the only known landscape of its sort to survive in all its essential parts. As a rare linear layout of Khmer temples, it can be compared, for example, with Preah Vihear on the Thai-Cambodian border. It is also an example of a relatively rare form of hilltop Khmer temple planning.

Only at this property has evidence so far been found for cities, rural agglomerations, sites specializing in different craft activities, and communications systems, all associated with water-management structures and religious buildings to provide a basis for an overall understanding of the development of Khmer civilization.

In terms of historical significance and monumental importance, Vat Phou can be compared directly with two other sites emerging in mid-millennium as belonging essentially to the pre-Angkorian phase. The major ruins are regarded as being at Phnom Da near Angkor Borei in the Mekong delta and Sambor Prei Kuk. At both there is much stone sculpture representing a rich pantheon of Hindu deities with hardly any evidence of Buddhism. It needs to be borne in mind that irrigation was a well known and widespread phenomenon in south-east Asia in the early centuries AD, and probably began much earlier. Particularly was this true of areas like Cambodia that are subject to heavy seasonal rains and long dry periods, weather which made water-storage and distribution essential for successful rice-growing. Elaborate though the systems at Vat Phou are, they can be appreciated within a regional context in which they are representative rather than exceptional. Similarly, although recent research has undoubtedly given Shrestapura a place in the debate about urban origins in south-east Asia, it has not diminished the significance, actual or, like Shrestapura, potential, of other early cities in the region. Oc-éo, for example, to the south of Vat Phou lay in a lowland area west of the delta of the Mekong and Bassac Rivers where access to the sea and other settlements was by canals in a system described as "the outstanding urban feature ... to an extent [not] found elsewhere in south-east Asian settlements." Canal-based irrigation was also developing elsewhere in the world in the 1st millennium AD. In the North American south-west, for example, the economy of the desert-living Hohokam was almost exclusively agricultural by AD 500 because their irrigation system was ambitious from the outset.

The Champasak cultural landscape as a whole can be viewed in wider perspectives. Considerable significance is attached in the nomination to the fact that the urban centre shifted westwards from Shrestapura on the bank

of the Mekong to Hong Nang Sida south of Vat Phou temple itself. Undoubtedly this adds considerably to the interest of the property overall and the case is well made that the archaeological potential of two successive but adjacent rather than superimposed cities will bear significantly on regional issues of state formation and urban development. But "settlement shuffle" is a common phenomenon, archaeologically well recorded around the world and not least with cities such as Delhi, and, among current nominations, Samarkand.

In a global perspective, the nominated property overall also shares many features in common with some principal sites of different but contemporary cultures developing in those centuries perceived in Western scholarship as Early Medieval. In western Europe itself, for example, great religious complexes, also involving alignments, as at Cologne (Germany), Chartres (France), and Canterbury (England), were developing. A close parallel in terms, not of architectural form but of state formation, water management, and road network within a core area containing built, religious complexes closely allied to natural phenomena, is at the World Heritage site of Chaco in New Mexico (USA), part of a civilization flourishing and fading at about the same time as that of the Khmer.

#### *ICOMOS recommendations for future action*

Within the site's management programme urgent attention must be given to the stabilization of ancient standing buildings and other structures, and a particular effort made to bring the hydrological situation under control, both in preventing flash floods and the undercutting of buildings and in restoring the ancient system of water management as far as possible.

ICOMOS believes that inscription would reflect international endorsement of the stated objectives of the Champasak Heritage Management Plan which comes as an integral part of the nomination and already has the force of law at national level. ICOMOS therefore expects the practical implementation of that Plan should inscription occur.

#### **Brief description**

The Champasak cultural landscape, including the Vat Phou Temple Complex, contains a remarkably well preserved planned landscape more than a thousand years old. It was contrived to express the Hindu version of the relationship between Nature and humanity, using an axis from mountain top to river bank to lay out a geometric pattern of temples, shrines and water-works related over some 10km. The site also contains two successive early planned cities between the banks of the Mekong and Phou Kao, the whole representing a development over nearly a thousand years from the 5th to 15th centuries AD associated above all with the Khmer Empire.

#### **Statement of Significance**

The outstanding significance of the Champasak cultural landscape lies in the broad scientific perspective of the powerful Khmer culture of the 10th–14th centuries AD as a whole. In particular, the

Temple Complex of Vat Phou represents a masterpiece of human creative genius for the high quality of its artistic work and the integration of its symbolic plan with the natural landscape to create a physical manifestation of a Hindu mental template of the perfect universe. The resulting expression of these ideas, not only on the ground but also in architecture and art was a unique fusion of indigenous nature symbols, religious inspiration, and technical prowess.

#### **ICOMOS Recommendation**

That this property be inscribed on the World Heritage list on the basis of *criteria iii, iv and vi*:

**Criterion iii** The Temple Complex of Vat Phou bears exceptional testimony to the cultures of south-east Asia, and in particular to the Khmer Empire which dominated the region in the 10th–14th centuries.

**Criterion iv** The Vat Phou complex is an outstanding example of the integration of a symbolic landscape of great spiritual significance to its natural surroundings.

**Criterion vi** Contrived to express the Hindu version of the relationship between nature and humanity, Vat Phou exhibits a remarkable complex of monuments and other structures over an extensive area between river and mountain, some of outstanding architecture, many containing great works of art, and all expressing intense religious conviction and commitment.

#### **Bureau Recommendation**

That Vat Phou and associated ancient settlements within the Champasak Cultural Landscape be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of *criteria iii, iv, and vi*.

ICOMOS, September 2001