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## Megalithic Jar Sites in Xiengkhuang – Plain of Jars (Lao People’s Democratic Republic) No 1587

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**Official name as proposed by the State Party**  
Megalithic Jar Sites in Xiengkhuang – Plain of Jars

### Location

Xiengkhuang Province  
Lao People’s Democratic Republic

### Brief description

More than 2100 tubular-shaped megalithic stone jars used for funerary practices in the Iron Age give the Plain of Jars its name. This serial property of 15 components contains 1325 of these large carved stone jars, stone discs (grave markers, or lids for the jars), secondary burials, grave markers, quarries, manufacturing sites, grave goods and other archaeological materials and features. The jars are large, well-crafted, and require technological skill to produce and move from the quarry locations to the funerary sites. Located on hill slopes and spurs surrounding the central plateau, the jars and associated elements are the most prominent and intriguing evidence of the Iron Age civilisation that made and used them, about which little is known. The sites are dated from between 500 BCE and 500 CE (and possibly up to as late as 800 CE). The Plain of Jars is located at an historical crossroads between two major cultural systems of Iron Age southeast Asia – the Mun-Mekong system and the Red River/Gulf of Tonkin system. Because the area is one that facilitated movement through the region, enabling trade and cultural exchange, the distribution of the jars sites is thought to be potentially associated with overland routes, and demonstrate social hierarchies.

### Category of property

In terms of categories of cultural property set out in Article I of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this is a serial nomination of 15 *sites*.

## 1 Basic data

### Included in the Tentative List

25 March 1992  
Sites Mégalithiques de la province de Xieng Khouang

### Background

This is a new nomination.

### Consultations and Technical Evaluation Mission

Desk reviews have been provided by ICOMOS International Scientific Committees, members and independent experts.

An ICOMOS technical evaluation mission visited the property from 21 to 30 October 2018.

### Additional information received by ICOMOS

A letter was sent to the State Party on 9 October 2018 requesting further information about the selection of components, disaster risk management, Heritage Impact Assessment, proposed developments, community awareness and involvement, interpretation of the Jar sites, tourism management plan and monitoring.

An Interim Report was provided to the State Party in December 2018 summarising the issues identified by the ICOMOS World Heritage Panel. Further information was requested in the Interim Report including: selection of components, management system, future development plans (particularly at site 1), research and interpretation strategies, corrections to site maps, and UXO clearance.

Additional information was received from the State Party on 7 November 2018 and 22 February 2019, and has been incorporated into the relevant sections of this evaluation report.

### Date of ICOMOS approval of this report

13 March 2019

## 2 Description of the property

Note: The nomination dossier and additional information contain detailed descriptions of this property, its history and its state of conservation. Due to limitations on the length of evaluation reports, this report only provides a short summary of the most relevant aspects.

### Description and history

The Plain of Jars is located on a plateau in Central Laos, and takes its name from the presence of more than 2100 megalithic stone jars that date from the Iron Age. The nominated property comprises 15 components that contain 1325 of these large stone jars and associated other elements (stone discs, secondary burials, grave markers, quarries, manufacturing sites, grave goods and other archaeological materials). The jars are tubular in shape, have various rim styles, and range in size from 1 to 3 metres. The jars are associated with mortuary practices, and are thought to reflect funerary practices of elites. They are the most prominent and intriguing evidence of the Iron Age civilisation that made and used them, and have been dated from between 500 BCE and 500 CE (and possibly up to as late as 800 CE). The State Party considers that the jars are evidence of a widespread culture that existed in the region – a civilisation about which relatively little is known.

Located on hill slopes and spurs surrounding the central plateau, the jars are mostly made from carved sandstone (although other stone types are also found such as granite, limestone, conglomerate and breccia). While the jars are mostly undecorated (other than one jar with a distinctive ‘frogman’ motif), the stone discs (thought to be grave markers or lids for the jars) can include carvings with animal

or anthropomorphic figures, concentric circles, circular mouldings or a central knob or loop. The jars are very large, and well-crafted, requiring technological skill to produce and move from the quarry locations to the funerary sites. In most cases, quarry sites are located near to the locations of the jars, and the stages of manufacturing can be discerned. Human remains have been found inside and buried around the stone jars. There are no discernible patterns of placement of the jars within the sites.

The larger jars sites contain a number of archaeological features and demonstrate several burial traditions. Site 1 is the most extensive in this regard and has been subject to the most archaeological research. It has terracotta jars associated with secondary burials, stone jars with human remains and glass beads, a cave that possibly functioned as a crematorium, and pit burials with various artefacts. Site 21 is associated with Site 1 and is the largest quarry site, containing *in situ* evidence of each step of the quarrying process.

Within the Plain of Jars, there are 2107 known megalithic jars (finished and unfinished), 207 discs and 672 grave markers clustered in 59 surveyed sites within Xiengkhuang. There are a further 26 sites known that are yet to be surveyed, and it is likely there will be additional jars and associated sites found.

From this larger assemblage, 11 sites within 15 components have been selected, containing 1325 jars. The major jar sites are at sites 1, 2, 3, 42 and 52 (site 3 is presented as 5 separate components). Sites 8 and 21 are quarry sites, site 12 is a manufacturing site. Sites 25 and 28 are located on the northern-most and western-most ends of the series (respectively), and Site 28 has a single very large jar impressively located at the top of a hill. Some of the sites have jars made of different materials, such as Sites 23 (sedimentary breccia) and 25 (andesite). The State Party has explained that the sites have been selected to include both large and small sites with jars, as well as manufacturing and quarrying sites in order to provide a comprehensive basis for future research on population distributions and the geographical associations with ancient trade routes. The selected components contain one or more clusters, each of which includes from one to more than 400 jars. The nominated components cover a large area that spans up to 80 km (west to east) and 40 km (north to south).

Relatively little is understood about the prehistory of Laos. It may be that Xiengkhuang was part of a Lao kingdom known as Khottaboun (from approximately 1000 BCE to 979 CE), and that it was incorporated into the Lan Xang Kingdom in the mid-14<sup>th</sup> century. The Plain of Jars is located at an historical crossroads between two major cultural systems of Iron Age southeast Asia – the Mun-Mekong system and the Red River/Gulf of Tonkin system. It is also a geographic region that facilitated movement through the region, enabling trade and cultural exchange. The distribution of the jars sites could be associated with overland routes, reflecting a network of village locations. In the 1930s, the jars were studied in depth by the French

researcher Madeleine Colani, who suggested that the locations of the jars were linked to ancient trade routes, particularly for salt. Iron ore is also a valuable historical resource which is present in Xiengkhuang.

Dating from 2016, excavations found that secondary burials date to the period 900-1200 CE; and there is evidence of human occupation and activity within the nominated property up to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Laos came under the control of France in 1887; and Xiengkhuang and the kingdom of Vientiane fell under the control of Luang Prabang in 1941 as French control waned due to Japanese expansion. The Plain of Jars was heavily affected by bombing and other damage (trenches, foxholes, anti-aircraft positions and tank scrapes) during the Second Indochina War (1965-1975). Many of the jars within the nominated components show damage caused by bombing, and there is unexploded ordnance throughout the area; but there are also locally significant historic sites associated with this history, such as trenches and tunnels. The Lao People's Democratic Republic was established in December 1975.

### **Boundaries**

The nominated property of 15 components has a total area of 173.56 ha, with 10 buffer zones totalling 1,012.94 ha. The boundaries have been shaped by the protective designations. The buffer zone boundaries have been drawn in order to control development in the vicinity of the selected components.

A number of the components are fenced, and efforts have been made to establish boundary markers.

There are no occupants within the nominated components; and 24 residents within the buffer zone for site 1. The State Party has indicated an intention to relocate these residents to outside the buffer zone.

### **State of conservation**

The State Party has surveyed the condition of the jars and other elements within most of the nominated components, finding that 31% of the jars are intact (and 69% were broken); and 20% of the discs were intact (and 80% were broken). The archaeological deposits are considered to be largely intact, with few serious pressures.

While the State Party considers that the state of conservation of the nominated property is generally good, ICOMOS considers that the state of conservation is variable across the nominated components, based on the information provided by the State Party and the observations of the ICOMOS technical evaluation mission. On one hand, many of the jars are in poor condition due to natural processes of weathering by rain and wind, the impacts of cattle in these areas (now prevented), and damage caused by war-time battles and bombing during the Second Indochina War. However, the jars themselves are physically robust, and the archaeological deposits and elements are relatively intact. There are few current development pressures.

### Factors affecting the property

ICOMOS considers that the main factors affecting the nominated property are the ongoing challenges of removing unexploded ordnance from surrounding areas, visitor pressures, and various site-specific pressures of development and agricultural encroachment.

As noted, the Plain of Jars was heavily affected by bombing and other damage (trenches, foxholes, anti-aircraft positions and tank scrapes) during the Second Indochina War (1965-1975). Although the nomination dossier describes ongoing work to remove UXOs, the State Party has subsequently advised that this is now complete and all components are now clear. UXO clearing in the buffer zones is continuing. This is a significant achievement to ensure the safety for visitors, local people and researchers.

Vegetation growth is a factor at some sites, particularly tree growth and tree roots. Erosion, due in part to past cattle grazing, is also a factor in some cases. Cattle grazing is no longer permitted, and fencing has helped to eliminate this problem.

Visitor pressures have been noted for some sites (particularly sites 1, 2, 3 and 21), including damage from climbing on the jars or stepping on the discs.

There are some pressures from agricultural encroachment (site 23) and development in the buffer zones (sites 1 and 25). A new high voltage transmission line runs through the buffer zone of site 3; roadworks have damaged some the elements in some components (particularly site 52); and low density residential development has occurred in the buffer zones of several components, and could be a future issue for sites 1 and 25. Logging is currently occurring in the buffer zone of site 42, but is not considered to have any detrimental impact on the proposed Outstanding Universal Value of the serial property. Mining is prohibited in the nominated property and the buffer zones. In the past, looting has been a factor affecting the property, and some jars were removed; however, the State Party considers that this is not a current issue.

Future development pressures could arise from efforts taken by the national and provincial governments to address the economic disadvantage of the people of the Xiengkhuang Province. In part, these initiatives focus on expansion of cropping and cattle grazing, but also heritage tourism.

## 3 Proposed justification for inscription

### Proposed justification

The nominated property is considered by the State Party to be of Outstanding Universal Value as a cultural property for the following reasons:

- The jars and associated elements are an exceptional testimony to the funerary practices and the civilisation that created them, but disappeared sometime after 500 CE;

- The megalithic jars are impressive due to their large number and size, and the technical skill required to carve and transport them;
- The nominated components contain important archaeological evidence of material culture and cultural practices across several different eras and cultures.

### Comparative analysis

The comparative analysis considers megalithic sites and burial monuments throughout the world, in India and southeast Asia and in Laos, taking into account the current World Heritage List and Tentative Lists. This is a wide initial sweep of comparative examples, but the most useful are considered to be found in India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Viet Nam and the Philippines. None of the examples from other countries in the region are currently included in the World Heritage List or Tentative Lists, and they appear to relate to different civilisations and/or periods. Other provinces within Laos that feature jar sites are also included in the comparative analysis (Jar sites in Luang Prabang Province, and the Menhirs of Hua Pan).

The comparative analysis establishes the distinctiveness of the Plain of Jars. In response to queries raised by ICOMOS in its Interim report, the State Party has provided additional information in February 2019 to clarify the selection of the components, indicating that sites with large and smaller clusters have been selected, as well as sites with jars with unusual stone types. The selection also includes quarrying and manufacturing sites. The State Party has argued that the selection also provides a comprehensive basis for future research. The components include the full range of sizes, production styles, stone types and rim styles. The sites that have been excluded from the series were omitted because of their poor condition and that they were unnecessary to convey the proposed Outstanding Universal Value.

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ICOMOS considers that the comparative analysis justifies consideration of this property for the World Heritage List.

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### Criteria under which inscription is proposed

The property is nominated on the basis of cultural criterion (iii).

Criterion (iii): *bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilisation which is living or which has disappeared;*

This criterion is justified by the State Party on the grounds that the jars and other elements in the nominated components are evidence of the funerary practices and are the principal and exceptional testimony to the civilisation that made them, which disappeared sometime after 500 CE. The selected sites include important archaeological evidence of cultural practices from this period. While the use of jars in funerary practices is known in other parts of Laos, northeast India and southeast Asia, the scale and number of the sites in Xiengkhuang is remarkable.

ICOMOS considers that the Plain of Jars exhibits an exceptional testimony to the civilisation that made and used the jars for their funerary practices over a period from approximately 500 BCE to sometime after 500 CE. The jars and associated archaeological features provide evidence of these ancient cultural practices, including social status hierarchies. The serial property contains a range of sites that can attest to the quarrying, manufacturing, transportation and use of the funerary jars over this period. The lack of knowledge about these histories, peoples and cultural traditions poses certain challenges within the context of the World Heritage Convention. However, ICOMOS considers that over time, the unfolding of an enhanced understanding through continuing research will further enrich the appreciation of the importance of these sites.

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ICOMOS considers that the nominated property meets criterion (iii).

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### **Integrity and authenticity**

#### **Integrity**

The integrity of the nominated serial property is based on the rationale for the selection of the components and their ability to convey the potential Outstanding Universal Value; the material evidence of the jars and other archaeological evidence; the intactness of the individual components and the series as a whole (including consideration of the adequacy of their boundaries); and the state of conservation and the way major pressures are managed.

The serial approach is justified by the State Party on the grounds that the phenomenon of the megalithic jars extends over a large area, and there is a need to select sites that can represent their characteristics. ICOMOS considers that the serial approach is justified.

However, there are issues with the integrity of individual components that need to be addressed. Site 3 is a large site, broken into a number of separate components for the purposes of the nomination. This is a confusing arrangement, but more importantly, there are conservation problems in components 3-3, 3-5 and 3-7, and various intrusive elements. ICOMOS suggests that efforts be made to improve the management of these separate components as a 'whole site' to strengthen their integrity.

There are impacts on the visual integrity of some components. For example, at Site 1, new houses outside the buffer zone are visible, and a large Buddhist temple is under construction to the north-east of the component; the middle of Site 2 is divided by a road; and Site 3 (group 3) is affected by the construction of two water basins and a concrete construction to the immediate south of this group of jars.

#### **Authenticity**

The authenticity of the nominated serial property is based on the form, design, materials and locations of the jars and other elements. The sites have been the subject of archaeological research which is continuing. For the most part, the materials are original, located in their original locations, with relatively little disturbance to the archaeological deposits.

ICOMOS notes that there have been factors that have damaged the jars and their settings (such as the damage from bombing) in the past, and that these have impacted on the authenticity of the nominated property. However, given the antiquity of the jars and other elements, ICOMOS considers that the property demonstrates authenticity in relation to the proposed Outstanding Universal Value.

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ICOMOS considers that while damages have occurred in the past, the requirements of authenticity and integrity have been met. The integrity of the property is vulnerable due to the impacts of natural processes, and current and past human activities.

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### **Evaluation of the proposed justification for inscription**

ICOMOS considers that the comparative analysis justifies the consideration of this nominated serial property to the World Heritage List, although the lack of knowledge of the cultural and historical context of the jars is an overall challenge, as acknowledged by the State Party. The nominated property demonstrates criterion (iii). The nominated property meets the requirements of authenticity and integrity, despite the damages that have occurred in the past.

#### **Attributes**

The attributes that convey the heritage values of the nominated property are the megalithic jars, discs, secondary burials, human remains, grave markers, quarries, grave goods and manufacturing sites, and associated archaeological deposits demonstrating the long human history of the Plain of Jars area.

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In summary, ICOMOS considers that the comparative analysis justifies the consideration of this nominated serial property to the World Heritage List and criterion (iii) is demonstrated. The nominated property meets the requirements of authenticity and integrity.

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## **4 Conservation measures and monitoring**

### **Conservation measures**

Few conservation measures have been applied to the nominated property, and a well-defined and active programme of conservation has yet to be established. The State Party recognises this need, and has developed a general set of Conservation Guidelines which forms part of the management system. This includes 'risk mapping'

and the development of a comprehensive 'Risk Map' for each component. A 'Conservation Plan' is envisaged and the State Party acknowledges that additional training will be needed.

The State Party has indicated in the additional information received in February 2019 that there are possible future plans for a 'large-scale' restoration at Site 1, including consolidation of vulnerable jars and improvements to the presentation of the site. ICOMOS considers that this will require in-depth conservation planning and Heritage Impact Assessment, and that all such restoration or other significant conservation programmes should be submitted to the World Heritage Centre for review in accordance with Paragraph 172 of the *Operational Guidelines*.

### Monitoring

A system of monitoring is described in the nomination dossier, and the State Party has advised that it is still being put into operation. Village Heritage Teams provide the daily monitoring, supported by technical staff. Indicators are focused on the state of conservation of the nominated components, and the frequency and responsibility for monitoring are identified. Responsibilities are shared between national, provincial and local actors, and link with higher level national processes.

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ICOMOS considers that there is no well-defined and active programme of conservation for the nominated property. This requires further attention. All major conservation and restoration proposals should be subject to Heritage Impact Assessment, and review by the Advisory Bodies. The monitoring system is adequate for the current conditions and pressures.

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## 5 Protection and management

### Documentation

Archaeological research has been undertaken at the Plain of Jars by Madeleine Colani through the École Française d'Extrême-Orient in the 1930s; and by the Japanese archaeologist Eiji Nitta and the Lao archaeologist Thongsasayavongkhamdy (both in the 1990s).

The UNESCO-Lao Safeguarding the Plain of Jars project (1998-2010) inventoried and mapped many of the sites, established a GIS database, developed community-based heritage management, established monitoring, drew up the community-based Heritage Tourism Plan, cleared UXOs at a number of sites, and conducted capacity building activities.

In 2016, the first major excavation at the Plain of Jars since the 1930s was conducted by the Australian National University and the Monash University, supported by funding from the Australian Research Council. This project is ongoing. A 2017 survey located new sites and elements that are yet to be included in the Department of Heritage inventory. At the end of Phase 1 of this project, mapping and inventory work was completed at sites 1, 12 and 52,

including ground-penetrating radar survey, digital modelling of Site 1, and sampling and analysis of human remains and jar contents. This work will continue in Phase 2 of the project.

A simple GPS survey and mapping serves as the baseline for the nomination dossier and its maps. However, for many of the sites, the exact number and location of stone remains is imprecise, and there are some discrepancies in the data sets between the inventory of the Department of Heritage and more recent surveys (such as the 2017 survey of Site 1). ICOMOS considers that it is an urgent priority to provide updated survey maps of all the components, starting in the short-term with the most prominent and heavily visited sites. In response to questions raised by ICOMOS in its Interim report on this matter, the State Party has advised that additional survey and updating of maps has been done for Site 25 and part of Site 23. Additional details have also been added to the maps for Sites 1 and 2. Further improvements to the mapping of the nominated components are continuing, and an application to the US Ambassador's Fund has been lodged to support this work from September 2019.

Despite these efforts (and more than 100 reports prepared in the past 20 years), many components have had no archaeological research. ICOMOS considers that the scientific research and knowledge of these sites has considerable future potential. Further survey and archaeological excavation of the nominated components has been hampered in the past by the need to clear UXOs. It is therefore promising to note the progress made in clearing UXOs, and the initiation of new international collaborations and archaeological research programmes, as detailed in the Archaeological Research Plan.

The Action Plan provided by the State Party acknowledges the need to prioritise the organisation of data management.

### Legal protection

The nominated property is owned by the Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism on behalf of the Government of the Lao People's Democratic Republic, and is designated as 'cultural land' within the Land Law. The nominated property is protected under the Law on National Heritage 2013, supported by the Decree of the President of the Lao People's Democratic Republic on the Preservation of Cultural, Historical and Natural Heritage 1997, and the Provincial Governor's Decree concerning the Management and Conservation of the Plain of Jars World Heritage Sites No. 996.

The buffer zones are also owned by the national government, although private use that is sympathetic to the proposed Outstanding Universal Value is permitted by Provincial Decree 996.

The State Party has drafted a Ministerial Decree, Order on the Protection of the Plain of Jars upon the inscription of the nominated property in the World Heritage List.

## Management system

Implementation of the mechanisms of protection occurs at the national, provincial, district and village levels. Coordination is provided by the National Committee for World Heritage (coordination of activities and decisions at the national level, and interface with the province) and the Xiengkhuang Heritage Steering Committee (coordination of activities at the provincial, district and village levels).

The management system involves several agencies at the national and provincial levels of government. The national Department of Heritage provides technical roles such as research, conservation, Heritage Impact Assessment and monitoring. A 5-year action plan of specific projects has been developed by the Department, including an archaeological research plan.

Provincial decrees establish the funding base and the Plain of Jars Heritage Technical Division which manages site 1, and supports the day-to-day management of the other components which is provided by nearby villages. In practice, ICOMOS considers that there is considerable reliance on village communities to ensure effective management.

Development planning is guided by the Provincial Strategy for the Department of Information, Culture and Tourism 2016-2020. This provides financial resources for further survey of the jars sites, fencing, basic visitor facilities, road improvements, implementation of the national heritage law, production of interpretive materials.

The Plain of Jars Heritage Technical Division has a minimum guaranteed funding, but this can be augmented by ticket sales. The State Party has established a formula for sharing income from ticket sales between the Plain of Jars Heritage Technical Division, villages and district administrations, including a province-wide heritage fund. Some recent initiatives have been financially supported by New Zealand and Australian aid. This outside funding has allowed a number of key improvements to be made in the documentation, protection and presentation of the nominated property.

The State Party has taken steps to ensure sufficient expertise in archaeological research, and heritage conservation and management. Staff are located in the national and provincial organisations that comprise the management system, but at present, not all key staff positions have been filled, and the office of the Plain of Jars Heritage Technical Division is not yet fully established. Furthermore, ICOMOS notes that the capacity of the State Party in this regard is modest, and that training of Lao heritage practitioners is an ongoing need and challenge that could be assisted through mechanisms of international cooperation.

The State Party has not prepared a consolidated Management Plan for the overall property. The operationalisation of the management system is therefore based on the framework of legal protection (at national and provincial levels), together with the approved 5-year

Action Plan, Archaeological Research Plan, Conservation Guidelines, and the Heritage Impact Assessment Guidelines. While all proposals, designs or plans for regional development or infrastructure implementation from other arms of government must be forwarded to the World Heritage Office for Heritage Impact Assessment, it is not clear whether this is fully functioning. A range of further policies are foreshadowed in the Action Plan, including policy for conservation of the jars and a policy for dealing with broken jars.

Site guidelines orient day-to-day activities at the village level, and are supported by village contracts. These seem sufficiently detailed in relation to the specific roles and responsibilities, existing land uses, and the actions to be undertaken to maintain the components and monitor their condition. However, conservation measures, research and improvements to the presentation of the overall property are not prominent at this level of management planning.

Guidelines for Heritage Impact Assessment have been developed as part of the management system, but these are not yet included in the legal framework, and the State Party notes that they are not yet consistent with the management system that has been presented. ICOMOS considers that this is a rather hypothetical response to the need for HIA, and recommends further work to activate these as a priority. The existing Guidelines are a good basis for this, and will be useful for training purposes.

The State Party considers that the nominated property has few risks associated with natural hazards and so no risk preparedness measures have been developed. The jars are physically robust, and generally located in elevated locations. In 2018, the Province of Xiengkhuang was affected by the collapse of a dam followed by heavy storms, causing a slight postponement of the ICOMOS evaluation mission. Few areas within the nominated serial property were directly affected, although Site 1 experienced some flooding, and the access road to Sites 52 and 12 was impacted. As a result of these recent events, the State Party has recently been in contact with the Heritage and Disaster Risk Reduction Programme at Ritsumeikan University (Japan) to organise capacity building for risk preparedness.

UXO clearance has been a significant ongoing activity within the nominated property, and the State Party advises that this is now completed in the nominated components, and that the work to clear UXOs in the buffer zones is continuing as a high priority. A protocol has been developed to guide UXO clearance in archaeologically sensitive locations. In response to a question from ICOMOS, the State Party indicated in the additional information submitted in February 2019 that it aims to complete the removal of the white concrete markers that once indicated safe pathways through areas not yet cleared of UXO by the end of 2019.

### **Visitor management**

Tourism to the nominated property is minimal and visitor pressure is low. The sites that are most visited are 1, 2, 3, and 21, although there is some organised access to sites 23 and 52 as well. In 2017, the Province had 130,000 international visitors, and the Plain of Jars is the main attraction. Visitor numbers to the nominated sites have fluctuated from year to year. The figures for 2015 are available for sites 1, 2, 3, and 21, and range from 38,000 visitors per year to Site 1, and totals that range between approximately 3000-6000 per year to the others. The patterns are therefore uneven. There are several peak periods such as Hmong New Year and Lao New Year. World Heritage inscription is anticipated to support growth in visitor numbers, but the projections are relatively modest due to the distance from Vientiane, Luang Prabang and other tourism routes. An Interpretation Plan for the Plain of Jars has been developed with support from the Tourism Development Department of the Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism.

Site 1 is the major tourism destination within the nominated serial property, due in part to its closer proximity to Phonsavan. It has a large visitor centre staffed by the provincial Plain of Jars Heritage Technical Division, with an electric shuttle service, interpretive displays, ticket booth and tourist shops. There are plans to train local guides. Site 2 has a small information kiosk; and site 3 (which also services site 8) has a ticket booth, restaurant and information kiosk. Changes are planned for upgrading the road and relocating visitor facilities at site 3. Access and ticket sales at Sites 2 and 3 are managed by local villages. Site 21 also has ticketed entry, and Site 52 has a community-based tourism operation. Many of the remaining sites have limited or no visitor facilities, and some are remote and difficult to access, with no visitation. Some interpretation signs have been recently installed, and further signs are part of the 5-year Action Plan. The newly rebuilt Provincial Museum in Phonsavan has some exhibitions with recent archaeological findings.

There are intentions that tourists should be accompanied by local guides, but ICOMOS notes that this is not always the case (other than at Site 3), and many visitors guide themselves. ICOMOS considers that the interpretation of the nominated property needs strengthening. The availability of printed information is limited, and while many visitors are from Laos, visitors without Lao language would find it difficult to gain a good understanding of many of the sites they visit.

There is a provincial tourism strategy, a campaign for '2018 Visit Laos Tourism', and a Tourism Management Plan is currently under preparation and should be completed during 2019.

### **Community involvement**

Local community involvement is crucial to the successful implementation of the management system, and the State Party has worked to build effective partnerships with individual villages associated with the nominated

components. Given the expanse of the area in which the nominated components are found, the management system is designed to involve 9 local villages. Village Contracts have been signed to establish 'Village Heritage Teams' to undertake routine monitoring, cleaning, guarding and maintenance of the nominated components. According to the Provincial Governor Decree 995, part of the tourism income from the Plain of Jars will be distributed to all villages associated with the nominated components.

ICOMOS has observed that there is a good awareness within these local communities of the World Heritage nomination processes and the local implications, especially in relation to future land uses. The establishment of the boundaries and buffer zones appears to have involved consultation with affected communities. ICOMOS also notes the community-based programming of the UNESCO-Lao Plain of Jars project over a long period.

### **Evaluation of the effectiveness of the protection and management of the nominated property**

The State Party has completed an impressive amount of work to prepare the documents that support the management system, and has recently achieved the clearance of UXOs from the nominated components (with clearing of the buffer zones continuing and given a high priority). ICOMOS considers that the engagement and active custodianship of local communities is a strength of this nomination; however, the devolved approach taken to the management system will require considerable and active coordination. A number of key components of the management system are general (such as the Conservation Guidelines) and do not indicate how conservation measures will be applied. The principles and objectives for advancing major strategic initiatives (such as the improvement of the presentation of the nominated components to visitors) are not clearly indicated in the explanation of the management system, and the Heritage Impact Assessment Guidelines need to be fully implemented. A Tourism Management Plan is currently being developed and will guide new interpretation actions. For these reasons, ICOMOS considers that a Management Plan should be developed to ensure that the management system is coordinated for the nominated property, and has made suggestions for improvements to the accuracy of the documentation.

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ICOMOS considers that the framework of legal protection is adequate. While there is no consolidated management plan, the management system seems able to maintain the components. In practice there is considerable reliance on village communities to ensure effective management, and long-term capacity building is therefore critical. The conservation approach is not elaborated or applied at this stage; and the present standards of interpretation and availability of information about the sites are also limited. While tourism planning and visitor pressures are not urgently required, they should be a medium-term priority, and all new visitor infrastructure (including access roads) should be subject to Heritage Impact Assessment.

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## 6 Conclusion

Despite the limited knowledge of their cultural origins, the nominated series of 1325 megalithic jars presents an impressive achievement of an ancient civilisation of southeast Asia. This serial property of 15 components with carved stone jars, stone discs (possibly lids for the jars), secondary burials, grave markers, quarries, manufacturing sites, grave goods and other features (including human remains) are the most prominent and intriguing evidence of the civilisation that made and used them, about which little is known. ICOMOS considers that there is a potential for sites with these megalithic jars to be inscribed in the World Heritage List, and agrees that the Plain of Jars contains an unusual and impressive array of such sites.

ICOMOS accepts the conclusions of the State Party concerning the comparative significance of the Plain of Jars, especially within the context of comparisons with India, southeast Asia and other provinces of Laos. Additional information provided by the State Party in February 2019 has strengthened the justification for the inclusion of each of the 15 components. Together, the components demonstrate the range of site types (including topographic and locational contexts, stone types, density and sizes of jars and other archaeological evidence). The selected components also ensure the protection of the substantial archaeological potential of these sites. There is relatively little knowledge about the civilisation which created these sites and objects, and there is a need for accurate documentation and continuing archaeological research.

Despite these challenges, ICOMOS considers that the nominated serial property demonstrates criterion (iii) and the requirements of authenticity and integrity have been met.

The main factors affecting this property are processes of natural deterioration and future development pressures. Most of the key factors that have damaged the elements of the property in the past – such as the damages caused by war in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and cattle grazing – are no longer affecting the sites. Visitor pressure is not a serious issue at present, but development pressure could increase in the medium-term. A Tourism Management Strategy is in preparation and will augment the provisions of the Interpretation Plan for the Plain of Jars.

The framework of legal protection is adequate. Active conservation measures are lacking, interpretation needs improvement, and the documentation requires updating. However, ICOMOS considers that the management system is workable in the short-term for maintaining the components. The direct involvement of the Village Teams and associated agreements with government agencies is commendable. Nevertheless, ICOMOS considers that a management plan is needed, due to the heavy reliance on coordination and legal frameworks. Many dimensions of the management system do not seem to be fully operationalised, and the Heritage Impact Assessment is

yet to be fully functioning and is unrelated to the legal frameworks.

In practice there is considerable reliance on village communities to ensure effective management and monitoring, and long-term capacity building is therefore critical. While tourism planning and visitor pressures are not currently urgent, this should be a medium-term priority, and all new visitor infrastructure (including access roads) should be subject to Heritage Impact Assessment.

In conclusion, ICOMOS sees considerable promise for this property to be inscribed in the World Heritage List, despite the research, documentation and management challenges that remain.

## 7 Recommendations

### Recommendations with respect to inscription

ICOMOS recommends that the Megalithic Jar Sites in Xiengkhuang – Plain of Jars, Lao People's Democratic Republic be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of **criterion (iii)**.

### Recommended Statement of Outstanding Universal Value

#### Brief synthesis

More than 2100 tubular-shaped megalithic stone jars used for funerary practices in the Iron Age give the Plain of Jars its name. This serial property of 15 components contain 1325 of these large carved stone jars, stone discs (possibly lids for the jars), secondary burials, grave markers, quarries, manufacturing sites, grave goods and other features. Located on hill slopes and spurs surrounding the central plateau, the jars are large, well-crafted, and required technological skill to produce and move from the quarry locations to the funerary sites. The jars and associated elements are the most prominent evidence of the Iron Age civilisation that made and used them, about which little is known. The sites are dated from between 500 BCE and 500 CE (and possibly up to as late as 800 CE). The jars and associated archaeological features provide evidence of these ancient cultural practices, including associated social hierarchies. The Plain of Jars is located at an historical crossroads between two major cultural systems of Iron Age southeast Asia – the Mun-Mekong system and the Red River/Gulf of Tonkin system. Because the area is one that facilitated movement through the region, enabling trade and cultural exchange, the distribution of the jars sites is thought to be associated with overland routes.

**Criterion (iii):** The Plain of Jars exhibits an exceptional testimony to the civilisation that made and used the jars for their funerary practices over a period from approximately 500 BCE to sometime after 500 CE. The size of the megalithic jars, and their large number and wide distribution within the Province of Xiengkhuang is remarkable, and the serial property of 15 components contains a range of sites that can attest to the quarrying,



manufacturing, transportation and use of the funerary jars over this lengthy period of southeast Asian cultural histories.

#### Integrity

The integrity of the serial property is based on the material evidence contained in the 15 components, the intactness of the individual components and the series as a whole, and the relatively stable state of conservation of the attributes. There are impacts on the visual integrity of some components, such as the construction of new houses and Buddhist temple outside the buffer zone for Site 1; poorly sited roads/tracks within several components; and conservation problems and intrusive constructions within Site 3. Some attributes have been damaged in the past by bombing and other effects of war, and by cattle grazing.

#### Authenticity

The authenticity of the serial property is based on the form, design, materials and locations of the megalithic jars and other attributes such as lids, secondary burials and archaeological deposits. For the most part, the materials are original, located in their original locations, with relatively little disturbance to the archaeological deposits. While past factors have damaged the jars and their settings, their abundance, antiquity and condition support the authenticity of the serial property.

#### Management and protection requirements

The serial property is protected under the Law on National Heritage 2013, supported by the Decree of the President of the Lao People's Democratic Republic on the Preservation of Cultural, Historical and Natural Heritage 1997, and the Provincial Governor's Decree concerning the Management and Conservation of the Plain of Jars World Heritage Sites No. 996. Implementation of the mechanisms of protection occurs at the national, provincial, district and village levels. Coordination is provided by the National Committee for World Heritage and the Xiengkhuang Heritage Steering Committee. A 5-year action plan of specific projects has been developed, including an archaeological research plan, as well as resources for fencing, basic visitor facilities, road improvements, implementation of the national heritage law, and production of interpretive materials. The day-to-day management of most components is provided by nearby villages based on contracts established with the Provincial Government; and a formula for sharing the income from ticket sales with local communities is in place.

The main factors affecting this property are processes of natural deterioration and future development pressures. The State Party has recently achieved the clearance of UXO from the components, commendably removing a challenging barrier to access, research and safety.

The management system requires further development, including the establishment of a management plan and a conservation plan to ensure coordination and consistent

conservation approaches, and to pursue needed longer-term strategic improvements. A number of aspects of the management system are yet to be fully implemented, such as the arrangements for Heritage Impact Assessment. Interpretation and provision of information about the sites to visitors are modest and should be enhanced in the longer term, particularly in light of continuing archaeological research and sustainable tourism initiatives for the Province.

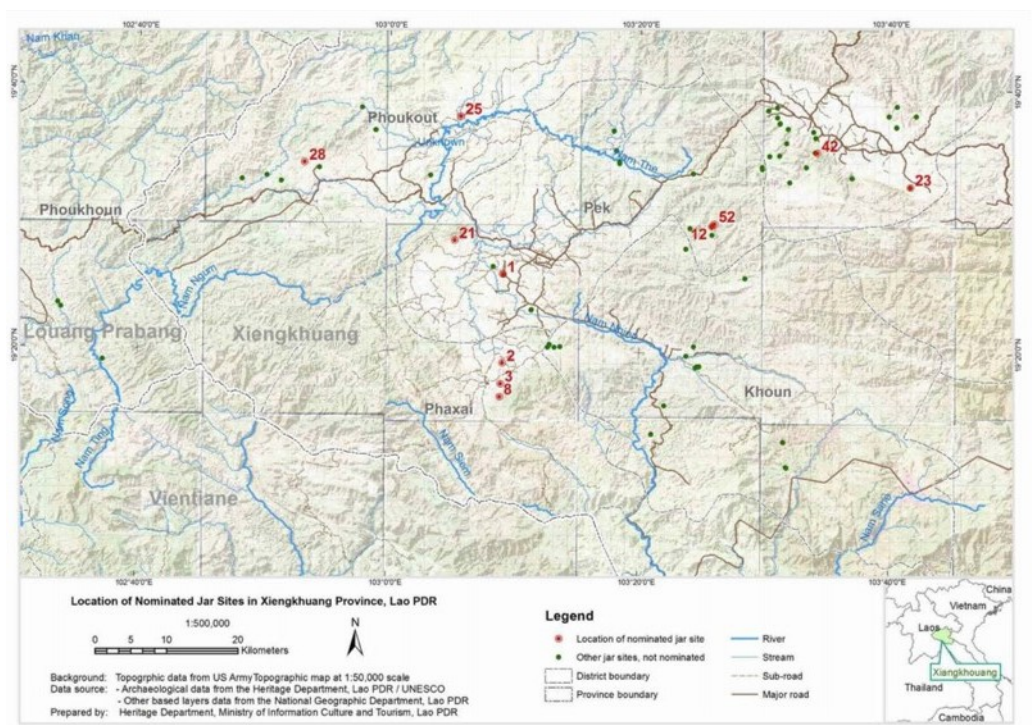
#### Additional recommendations

ICOMOS further recommends that the State Party give consideration to the following:

- a) Using the themes and implicit principles of the Action Plan, developing a Management Plan for the entire serial property in order to ensure the needed coordination of management activities, clearly directing active conservation measures, and providing for a strategic approach to new initiatives,
- b) Developing the envisaged 'Conservation Plan' and implementing a well-defined and active programme of conservation,
- c) Improving the management and conservation of the different component parts of 'Site 3' to strengthen their integrity,
- d) Urgently and professionally backfilling the excavation trench dug in the 1930s by Colani in Site 28,
- e) Closing the various dirt-roads within Site 52 and rehabilitating the setting to avoid continuing erosion problems,
- f) Continuing the work of clearing UXOs in the buffer zones and areas surrounding the components of the property, guided by the protocols for minimising the impacts on archaeological deposits and features; and completing the removal of the concrete boundary markers that indicate safe paths in areas cleared of UXOs once these are no longer needed,
- g) Completing the Tourism Management Plan for the Plain of Jars, ensuring its consistency with the management system, and incorporating visitor experience and visitor management into a wider framework of tourism destinations in the area,
- h) Continuing to improve the accuracy and detail of the mapping of all property components, including the location of jars, other archaeological features and attributes, particularly for the most heavily visited components. The mapping should also indicate all management structures, land tenures (for Site 1), and other topographic and management-related elements of these sites,
- i) Continuing to conserve and interpret other historic sites and elements within the serial components even though they are not attributes associated with

the Outstanding Universal Value (such as the Palaeolithic, Neolithic and modern era archaeological sites, and locally significant historic sites associated with the Second Indochina War),

- j) Developing and implementing strategies for disaster reduction, including capacity building activities,
- k) Further developing and implementing 'Heritage Impact Assessment' for development proposals and incorporate these processes into the systems for management and legal protection of the property,
- l) Ensuring that all major projects – including restoration projects – that could impact on the property are communicated to the World Heritage Centre in line with Paragraph 172 of *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*,
- m) Submitting to the World Heritage Centre and to ICOMOS by 1<sup>st</sup> December 2021 a report on the implementation of the recommendations set out above.



Map showing the location of the nominated components





Jars - site 1



Group of Jars – site 52





Quarry – site 21



Single very large Jar – site 28