The Plain of Jars has a variety of reputations both real and imaginary. These monolithic carved jars boast legends of giants celebrating a victorious, and perhaps fictitious, military victory with large vats of wine (Ciochon & James, 1995). In reality, most archaeological evidence proves that the Jars were used in various funerary practices. During the 1960’s and 1970’s, the Plain of Jars became known as the battleground of a very real war waged by the United States secretly during the Vietnam/American War, also known as the Second Indochina War. In recent years, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has nominated the jars for the World Heritage List. Their proposal consists of clearing unexploded ordinance (UXO) and promoting conservation while encouraging tourism to improve the local economy of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (PDR). This paper will detail the history of the archaeological excavations and research completed on the Plain of Jars, the impact of UXO on the site, and the ongoing efforts of UNESCO to protect and preserve the Plain of Jars as a
The Plain of Jars, also referred to as the Xieng-Khouang province, is located in north-central plateau of the Lao PDR and comprised mostly of rolling grasslands with sporadic forested areas throughout. Due to the higher elevation in this area, the mountain peaks of the Lao PDR are located here: including Phou Bia, the tallest peak in the country, among others. The mountains are categorized as rain-shadow; the western side is heavily forested and the eastern side is desert (Ciochon & James, 1995). Precipitation in this climate has two seasons, a hot season and a rainy season that results in heavy rainfall that washes away the protective soils surrounding the jars (Suliyanon, et al., 2009). Drastic changes in weather, as well as the windy conditions of the plains, are responsible for the natural weathering and erosion affecting the monolithic jars, especially those made of limestone (Baldock & Ven Den Bergh, 2009). It is rather remarkable that the jars have lasted this long in such a detrimental environment.

The jars themselves are varied in size, type, and weight. There are currently 85 sites, expanding upon the original list compiled by Dr. Madeleine Colani in the 1930’s (Genovese, 2012). The newly recorded or discovered sites pose a higher risk of contamination or damage due to the lack of documentation and access currently available. Most jars have a squat or slender shape and have one opening, although there are notable exceptions in which the vessels have two carved openings at either end. Dr. Colani believed that the jars were used to represent these ‘male’ and ‘female’ aspects and have some symbolic properties linked to fertility (Genovese, 2012). The jars also bear various symbolic, animalist or humanistic carvings (Suliyanon, et al., 2009). Eighty percent of the sites contain jars formed from sandstone, although granite, conglomerate and limestone have also been commonly recorded (Baldock & Ven Den Bergh, 2009). Numerous quarries have been found in close proximity to the jar
sites, although none of granite (Suliyanon, et al., 2009). This suggested that the granite jars were carved in situ or not moved far before reaching their final resting place, although the exact reason for this remains unknown.

Dr. Colani was the only archaeologist in the world to gain unfettered access to the Plain of Jars, due to the fact that she was a citizen of France excavating in the French colony of Indochine. Colanis’ large compilation of research, written in the French language, is considered the seminal documentation of the site. She found various artifacts, including glass beads, pottery fragments, and objects made of iron and bronze (Suliyanon, et al., 2009). At one point, Colani was even accused of being a grave-robber due to the amount of artifacts that she had uncovered (Ciochon & James, 1995). After excavating a cave containing ash and burned bone, she concluded that the jars were utilized as urns to store the remains, and the cave was used as a crematorium complete with chimney holes (Suliyanon, et al., 2009). The theory for funerary practices has gained support from further excavations, most notably those of Professor Eiji Nitta in 1994 and Dr. Julie Van Den Bergh who began working in the early 2000’s and continues on to this day.

Another interesting feature is the large discs found at the jar sites, originally assumed to be lids. Dr. Colani refuted this theory by demonstrating their ill fit and hypothesized that they were used as grave markers instead (Genovese, 2012). In stark contrast to this theory, Nitta theorizes that the jars were monumental architecture used to mark the location of burial pits (Coates, 2005). Dr. Van Den Bergh believes that the purpose of the jars for burials evolved over time, the main function shifting from burials to cremations, reflecting in the need for smaller openings in the jars (Suliyanon, et al., 2009). This implies that the function of the site started off as primary burials, and then shifted to become secondary burials in which the human ashes stored in the jars
were buried after the bodies had already been cremated.

Generally speaking, the dating of the Plain of Jars is assumed to be anywhere from 500-200 BCE to around 1000 CE. The approximate date is a point of contention when taking into the account the large discrepancies among the theories regarding the supposed ages of these priceless contributions to archaeology. Dr. Colani believed that the jars date back to the Bronze or Iron Age based on the funerary customs of those who occupied the site (Genovese, 2012). However, Nitta and others believe that the sites are younger than Colani suspected, perhaps only dating back to the tenth century during the reign of the Angkor Empire based on grave goods found at his site (Suliyanon, et al., 2009). Dr. Van Den Bergh, who is currently working in the field with MAG, is in possession of two jars that were mistaken for UXO and removed from their site; unfortunately, there is no funding readily available to have their contents carbon-dated (Coates, 2005). To public knowledge, no absolute data techniques have been performed on any of the artifacts either due to access or funding, so neither the Iron Age dating of Colani nor subsequent younger ages suggested by recent theories can be tested or proved at this time.

During the Second Indochina War, the Lao PDR became a very strategic location whose various roadways were operated by the communist parties of Southeast Asia in order to transport troops and supplies to the battlefields in Vietnam. The Plain of Jars was unfortunately located halfway between the headquarters of the opposing sides, becoming the choice battleground for waging war (Brafman, 1972). The International Agreement on the Neutrality of Laos was signed on 23 July 1962 by fourteen countries that promised to stop all military action within the country. The United States government under the Kennedy administration authorized the secret bombing of the Lao PDR, with Plain of Jars being of particular interest due to its strategic location and known trade ways (McCoy, 2006). The secret war waged on for the next nine
years, affecting the people of the Xieng-Khouang province.

The U.S. utilized tactical bombing strategies as a way to hold the Plain of Jars to minimize the risk of ground infantry, thus minimizing the American casualties of war, while thoughtlessly wreaking havoc on the civilians of the Lao PDR. The years from 1964 to 1973 were characterized by 580,000 secret missions over Laos, which is comparable to bombs dropping every eight minutes for twenty four hours a day (Mines Advisory Board, 2014). As a result of the intense bombing, thousands of the civilians perished while others fled from their homes and were placed into refugee camps outside of the Xieng-Khouang province (Suliyanon, et al., 2009). The aftermath of this deadly time in Laotian history lives on as UXO continues its mission as a deadly threat to the people and impedes the modernization and development in the Plain of Jars.

The Lao PDR is now regarded as the most heavily bombed country on the planet. During nine years of destruction, more than two million tons of bombs were dropped on the Lao PDR. Approximately 75,000 tons were concentrated on the Xieng-Khouang province due to its strategic location and the number of displaced, wounded, or killed civilians is estimated at over ten million (Brafman, 1972). Most of the people affected by the bombings were poor peasants of agricultural lifestyles. According to a poll performed by the U.S. Information Service in the early 1970’s, 96 percent of civilians had witnessed the bombing of their villages, 75 percent of homes were damaged, and 61 percent witnessed someone’s death (McCoy, 2006). The repercussions of the Secret War in Laos still reverberate long after the civilians vacated the refugee camps and returned to their villages to rebuild and repair the incomprehensible damage done by the explosives.

The tragic aftermath of the Second Indochina War continues to this day. Thirty percent of all UXO have yet to be detonated in the seventeen contaminated provinces of the Lao PDR. In these areas, ninety percent of people live in constant fear of explosions that could affect their safety.
or the safety of their children (Mines Advisory Board, 2014). Cluster munitions, also referred to as ‘bombies’ or ‘bomblets’, especially pose a threat to the safety of children, as they are big enough to kill a child or seriously maim an adult (Ciochon & James, 1995). Land contaminated with UXO is still being utilized by over 80 percent of people in affected areas, resulting in additional threats to safety. UXO continue to be responsible for hundreds of deaths per year, and thousands of injuries that regularly result in amputation and blindness (Mines Advisory Board, 2014). New markets have recently developed for selling disarmed UXO to tourists who visit the Plain of Jars, the purchasing of which is not advisable for safety reasons (Box, 2003). Currently, over 25 percent of Xieng-Khouang remains contaminated with UXO, resulting in hindrances to agriculture, development and tourism in the province.

The Mines Advisory Group (MAG) is a non-profit international organization that has been instrumental in the clearance of UXO in the Lao PDR and elsewhere in the world. UNESCO consultants working in the Lao PDR dutifully map and survey the sites using geo-referencing techniques while MAG clearance teams remove staggering amounts of UXO (Coates, 2005). From 2011 to 2013, MAG cleared more than 1.6 million meters of land in the Lao PDR, most of which has since been developed for agriculture and aids local farmers to grow their own crops under safe circumstances (Mines Advisory Board, 2014). In previous decades, several propositions have been written for various methods of preservation and the importance of clearing UXO in the Plain of Jars in particular. In 2005, UNESCO and The Ministry of Information and Culture in the Lao PDR partnered to clear UXO from the three most popular sites (Box, 2003). The Lao-UNESCO project takes into account the socio-economic considerations involved with the Plain of Jars in an attempt to encourage tourism, development, and conservation in the Lao PDR.

Tourism is the second largest source of income to the country after
mineral exports. ‘Sustainable tourism’ to the Plain of Jars will be required in order to maintain consistent levels of income needed for preserving and monitoring the site, while economically supporting the development of infrastructure such as roads, hotels, and tour companies (Suliyanon, et al., 2009). The clearance of the most popular sites in and of itself is a great accomplishment, but unless tourists have safe and reliable access, such measures are fruitless (Coates, 2005). The promotion of tourism results in many variables to take into consideration. Factors include, but are not limited to: UXO removal to promote the protection and security of the site, a rise in social and historical awareness among the villagers to prevent the construction of roadways and other detrimental means of developments throughout the sites, preservation efforts to combat natural and constructed forms of erosion, as well as the tourism sector developing into a safe and sustainable economic venture (Suliyanon, et al., 2009). Tourism will undeniably encourage the local economy, but careful steps must be implemented to ensure that tourism develops at the same rate as infrastructure, conservation measures and community involvement.

When considering all the positive outcomes that will impact the local and national economy of the Lao PDR, it is important to detail the negative aspects that tourism might have on fragile sites such as the Plain of Jars. Human expansion is rendering unmitigated and unforeseen impacts on the sites; the jars are continually being recycled in new and detrimental ways including the repurposing for garbage disposal and housing, as well as modifying for chicken coops and animal troughs (Genovese, 2012). Even well-known and fully decontaminated sites are at risk to human impact. The factors that are often underestimated at these locations include: valid concerns about littering and pollution, the lack of security that can lead to the theft of priceless artifacts and possible vandalism to the jars themselves, and future over-crowding can potentially cause irreversible, albeit unintentional, damage to the sites (Suliyanon, et al., 2009). It is clear that the Lao PDR still has numerous obstacles to
overcome in the years ahead before the Plain of Jars can be fully protected and preserved for future generations. An additional problem concerning the preservation of the Plain of Jars is the fact that Lao PDR does not have an abundance of resources in which to fund such a large undertaking.

In 1998, the Plain of Jars was officially nominated as a World Heritage Site. According to UNESCO, in order to be considered for such a nomination, “sites must be of outstanding universal value and meet at least one out of ten selection criteria” (UNESCO, 2014). The Plain of Jars, including all known and unknown jar sites and the landscape surrounding them, meet three of the aforementioned criteria required for consideration as a World Heritage Site: they “bear a unique… testimony to a cultural tradition or civilization… which has disappeared” illustrated by unique funerary practice which have evolved over time; they are “an outstanding example of… technological assemble which illustrate a significant stage in human history” characterized by the jars, their carvings, various stages of burials and numerous artifacts including grave goods and pottery; they are “an outstanding example of a traditional human settlement… representative of… human interaction with the environment” indicating new perceptions and values placed on funerary practices, death, and perhaps even rebirth (Suliyanon, et al., 2009). Once the site is under the protection of UNESCO, the Plain of Jars will undoubtedly continue to contribute to the archaeological record of human history both in the Lao PDR and in Southeast Asia in general.

Unfortunately, UNESCO’s nomination will be pointless unless the Lao PDR treat the jars with the utmost respect and do everything in their power to protect the integrity of the sites. The people of the Xieng-Khouang Province do not consider the jars sacred, but rather as objects that may be modified or utilized in their everyday life. This could be attributed to the lack of knowledge regarding the jars, which is a testament to the importance of archaeology to discover and share
relevant information so that the Lao PDR and the world may know the true value of such priceless artifacts. Therefore, the Plain of Jars is at risk not because of ethnocentrism but of reverse-ethnocentrism. This theory implies that the people of the Western world hold the plain of jars to a higher standard than the Lao PDR and the culture to which the jars belong. The disparity is a result of Western views of preservation contrasting starkly to the sensibilities and functionality with which the Lao PDR views the jars. Aside from a lack of economic funding, this proves to be the greatest contributing factor that hinders the Plain of Jars in becoming a World Heritage site and receiving the protection that it deserves.

In conclusion, the Plain of Jars will never be able to reveal all of its secrets to the world. The continued interest of archaeologists and their efforts to excavate, as well as to preserve, the Plain of Jars proves to be indispensable to discovering more about these fascinating burial practices. Information is even harder to come by in the decades following the Second Indochina War. The devastating amount of UXO hinder all aspects of forward progress in the Lao PDR, including archaeology, socio-economic development, tourism, infrastructure and agriculture as well as everyday threats to the safety of the people. Tourism would undoubtedly improve the economy and help the Plain of Jars become a World Heritage Site, but at an unknown cost to the preservation of the sites, and the integrity of uncovered artifacts. What began as a story about an imaginary victory has evolved into a very real story of perseverance involving many distinct aspects that connect and overlap: the jars unable to reveal their secrets, the world unwilling to abandon plans for preservation, and Lao People’s Democratic Republic refusing to surrender to defeat in the face of warfare and adversity.
Bibliography


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