

EuroSEAS 2022

Panel Proposal

(1) title

Current studies in the epigraphy of Thailand and Laos

(2) convener

Gregory Kourilsky

(3) brief description and explanation of the chosen format

Although Western epigraphy of the “greater Thai” world – which includes the works of A. Pavie, G. Coédès, A.B. Griswold & Prasert na Nagara, H. Pentz, etc. – is over one-century year old, academic production in this field has been at a standstill for decades. On the other hand, Thai scholarship has continued to discover and study new inscriptions, and therefore new findings on the history and social organization of this region. This panel presents an attempt to revive epigraphic research on the Thai-Lao world in Western language – which is expected to be done in close collaboration with local scholars and institutions.

This fresh start also has an epistemological dimension, as it aims to take into account recent issues raised by epigraphists and historians working on other geographical areas, who have questioned the implicit usage of the inscribed letters rather than the explicit message they convey – in other words, the relationship between the message and its material manifestation.

This panel intentionally focuses on the Thai-Lao historical period – viz. 13th century onwards –, as inscriptions that pertain to earlier Mon and Khmer civilizations present in Thailand and Laos have been continuously studied. This geographical and periodical limitation means that only four interventions are required, to be organized in a single session.

(4) brief description of panel

This panel is constituted of four scholars from France and Thailand. They examine different aspects of the Thai “epigraphic habit” – as Latinist Ramsay MacMullen puts it – relative to specific political areas, namely Sukhothai, Ayutthaya, Lan Na and Lan Xang.

The first paper studies the inscriptions of Sukhothai written in Pali language, focusing on two aspects. On the one hand, it evaluates the function that this language occupies in the inscriptions – e.g. public, symbolic, apotropaic, etc. – and in their contents, in order to draw out the elements that participate in the installation and dissemination of the Pali “ideology”, with all that it conveys in terms of references to the canonical corpus. Pali epigraphy was an essential vector in the installation of “Theravada” Buddhism in the kingdom, as a tool embodying a form of religious legitimacy, perfectly manipulated by the Thai religious and royal powers.

The second paper aims to address a little-documented period of the history of the kingdom of Ayutthaya, namely the reign of Somdet Chao Sam Phraya (r. 1424-1448). It will scrutinize the epigraphic corpus of this period, which was overlooked by Western scholars. At the same time, the issue of the scarcity of inscriptions found in the kingdom of Ayutthaya will be raised. The epigraphy of Ayutthaya, in the first centuries, is extremely limited and seems to ignore the model of Sukhothai inherited from the Khmer: the warrior narratives, the long eulogies of the rulers, the lists of foundations, the territorial claims, are all absent. The question arises, therefore, what remains of the Siamese contribution to epigraphy, and also what are the connections with Lanna and Sukhothai inscriptions in terms of historiography and literacy.

The third and fourth papers address ongoing projects dedicated to the epigraphic corpus of the kingdoms of Lan Na (present-day in Northern Thailand) and Lan Xang (present-day in Laos) respectively. The former reports a research project on the epigraphic corpus and archaeological remains recently unearthed in the Fang river basin (Chiang Mai province), in cooperation with two researchers at the Chiang Mai University (Thailand). This project aims to document and publish the epigraphic corpus of this region, as well as to contribute to the history of the spread of Buddhism (in the 15th-16th centuries) in this part of the ancient kingdom of Lan Na, on the fringes of Burma. The latter concerns the inscriptions written on stone of the Lao cultural area. It aims to take stock of the first corpus to be edited, i.e. the stele inscriptions of the “greater” Lan Xang kingdom (16th-17th c.), on a territory which corresponded to present-day Laos and the northeastern region of Thailand. It attempts to highlight what characterizes these inscriptions - especially with regard to that of neighboring realms -, and to explain the choices that have been made for their edition on paper and for online database.

(5) **single session** (1 x 90 min.) - **presenters**

- Gregory Kourilsky (EFEO, France)
- Michel Lorrillard (EFEO, France)
- Thissana Weerakietsoontorn (Ramkhamhaeng University, Thailand)
- Javier Schnake (Independent researcher)

(6) **discussant**

- François Lagirarde (EFEO, France)