

History

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PREHISTORY & TAI-LAO MIGRATION

The first modern humans (*Homo sapiens sapiens*) arrived in Southeast Asia around 50,000 years ago. Their stone-age technology remained little changed until a new Neolithic culture evolved about 10,000 years ago. This was the Hoabinhian, named after an archaeological site in northern Vietnam. Hoabinhian hunter-gatherers spread throughout much of Southeast Asia, including Laos. Their descendants produced the first pottery in the region, and later bronze metallurgy. In time they supplemented their hunting, fishing and gathering by horticulture and eventually rice cultivation, introduced down the Mekong River valley from southern China. These people were the ancestors of the present-day upland minorities, collectively known as the Lao Thoeng (Upland Lao), the largest group of which are the Khamu of northern Laos.

Other Lao Thoeng tribes live in southern Laos, including the Brao and the Katang. Like their northern cousins, they speak Austro-Asiatic languages, a group which includes Khmer. In fact southern Laos is believed to be the birthplace of the Cambodian people, from where they spread further south to establish the kingdom of Funan by the 2nd century CE. The earliest kingdom in southern Laos was identified in Chinese texts as Chenla, dating from the 5th century. Its capital was close to Champasak, near the later Khmer temple of Wat Phu. A little later Mon people (speaking another Austro-Asiatic language) established kingdoms on the middle Mekong – Sri Gotapura (Sikhottabong in Lao) with its capital near Tha Khaek, and Chanthaburi in the vicinity of Viang Chan (Vientiane).

Tai peoples probably began migrating out of southern China about the 8th century. They included the Tai-Lao of Laos, the Tai-Syam and Tai-Yuan of central and northern Thailand, and the Tai-Shan of northeast Burma. They are called Tai to distinguish them from the citizens (Thai) of modern Thailand, though the word is the same. All spoke closely related Tai languages, practised wet-rice cultivation along river valleys, and organised themselves into small principalities, known as *meuang*, each presided over by an hereditary ruler, or *chao meuang* (lord of the *meuang*). The Tai-Lao, or Lao for short, moved slowly down the rivers of northern Laos, like the Nam Ou and the Nam Khan, running roughly from northeast to southwest, until they arrived at the Mekong, the Great River. They worshipped the *ngeuk*, powerful snake deities believed to inhabit these rivers, which if not propitiated could so easily tip frail canoes and drown their occupants. Most Lao peasants still believe that *ngeuk* exist.

The early Lao text known as the *Nithan* (story of) *Khun Borom* recounts the myth of creation of the Lao peoples, their interaction, and the establishment of the first Lao kingdom in the vicinity of Luang Prabang. The creation myth tells how two great gourds grew at Meuang Thaeng (Dien Bien Phu, now in Vietnam) from inside which sounds could be heard. Divine rulers, known as khun, pierced one of the gourds with a hot poker, and out of the charred hole poured the dark-skinned Lao Thoeng. The khun used a knife to cut a hole in the other gourd, through which escaped the lighter-skinned

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The Lao believe most *ngeuk* have been converted to become serpent protectors of Buddhism, called *naga* (in Lao *nak*). They still require propitiation, however, and annual boat races are held for their amusement. Many Buddhist temples (*wat*) have protective *naga* balustrades.

TIMELINE 1353

Fa Ngum establishes the Lao kingdom of Lan Xang

1479

The Vietnamese emperor La Thanh Tong invades Lan Xang

Tai-Lao (or Lao Loum, Lowland Lao). The gods then sent Khun Borom to rule over both Lao Loum and Lao Thoeng. He had seven sons, whom he sent out to found seven new kingdoms in the regions where Tai peoples settled (in the Tai highlands of Vietnam, the Xishuangbanna of southern China, Shan state in Burma, and in Thailand and Laos). While the youngest son founded the kingdom of Xieng Khuang on the Plain of Jars, the oldest son, Khun Lo, descended the Nam Ou, seized the principality of Meuang Sua from its Lao Thoeng ruler, and named it Xiang Dong Xiang Thong (later renamed Luang Prabang).

THE KINGDOM OF LAN XANG

The first extended Lao kingdom dates from the mid-14th century. It was established in the context of a century of unprecedented political and social change in mainland Southeast Asia. At the beginning of the 13th century, the great Khmer king Jayavarman VII, who had re-established Cambodian power and built the city of Angkor Thom, sent his armies north to extend the Khmer empire to include all of the middle Mekong region and north-central Thailand. But the empire was overstretched, and by the mid-13th century the Khmer were in retreat. At the same time, the Mongol Yuan dynasty in China lost interest in further conquest in Southeast Asia.

This left a political vacuum in central Thailand, into which stepped Ramkhamhaeng, founder of the Tai-Syam kingdom of Sukhothai. To his north, his ally Mangray founded the Tai-Yuan kingdom of Lanna (meaning 'a million rice fields'), with his capital at Chiang Mai. Other smaller Tai kingdoms were established at Phayao and Xiang Dong Xiang Thong. In southern Laos and southern Thailand, however, the Khmer still held on to power.

We know that at this time Viang Chan was tributary to Sukhothai, and it may well be that Xiang Dong Xiang Thong was too. As the power of Sukhothai grew, it exerted more pressure on the Khmer. The Cambodian court looked around for an ally, and found one in the form of a young Lao prince, Fa Ngum, who was being educated at Angkor. Fa Ngum's princely father had been forced to flee Xiang Dong Xiang Thong after he seduced one of his own father's concubines. So Fa Ngum was in direct line for the throne.

The Khmer gave Fa Ngum a Khmer princess and an army, and sent him north to wrest the middle Mekong from the control of Sukhothai, and so divert and weaken the Tai-Syam kingdom. In this he was successful. Sikhotabong acknowledged Fa Ngum's suzerainty. So did Xieng Khuang and a number of other Lao *meuang*. Only Viang Chan held out. Fa Ngum was acclaimed king in Xiang Dong Xiang Thong, then brought Viang Chan into his empire. He named his new kingdom Lan Xang Hom Khao, meaning 'a million elephants and the white parasol'.

Fa Ngum built a fine capital at Xiang Dong Xiang Thong and set about organising his court and kingdom. He appointed his Khmer generals to positions of power, even though this antagonised the local aristocracy. Tributary rulers had to journey to the capital every three years to renew their vows of fealty and present tribute.

Fa Ngum performed sacrifices to the *phii* (traditional spirits) of the kingdom, and to the *ngueuk* of the Mekong. But he also acquiesced to his wife's request to introduce Khmer Theravada Buddhism to Lan Xang. Here, according to the Lao chronicles, he began to run into problems. The Cambodian

By naming his kingdom Lan Xang Hom Khao, Fa Ngum was making a statement about power and kingship. Elephants were the battle tanks of Southeast Asian warfare, so to claim to be the kingdom of a million elephants was to issue a warning to surrounding kingdoms: 'Don't mess with the Lao!' A white parasol was the traditional symbol of kingship.

1501

King Visoun installs the Pha Bang Buddha image in Luang Prabang

1560

King Setthathirath moves the capital to Viang Chan