

The Development of Lan Xang Communities in the Loei-Nam Mong River Basin: Vientiane Period (1560-1779)¹

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Received: October 18, 2022

Revised: March 7, 2023

Accepted: April 5, 2023

Abstract

This article investigates the development of Lan Xang communities in the Loei-Nam Mong River basin during the Vientiane Period (1560-1779) by analyzing archaeological and historical evidence. The study indicates that the riverine regions of the Loei-Nam Mong River basin were remarkable for their natural resources, including gold, copper, iron, forest products, and salt. When Vientiane was the administrative center from 1560 to 1779, six communities developed which interacted with the capital in four different ways: as border towns, resource areas, economic centers, and a religious site. Specifically, 1) Mueang Sai Khao was an outer outpost town with mineral resources and forests; 2) Mueang Nong Bua was a middle outpost town rich in forests; 3) communities surrounding Wat Phra That Bang Phuan-Mueang Wiang Khuk comprised the inner outpost and economic area of Vientiane; 4) Mueang Phan Prao was the inner outpost (along with Mueang Wiang Khuk); 5) Mueang Phan was a sacred area (for worshipping the Buddha's footprint) with forest resources; and 6) Mueang Chiang Khan was a stopover along the Mekong River with mineral and forest resources. Both external and internal factors contributed to the development of these communities. External

¹ This article is part of a thesis entitled "Cultural Development of Ancient Lan Xang Settlements in the Area Between the Loei-Nam Mong River Valleys, during A.D. 1353-1779," Master of Arts in Mekong Studies, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Khon Kaen University. The research received funding from the Center for Research on Plurality in the Mekong Region (CERP), Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Khon Kaen University.

factors included the surveillance of Ayutthaya's and Burma's power expansions, and the influence of the Age of Commerce in Southeast Asia. Internal factors consisted of suitable geographical conditions, proximity to the city center (Vientiane), and the popular practice of worshipping relics and footprints (part of the Urangkhathat Legend) which came to supplant the Satta Mahasthan.

Keywords: Lan Xang, Loei River, Mong River, Vientiane, Urangkhathat Legend

Introduction

The Loei-Nam Mong River basin is situated within the provinces of Loei, Udon Thani, Nong Bua Lamphu, and Nong Khai. It is bordered to the north and east by the Mekong River and is separated by the Phu Phan Mountain Range, which divides the area into two different distinctive sides. On the eastern side, it is a sloped plain on a large salt basin. On the west side, it is a mountainous region rich in minerals such as gold, copper, and iron. The mining and smelting activities of copper ore were found at the Phu Lon Archaeological Site (the only copper mining and production site found in northeast Thailand), Ban Muang subdistrict, Sangkhom district, Nong Khai province. The site dates back about 4,000-3,500 years, continuing to the Iron Age (2,500-1,500 years ago) and the Dvaravati period (c. 8th century). In this historic period, the transverse line of the Phu Phan Mountains served as a space barrier, resulting in the distinct styles of boundary marker (*bai sema*) development in the two areas. On the west side, the boundary markers resemble those found in the Chi River basin, which is a simple, slightly ornamented design in the center of the boundary stone, while on the east side, the pattern is influenced by Khmer culture, which is frequently represented through narrative pictures (see Samackthai, Mattariganond, and Choun-u-dom, 2021: 81-113). Therefore, it can be seen that geography and resources could result in different cultural developments.

Later, in the Lan Xang Period with Luang Prabang as the administrative center (1353-1559), the first communities were established in the Loei-Nam Mong River basin: (1) Mueang Sai Khao (on the bank of the Loei River, Loei province); (2) Mueang Nong Bua

(Suwannakhuha district, Nong Bua Lamphu province) (Sisam-ang, 2002: 55); and (3) communities surrounding Wat Phra That Bang Phuan (Nong Khai province). Mueang Sai Khao and Mueang Nong Bua are designated as “border towns” because of their western border with Ayutthaya. It can be seen from the preceding information that the development of communities with their unique characteristics at different times was the result of various factors. To advance the study, this article seeks to answer the question, “How did these communities evolve by the time Vientiane became the new administrative center of Lan Xang (1560-1779)?”

Relevant literature on the subject can be divided into two groups: one studying the Loei-Nam Mong River basin, and another studying Lan Xang in various dimensions, such as inscriptions found in the northeast (Poonotoke, n.d.), sequencing of the Lao kings, the economy of Lan Xang (Masuhara, 2003), and the dynamics of Vientiane (Pupiupa and Mattariganond, 2021).

The first group of literature, studying the Loei-Nam Mong River basin, can be further separated into two subgroups: 1) a group that studied the development of communities in the river basin, focusing on prehistoric times to early history (before the 14th century) in the pre-Lan Xang period (Samackthai, Mattariganond, and Choun-u-dom, 2021: 81-113); and 2) another group that studied the development of communities in the Lan Xang period at the micro-level, i.e., the development of Mueang Loei through the ancient site of Wat Huai Hao (Sreetarrang, 2006), Mueang Nong Bua Lam Phu (Sankom, 2015a: 27-58), Mueang Sai Khao (Sankom, 2015b: 67-106), Ban Na O Community (Sankom, 2016a: 45-70), Mueang Phan (Sankom, 2016b: 191-218), and Mueang Chiang Khan (Sankom, 2020: 1-34).

This article is an extension of Samackthai, Mattariganond, and Choun-u-dom (2021), which studied the Loei-Nam Mong River basin focusing on the Luang Prabang Period (1353-1559). The article focuses on the Vientiane Period (1560-1779) and is also an extension of the micro (community) studies of Sreetarrang (2006) and Sankom (2015a, 2015b, 2016a, 2016b, 2020) to macro (watershed) studies in order to

reflect broader findings. Thus, this article analyzes the development of the Lan Xang communities in the Loei-Nam Mong River basin area of the Vientiane Period (1560-1779) using archaeological evidence (monuments, archaeological sites, artifacts, and inscriptions) and historical documents (the Khun Borom Legend, Lao chronicles, relevant articles, and research).

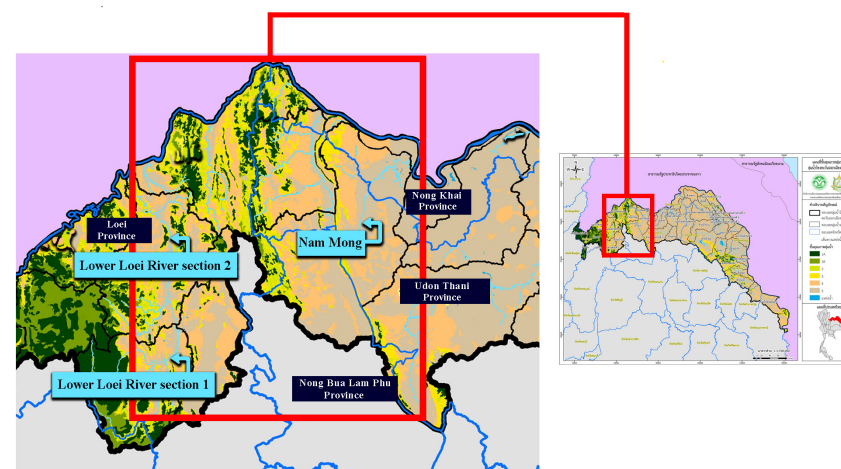


Figure 1 Map showing the boundaries of the research area between Nam Loei and the Nam Mong river basin

Source: Adapted from <https://shorturl.asia/PDtgm>, retrieved March 7, 2023

Contexts and the Importance of the Research Area

Two factors must be considered when analyzing the development of communities in the Loei-Nam Mong River basin when Vientiane was the administrative center: geography and history.

Space Significance

The basin is divided into the following two areas:

1. Geography and resources

The Mekong River borders the Loei-Nam Mong River basin on the north and east, the Phetchabun Mountains on the west with the Phu

Phan Mountain range in the center, which divides the region into two geographical and resource areas. The west side of the Phu Phan Mountains has gold, copper, iron, and forests; while the east side has a sloped plain atop a salt dome, the largest salt basin in the region (Department of Mineral Resources, 2009a, 2009b). Salt evidence is also referenced in Lan Xang's Suwanmukha legislation. Throughout the 17th century, the Vientiane trade market exported rare goods, including gold, iron, copper, lead, tin, frankincense, shellac, rhino horn, ivory, deerskin, civet, and others, derived from these two areas (Masuhara, 2003: 111, 152).

2. Border towns and remote areas of Burmese power

The Phetchabun Mountains separate the Loei-Nam Mong River basin from Ayutthaya, and during the Luang Prabang Period (1353-1559) the Loei-Nam Mong River basin was Luang Prabang's southwest border. Hence, the jurisdiction of Luang Prabang is on the eastern side of the Phetchabun Mountains, which the Khun Borom narrative referred to as a "border town" with a checkpoint called the Sam Muen pass (The Fine Arts Department, 2002: 156).

In 1560, Lan Xang relocated its capital to Vientiane, in the central plains of what is now Lao PDR, because of Burmese threats (Sisam-ang, 2002: 88). Hence, the Loei-Nam Mong River basin became Vientiane's western region, bringing it closer to the capital.

Historical Significance

The Loei-Nam Mong River basin has been inhabited since prehistoric times, around 4,000-3,500 years ago. It is part of the Phu Lon Archaeological site, Sangkhom district, Nong Khai province, where copper was produced. In the Iron Age, 2,500-1,500 years ago, the settlements expanded and developed into the Dvaravati civilization in the 8th century AD. In the mid-14th century, Luang Prabang's King Fa Ngum dominated the area.

Lan Xang was founded in 1353 with Luang Prabang as its first capital, relocated to Vientiane as its second center in 1560, and

eventually lost its independence to Siam in 1779. The Khun Borom Legend depicts Lan Xang's earliest influence on communities; however, Luang Prabang initially focused exclusively on the western portion of the Phu Phan Mountain Range owing to its border with Ayutthaya and its abundant resources. Thus, Luang Prabang appointed the rulers of Mueang Sai Khao, Mueang Nong Bua, and Mueang Kaen Thao (now Lao PDR), to monitor the Sam Muen pass checkpoints at the city's perimeter. Mueang Sai Khao was situated on both sides of the Loei River, in Wang Saphung and Mueang Loei districts (Sisam-ang, 2002: 49,55). Mueang Nong Bua was probably located in the Wat Tham Suwannakhuha, Suwannakhuha district, Nong Bua Lamphu province. This temple is located at the base of Mount Phu Phan, where the Nam Mong stream flows. During King Phothisarath's reign (1520-1547), a third settlement was established on the eastern side of the Phu Phan Mountain range near the Mekong River. It was centered in Wat Phra That Bang Phuan, Mueang district, Nong Khai province. Hence, Mueang Sai Khao, Mueang Nong Bua, and communities around Wat Phra That Bang Phuan were the first settlements developed after Luang Prabang (1353-1559).

King Setthathirat (1548-1571) established Vientiane to replace Luang Prabang in 1560, according to the Wat Phra That Si Song Rak inscription (discovered at Wat Phra That Si Song Rak, Dan Sai district, Loei province). Therefore, this region became the western side of Vientiane. In 1576-1598, Vientiane was a vassal state of Burma; then in 1779, it became a vassal state of Siam, which weakened its political power. Six communities (all on the right bank of the Mekong River) were formed during the years 1560-1779, according to archaeological and historical evidence: (1) Mueang Sai Khao, (2) Mueang Nong Bua, (3) Wat Phra That Bang Phuan-Wiang Khuk communities, (4) Mueang Phan Phrao (Pan Phao), (5) Mueang Phan, and (6) Mueang Chiang Khan.

Development of Lan Xang Communities during the Vientiane Period (1560-1779)

The archaeological record reveals that these six communities prospered during the Vientiane Period (1560-1779). Information about each community is below.

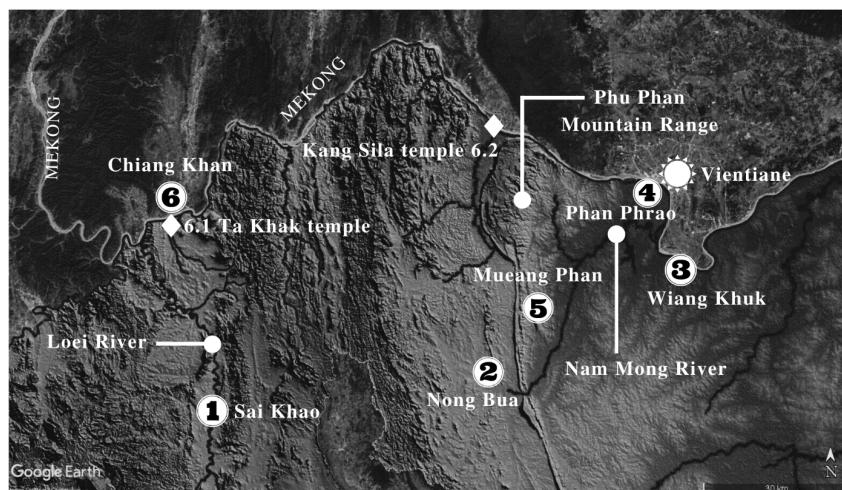


Figure 2 The location of Lan Xang's communities in the Loei-Nam Mong river basin during the Vientiane Period (1560-1779 AD), Sites 1-6

Source: 1. Adapted from Google Earth pro (version 7.3 Data SIO, NOAA, U.S. Navy, NGA, GEBCO Image Landsat/Copernicus Image @2022 retrieved September 20, 2022
2. Santi Pailoplee, Department of Geology, Chulalongkorn University

Mueang Sai Khao: Vientiane's Outpost and Resources

Mueang Sai Khao (Figure 2, Site 1), together with Mueang Nong Bua, was a frontier town in the Loei River basin during the Luang Prabang Period (1353-1559) (The Fine Arts Department, 2002: 156). The largest source of gold in Thailand was found there, as well as iron, copper ores (Department of Mineral Resources, 2009a: 77-78) elephants, and forest products (Amonier, 1996: 200).

Wat Huai Hao (along the Loei River), Ban Na O, Na O subdistrict, Mueang district, Loei province, was a Vientiane Period site (1353-1779), housing the inscriptions of King Setthathirat (1562), King Worawongsa Thammikarat (1607), and others. Several archaeological remains and artifacts have been found during archaeological excavations (The 9th Regional Office of Fine Arts, Khon Kaen, 2014), including the inscription at the base of the Buddha image of Phra Chao Ong Thong (Golden Buddha Image) at Wat Sisa-at, Wang Saphung district, Loei province (1681), which mentions "Five *chao dan*" (heads of customhouses); and the Buddha image of Wat Sri Sutthawat, Mueang district, Loei province (1712), which mentions the title, "Phraya Sai Khao" (Chaisin, 2008: 52, 68).

This information suggests that Wat Huai Hao was an important area in the Vientiane Period (1560-1779), and that Phraya Sai Khao might have been the title of the town's leader. During the 16th-17th centuries, gold, iron, copper, and forest products were Vientiane's main exports from this area. Sai Khao, thus, was one of Vientiane's outposts and a source of mineral and forest resources.

Mueang Nong Bua: Vientiane's Middle Outpost

Mueang Nong Bua (Figure 2, Site 2) is mentioned in the Khun Borom Legend as a frontier town (alongside Mueang Sai Khao) since the Luang Prabang Period (1353-1559). Sankom (2015a: 36-38) suggested that the town's center was around a large swamp (Nong Bua), with Wat Si Khun Mueang (Mueang district, Nong Bua Lamphu province) as one of the important communities since King Setthathirat's reign (1548-1571). Archaeological excavations, however, found that the temple was actually built in the 17th century (see Hanwong, 2006: 60, 72-73).

Thus, the present article suggests that the early Mueang Nong Bua community had a center in Wat Tham Suwannakhuha (Suwannakhuha district, Nong Bua Lamphu province), a hillside location in the western part of the Phu Phan Mountain Range. The temple is two kilometers above the Nam Mong stream and near the Chong Khao Pha Daeng (or Chong Nong Hom) mountain pass.

There is much evidence inside the temple, such as Stone Inscription No. 1 at Wat Tham Suwannakhuha, with the first side devoted by King Setthathirat (1562), the second side by King Sumangala Bodhisattva (1572) (Poonotoke, n.d.: 258-259, 271-272), and Inscription No. 2 devoted by Phraya Suratthep Chao (1626). In addition, there are a few small masonry stupas. From the time of King Setthathirat (1548-1571), *lai-pok-kam* or gilding, a Lao art reserved for the upper classes, has been seen on some stupas (Vadhanabhu, 2017: 665-666). It demonstrates that the royal court of Lan Xang valued this area. It was also surrounded by satellite communities, such as the archaeological site of Wat That Tham Silawat and Wat Pa Non Thong Wararam, located on the outskirts of Wat Tham Suwannakhuha, approximately three to five kilometers away.

The importance of Mueang Nong Bua can be seen in Inscription No.1 of Wat Tham Suwannakhuha, one side of which was created by King Setthathirat (1562) and the other by King Sumangala Bodhisattva (1572). Both dedicated lands and serfs to the temple (Poonotoke, n.d.: 258-259, 271-272). In inscription No. 2 (1626), however, the dedication was carried out by aristocrats who donated only serfs to the temple (Poonotoke, n.d.: 309). Changes indicate the region's decline. Before Burmese rule, Vientiane's primary attraction was Wat Tham Suwannakhuha. The location has many nooks, crannies, and caves for hiding manpower as does Chong Khao Pha Daeng, a mountain pass to access Vientiane. Thus, this is likely one of the checkpoints that Vientiane employed to keep an eye out for the enemy (Burma); moreover, ill-intentioned persons could use these locations as hiding spots. Because of its location between Vientiane (on the east) and Mueang Sai Khao (on the west), Wat Tham Suwannakhuha was probably the central checkpoint as well as a source of forest products.

Vientiane's connections with merchants from Ayutthaya during the commercial era might have had an impact on the town's status because of the presence of the Chong Khao San Mountain pass about 10 kilometers south of Chong Khao Pha Daeng Mountain Pass. This pass can be seen on the early Rattanakosin marching route map from

Bangkok to Vientiane (Phasuk and Stott, 2004: 131). Therefore, there were two phases to the development of the Mueang Nong Bua community: the first phase was centered on Wat Tham Suwannakhuha, the middle outpost of Vientiane with forest resources; and the second phase was centered on the edge of Nong Bua, during the 17th century. Transport route changes were the cause of the transformation.

Communities around Wat Phra That Bang Phuan-Wiang Khuk: Vientiane's Inner Outpost and Economic Center

The location of the communities around Wat Phra That Bang Phuan-Wiang Khuk is shown in Figure 2, Site 3. The development of these communities can be separated into two periods, with the first phase concentrated at Wat Phra That Bang Phuan, Phra That Bang Phuan subdistrict, Mueang district, Nong Khai province, approximately seven kilometers south of the Mekong River. In the latter phase, the town had expanded into Mueang Wiang Khuk, centered along the Mekong River in Wiang Khuk and Pako subdistricts, Mueang district, Nong Khai province, about six kilometers beyond Wat Phra That Bang Phuan. The settlement distributions could be observed from the mouth of the Nam Mong stream in Tha Bo district, Nong Khai province, continuing east with the Mekong River as the northern boundary.

The Satta Mahasthan complex of buildings and the Phra That Bang Phuan Stupa indicate that the temple was established at the end of King Phothisarath's reign (1520-1547). The stone inscription of Wat Phra That Bang Phuan (1562) (Kingmanee, 1999: 219, 217-218) and the inscription at the base of the Bu Thong-Bu Ngoen Buddha image (Buddha image covered with gold and silver) with the same text and date of 1624 (as contained in the Phra That Bang Phuan Stupa) are contemporary evidence of the Vientiane Period (1560-1779). Additional adjacent sites include the stone inscriptions and Buddha images of Wat Sri Chomphu Ong Tue (1562), stone inscriptions and ancient sites at Wat Sila Lek (1566) (Phonsa subdistrict, Tha Bo district, Nong Khai province), Wat Thep Phon Pradittharam (Wiang Khuk subdistrict), and Wat Phra That Bu (Pa Kho subdistrict, Nong Khai province), etc.

Archaeological surveys found more than 100 archaeological artifacts beneath the Nam Mong stream's outlet (The 9th Regional Office of Fine Arts, Khon Kaen, 2010), which reveal the community's expansion through two phases, which are explained below.

First phase: When examined with two environmental factors: 1) the temple's location near Vientiane with the Mekong River separating the land, and 2) the reproduction of Lan Xang's Satta Mahasthan complex to convey the area's significance. The Satta Mahasthan, a group of seven monuments erected to commemorate the seven places (in the vicinity of Bodhi tree) where the Buddha spent time after attaining enlightenment, originated in India at Bodh Gaya (see Tingsanchali, 2012: 302-333). In the 15th century, King Tilokarat of Lanna also created a Satta Mahasthan. Lan Xang might have absorbed Lanna's ideology and art forms of Satta Mahasthan (The 7th Regional Office of Fine Arts, Khon Kaen, 1993: 40-51) and transferred them through a complex of Buddhist buildings. The construction would be costly; thus, Wat Phra That Bang Phuan was important before the establishment of Vientiane as the capital. Vientiane had to control both sides of the Mekong, and consequently, building a Satta Mahasthan complex at Wat Phra That Bang Phuan could be part of the plan to relocate the capital, which would become the center of the communities on the right bank of the Mekong River.

After King Setthathirat (1548-1571) founded Vientiane, Wat Phra That Bang Phuan became significant again. According to the Phra That Bang Phuan inscription, King Setthathirat donated land and serfs to Wat Phra That Bang Phuan in 1562. He also created the Buddha image at Wat Phra That Bang Phuan, according to the Wat Tham Suwannakhuha Inscription, Side 1 (1562). The inscription at Wat Sri Muang states that in 1566, the King ordered tiles and gold to be distributed to Wat Phra That Bang Phuan during the construction of Wat Sri Suphan (Wat Sila Lek, Phonsa subdistrict, Tha Bo district, Nong Khai province) (Poonotoke, n.d.: 258-259, 262-264). In addition, the construction of Wat Sri Suphan indicated that the number of settlements in this area increased. Subsequently, an inscription was uncovered at the

base of the Bu-thong Buddha image in the Phra That Bang Phuan stupa, mentioning, the year "1624" and "...That Bang Phuan Phra Chedi Sri Satta Mahatan..." (Sisam-ang, 2002: 153-154). The Satta Mahasthan and the That Bang Phuan stupa were worshipped until the reign of King Worawongsa Thammikarat (1598-1624).

The distribution of evidence and geography indicates that Wat Phra That Bang Phuan was located in a central area surrounded by satellite communities, including Wat Sila Khet Udom (10 kilometers east of Wat Phra That Bang Phuan). Inscriptions suggest the temple was constructed during King Phothisarath's reign (Sisam-ang, 2002: 139). According to Masuhara (2003: 152), who researched ancient Lao Suwanmukha law, salt had long been an important commodity in Vientiane. Thus, Wat Phra That Bang Phuan represents Vientiane's right bank and possible access to salt resources at the Songkhram River basin. Therefore, the expansion of this community during this period might have been linked to resource availability.

Latter stages: In 1638, King Suriyawongsa Thammikarat designated Phra That Bang Phuan Stupa and Phra That Phonechik Wiang Ngoa Stupa (Wat Phra That Bu, Pako subdistrict, Mueang district, Nong Khai province) in the Urangkhatat Legend, which he ordered to be written down (The Fine Arts Department, 1994: 15), in order to demonstrate his dominion over this territory. By identifying these two locations in the Urangkhatat Legend, the story of Buddhism on the land on both sides of the Mekong River influenced the attitudes and beliefs of Phra That Phanom's believers, demonstrating that the attention shifted from the Satta Mahasthan to beliefs about the Buddha's relic. Moreover, it also confirms the significance of both places. This is consistent with the findings of archaeological excavations which revealed that the Satta Mahasthan complex was abandoned, but the Phra That Bang Phuan Stupa, which had been built at the same time, remained important as a location containing the Buddha's pubis bone relics (Kingmanee, 1999: 215-216). Meanwhile, the Phra That Phon Chik Wiang Ngoa at Wat Phra That Bu thrived throughout Vientiane's commercial era, because it was closer to the Mekong River than was

Wat Phra That Bang Phuan, thus becoming more well known. Wat Phra That Bu has a large swamp on the northwest and north of the temple, which meant that the expanded community had to cross the swamp to be located on the Mekong River plain. Hence, Mueang Khuk or Wiang Khuk was formed in Wiang Khuk subdistrict (northwest of Wat Phra That Bu) and Pako subdistrict (northeast of Wat Phra That Bu). In accordance with Parmentier's record (Parmentier, 1954: 124-126, 128), the Siamese city of Mueang Kuk was filled with ruined stupas in 1911, and he explored Wat Thep Phon Pradittharam (Vat Xetapon), Wat Sao Suwannaram (Vat Sao Savan), the conical stupa (probably referring to That Phonchik Stupa) in Wat Phra That Bu (That Bo), and Wat Ban Pako (Vat Ban Phra Ko), and others, the majority of which were dated to the reign of King Suriyawongsa Thammikarat (1638-1695) (The 9th Regional Office of Fine Arts, Khon Kaen, 2010).

Hence, the Urangkhathat Legend and the commercial era shaped Wiang Khuk communities. According to Masuhara (2003: 68), in the 17th century Lan Xang's commercial center was Mueang Khuk while Vientiane was the political center. Gerrit Van Wusthoff, a Dutch trader who visited Vientiane between 1641 and 1644, recorded that "Mueang Khuk" was on the bank of the Mekong River, across from Vientiane. It was a major economic center where merchants from Ayutthaya and Cambodia came to trade (Masuhara, 2003: 86-87, 133).

The inscription at the base of the Buddha image from Wat Pothisomphon (1666) mentions "Luang Mueang Khuk," which might be the title of the city lord (*chao muang*) (Poonotoke, n.d.: 345-346) signifying the town's position and hierarchy. The Vientiane Chronicle later mentions "Mueang Khuk" in 1713. "Wiang Khuk" appeared on the early Rattanakosin map. The evidence suggests that Mueang Khuk or Wiang Khuk was a city-level community near Vientiane. It had city rulers, and it might have been Vientiane's inner outpost and commercial center.

Mueang Phan Phrao (Pan Pao): Vientiane's Inner Outpost

Mueang Phan Prao (Figure 2, Site 4) is in Si Chiang Mai near the Mekong River. Local legends mention Mueang Phan Phrao dating back

to King Phothisarath's reign (1520-1547). Archaeological surveys, however, have found that the oldest evidence is the inner part of the wall line, found in Muu 1, Ban Sri Chiang Mai (Phu Phrabat Historical Park 2009: 504-507), characterized by a line of brick walls about 10 meters wide, 2 meters high, and 3,000 meters long (incomplete condition), presumably built during King Setthathirat's reign (Chuvichean, 2010: 104-106) or after 1560. Two archaeological sites are within the wall boundary: 1) Wat Phra That Dam, where the White and Black Stupas are situated; and 2) Wat Chumphon, 1.5 kilometers southwest of Wat Phra That Dam, where a masonry stupa was uncovered. When examined with evidence from excavations, such as clay pipes and Qing Dynasty Chinese wares, it was found to be from the 17th century onward. After that, the name of the town Phan Phrao (*Pan Pao*) emerged beside Wiang Khuk on the map of the early Rattanakosin period, indicating that Mueang Phan Phrao flourished after the founding of Vientiane as the capital. Phan Phrao's location within the inner-city walls on the right bank of the Mekong River demonstrates that Vientiane was divided by the river. Moreover, Mueang Phan Phrao's rampart-like symbol on the Rattanakosin marching map was larger than that of other cities on the right bank of the Mekong River. This suggests that Bangkok considered Phan Phrao a strategic area of Vientiane. Hence, Phan Phrao was the last inner checkpoint before entering Vientiane.

Mueang Phan: The Land of Buddha Footprints in the Urangkhathat Legend

Mueang Phan (Figure 2, Site 5) is a mountainous location in Ban Phue district, Udon Thani province, on the eastern side of the Phu Phan Mountain Range. The creeks run from south to northeast, making the area rich in forest resources.

Two significant inscriptions from the late 16th century, the Wat Sri Boonruang inscription of King Worarattana Thammaphrachot (1584-1598) and the Wat That Upasamaram inscription (Wat Ban Kom) by the nobleman titled "*Sri Phum Wiangchan*" (Vientiane), are evidence

of early communities (Paiboonwangcharoen, 1992: 59). They were both made in 1591 and mention the dedication of lands, rice fields, temple serfs, as well as a curse on anyone who would destroy the temples (Poonotoke, n.d.: 279, 281-283). Later, in 1638, when the Urangkhathat Legend became popular, Mueang Phan was found to be the “Phu Ku Wien” referenced in the legend. It was an important site where the Lord Buddha is said to have left a footprint in each of the four adjacent places (The Fine Arts Department, 1994: 53-54). They probably include: 1) Phra Phutthabat Bua Bok (Phu Phra Bat Historical Park), 2) Phra Phutthabat Bua Ban (Wat Phra Phutthabat Bua Ban), 3) Phra Phutthabat Lang Tao (Phu Phra Historical Park), and 4) Phra Phutthabat Phupha Daeng (Ban Na Ang, Champa Mong subdistrict) (Kingmanee, 1997: 56-64). Another possibility is that they are the footprints at the abandoned relics of Upmung (the masonry building without a pinnacle that houses the footprints) at Phu Phra Bat Historical Park. All were discovered in the Phu Phan Mountain range of the Ban Phue district in Udon Thani.

The significance of early Mueang Phan has not been sufficiently documented. But it is noted that Burma backed King Worarattana Dhammaprachot's ascendance to the throne, and his inscriptions commonly mention his grandfather, King Phothisarath, and his father, King Setthathirat (Sisam-ang, 2002: 135-136, 139). He might have sought public acceptance by invoking faith and being accepted by the public. Giving Mueang Phan status is likely an indication of his authority in the area, in an effort to acquire recognition for his own authority. Later, during the reign of King Suriyawongsa Thammikarat (1638-1695), Mueang Phan was a place where Buddha Footprint worship was practiced, according to the Urangkhathat Legend. This happened during Vientiane's concentration on trade, therefore the Urangkhathat Legend's focus on the Phu Phan Mountain area may indicate a demand for mountain resources. Thus, Mueang Phan was both Vientiane's sacred town and a site of forest resources.

Mueang Chiang Khan: Mekong River Stops and Resources

Sanakham (Laos PDR), was the center of Chiang Khan (Figure 2, Site 6), a town on both sides of the Mekong River. Mueang Chiang Khan's boundary (on the right bank of the Mekong River) runs across the mountainous Sangkhom district, Nong Khai province. In Loei's Chiang Khan and Nong Khai's Sangkhom districts, gold, copper, and iron ore were abundant (Wiphakphochanakit, 2003: 285, and Department of Mineral Resources, 2009b: 73-7). Community settlements were few because of the steep environment. Two stone inscriptions were uncovered in Wat Tha Khak (1666), Chiang Khan district, Loei province (No. 6.1) and Wat Kang Sila (1678), Sangkhom district, Nong Khai province (No. 6.2) (Poonotoke, n.d.: 279, 281-283). Nine Buddha images were found in Na Ngio subdistrict (Sangkhom district, Nong Khai province) with inscriptions dating from 1678 to 1706 (Suesat, 2014: 59-60). Slags from metal smelting were also detected in Sangkhom district, Nong Khai province, as well as in Nam Som district, Udon Thani province, which was near mineral resources. Earthenware from the Lan Xang period suggests this activity occurred at the time.

The information above suggests that Mueang Chiang Khan on the right bank of the Mekong River developed in the 17th century, likely during Vientiane's commercial heyday. It was a transit hub and a source of metal ores and forest products. Remote mountain communities might have been smelting and storing forest goods for transport to the Mekong River. The area has also unearthed one of Thailand's biggest ancient lime-burning sites (Samackthai, 2017), which might have been utilized to build temples in Vientiane and Wiang Khuk.

During the Vientiane Period (1560-1779), six major communities appeared in the Loei-Nam Mong River basin. Some settlements developed during the Luang Prabang Period (1353-1559) and others were contemporary to Vientiane. All of them are tied to Vientiane in four ways, as stated in Table 1: 1) border towns, 2) resource areas, 3) economic centers, and 4) religious sites. This indicates the connection between the center area and the transportation route.

Table 1 Summary of the development of Lan Xang communities in the Loei-Nam Mong River basin during the Vientiane Period (1560-1779)

Communities	Development period		Key developments related to Vientiane				Locations (from Phu Phan mountain range)
	1353-1559	1560-1779	Border towns	Resource areas	Economic centers	Religious sites	
Sai Khao	✓	✓	✓ (outer)	✓	-	-	West
Nong Bua (Wat Tham Suwannakhuha)	✓	✓	✓ (Middle)	-	-	-	West
Wat Phra That Bang Phuan-Wiang Khuk	✓	✓	✓ (Inner)	-	✓	-	East
Mueang Phan Phrao	-	✓	✓ (Inner)	-	-	-	East
Mueang Phan	-	✓	-	✓	-	✓	East
Mueang Chiang Khan	-	✓	-	✓	✓	-	West

Factors Affecting the Development of Lan Xang Communities

There were external and internal factors relevant to the development of the six communities.

External Factors

First, for surveillance of the expansion of Ayutthaya's borders since the time of Luang Prabang (1353-1559), Sai Khao and Nong Bua served as frontier settlements (The Fine Arts Department, 2002: 156) until the Vientiane era (1563-1767) (Chaisin, 2008: 52; Sankom, 2015b: 96). Next, Burmese influence resulted in the relocation of Vientiane to the central area (Sisam-ang, 2002: 88), which brought it closer to the river basin region. Finally, the Age of Commerce in Southeast Asia, notably

in the 17th century, made Vientiane a collection place of rare items (Masuhara, 2003: 154). Mueang Wiang Khuk was Vientiane's main economic area, whereas Mueang Nong Bua, Mueang Phan, and Mueang Chiang Khan contained the main resources. Because of trade with Ayutthaya, the cave temple, Wat Tham Suwannakhuha, which had been the old center of Mueang Nong Bua, also declined.

Internal Factors

There were three internal factors that influenced the development of Vientiane. First, its geography played a role in its success as the Mekong River was the primary transportation route, and its tributaries provided access to transit. Moreover, the inner region and settlements near the Mekong River were connected by a mountain pass route, which allowed access to natural resources, including gold, copper, iron, and forest products as well as salt in the Songkram River basin.

Second, the proximity to Vientiane resulted in the proliferation of cultural connections, such as the Buddha image at Wat Sri Chompu Ong Tue (Tha Bo district, Nong Khai province). It resembles the Ong Tue Buddha image in Vientiane in both appearance and size (Saising, 2012: 188). The Thep Phon Pradittharam Stupa (Mueang district, Nong Khai province) also resembles a stupa at Vientiane's Wat That Nak in terms of architecture (Sisam-ang, 2002: 186, 188).

Third, the Urangkhatat Legend refers to two Buddhist beliefs. One is the worship of relics enshrined in the Phra That Bang Phuan Stupa and the Phonchik Wiang Ngua Stupa (Wat Phra That Bu), which, along with the influence of the commercial era, led to the expansion of the community into Mueang Wiang Khuk. The other belief mentioned is the worship of the Buddha's footprints, hence, the community of Mueang Phan was recognized as a religious holy site.

Conclusion, Discussion, and Recommendations

This study demonstrates that this research area was distinctive in terms of resources (gold, copper, iron, forest, and accessibility to salt resources)

and proximity to Vientiane. It builds on Samackthai, Mattariganond, Choun-u-dom (2021: 81-113). It is also an extension of micro-studies in Sreetarrang's Mueang Sai Khao (Sreetarrang, 2006), Sankom (2015b), Sankom (2s016b), Sankom's Mueang Phan (Sankom, 2016a), and Sankom's Mueang Chiang Khan (Sankom, 2020). When analyzed in conjunction with the evidence of three other communities, namely Mueang Nong Bua, Phra That Bang Phuan-Mueang Wiang Khuk, and Mueang Phan Phrao, the results illustrate the development of communities at the macro level throughout the area of the Loei-Nam Mong River basin, during the Vientiane period (1560-1779).

The findings related to resources (gold, copper, iron, and forest products) also complement Masuhara (2003: 85-86), demonstrating that Vientiane was prosperous because of its triangular economic network during the 16th and 17th centuries. Mueang Dan Sai and the neighboring mountainous regions—Mueang Sai Khao, Mueang Nong Bua, Mueang Chiang Khan, and Mueang Phan—provided a portion of these resources. This article refutes Sankom's (2015a: 27-58) assertion that the center of Mueang Nong Bua was located on the edge of the large marsh (Nong Bua) in Nong Bua Lamphu province. It suggests, instead, that the center of Mueang Nong Bua should be divided into two phases: during the first phase, it was located at Wat Tham Suwannakhuha, and in the 17th century, it shifted to the bank of Nong Bua.

Archaeological sites, artifacts, and inscriptions suggest that from 1560 to 1779, when Vientiane was the capital of Lan Xang, Lan Xang's influence extended throughout northeast Thailand. Consequently, to see the community's development more clearly, similar research should be conducted in other watersheds associated with the Loei-Nam Mong River basin, specifically the Chi River basin (in the present-day Thai provinces of Khon Kaen, Chaiyaphum, Kalasin, Maha Sarakham, Roi Et, etc.) and the Songkhram River basin (Udon Thani, Sakon Nakhon, Nong Khai and Nakhon Phanom).

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