

An Archaeological Investigation at the Bang Nongsa Site in Southern Laos

Yukitsugu TABATA (ed.)



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Institute for Cultural Heritage, Waseda University

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2. This site report was written by Shoko OTSUBO (Chs. 1 and 5), Miku YOKOYAMA (Chs. 2 and 4), Momoko TSUJIKADO (Ch. 3) and Yukitsugu TABATA (Chs. 4 and 5). Editorial work was done by Yukitsugu TABATA.
3. The following personnel have participated in the investigation (in alphabetical order):

2018: BOVNDYLATH Bounyord, KANHAPHANH Souban, Ayumi KATO, Shiori KAWABE, Mana KAWAKAMI, KEOSACKSITH Oudomusy, Shoko OTSUBO, SENGPHACHANH Ampol, Yukitsugu TABATA, Momoko TSUJIKADO, Chihiro UMEBAYASHI, Minoru UMEZAWA and Miku YOKOYAMA.

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1.Introduction

A significant number of the pre-Angkor and Angkor monuments, including the World Heritage Site of Wat Phu, are located on the floodplain of the Champassak region, Lao P.D.R. Within a 10km radius around Wat Phu, 164 archaeological sites were identified by Masao Nishimura in his general survey in the 1990s (Fig.1). These were identified as artificial ponds, mounds and religious monuments, tentatively dated to the 11th-12th centuries (Nishimura 1997, Otsubo 2007).

Among these sites, the Ban Nongsa site is located 500m southeast of Wat Phu. The area is known for scattered stoneware sherds on the ground surface and the possibility of a production site has been assumed without further investigation.

On this occasion, the Waseda University Research Institute for Cultural Properties conducted a small-scale archaeological excavation from March 5-12, 2018 and March 5-11, 2019 to identify this site-type at Ban Nongsa.

Shoko OTSUBO



Fig. 1 Location of the Wat Phu Complex

2.Outline of the Research

The site was located in a rice field of the Ban Nongsa village (14°50'32.7 N, 105°49'34.2 E), 500m southeast of Wat Phu monuments (Figs. 2 and 3). A series of test pits were designed to confirm the archaeological features or traces of human occupation. These test pits were set up on the raised footpath between the rice fields on which significant numbers of stoneware sherds were observed.

In 2018, three test pits on the north side of the research area were set up. Test pit #1 was 2.0m long and 1.0 m wide and was dug down to 80 cm depth from the ground surface. Test pit #2 was 4.0m long and 1.0 m wide (Fig. 4). Test pit #3 was set at 2.0 m long and 2.0 m wide. The depth of excavation of these two pits was about 50 cm from the ground surface.

A long trench was set up on the south part of the research area in 2019 (Fig. 5). The trench is 15.0m long and 2.0m wide. This trench was dug down to 50 cm depth from the ground surface, as in the previous year's excavation, and, in the northern end of the trench was excavated for a further 50 cm to examine the stratigraphy.

In both the 2018 pits and 2019 trench, no underground archaeological features were observed.

Miku YOKOYAMA

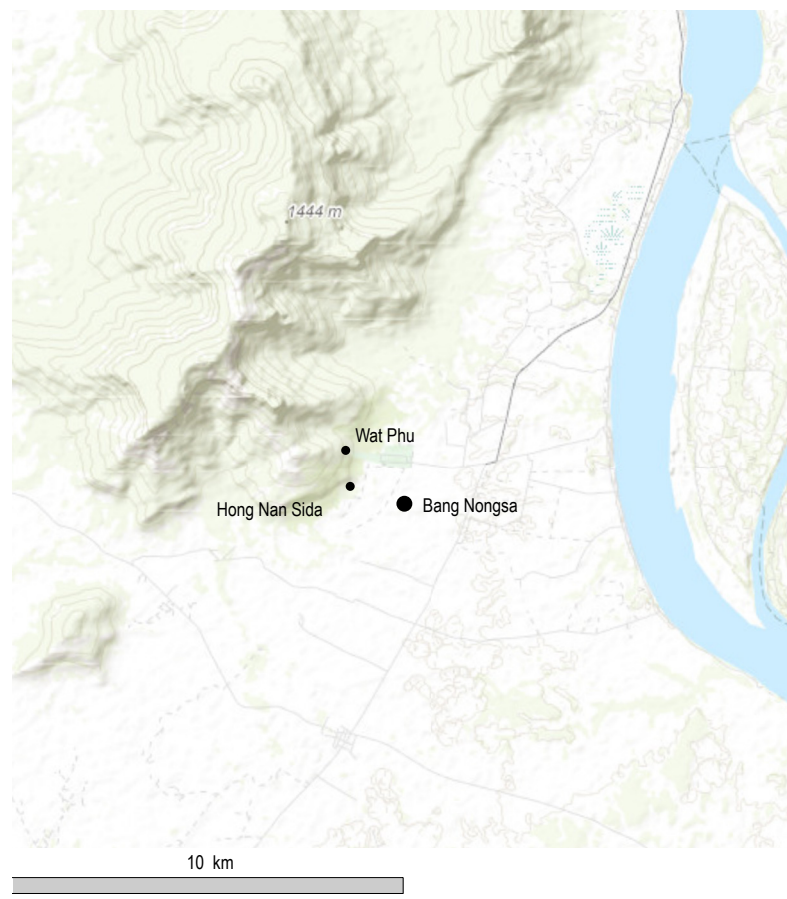


Fig.2 Location of the Bang Nongsa Site

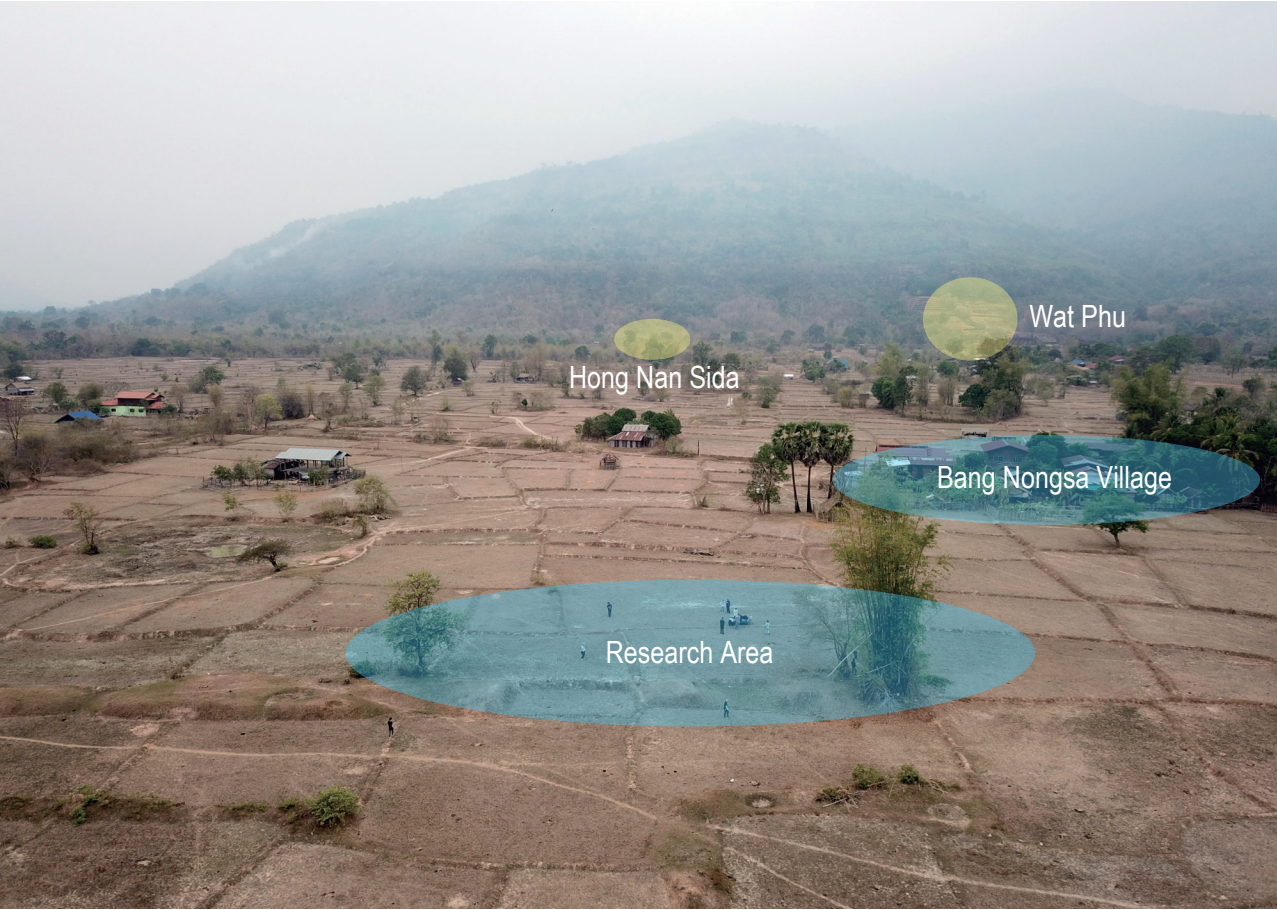


Fig.3 Location of the Research Area(looking towards the west)



Fig.4 Test Pits (2018, Upward is north)



Fig.5 Trench (2019, looking towards southwest)

3.Stratigraphy

Momoko TSUJIKADO

Within the trench and test pits, the horizontal accumulation of sediments were observed. The basic stratigraphical structure was common in all pits and the trench. Most of the strata contained stoneware or earthenware sherds and therefore suggest human occupation (or at least some kind of activities) in this area.

The soil profiles are as follows:

Test Pits (Figs.6–8)

Topsoil: Bright brown (Hue 7.5YR 5/6) clayish silt, vegetated. This topsoil seems to be a part of an eroded and weathered lower layer. A significant number of Khmer stoneware sherds were observed.

I: Orange (Hue 7.5YR 5/6) clayish silt. Partly including colored particles (carbonized or decayed woods?). The particle size is 2 to 3mm in diameter.

IIa: Dull yellow orange (Hue 10YR 7/2) clayish silt. Including colored particles and about 5mm diameter brown particles (micro iron nodule?). A small number of artifacts were unearthed.

IIb: Grayish yellow brown (Hue 10YR 6/2) clayish silt. The matrix of the sediments of this layer is similar to layer IIa, although it contains much more brown particles which turns the soil color darker than the upper layer. A small number of artifacts were also unearthed.

III: Dull reddish brown (Hue 5YR 4/4) clayish silt. Including many black particles.

Trench (Fig. 9)

Topsoil: Bright reddish brown (Hue 5YR 5/6) silty sand, vegetated. Including a large number of small (1 to 5cm in diameter) pebbles.

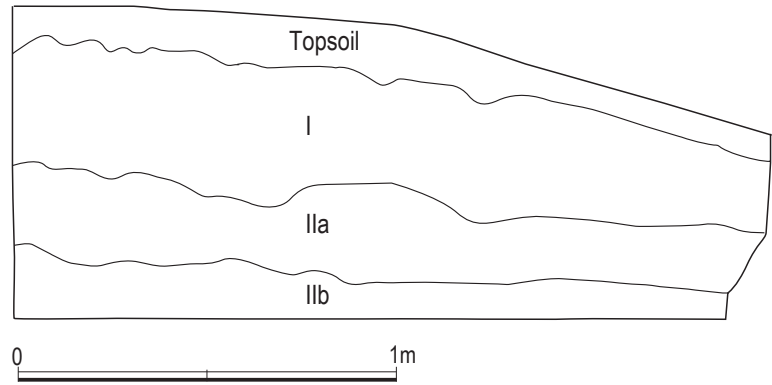
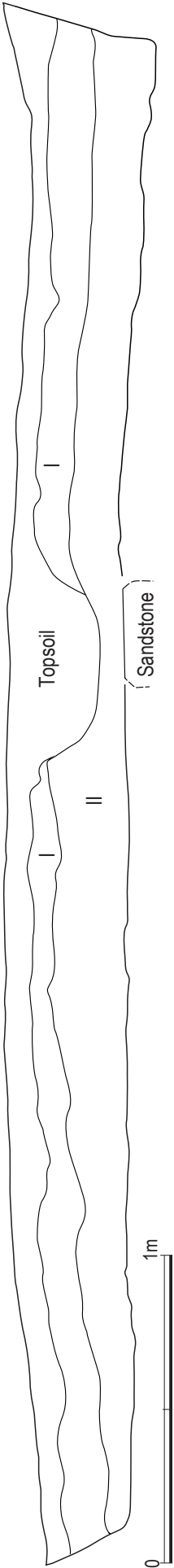


Fig.6 Test Pit 1 Cross-section (south wall)



Fig.7 Test Pit 2 Cross-section (south wall)



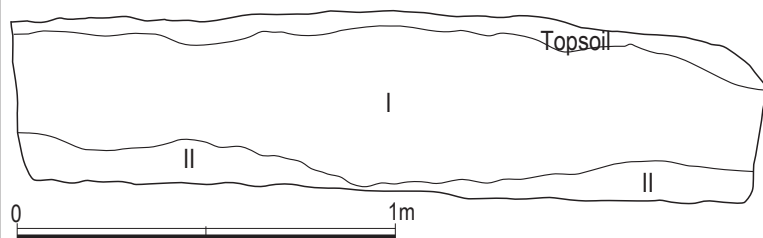
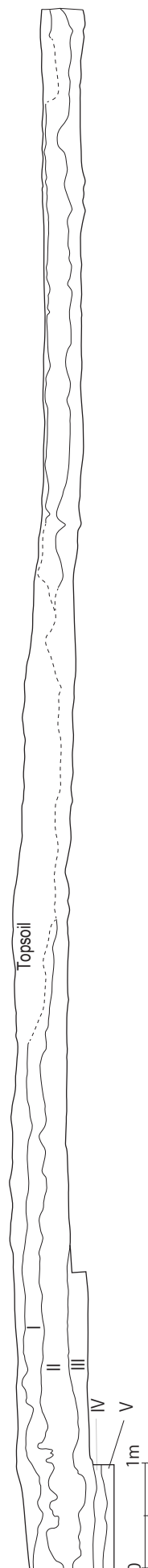


Fig.8 Test Pit 3 Cross-section (North wall)



Fig.9 Trench Cross-section (west wall)



- I: Bright reddish brown (Hue 5YR 5/6) clayish silt. Including black particles (carbonized or decayed woods?). The particle size is 5 to 10mm in diameter.
- II: Dull reddish brown (Hue 5YR 5/4) clayish silt. Including black particles and about 5 to 15mm diameter brown particles (micro iron nodule?).
- III: Dull reddish brown (Hue 5YR 4/4) clayish silt. Including a small number of black particles and brown particles.
- IV: Grayish brown (Hue 5YR 4/2) clayish silt with black particles/
- V: Brown (Hue 7.5YR 4/4) brown clayish silt. Containing a large number of brown particles (5 to 20cm in diameter). No artifacts were observed from this layer.

Basic stratigraphical structure was common in all pits and trench. Khmer style stoneware sherds were observed in the topsoil, Layer I, II and III. Only the earthenware was unearthed from layer IV.

4. Artifacts

Miku YOKOYAMA and Yukitsugu TABATA

Only one ceramic sherd which seemed to be an Angkorian style stoneware was excavated from the test pits in 2018 although a significant number of earthenware and stoneware sherds were collected from the ground surface of the research area. The artifacts from the ground surface collection consist of three types of Angkorian style ceramics: stoneware with transparent green colored glazing (ash-glazed ware); translucent / nontransparent dark brown colored iron-glazed stoneware (brown-glazed ware); and, unglazed stoneware. There were no archaeological contexts (miss-fired sherds, fragments of the kiln body, kiln furniture etc.) that indicated stoneware production from either the surface collection or excavated artifact.

Among the collected stone ware sherds, most of the unglazed and ash-glazed sherds were too small to identify their original shape, though several pieces of the unglazed wide-mouth jar and jar with everted and stepped mouth (so-called dish mouth) were observed. In terms of the brown-glazed ware, there were many sherds of the long jar and the baluster jar with incised lines, scalloped pattern, or cross-hatching on the shoulder. One of the notable brown-glazed wares was the offering plate: a pedestal plate with a small bowl which was attached on the interior surface of the plate.

In 2019, a total of 508 artifacts were unearthed from several layers of the trench. Most of the remains were earthenware and unglazed stoneware sherds. A small amount of brown-glazed stoneware was unearthed. All of the stoneware is identified as Angkorian style stoneware. A few Chinese porcelain, white ware and *qingbai* ware were also excavated and collected from the surface. Most of the earthenwares enabled a precise determination of date, though some of the jars or basins with an incised line pattern are suggestive of the Angkorian period. Some pieces of earthenware unearthed from the lower part of the trench (Layer IV) were identified to the spouted jar (*kendi*) a shape is typical of the pre-Angkorian period.

5. Remarks

Yukitsugu TABATA and Shoko OTSUBO

The collected and unearthed stoneware shows strong stylistic resemblances to those found in the Angkor region, and obviously these two stoneware groups belong to the same stoneware tradition: Khmer stoneware ceramics. But due to the insufficient quantity of excavated sherds which would enable an understanding of their whole shape and characteristics, it is quite difficult to clarify the regional traits of those from southern Laos so far. However, if more materials are available in future studies, it might be possible to discuss the regionality of Khmer stoneware in southern Laos in terms of techno-morphological aspects.



Brown-glazed stoneware jar



Brown-glazed baluster jar



Brown-glazed stoneware jar



Brown-glazed stoneware jar



Unglazed dish mouth stoneware



Brown-glazed offering plate



Unglazed rooftile



Chinese qingbai ware

Fig.10 Artifacts (surface collection)



Fig.11 Artifacts from the Trench LayerIII



Fig.12 Artifacts from the Trench LayerIII



Fig.13 Artifacts from the Trench LayerIV



Fig.14 Kendi from the Trench LayerIV

As for dating, the pre-Angkorian style kendi suggests human occupation in this area before the ninth century. But the majority of the artifacts belong to the later periods. Excavated and collected Chinese porcelain can be datable to from the eleventh to twelfth century. Regarding Khmer stoneware, brown-glazed stoneware is considered to be mainly produced after the eleventh century, based on studies in Angkor area (Cort, 2000, Groslier 1981, Tabata 2007.2017).

As mentioned before, there were no archaeological contexts like miss-fired sherds, fragments of the kiln body and kiln furniture to indicate stoneware production in this area. Generally, at kiln sites, almost all excavated products are deformed, blasted or stuck-together during the kiln operation. On the contrary, the unearthed artifacts are all non- miss-fired sherds and have a wide variation of ceramics type: earthenware, ash-glazed ware, brown-glazed ware and unglazed ware. Earthenware ceramics have different physical conditions from stoneware ceramics and therefore they are not fired in the same kiln in general. They are a different tradition of ceramics production. Therefore, despite the former assumption, we have to conclude that the Ban Nongsa site—at least the researched area in this study—is not a kiln site. The wide variety of the artifacts and geographical closeness of the site to the large Khmer temples (Wat Phu and Hong Nang Sida) suggests that this area was some kind of Khmer center or temple-related area.

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