

Vat Phou and Associated Ancient Settlements within the Champasak Cultural Landscape

Retrospective Statement of Outstanding Universal Value

1. Vat Phou and Associated Ancient Settlements within the Champasak Cultural Landscape is located on the west bank of the Mekong River in the Champasak District of southern Lao PDR, 500km south-east of the capital, Vientiane. The total inscribed area covers 39,000 ha.

2. The Vat Phou temple complex is a major example of both early and classic Khmer architecture from the 7th–12th centuries AD.

3. The complex is the focal point of a sophisticated cultural landscape centred on the Champasak Plain, taking in the Phou Kao (mountain) to the west, and the banks of the Mekong River to the east.

4. Between them are temples, shrines, water tanks, water channels, quarries, historic field systems, ancient roads and settlement sites, including one of the earliest known urban settlements in Southeast Asia.

5. The Champasak Cultural Landscape, including the Vat Phou temple complex, is one of the most important sites of the greater Khmer Empire. The Ancient City exhibits some of the earliest known evidence of urbanism in Southeast Asia.

6. The remarkably well-preserved landscape reflects more than a thousand years of development, from the 3rd century AD, where many civil works and artefacts had been planned.

7. Using a East-West axis from riverbank to mountaintop, to set out a geometric pattern of temples, the temples were contrived to express the Hindu version of the relationship between nature and humanity.

8. The outstanding significance of the Champasak Cultural Landscape lies in the broad scientific perspective of the powerful Khmer culture.

9. The temple complex represents a masterpiece of human creative genius due to the high quality of its artistic work, and the integration of its symbolic plan with the natural landscape to create a physical manifestation of a Hindu concept of the perfect universe.

10. The resulting expression of these ideas, on the ground and in its architecture and art, is a unique fusion of indigenous natural symbols, religious inspiration, and technical prowess.

(Source: Advisory Body Evaluation: ICOMOS, September 2001)

b. Criteria

Criterion iii: The temple complex of Vat Phou bears exceptional testimony to the cultures of southeast Asia, and in particular to the Khmer Empire which dominated the region in the 9-14th centuries.

Criterion iv: The Vat Phou complex is an outstanding example of the integration of a symbolic landscape of great spiritual significance to its natural surroundings.

Criterion vi: Contrived to express the Hindu version of the relationship between nature and humanity, Vat Phou exhibits a remarkable complex of monuments and other structures over an extensive area between river and mountain, some of outstanding architecture, many containing great works of art, and all expressing intense religious conviction and commitment. (Source: Advisory Body Evaluation: ICOMOS, September 2001)

c. Integrity

1. The integrity of the property is related to the integrity of the whole cultural landscape setting, the evidence for deliberate planning, and the association of various elements including

standing structures, buried archaeological remains and surviving sites as visible earthworks

2. All of these elements are considered integral to an expression of the property's outstanding universal value.

3. All are original and with their in-situ historical and archaeological contexts remaining undisturbed, it is relatively easy to see how the various elements articulate with one another.

4. Furthermore, the landscape setting, at the foothills of the mountain, consisting of shallow rice paddy fields and small agricultural settlements, has preserved its natural topographic elements and traditional appearance.

(Source: Nomination Document, Chapter 2 Justification for Inscription)

5. The integrity of the property and its buffer zone is vulnerable from urban and infrastructure development, and environmental and tourism pressures.

(Source: WH Committee state of conservation reports)

d. Authenticity

Evaluation of authenticity involves five main elements:

1. *The landscape setting of the whole*

The river and the mountain, the frame of the man-made complex, remain in place and little altered; the plain in between is probably more wooded and less coherent in appearance than it was a thousand years ago. Overall, however, authenticity in this respect is high.

2. *The association of the various elements and the evidence for deliberate planning*

The various elements comprising the landscape survive well as archaeological sites or standing ruins. It is therefore relatively easy to see how the elements were articulated with one another and to understand their relationships. The axial arrangement of structures in relation to the *Lingparvata* of Phou Kao is clearly visible.

3. *Buried archaeological sites*

The general depth of archaeological stratigraphy is no more than 0.5m in the urban sites, but neither natural nor human disturbance has so far been significant. The archaeological integrity is therefore high.

4. *Archaeological sites surviving as visible earthworks*

Of former structures now earthworks, the most notable are the ramparts around the Ancient City. Some damage has been caused by cuts through them (e.g. for modern roads), but the most serious damage has been erosion of the second and third walls of the Ancient City by a stream and the Mekong river.

Other upstanding earthworks include the roads, canals, and *baray* (reservoir), and mounds where buildings or other structures have collapsed and become overgrown. Again erosion, and some robbing and digging, have affected these features but generally they are in good condition.

5. *Standing structures*

While no ancient buildings are now intact, most survive to the tops of their walls. The standing structures are therefore still entirely authentic with a high level of integrity despite partial collapse.

Most of the present population live away from

the main archaeological complexes. Many of the inhabited houses are traditional in form, but developmental pressures are mounting. Nevertheless, overall, with little vegetational or other natural changes and minimal archaeological or restorative activity, the integrity and authenticity of the site of this property are remarkably high.

(Source: Advisory Body Evaluation: ICOMOS, September 2001)

e. Management and Protection

(i) *Overall framework*

The Vat Phou and Associated Ancient Settlements within the Champasak Cultural Landscape are protected by the Provincial Decree on the Regulations for the Preservation of the Historical Site of Vat Phou and the Areas related to Vat Phou No 38/88 (October 1988). Not just limited to the main standing monuments, this Decree defined a large Protection Zone. Within the zone three Preservation Areas cover the main archaeological complexes.

The national legal framework for heritage preservation is provided by the Law Concerning National Heritage No 08/NA, adopted by the National Assembly in 2005.

Management is undertaken in accordance with the Champasak Heritage Management Plan that was officially adopted by the Government in September 1998. The Plan defines the boundaries of the Protection Zone and the three Preservation Areas. It contains regulations for the management of the World Heritage Site to cover archaeological work, conservation, and development control. In addition, action plans to identify priority management measures are developed every five years.

The Department of Vat Phou Champasak World Heritage manages the site. It has staff trained in archaeology, architecture and city planning, and cooperates closely with various international teams of experts. The Government has also established a National Inter-Ministerial Co-ordinating Committee to oversee the management of the Protection Zone, and to integrate the activities of the various Government Departments at national, provincial, and district levels.

(ii) *Specific long-term expectations*

Long-term challenges for the management of the property principally concern the control of urban and infrastructure development within the large historic cultural landscape that functions as the property buffer zone. In addition, other challenges arise from environmental pressures (mainly flooding, run-off, and erosion), visitor/tourism pressures (including that of the annual February festival) and a growing population within the protected zone that have higher lifestyle expectations. The continuing integrity of the property relies on the importance of adhering to the government approved management plan in order to conserve the heritage values of all four protected zones through inter-department co-ordination and on-property management. Without this cohesive approach, and access to appropriate professional knowledge, it is vulnerable to visitor and other infrastructure developments, environmental pressures and, particularly during the monsoon season, water erosion.

(Source: Nomination Document, Chapter 4 Management)