

LAO PAKO IN THE LATE PREHISTORY OF MAINLAND SOUTHEAST ASIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents some interpretations of the late prehistoric site of Lao Pako on the Nâm Ngum River in Laos. The situation of Lao Pako in the archaeology of Mainland Southeast Asia provides the opportunity to question concepts such as centre, hierarchy and richness, whose significance is often taken for granted. An analytical perspective is used here which puts Lao Pako and its inhabitants in the centre, and they are further considered in relation to their immediate and more distant surroundings. It is argued that the internal structure of the site is pivotal for us to be able to give meaning to its material culture and for our understanding of the people of Lao Pako.

INTRODUCTION

This paper presents some interpretations of the material culture of the Lao Pako site on the Nâm Ngum River in Laos. It is based on the results from the 1995-96 excavation campaign directed by Thonglit Luang Khoth and assisted by Thongsa Sayavongkhamdy of the Lao Ministry of Information and Culture, Department of Museums and Archaeology (Källén and Karlström 1997, 1999). It aims to give a brief view of the world of the Lao Pako occupants, a world of which that very site was the centre. The people at Lao Pako have in some sense been aware of, and have related to, the immediate as well as more distant surroundings of the site, as intimated in this paper.

ON CENTRES AND PERIPHERIES

The Lao Pako site can in many respects be apprehended as peripheral, when incorporated into the present archaeological discourse on Mainland Southeast Asia. Geographically it is peripheral since it is situated in an area of the Lao PDR that has not yet been subjected to a sustained archaeological survey and is subsequently a blank on the map of prehistoric activities (e.g. Higham 1996:47, 186; White and Pigott 1996:152). The site was

occupied during a relatively short period of time in the fourth to sixth centuries AD (see Karlström's paper, this volume). Large political centres established in the southern part of the mainland have attracted most of the archaeological attention for this period (e.g. Higham 1989:239-320).

Lao Pako is nothing like those centres. And in my view this site has one of its greatest assets in being, or at least being considered, peripheral. The conventional focus on centres, hierarchies and richness in the archaeology of Southeast Asia leaves an empty space to be filled by investigations into periphery, heterarchy and structural quality. The discussion on the centre-periphery concept in anthropology and archaeology has emphasized that, as with other analytical tools, it is an abstraction deriving from a sense of identity typical for cultures (e.g. 'the West') which perceive themselves as strong and dominant in relation to an outside world. Thus *we* in the centre identify ourselves in opposition to *them* in the periphery (Rowlands 1987:8; Friedman 1994). The importance of centres, therefore, cannot be taken as an *a priori* fact, but must be seen as an intellectual construct whose relevance is largely dependent on the researcher's attitudes. Furthermore, the act of privileging hierarchy and hierarchical systems in interpretations of socio-political structures in the archaeology of Southeast Asia has been rightly criticized by Joyce White (1995). Heterarchical structures within and between autonomous communities are likely to have been equally important in the dynamics of the prehistoric period in the area, as White points out. Thus to understand the dynamics of the late prehistory of Mainland Southeast Asia, and not simply reduce it to being "the pre-Khmer period", our scope must be expanded to include those areas that have become peripheral in terms of our analytical abstractions today.

Let us return to Lao Pako. It gives a modest impression; a small site on a small hill that yields to us quite ordinary finds such as pottery, pebble tools and iron knives. The fact remains, however, that Lao Pako and its occupants were a part of the world in these late prehis-

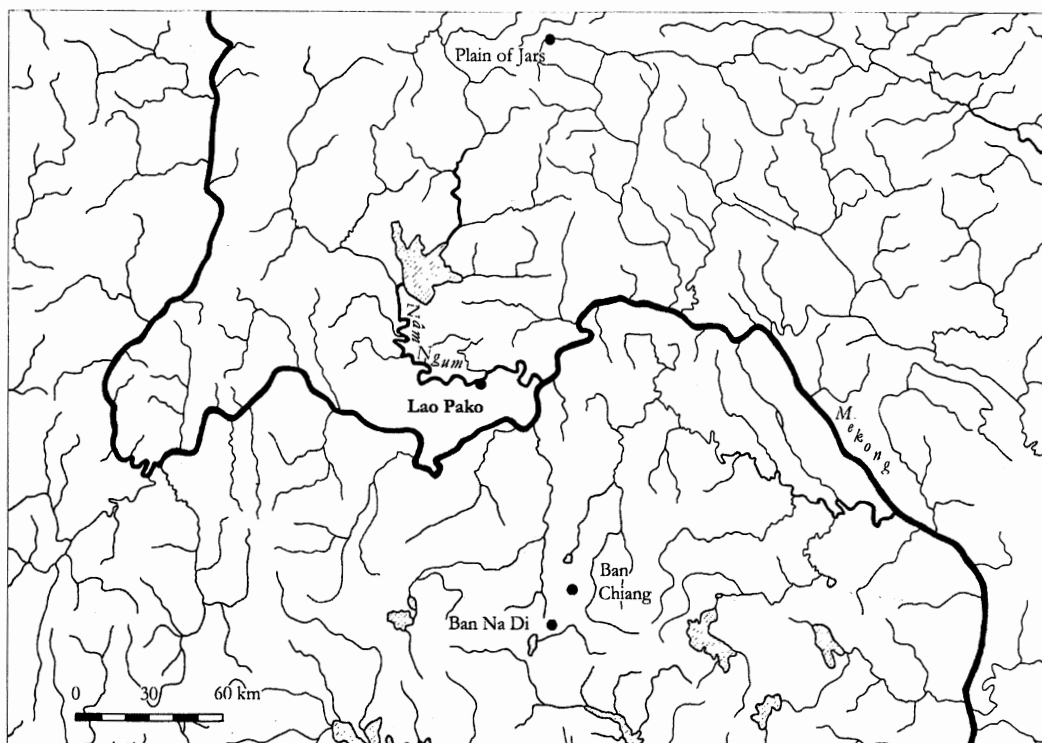


Figure 1. The location of Lao Pako in the river system around the Mekong.

toric times. For the inhabitants, of course, the site was not peripheral, but the centre of their world. The artefacts provide evidence of contact with other areas along the Mekong River, and the occupants should have been aware of the various political and social forces in the surroundings. They organized their community in relation to that outer world, and the outer world also to some extent related to them. To do them justice, we must, therefore, approach the archaeological record in a way that will acknowledge the site Lao Pako and its people as being the centre of the world.

THE SITE AS PART OF A LARGER STRUCTURE

The Mekong River is said to be the artery of Mainland Southeast Asia. To this day together with its tributaries it is the main route of transportation and communication (Sluiter 1993:17, 42). This has been so at least as far back as the earliest written accounts can tell, and we have no reason to doubt it has always been the case. Today large rivers are often used as national and regional borders, which is something we have to disregard when

studying the prehistory in this area where the rivers have a strong connective quality.

The Lao Pako site is situated on the southern bank of the Nâm Ngum River, one of the largest tributaries of the Mekong (Fig. 1). The Nâm Ngum rises in the uplands near the Plain of Jars (see Higham 1989:228-31, 1996:307) and flows down into the lowlands of the Khorat Plateau where it joins the Mekong east of Vientiane city. Near this confluence in the lowlands but with the mountainous uplands within sight is Lao Pako, situated on a hill with a good view both upstream and downstream along the river.

The river must have played a central part in the people's lives at Lao Pako. Not only is it the main link to and from the outer world, but it is also essential for survival in the dry season as it provides fresh water and fish. Notwithstanding its merits as an essential life giver, the river can also be a deadly threat in the rainy season when it can get out of control, often causing serious flooding around the site. This dual quality of the river and its water makes it plausible that the Mekong was as central in the cosmology and mythology of the Lao Pako people as

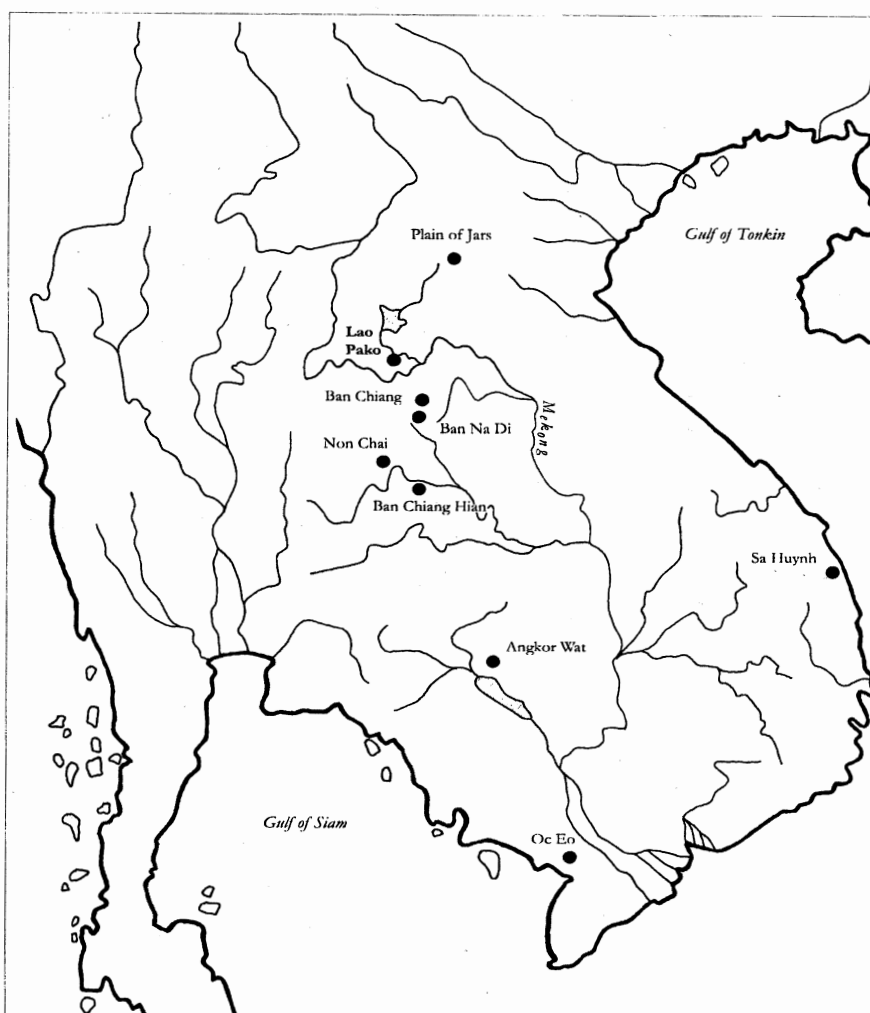


Figure 2. Map of Mainland Southeast Asia with sites mentioned in the text.

ivers have been and are for people living alongside them in Southeast Asia and elsewhere today (e.g. Allan 1997).

The hill with the site is not a particularly sheltered spot, so the people who used it for rituals, settlement or both must have had good reasons. They may of course have had lots of reasons which we today are unable to understand for having chosen that particular spot. But what seems apparent is that there has been a need to supervise the flow of the river; for reasons of trade, external relations or threats, or because the river was of such importance in their cosmology, or for some other reasons. Since all archaeological evidence recovered so far at Lao Pako suggests a quite peaceful character we have no reason to believe that the site's location was due to

the existence of external threats. Rather its position overlooking and controlling a point along the major prehistoric highway of the area indicates that the Lao Pako people had a lot of external contacts, and were indeed aware of the world around them.

How did the surrounding world seem to the people at Lao Pako? We shall, of course, never be able to reconstruct their view of the world, but we can create a picture of how it might have seemed. As a point of departure we shall look at the developments which simultaneously occurred in the surroundings, in the fourth to seventh centuries AD.

Further north was the expanding and aggressive Chinese empire. During the Han Dynasty it had been in con-

trol of large areas and populations in Bac Bo, but now it no longer fostered such expansive designs towards the south (Higham 1996:332).

Downstream along the Mekong, on the Khorat Plateau, a lot of moated sites of differing size were constructed, probably both before and during the occupation at Lao Pako. Most archaeological work so far on these moated sites has involved survey, and only a few have been excavated, therefore they are surrounded by many uncertainties. They seem to represent large settlements, and some were regional centres for smaller communities in the surrounding area. Their systems of water control were evidently of great importance (Moore 1988, 1992; Higham 1996:240-45; O'Reilly 1997; Welch 1997:71). There are notable similarities between these sites and Lao Pako in their material culture, as we shall see below.

Even further downstream the Mekong in the delta near the coast, a large centre with strong influences from Indian culture emerged in the first century AD. Changes occurred there during the period Lao Pako was occupied. Oc Eo, which has revealed a large amount of archaeological evidence corroborating the Chinese historical accounts, seems to have been the earliest political centre, until its abandonment in the fifth or sixth century. Another political centre then grew around Angkor Borei. Several centuries later the important centre of Angkor developed even farther north near the Tonle Sap Lake. These large centres were under strong cultural influence from India with similar political organization and religious elements, but were also in close contact with China, and had exchange contacts with the Roman empire. The architecture was based on bricks and carved stone which, as well as the extraordinary and rich material culture, provide evidence of participation in an extensive trade network (Higham 1989:245-254; Stark et al. 1999).

Related to the Sa Huynh culture on the east coast, in what is today central and southern Vietnam, we find the Cham civilization with an Austronesian language and strong cultural connections to Island Southeast Asia. It is most probable that the Cham had been in contact with the Mekong valley which lies directly across the Truong Son mountains (Higham 1996:307).

The enigmatic Plain of Jars, with its huge stone jars that have been interpreted by Madeleine Colani as burial monuments, has been dated by Colani (1935 (II):123) to the same period when Lao Pako was occupied. This site is connected with Lao Pako via the Nâm Ngum River (see Fig 1), and if there were simultaneous activities at both sites, they were most probably in contact with each other. The dating of the Plain of Jars cannot however be regarded as totally reliable, since it is based solely on the typological sequence established in the 1930s. The available radiocarbon dates (see Sayavongkhamdy and Bellwood, this volume) do not unfortunately shed much light on Colani's chronology for the Plain of Jars.

There were, however, other areas with smaller communities not as centralized as the polities described above. The northern upland areas have not yet been subjected to much archaeological enquiry. Nonetheless, examples are known in northern Thailand (Higham 1989:61) of hunter-gatherer communities that kept their subsistence economy throughout the first millennium AD, and even into the present century, without however living in isolation from the rest of the world.

All the above were part of the diverse world which surrounded the people at Lao Pako. Not very far away were dominant and expanding civilizations, just as there were also hunter-gatherers living in interplay with other communities.

Given the location of Lao Pako on one of the major waterways in Mainland Southeast Asia, and the knowledge we have of contemporary dominant communities and even state formations not far away, we can conclude that the people who occupied Lao Pako were exposed to a lot of different cultural influences. They were indeed well aware of the surrounding world, as will now be discussed, and organized their community actively in relation and response to that world.

RELATED ARTEFACTS

The archaeologically peripheral situation of Lao Pako, in combination with the very small area excavated there, makes all comparisons with other sites difficult. No other sites in this part of Laos have been excavated and reported, so we will now turn to the area south of the Mekong that is connected with Lao Pako through the river system (see Fig. 1). Not only is it plausible that the rivers have enabled close contact, but also we find sites on the Khorat Plateau that are similar in their size and material culture to Lao Pako.

The known sites that are contemporary with Lao Pako south of the Mekong can be divided into two groups, the moated sites and those without moats. The moated sites are in general situated further south, often in dry areas. These, while yet insufficiently dated, seem to have appeared with the introduction of iron working. The known sites without moats in general show continuity from the preceding Bronze Age, and their stratigraphic sequences indicate that major changes occurred with the introduction of iron. New artefacts were introduced, as well as new pottery, regarding both technology and style. It has been suggested, in the interpretation of the cultural sequence at the site of Ban Na Di, that these changes were due to an immigration of people from the south, since there are striking similarities with the material culture of the moated sites to the south (Higham 1996:231-235). As Helmut Loofs-Wissowa (1993:327) has pointed out, to talk about migrations as explanation for cultural change in this area, would be to oversimplify the complex rela-

tions between people and material culture (cf. Shanks and Tilley 1987:Ch. 4). I suggest that explanations for change must be found within the dynamics of these bronze- and iron-using communities, without ignoring the importance of external contacts.

Ban Chiang had its main period of occupation much earlier than at Lao Pako. The initial occupation of Lao Pako was contemporary with the very latest activity at Ban Chiang, in the third or fourth century AD. It is also in this late period – period LP X, dated from 200 BC to AD 300 (White 1990:125) – that we find similarities with the material culture at Lao Pako (White 1982; Labbé 1985).

An artefact type that is represented at both Lao Pako and Ban Chiang is the cylindrical roller (also called a clay roller or clay seal in some publications). Two specimens were found at Lao Pako (see Karlström, this volume:Fig. 5), and especially one with a zigzag pattern is in almost total correspondence to rollers from the late period of Ban Chiang (White 1982:54). One interesting quality of the Lao Pako rollers is that they do not have holes bored all way through, so the possibility that they had been used as beads can be ruled out (Källén and Karlström 1997:51 ff., 1999:35).

The pottery at Lao Pako differs significantly from that of Ban Chiang (cf. Glanzman and Fleming 1985). There are few similarities in vessel forms and the composition differs. For example, there are no finds of pottery tempered with rice chaff at Lao Pako. Both sites reveal, however, a great cultural focus on pottery, and a highly developed artistic skill in manufacturing it. The basic manufacturing technique, with a moulded basal hemisphere and the upper body and rim added with the paddle-and-anvil technique, is the same (cf. White 1982:31). The appliqué decoration which was refined and very common at Lao Pako (see Karlström, this volume:Fig. 3) occurs as well, albeit sparsely on the Ban Chiang pottery. The relation is reversed with the red-on-buff painted pottery which is very common at Ban Chiang, whereas painted pottery occurs only as an exception in the Lao Pako material. All this indicates that there are relations between these two pottery traditions, even though it has been refined to the point of having a distinctive local character at both sites.

The material culture of *Ban Na Di* is closely related to that of Ban Chiang. Major changes occurred at Ban Na Di with the introduction of working iron in the last few centuries BC (cf. the late period of Ban Chiang). It is this iron-related settlement at Ban Na Di which reveals the closest similarities to Lao Pako. One major advantage with Ban Na Di is that the excavations there have been very well reported (Higham and Kijngam 1984). This enables comparison on a more general level than merely noting similarities between particular artefacts. But we start with the artefacts.

Eight rollers ('clay seals', Higham and Kijngam 1984:148-151; Higham and Thosarat 1998:168) have been found at Ban Na Di, all but one in the upper occupation levels. The radiocarbon dating of Ban Na Di is very uncertain, so no exact chronological sequence of the different occupation layers has been established (Higham and Kijngam 1984:30-34), but these later occupation levels should be roughly contemporary with the activities at Lao Pako.

Ban Na Di and Ban Chiang are similar in the relation their pottery shows to the Lao Pako pottery. The same manufacturing techniques have been used, but there are significant differences in the composition of the fabric. The rim sections show a remarkable correspondence with the Lao Pako rims, which may very well be the result of the use at both sites of the paddle-and-anvil manufacturing technique. Also the complete vessels, although often insecurely dated, show a lot of similarities to the Lao Pako vessels. At Ban Na Di we see a preference for appliqué decoration (Higham and Kijngam 1984:312-322) as at Lao Pako (see Karlström, this volume: Fig. 3), but unlike Ban Chiang. The shapes of the complete Ban Na Di vessels are also more similar to Lao Pako examples than to Ban Chiang vessels. For example, both Ban Na Di and Lao Pako have round-based, softly contoured jars with appliqué decoration immediately below the neck (Higham and Kijngam 1984: 312-322; Källén and Karlström 1999:15).

Ban Chiang Hian and *Non Chai* are both large moated sites in the Chi valley farther to the south on the Khorat Plateau. The former was occupied from the early Bronze Age into the Iron Age, while the latter had a rather brief period of occupation from the fifth century BC to the third century AD. They appear to have a closely related material culture, except for the pottery, which shows important differences, both in form and fabric (Vincent 1984:688). Neither of the sites has been sufficiently excavated and reported to provide enough evidence for thorough comparisons, but there are similarities with Lao Pako that should be mentioned.

As regards the Ban Chiang Hian pottery, the examined rims from the upper layers show remarkable correspondence to the rims found at Lao Pako (cf. Higham and Kijngam 1984:607-609). The appliqué decoration also occurs at Ban Chiang Hian (Higham and Kijngam 1984:616), but as no complete appliqué vessels have been found, we cannot know where the appliqué strips were placed on the jar. As was the case with Ban Chiang and Ban Na Di, there are differences in the fabric composition compared to the Lao Pako wares, which had not been tempered with rice chaff.

The same difference from Lao Pako in fabric also applies to Non Chai. Here it is the later pottery decoration, or rather the lack of decoration with a preference for plain and cord-marked wares (Higham 1996:214; cf. Ba-

yard *et al.* 1985), that corresponds well to the majority of the Lao Pako vessels. There was probably local iron smelting at both Non Chai and Ban Chiang Hian, just as there was at Lao Pako.

RELATED STRUCTURES

Now a few words on structures. The term "structure" is used here in a so-called neo-structuralist way, as done by Hodder (1992:Ch. 14), Barrett (1994:1 ff.), and Shanks and Tilley (1987:Chs 3 and 4); see also Bourdieu (1977), and Giddens (1984). It can rightly be argued that the information available on sites in the Mekong valley at the moment is insufficient to provide a steady ground for interpretation of structures. Most pieces in the structure are still missing, and there is a risk that we might end up inventing them to fit our own ends. Since talking about structures is indeed a risky business in this poorly investigated area we instead feel forced to turn to comparisons of objects and artefacts, just as I have done above.

It is, however, clear, that the use of single artefacts in comparison and interpretation is not as straightforward as we would like to think. We all agree that the presence of Roman medallions at Oc Eo does not necessarily mean that the people of Oc Eo had the same ideas about those artefacts as the Romans who made them had. And it is very unlikely that the sheer presence of those artefacts at Oc Eo means that the Oc Eo inhabitants lived their lives as people in the Roman empire did. It might also be the same case with sites that are geographically much closer together. Many of the prehistoric communities in Southeast Asia could very well have been in close contact with each other, for trade and exchange, without having much

in common apart from the objects they exchanged. The opposite relation is, of course, also plausible; two culturally similar communities with different exchange partners could reveal large differences in material culture as far as particular artefacts are concerned. It is therefore essential that we strive to go beyond the comparison of single artefacts in the study of Southeast Asian prehistory, and instead adopt a contextual approach. For a fuller discussion of these points, see Shanks and Tilley (1987), Tilley (1990), Hodder (1992), and Johnsen and Olsen (1992).

I argue that the internal structure of a site is pivotal to understanding these ancient communities and the way they organized their world. The area excavated so far at Lao Pako reveals material culture deliberately deposited in a manner that seems totally irrational to us, but still has a strong inner logic. The most distinctive feature of the site involves the complete jars of differing size, decoration and temper that were buried alone or in groups of up to five vessels. Not one of the 45 complete excavated vessels has revealed anything to indicate that the jars had been buried as containers of any artefacts or substances. Indeed the phytoliths from one Lao Pako jar produced a very similar profile to the phytoliths recorded from the surrounding sediments (Bowdery 1999). The jars seem to have been buried just for the sake of interring the jars. They have been placed at the bottom of small pits in careful arrangements, which are unique for each group (Fig. 3). These groups of jars have been buried at and adjacent to an area for iron working.

There are similar contemporary structures of buried jars found in Southeast Asia, mainly in the form of the so-called jar burials. This form of human interment, involving

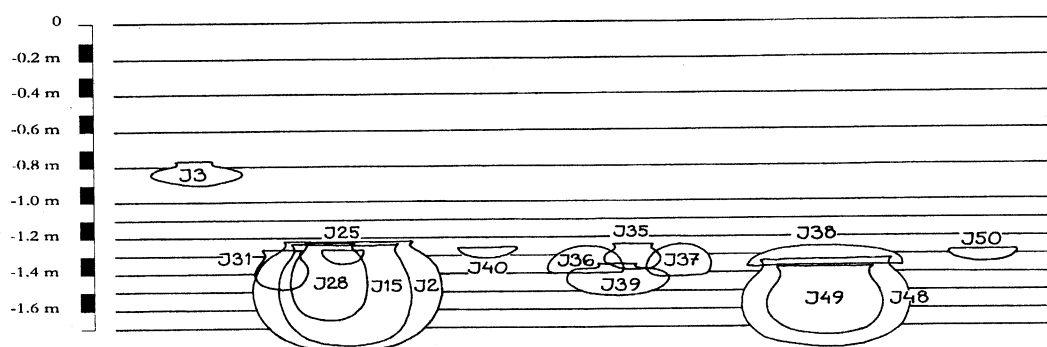


Figure 3. Schematic drawing of groups of jars at Lao Pako, square E2 (Källén and Karlström 1999:App. 14)

either primary or secondary burials in jars, is most common in insular Southeast Asia and along the coasts. It does, however, also occur at moated sites on the Khorat Plateau which are closely related to Ban Chiang Hian and Non Chai, for example at Ban Kan Luang (Indrawooth 1997). Similar mortuary pottery jars are known from the Plain of Jars (Colani 1932: Pl. XLI:1; Sayavongkhamdy and Bellwood, this volume). The association with iron-working activities at these sites corresponds to the internal structure of Lao Pako, but it is quite clear that the jars at Lao Pako had not been buried with human interments.

It may be reasonably objected that bone remains could have dissolved in the sandy acidic sediments. However, the lack of any traces of bone or other grave goods that could be expected to be found, as well as the arrangements of the jars, indicate that they cannot, based on the evidence recovered so far, be interpreted as jar burials. The arrangement of the jars in the Lao Pako pits is quite unlike the Ban Kan Luang burial jars. The latter were always placed so that the one with the bottom down contains the human remains and grave goods, and is covered with a smaller jar to prevent the spirit of the deceased person from escaping (as interpreted by Indrawooth 1997:151). The varied yet extremely careful arrangement of the Lao Pako jars points in another direction, towards the symbolic importance of pottery (and/or the jars) in its very own right, possibly in combination with iron-working activities. So far no reported excavations of sites on the Khorat Plateau have revealed an internal structure that appears closely related to that found at Lao Pako, although there are indications of the importance of pottery and small-scale iron working at most of the Iron Age sites mentioned in the literature. Further investigations with more extensive reports will provide a more solid ground for comparisons. With an extended knowledge of the internal structure of the sites we shall be able to give meaning to the material culture, and we may also ask what these structures tell us about how the people at Lao Pako saw their world. That, however, would be quite another story.

NOTE

1. I here use the concept of heterarchy as discussed by Joyce White (1995) in her article 'Incorporating heterarchy into theory on socio-political development: the case from Southeast Asia'. She argues that socio-political structures will appear different depending on the analytical perspective put on them, and that a shift in focus to acknowledge flexible ranking and horizontal differentiation will make heterarchical structures (flexible and horizontal) visible, as a complement to hierarchical structures (rigid and vertical). I do not wish, however, to portray White's concept as a general theory of social development and evolution in Southeast Asia, since that, in my opinion, would contradict the basic aims of the heterarchical approach, i. e. to appreciate complexity and cultural pluralism

(White 1995:103 ff.).

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