

Ancient burial ground discovered at the Plain of Jars

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Researchers at the Laos site

Researchers are a step closer to unravelling one of the great prehistoric puzzles of South East Asia, after discovering an ancient burial ground, including human remains, at the Plain of Jars in central Laos.

The discoveries were made during excavations conducted in February 2016 and led by a team of Australian and Lao researchers including Dr Louise Shewan from the Monash Warwick Alliance and Centre for Archaeology and Ancient History, Dr Dougald O'Reilly from the Australian National University and Dr Thonglith Luangkhoth of the Lao

Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism.

The field work is part of a five-year project, funded by the Australian Research Council, aimed at uncovering the mysteries surrounding the 90-plus jar sites, including who made the jars, what they were used for and how the sites came into existence.

The sites, located in the central Lao province of Xieng Khouang, comprise large carved stone jars of varying sizes – some as big as two metres in diameter and three metres high. Initially brought to the attention of science by French researcher Madeleine Colani in the 1930s, the sites have remained largely unstudied due to the huge quantity of unexploded bombs in the area - the result of heavy bombing during the 'Secret War' in Laos in the 1970s.

The recent excavations – the first major excavations in nearly two decades - uncovered an ancient burial ground in an area known as 'Site 1', and revealed various burial methods including the internment of whole bodies, the burying of bundled bones and bundled bones placed inside ceramic vessels and then buried.

Dr Shewan, who is analysing teeth found at the [burial ground](#), says the project has the potential to ascertain who these people were and where they lived.

"My research involves the measurement of strontium isotopes in human dental enamel to shed light on the home environment of the individual," Dr Shewan says. "Teeth mineralise at different ages, so by analysing different teeth we are able to ascertain where an individual lived during their childhood."

The results of the project will be showcased in the CAVE2 facility with support from the Monash Immersive Visualisation Platform.

"To visualise all our research findings, including excavation data, remote sensing data and drone imagery in the CAVE2 environment is going to greatly assist our analysis and interpretation and provides a unique opportunity to conduct 'virtual fieldwork' in areas that are inaccessible by foot. From the drone imagery we may also be able to identify potential occupation areas. At present there are no known occupation sites. No one knows where these people lived," Dr Shewan said.

Provided by Monash University

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