

Wiang Nong Lom Cultural Heritage Public Relations Media Project

Mae Chan District and Chiang Saen District, Chiang Rai Province

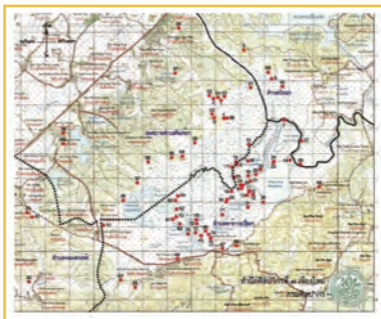
Wiang Nong Lom Cultural Heritage

Mae Chan District and Chiang Saen District,
Chiang Rai Province

The 7th Regional Office of Fine Arts, Chiang Mai,
Fine Arts Department



The condition of the Wiang Nong Lom area



Location of the monuments in the Wiang Nong Lom area

General Information on Wiang Nong Lom

Wiang Nong Lom is a region of great historical significance in Northern Thailand. It is associated with the emergence and decline of an ancient town called 'Mueang Yonok Nagaphan Singhanavati Nagar' or 'Wiang Nong Lom'. This town is believed to be one of the earliest historical settlements in Northern Thailand.

The area is located within Mae Chan District's administrative jurisdiction. Tha Khao Plueak Subdistrict governs the eastern and southern parts of the region. At the same time, Chan Chwa Subdistrict, Chan Chwa Tai Subdistrict, and Chom Sawan Subdistrict cover the western to the southern part. The northern part is under the administrative jurisdiction of the Yonok Subdistrict, and some areas of the Pa Sak Subdistrict in Chiang Saen District are also included.



The condition of the Wiang Nong Lom area



The topography of the Wiang Nong Lom area

Topography of Wiang Nong Lom

The Wiang Nong Lom area is a valley basin approximately 19 kilometres long and 4 kilometres wide. It stretches towards the Mekong River in a northeast-southwest direction. The surrounding plain is about 200 meters lower than the mountains on the east and west sides, which rise to about 320-500 meters above sea level.

The northern part of the western mountain range is connected to the Phra That Pha Ngao range, which surrounds the southern areas of Chiang Saen. These mountains act as a natural barrier and serve as a water catchment area for the Wiang Nong Lom basin. In the south part of the basin, the Mae Tha and Mae Lak are the two major rivers that are fed by water streams from the surrounding mountains of Ban Si Yang Chum and flow down to the lower plain. The mountain ranges on the east and west have several channels and waterways. On the northern side of the basin, the Lua River is a vital river that originates from the Nong Luang and flows towards the northeast. It joins the Kok River near the Ban Thap Kumarn Thong. The physical characteristics of the area play a crucial role in this process, explaining why the Wiang Nong Lom basin is an area that receives water from the surrounding mountain ranges. This water is collected in the basin and flows out to join the Kok River at the northeastern end.

Geology of Wiang Nong Lom



According to geological studies, the Wiang Nong Lom basin is on the Mae Chan Fault. This strike-slip fault passes through the Fang District, Mae Chan District, Wiang Nong Lom and the Mekong River as it enters Laos. The fault primarily affects the region's southern part and the mountains' eastern edge.

The Mae Chan Fault is known for its strength, with the centre of occurrence located at the tip of the fault in Lao. The region experiences frequent earthquakes with a magnitude not exceeding six on the Richter scale. According to geological data, the Wiang Nong Lom swamp originated approximately 2.5 million to 10,000 years ago during the Quaternary period.



The Legend and Historical Background of Wiang Nong Lom

Mueang Yonok, the Ancient Town in the Legend of the Lanna Kingdom

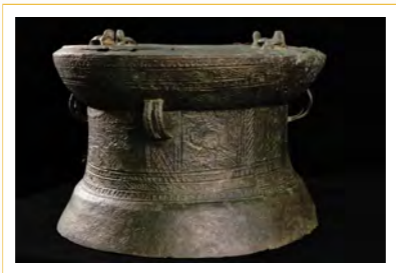
According to the Legend of Singhanavatikumar, the Tai people migrated to the Kok River and founded a town called Yonok Nagaphan in the 7th century CE. However, an earthquake destroyed the city in the 12th century CE, believed to be caused by a curse. The townspeople had caught white eels for their meals, which was thought to have led to the disaster.

The region around the Kok River has been inhabited by a people and chiefdom called 'Yon' or 'Yuan' since the time of Phraya Mung Rai through the Rattanakosin Kingdom. The name 'Yon' is believed to have originated from Mueang Yonok, an ancient town mentioned in local legends. Historians have debated the authenticity of these legends, but the mention of kings who ruled the city in the myths suggests that they may have some historical significance.

There are two hypotheses about the location of the collapsed town of Yonok. One theory suggests it is situated around the Wiang Nong Lom basin, on the border between the Mae Chan District and Chiang Saen District in Chiang Rai Province. The second hypothesis suggests that it is located in Nong Luang, which is in Wiang Chai District. Although both areas share the characteristics of being wetlands, archaeological evidence indicates that Mueang Yonok was possibly located at Wiang Nong Lom.



Location of the Wiang Nong Lom area



Bronze Drum discovered at Nong Khiew

It is believed that it collapsed due to its location on the powerful Mae Chan Fault, as stated by Dr. Nuansiri Wongtangsawat.

The Wiang Nong Lom area comprises four sub-districts spanning two districts, which are Chan Chwa, Tha Khao Plueak, and Chom Sawan Subdistricts in Mae Chan District and Yonok Subdistrict in Chiang Saen District. Archaeological investigations have led to the discovery of more than 70 monuments in this region. Most of the uncovered artefacts and sites date back to the Lanna Kingdom and are no older than that. However, the villagers found a prehistoric bronze drum in Nong Khiew, estimated to be around 2,500-2,000 years old.

Wiang Nong Lom, situated in the Chiang Saen region, was likely an essential area for agriculture and fishing. This is due to its location near numerous streams and river drainage systems that connect it to the Mekong River. The archaeological evidence found at the site also suggests it was located on the route connecting Chiang Rai and the Kok River-Mekong River joint area and between Chiang Rai and Chiang Saen.

The Legend of Chiang Saen, as narrated in 'Phuen Mueang Chiang Saen', describes Phraya Saen Phu as the founder of the city in the old town area, which was believed to have encompassed the land of Wiang Nong Lom. However, there is no archaeological evidence to substantiate this claim, and it is thought that the initial settlement of Chiang Saen had a lower population density, with no evidence predating the Lanna Kingdom.

Yonok Nagaphan and Singhanavati

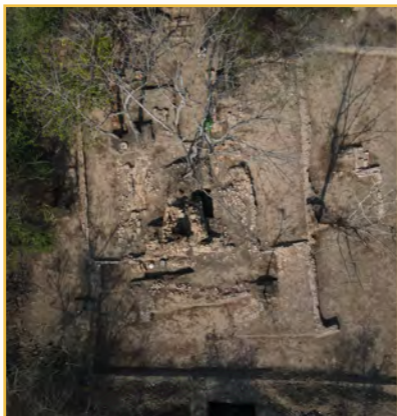
Yonok Nagaphan, an ancient town in the Chiang Rai-Chiang Saen basin, dates from 691 BCE to 545 CE. It has traces of earlier settlements and the oldest Buddhism.

Legend has it that Prince Singhanavati led a group of people to migrate from Mueang Thai Thets and establish a new city in the basin, about 14 kilometres away from the Khanatee River. This city came to be known as Yonok Nagaphan and is located in the present-day Nong Wiang Lom, a large wetland that spans across Yonok, Chan Chwa, Tha Khao Plueak, Chom Sawan Subdistricts in Mae Chan District, and Chiang Saen District.

In 2009, the 7th Regional Office of Fine Arts in Chiang Mai collaborated with Chiang Rai Rajabhat University to conduct an archaeological survey in Wiang Nong Lom. The survey revealed numerous archaeological sites, with the highest concentration being around natural sub-surface water sources such as Nong Luang, Nong Ka Kok, Nong Khwang, Nong Mon, and Lua Stream in the Tha Khao Plueak Subdistrict.



Discovered the head of the Buddha Image made of stucco from the archaeological excavation



Plan view of the Wat Ban Dong Monument
after an archaeological excavation

Numerous monuments are situated along the basin's edge, primarily on its northwestern side, where the slope transforms into a small hill. Moving away from this area, we encountered several moated sites on the peak. Most religious buildings, such as viharas and stupas, are in the middle and along the edge of the region, arranged in a west-east direction. This is a typical style in the Lanna Kingdom, where the vihara is placed on the east, and the round-shaped stupa is placed on the west.

It's important to note that the birth period of Yonok Nagaphan is significant. According to legend, Prince Singhanavati established this place in the Chiang Saen basin 148 years before the death of Buddha (148 years before the Buddhist Era). This period is believed to be accurate, as the migration of Prince Singhanavati can be traced back to the earliest historical evidence in the northern region, around 2,700 years ago. This was during the prehistoric period's transition from the Bronze Age to the Metal Age. At that time, the social organization had developed from the village to the chiefdom town after the locals began to produce and use iron.



The Legend of Singhanavati uncovers the migration of people from southern China to the Chiang Saen basin during the transition from the Late Bronze Age to the Metal Age. This migration was supported by the discovery of bronze drums scattered along the river from southern China to the Mekong River and Vietnam. For instance, a bronze drum was found while dredging Nong Khiew, a large pond near the Chan Chwa Wittayakom School northwest of the Wiang Nong Lom area. There is still a need for further archaeological study to determine the exact period of this migration.

Singhanavati is believed to have migrated during the Metal Age, about 2,500-1,500 years ago, from South China in search of new resources and areas to support its growing population. The migration led to the development of a large community, which eventually evolved into a town. Buddhism settled in the area about 1,500-1,300 years ago, further contributing to the town's growth and development.

During the investigation conducted by the researchers, no ancient structures that were built before 545 CE were found in the swamp area. Most of the discovered monuments date back to the Lanna Kingdom, which existed during the 14th-17th centuries CE. Nevertheless, there exists an ancient Chinese archive that refers to 'Pa-pai Si Fu', the Lanna state situated in the Chiang Rai basin. This archive is significant evidence of the creating of a powerful administrative network based on the marriage system between kinships along the trade route in southern China. 'Pa-pai Si Fu' means eight hundred concubines, reflecting this trade route's importance. This Chinese document is the oldest written evidence that mentions the Tai communities in the Chiang Rai – Chiang Saen basin. The document, dated at least 727 CE onward, tells about the social development of the area at the state level, even though the name of Yonok Nagaphan is not mentioned in it.

Wiang Nong Lom Archaeology

At the end of the fiscal year 2021, the 7th Regional Office of Fine Arts, Chiang Mai conducted an archaeological survey on the Wiang Nong Lom area covering the east part of Tha Khao Plueak Subdistrict, some part of Chan Chwa, Chan Chwa Tai, Chom Sawan and San Sai Subdistricts in the Mae Chan District, including the administrative area of Yonok and Pasak Subdistricts in Chiang Saen District, Chiang Rai Province.

This project aims to evaluate the present state of archaeological sites and evidence, particularly the remains found in the Wiang Nong Lom area. After a thorough investigation, it was discovered that there are 54 monuments, consisting of 40 religious monuments, 10 ancient moated sites, and four residential sites. Tha Khao Pluek Subdistrict has the highest number of archaeological sites, followed by Chan Chawa and Chan Chawa Tai Subdistricts, which cover most of the Wiang Nong Lom area and have also shown significant progress.



Location of the monuments
in the Wiang Nong Lom area

Based on the study, most archaeological sites, including high peaks and low hills, were found on the top of the ridge. This area is known for its religious monuments, residential locations, and ancient towns.

The second most common location is the hill slope leading up to the mountain or the boundary between the mountains and the plains. Similarly, these areas have also discovered monuments and residential sites. After that, the sites are located in the low plains, ridges along the rivers, and mounds in the middle of the plains. Although these areas were not affected by the water level, it is still possible that sites such as Wat Pa Mak Nor may eventually become islands in the middle of the water.

Following a previous project in 2021, a new project was launched in 2023 to preserve and develop cultural heritage sites in the Wiang Nong Lom area of Chiang Rai Province. The project involves archaeological excavations in the Tha Khao Plueak, Chan Chwa, and Chan Chwa Tai Subdistricts of Mae Chan District and the Yonok Subdistrict of Chiang Saen District. Moreover, an archaeological survey will be conducted throughout the Wiang Nong Lom area, which covers both Mae Chan and Chiang Saen Districts of Chiang Rai Province.



An archaeological excavation
at Wat Pa Ma Nor Monument



An archaeological excavation
at San Ku Ban Doi Ngam

Summary Information on the Archaeological Investigations in the Wiang Nong Lom Area

The Chiang Rai Basin is in the northern region of Thailand and is home to many ancient towns. These towns have varying shapes that are influenced by the terrain. According to scholars, some of these towns may have existed even before the establishment of the Lanna Kingdom. In contrast, others were given defined geometric shapes during the reign of the Lanna Kingdom. Examples of such towns include Chiang Mai and Chiang Saen.

Wiang Nong Lom is a significant junction connecting Chiang Rai to the communities downstream of the Kok River. One can travel north from here to Chiang Saen and Wiang Phang Kham or to the Chiang Saen-Mae Sai basin area that leads towards Keng Tung. Alternatively, the east route along the Mekong River takes you to Chiang Khong. The network of ancient roads and communities along this thoroughfare might have existed even before the Lanna Kingdom and expanded greatly during the Lanna Kingdom era.

Archaeological surveys have revealed that the settlements were selected based on specific Wiang Nong Lom area criteria. Areas with hilly terrain or higher elevation than the flood level were preferred. The surrounding plains had a minimal height difference, averaging around 20-40 meters. These settlements were located close to the river, providing easy access to other areas.

Excavations of archaeological sites in the Wiang Kew Prao and Wiang Chan Chwa areas offer valuable insights into the dating, settlement patterns, and activities of ancient towns in the Wiang Nong Lom region. The findings will also help verify the hypothesis that these settlements existed before the establishment of the Lanna Kingdom.



Location of the Wiang Nong Lom area



The ancient metallurgical furnaces site at Chiang Saen

Archaeological evidence was found in Wiang Kew Prao and Wiang Chan Chwa excavation pits. The findings were dated using the Thermoluminescent method, which revealed that the artefacts were created between the 10th and 12th centuries CE. However, they are not older than the Yonok Nagar or the age mentioned in the Legend of Sinhanavati. This conclusion is supported by the archaeological survey results in the Wiang Nong Lom area and its nearby vicinity.

The archaeological sites and monuments in the region are mainly linked to the Lanna Kingdom. However, some artefacts like polished stone axes, an iron sword similar to those found in China, and a pottery sherd painted with red clay suggest that there may be evidence of human activity in the area that predates the Lanna Kingdom. This evidence could date back to the 10th-12th centuries CE.

It has been observed that although various artefacts such as polished stone axes and stone bracelet fragments have been discovered at Neolithic sites, no other contemporary evidence has been found to link them with technological developments from the prehistoric period through the Lanna Kingdom. Therefore, it remains unclear how these artefacts fit into the broader context of technological advancements during that time.



An archaeological excavation at San Sin Khong Monument



The San Sin Khong Monument

During the Iron Age, also known as the Late Prehistoric period, there was a shift in social organization from clan to state. However, there is a shortage of evidence about the communities that existed during this period. Only a few artefacts that can be linked to the Haripunjaya Kingdom have been discovered, but there is no definitive connection between them. Nevertheless, these findings can be valuable for future research in the historical and archaeological study of the region.

The northern region has several legends that depict battles and interactions between different groups. These legends provide us with a glimpse of the movement and development of the country during the 12th century CE. One such legend is the Epic Poem of Thao Hung Thao Cheuang, which offers valuable insights into the resources and development of communities in the Chiang Rai-Phayao basin. This information was crucial in establishing the Lanna Kingdom by Phraya Mangrai during the early 14th century CE.

It has been determined that the archaeological sites in the Wiang Nong Lom area date back to the 14th to 17th Centuries CE, during the Lanna Kingdom. According to historical records, the location and distribution of ancient monuments and habitat sites align with this timeframe. This suggests that Wiang Nong Lom was either an ancient town without any surrounding moats or a collection of nearby communities that worked together for specific activities. The evidence suggests that these communities belonged to different Banna/Panna groups residing within the administrative area of Wiang Chiang Saen.



The topography of the Wiang Nong Lom area

The Importance of the Wiang Nong Lom Area in the Social, Cultural, and Economic Perspectives at the Provincial Level.

Wiang Nong Lom is a vast, marshy Chiang Saen Basin wetland region with excellent international significance. The area boasts a diverse ecosystem, providing water and fishery resources that serve as a means of subsistence and income for the local communities. Moreover, this wetland is a breeding ground for various economically valuable animal species, particularly cattle and buffalo.



This area is rich in history and legend, evident through various artefacts and archaeological sites. As a result, it has garnered the attention of academics, scholars, and tourists alike. Moreover, it is a popular tourist route from Chiang Rai Province to Chiang Saen District. It is also a popular route for those travelling from the 'R3A' connecting road from China to Laos, which enters the Thai border through Chiang Saen District and Mae Chan District of Chiang Rai Province. Therefore, Wiang Nong Lom has the potential to be developed into a new ecotourism destination in Chiang Rai Province in the future, based on its quality communities.



Integrating Cultural Resource Management, Social and Economic Aspects with the Fine Arts Department.

The Chiang Rai Province began developing Wiang Nong Lom in 2018 to create a significant water source that can be used for consumption and to support agriculture. They presented their plan to the Cabinet in an offsite meeting. In December 2020, Deputy Prime Minister General Prawit Wongsuwan visited Chiang Rai to inspect the project's progress. After his visit, he ordered all government agencies, the Office of National Water Resources, and Chiang Rai Province to work together to develop Wiang Nong Lom. The development plan includes the conservation and restoration of the historical sites in the area. This project aims to increase the area's potential by developing high-quality water sources and allowing one to study natural ecosystems, archaeology, and history. Furthermore, it will create a new ecotourism attraction in Chiang Rai Province.





The Fine Arts Department has presented a project plan as a part of the master plan for the development and restoration of Wiang Nong Lom in Chiang Rai Province. The project aims to preserve and develop the cultural heritage potential of the Wiang Nong Lom area. The primary objective is to transform the Wiang Nong Lom cultural heritage into an essential learning centre and cultural tourist attraction, focusing on ecology and archaeology diversity. The main focus is on promoting sustainable community development and creating a network connecting with other regional tourist attractions. The Wiang Nong Lom development and restoration plan is ongoing, with various sectors collaborating to ensure that it becomes a legendary destination that sustainably maintains its cultural, social, and economic values.





Fine Arts Department

The 7th Regional Office of Fine Arts, Chiang Mai,