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# Not just a monastery: The **Đông Dương** Complex of Vietnam

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**Abstract.** In this article we provide a critical re-examination of the sites associated with the “Đông Dương Buddhist Monastery” of the Champā civilization in Quảng Nam province, Vietnam. We argue this re-examination is needed because contemporary understandings are based on research that is more than 100 years old. While Vietnamese language research has progressed, until now, no English language publication has provided an update on the Đông Dương complex sites, including watchtowers, a citadel, relations with nearby ports, religious sites, a production site, and funerary sites, all associated with the Indrapura polity of Champā.

**Keywords:** *Southeast Asia, Champā, Buddhist Sites, Heritage Sites.*

## 1. Introduction

Contemporary scholarship most often refers to the monumental architecture at Đông Dương as a “Buddhist Monastery” or a “Temple and Monastery Complex” [8, pp. 51 – 78; 10; 25; 26, pp. 45 – 61]. Additionally, scholars often use Đông Dương as a term to refer to an artistic style of Champā art, especially referring to the period of the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century CE [12, 27 p. 14]. While the most notable remains of a Buddhist temple from the pre-colonial Hindu-Buddhist Champā civilization of what is now the coastline of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, it is also so much more than both a temple site and the name of an artistic style. The name Đông Dương is derived from the name of the Vietnamese village where the remains of the main temple and monastery were found at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The site is now in Bình Định Bắc commune, Tăng Bình district, Quảng Nam province. Đông Dương was almost immediately of interest and French Orientalist scholarship. French scholars came to associate this area with the center of the so-called “Indrapura Dynasty” of the Champā civilization, an association that is retained among contemporary historians, epigraphers, archeologists and art historians. Northern sections of Indrapura – those associated with Lín Yì of Chinese records, being what are now Quảng Bình and Quảng Trị provinces – were incorporated into Vietnamese control as early as 1069 CE with the campaign of Lý Thường Kiệt. However, those sections of Indrapura further southward, including the imperial core at Đông Dương shifted control to Amarāvātī [20, pp. 205 – 218; 26, pp. 45 – 61].

Louis Finot completed a study of the epigraphic records of Đông Dương that was published for the first time in 1904 [4]. Shortly after that, architect and art historian, Henri Parmentier completed a massive



study of the Champā monuments of Indochina, published in two volumes, including plates of detailed drawings of the Đông Dương temple, with the first published in 1909 and the second published in 1918 [18, 19]. Then, with the notable exceptions of Stern (1942) and Bosselier (1963) [1, 22], very few studies focused on Champā or even mentioned Đông Dương. The outbreak of the Second World War, the First Indochina War, the Second Indochina War, and the Third Indochina War frustrated research progress for the next half a century. Still, in 1978, three villagers unearthed a new find of a bronze of a female goddess that scholars have interpreted as either Lakṣmīndra-Lokeśvara or Avalokiteśvara in the Đông Dương style from the site, while they were digging for bricks to repurpose for construction [14, pp. 171 – 172]. No follow-up research was immediately conducted at the site. Yet, in 2000 CE, Đông Dương was recognized as part of the “National Heritage of Vietnam,” when it was granted the standing of “Special National Heritage” and there have been recent archeological studies of the site published in Vietnamese [16, pp. 46 – 57; 17, pp. 252 – 274; 23; 24]. However, English language publications – although they have been excellent – tend to be limited to the field of art history, focused entirely on the Buddhist temple and attached monastery at the site [2, 3, 7, 9, 12, 15, 21] with a couple of notable studies on inscriptions [5, 6]. In other words: English language readership does not have access to the latest archaeological studies published in Vietnamese, while scholars in both languages lack an overall assessment of the regional history of the Indrapura Dynasty and Amarāvati. Our simple research question is: *How could we more accurately describe this important site to English language readership?*

In this article, we draw upon the methods of a historian and an archaeologist to bring a fresh assessment of the Đông Dương site to a broader audience. We see Đông Dương as a complex of sites, rather than a single archaeological site. Indeed, based on recent archaeological studies, field surveys, and a historical assessment of the available records, in our view, Đông Dương is not limited to Đông Dương village, Bình Định Bắc commune, Tăng Bình district. We found a large number of sites associated with the Đông Dương temple and monastery were distributed across Bình Định Bắc, Bình Trị, and Quế Châu communes. Furthermore, in addition to Tăng Bình district, these sites spread along the Ngọc Khê and Bà Dăng streams, all along the banks of the Li Li River (alt.: *Sông Ly Ly*). Quế Sơn district, across the banks of the Li Li River, is also a location of interest in relation to this site. Of course, we do not want readers to underestimate the importance of the monastery itself. Indeed, epigraphic records also indicate an emergent local syncretic blend of Hinduism and Buddhism across areas controlled by the Indrapura Dynasty, now Quảng Nam, Quảng Ngãi, Thừa Thiên-Huế, and Quảng Trị provinces (Golzio 2004) [11]. The prevalence of these inscriptions and other archaeological finds, across Quảng Nam especially, suggested that Đông Dương might have been an even more significant site than previously thought.

In our analysis, Đông Dương includes a substantial Buddhist monastery and institute, along with a much larger settlement, protected by a series of embankments, defense walls, and watchtowers, including a royal residence, and citadel. We also found evidence of religious monuments, memorial sites, and a possible stone quarry associated with the construction of the site. All of these sites are relatively unknown to international scholarship, as evidenced by the persistent usage of the term “Đông Dương Monastery” in English language scholarship. In this article, we provide an analysis of these most recent discoveries, before we outline plans for future potential research while paying due attention to the site from the perspective of conservationists. We suggest conservationists would also need to complete significant research informed by our assessment of past conservation projects as well as our assessment of the region of Amarāvati, to avoid potential errors in the reconstruction work of such a site. We make this assessment, keeping in mind past errors that were made at the Hòa Lai and Mỹ Sơn sites in particular, where there has been an utter lack of attention to situating individual sites within a broader context. To begin with, we highlight contemporary discoveries.

## 2. Contemporary Discoveries at Đồng Dương

In Vietnamese, Đồng Dương Monastery is often colloquially referred to as *Tháp Sáng* – meaning “The Shining Tower” or “The Tower of Light.” However, our assertion is that there are many sites beyond *Tháp Sáng* itself, which scholars ought to understand as associated with the imperial core of the Indrapura Dynasty. The area that scholars refer to as the “imperial core” of the Indrapura Dynasty includes the Cham Islands (Cù Lao Chàm), the Great Port of Champā (Cửa Đại Chiêm), Simhapura (Trà Kiệu – Duy Xuyên), the Mỹ Sơn complex, and Indrapura itself (Đồng Dương), although the polity by the same name also controlled many sites much further northward in Quảng Bình, Quảng Trị, and Thừa Thiên-Huế provinces. The area in the imperial core then passed into the hands of the Amarāvati polity by the 11<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> century, before it was recentralized under the control of Vijaya from the 12<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> century. However, five centuries of substantial neglect and incremental devastating warfare left many of the sites associated with Đồng Dương itself completely unknown until a series of local archaeological surveys began in 2013. To date, ours is the only contemporary English language publication of these findings, representing, we hope, a significant contribution to scholarly studies of the Champā civilization and Southeast Asia. Indeed, even in significant Vietnamese language studies, leading scholars such as Lương Ninh (2004) did not cover these details [13], as they simply lacked the evidence to do so. To clarify, we refer to the sites individually as follows: The Watchtowers, The Citadel, The Palace Area, The Expanded Buddhist Complex, and Trà Cai Mountain.

### 2.1. The Watchtowers:

The remains of what we believe are “watchtowers” are located along the Ngọc Khê Stream, formulating a northern boundary of the development. Although we clear evidence of five watchtowers, we suspect there may have been as many as eight, based on their relative placement, although it is admittedly difficult to tell since the position of the stream could easily have shifted across the historical epochs. This said, given the contemporary placement, four are on the southern edge of the stream, while a fifth is along the northern bank. From another perspective, the tower on the northern bank of the Ngọc Khê and three of the towers on the southern bank form a staggered line, while the fifth is placed closer to the settlement, but strangely alone. Hence, the working hypothesis is that there is at least one other tower paired with the tower that stands oddly alone, or, perhaps, up to three other towers on the northern banks of the Ngọc Khê.

During preliminary surveys of the area around the Ngọc Khê Stream, only ruins of the watchtowers were discovered. This explains why these developments have been completely ignored by earlier studies. Nevertheless, their foundations of blocks and rubble are clearly Champā constructions, with decent sized rectangular vestiges of nearly 300m<sup>2</sup>. Oral histories from local elders in their 50s and 60s claim these watchtowers were *less* collapsed in the early and mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. The fact that they appear to have been defensive constructions, however, helps to explain how they escaped the interest of French studies. We found the foundations were simple, square, and the body of the towers were mostly formulated from bricks and quadrilateral stone blocks. At the heart of these watchtowers were brick stairs running around the central wall in a spiral. Their total height was significant, at least 10m. There are also a series of two-sided inscriptions at the center of the towers on tablets (120x70x50 cm). However, the inscriptions appear to be in Vietnamese and, thus, not part of the original constructions [17, pp. 252 – 274].

Furthermore, during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, locals dismantled parts of the watchtowers, pulling building supplies from them, accelerating their collapse. Construction projects in the 1960s, under the Republic of Vietnam, pillaged stones and bricks from the watchtowers for local dam construction, as part of wartime efforts to build irrigation systems and feed populations under incredible stress. Locals from Quế An and surrounding villages in Bình Định Bắc gathered supplies from the watchtowers and dammed the Ngọc Khê Stream. They additionally used materials for the foundation of bridges to cross this and other nearby

streams. Although the hasty wartime constructions were destroyed quickly by flooding, there are still reinforced concrete foundations as physical evidence of their past existence. Sadly, for researchers, the original Champā bricks were washed away. However, the difficulty of finding deeper foundations below the alluvial layers of the soil in this incredibly fertile area has prevented further excavation. Nonetheless, recent archaeological surveys *have* recovered a citadel nearby this location.

### 2.2. Citadel

Following the position of the Watchtowers eastward along the banks of the Ngọc Khê Stream, approximately 1km, toward the Ông Triệu Bridge and the Thành Forest, there is clear evidence of a citadel between the southern bank of the Ngọc Khê Stream and the northern bank of the Bà Đăng Stream. The size of this location is quite similar to the later Châu Sa citadel of Amarāvati, in the nearby province of Quảng Ngãi. Preliminary surveys have suggested that the Đồng Dương Citadel has two layers. The outer layer with lighter architectural styles, which then surrounds the inner layer, with the outer layer running along the nearby streams. The inner layer has thick brick walls. There is also a large cubicle “Square” structure in the innermost part of the inner layer, oriented toward the northeast. Each side is around 110m. There are also traces of bastions or watchtowers in this location, at the four corners of the construction.

What differentiates the Đồng Dương Citadel from the Châu Sa Citadel is that this citadel is built on a relatively high point with respect to the surrounding terrain. By contrast, the Châu Sa Citadel is located on a low-flat plain between an inner and outer urban area and entirely square, with clear evidence of moats. Furthermore, the Đồng Dương Citadel area is embellished with a thick layer of soil, at least 1m higher than the surrounding natural elevation. Along the edges of the brick structure, a substantial collection of Champā tiles was uncovered. We have hypothesized these were once part of a singular structure, which would explain the large vestige of rubble inside the inner settlement area, of which the "Square" seems to be on the edge. Based on an assessment of Champā patterns of construction, it is very likely there was a religious building or shrine attached to this structure. This "Square" is also at the end of the main thoroughfare, which progresses toward the center of Indrapura-Đồng Dương, toward the relative west. From here, there is a clear route of travel downstream from the Ngọc Khê Stream to the Li Li River, and thus to the aforementioned ports along the South China Sea. The way westward also connects to the main palace area, and then onward to the center of the monastery.

### 2.3. The Palace Area

Approximately 1km to the west of the citadel of Đồng Dương there is a Palace area where we have evidence of a wide moat and the potential political center of the Indrapura Dynasty. *What is this palace area?* Indeed, readers may be surprised to find that the “Square Pond” that Henri Parmentier decidedly pitched his tent in actually also features the Headquarters of the People’s Committee of Bình Định Bắc Commune [18, 19]. After all, this is directly above the remnants of the palace of Indrapura! Utilizing the methods of historical archaeology, we determined this area was very likely the core of Indrapura itself. It is located on an artificially elevated portion of the landscape, suggesting it was built up for both ceremonial and defensive purposes. Following the remnants of the square pond here, we found this an area showing evidence of a low hill on an agricultural plain, separated from the rest of the constructions in the area by trenches. Indeed, there is evidence of several trenches in the vicinity, as well as a rectangular pond (180m x 100m).

Construction of soil reinforcements and walls could have pulled earth easily from the surrounding area and piled it into a square and flat structural accumulation, running along the pond and thus reinforcing it. The inner edge of the soil reinforcement is 30m from the end of the pond, with the widest ramparts approximately 50m away, additionally exhibiting the light architectural vestiges reminiscent of the citadel’s construction. Here, the artificial hill is carefully designed in a somewhat convex, rectangular structure

(340m x 260m), facing to the northwest, and surrounding by an artificial defense mound. To answer the question of potential sources of agricultural production, we have hypothesized that the peoples of Indrapura could have built a dam or dams on or nearby the location of the nearby Bà Đăng Stream, thus bringing freshwater flowing into the southeastern corner of the urban area, water that could have additionally been useful for the process of trench construction. In the internal area of the square pond, there is an ideal area for growing lotus plants. Indeed, there are even lotus flowers that bloom every season in the pond today. Hence, we are reminded of the Jaya Simhavarman I [898 – 903 CE] inscription “...The splendid royal Indrapura city...beautified by white lotus, and ornamented with excellent lotus flowers, made by Bhṛgu in ancient times...” (C. 67; Corrected for fluency from [5, p. 87]. Unfortunately, parts of this stele have already broken off and been scattered elsewhere [17, pp. 252 – 274]. We say 'unfortunately' because the original four-sided stele likely provided and even a more rich account of the Hindu-Buddhist culture of Đông Dương.

#### 2.4. *The Expanded Buddhist Area*

From the west gate of the palace area, there is an artifice with ramparts across the field, next to the eastern gate of the Buddhist Monastery. The approximately 750m long road between the two is an average of 10m wide and 1m higher than the surrounding area. The details of the Đông Dương Monastery were drafted by Henri Parmentier after the 1902 excavation and the form the basis of every scholarly study since, even though they were completed more than a century ago. Hypothetically, the site was less damaged at the time, although the drawings were completed by hand, and the workload was enormous. However, since Parmentier (1918) only focused on the area directly around the Buddhist Monastery itself, we can rightly assert it is time to revisit the site with the advantages of digital mapping technologies, especially as much of the material enumerated above and below was left out of his studies. Our combined analysis of contemporary surveys and Parmentier's works confirms the Buddhist Monastery is of substantial size, encapsulated within a rectangular urban structure, with a long edge running east to west (326m x 155m), normally referred to as the outer wall [18, 19]. Traces in the foundation of the structure suggest this wall was high and thick, with settlement existing both inside and outside it. The Buddhist Monastery itself has three east-west coaxial architectural clusters or enclosures, and three artificial ponds, two in the northeastern corner, and one in the southeastern corner, although one of these ponds were filled in at a later date for agricultural purposes.

At present, the main portion of the citadel has two discernable gates: east and west, with faint vestiges. According to Mr. Trà Dú, a local historian, the east gate was more substantial in size and had a tower shape. There were statues on both sides of the door, likely *dvārapāla* protectors of the gate. The western gate is connected to the rear of the Buddhist Monastery. The clear view from the west gate to the back of the hill indicates there were architectural extensions. The structure is organized in a concentric fashion, with an inner urban and another urban area, with the innermost area surrounding by the central temple, including the main remaining tower. *Did this tower also serve as physical support for other structures?* While we cannot answer this question at present, inside the inner compound, researchers found a “Well Tower” in the southwestern corner. The area was initially a well that has since been filled in. The well also connected, we think, to the large square pond. As local legends reveal: if one were to throw a pomelo into the well, the next day, there would be a pomelo in the pond. Hence, there should be the remnants of an underground waterway between the Royal Palace and the Buddhist Monastery. There have been past hypotheses that this passageway was for the sake of security. However, we suspect, as have others, that this was an irrigation system. In fact, there is a similar well at Trà Kiệu, an archaeological site not too far away from a similar historical epoch.

### 2.5. The Trà Cai Mountain

There are large monolithic stone sculptures of non-human divine figures from the Đổng Dương Buddhist Monastery and the Đổng Dương Showroom at the Museum of Cham Sculpture – Đà Nẵng. There are also solid stelae, engraved with Champā script in both the Cham and Sanskrit languages. *From where did the artisans collect this stone? What was their production process?* There have been several theories attempting to answer similar questions at similar Champā sites, although no production sites have been found. Nonetheless, through extensive surveys of Indrapura's Citadel and the surrounding area, we have concluded the ancient stone processing area was nearby Trà Cai Mountain, Bình Trị commune, near the boundary of Bình Định Bắc commune. The mountain range takes a strange series of turns nearby Highway 14E, with the highest mountain located to the southwest of the Buddhist Monastery, about 1KM from the monastery. The mountain peak forms a natural cave that was a guerrilla shelter during the Second Indochina War according to local oral histories. Standing on the highest peak, one can see the South China Sea to the east quite clearly. Atop this mountain peak and along the mountainside, there are numerous pre-formed rock casts, which could be extracted without much effort. The stone in this location is extremely similar to Đổng Dương statues, rough sandstone; light greyish-white in color. Similar stones are not available elsewhere in the vicinity of Indrapura. Furthermore, it is possible to find large stones in this area with unfinished saw marks, indicating the probability of a stone splitting technique that made it possible to harvest medium-large stones, without crumbling the flesh of the valuable material. On the largest stones in the area, there are unusual lines that have been carved. There are two possible hypotheses for these lines. First, they could be an esoteric diagram. Second, they could be unfinished writing.

### 3. Conclusion

We have delineated several newly discovered archaeological finds that greatly expand our understanding of the Đổng Dương site above. We should note that parts of these finds were motivated by a proclamation published in *Tuổi Trẻ* newspaper on 17 August 2011.<sup>1</sup> Leading scholars in Vietnam announced a Workshop on the Conservation of Champā Monuments of Đổng Dương Buddhist Monastery. The concern from the indigenous Cham community was simple: *Were they planning to build new Cham-esque temples in the heart of the Buddhist Monastery like the E7 Temple that the Institute for Conservation of Monuments (ICM) had been working on at Mỹ Sơn?* Based on our existing studies, the project of the restoration of temple tower complex at Group G at Mỹ Sơn has been riddled with mistakes, almost entirely destroying an ancient structure, replacing it with a much less artful contemporary replica. Local Cham descendants of the Champā civilization even call this an “ICM Temple” rather than a “Champā Temple-Tower”. It was difficult to understand, since these works revered the scholar of the Mỹ Sơn site, Kazimierz Kwiatkowski, but ignored the principles of restoration that he had established for the Mỹ Sơn World Heritage Site. Hence, we sought to consider what an ideal path of action would be.

In short sum, our most solid assertion is the need for further studies on this site, to expand our scholarly knowledge of these monuments. Đổng Dương is not simply a “Buddhist Monastery” magnificent though that monastery may be. Indeed, it is a much more substantial center of Indrapura. To begin with, we need a process of utilizing stereo imaging, Lidar, or other such mapping technologies, to examine the site and establish where further excavations need to take place. Second, we need to establish a method of documenting monuments in a massive systematic fashion. We need to consider such possibilities for the field of historical archaeology as well. Moving forward, there may be local farmhouses and families relying on the larger land complex, which would have to be communicated with to ensure they are accepting of the plan of conservation work. Finally, we would be able to develop a

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<sup>1</sup> On 17 August 2011, People's Committee of Quảng Nam province held a Scientific Workshop to conserve and promote the value of Đổng Dương Buddhist monuments. Quảng Nam newspaper reported.

better mapping of the region, including of the corridors of the area, creating a non-residential buffer zone (Sổ Đỏ) with local authorities, to ensure that the system of Indrapura is protected. We would then also have to mobilize local media in Vietnam to raise the sense of public responsibility to the preservation of this site so that the monuments are not intentionally or unintentionally violated. We have been particularly concerned about locals attempting to dig for treasures at this site, as rumors spread about the value of classical statues during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and pervade through the present. A higher aim for the Đồng Dương – Indrapura site would be to elevate its recognition within the global community. One site is already recognized as a World Heritage site: Mỹ Sơn. However, we are confident that with the proper investment of UNESCO partnered to research, this would elevate the recognition of Đồng Dương to a similar status. We are confident that if, and only if, *all* of the above suggestions are taken into account, that the Đồng Dương architectural site would be safely protected.

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