

The Champa Buddhist Votive Tablets at Ch6i Mountain in Quang Ngai, Vietnam

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the Champa medieval Buddhist votive tablets recently found on Chòi mountain, Quảng Ngãi province, in central Vietnam. Through this discovery, more information has been added to our knowledge of Buddhism in medieval Champa and Southeast Asia. Examining these votive tablets, the paper suggests that Buddhism might not always have been the religion of only the elite who worshipped the Buddha at the Đồng Dương monastery. It is possible that local populations also practiced this religion in their own way, such as by using votive tablets for protection or as an amulet. Buddhist votive tablets are usually small in dimension and easy to carry in pockets or attach to necklaces and chains. Most of the Chòi Buddhist votive tablets bear the image of the Buddha in the middle with two bodhisattvas on either side. In this paper, we argue that the votive tablets indicate that the popular type of Buddhism in this region in the ninth and tenth centuries was Mahāyāna. Moreover, similar types of votive tablets have been found in Thailand, Myanmar, and Indonesia, suggesting that the interregional connections among these places might have influenced the practice of Mahāyāna in the early medieval period of Southeast Asia.

Keyword

Chòi mountain, Champa, Buddhist votive tablets.

ベトナム・クアンガイ省チョーイ山から出土した チャンパの仏教奉献板？

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要旨

この論文はベトナム中部・クアンガイ省のチョーイ山から出土したチャンパの仏教奉献板につ

いて論じるものである。この近年の発見によって、中世のチャンパと東南アジアにおける仏教に関して新たな知見が加わった。これらの奉獻板について吟味するならば、仏教がドンズオン寺院を崇拝したエリートたちだけの宗教ではなかったであろうことが示唆される。おそらくは地元住民たちも、奉獻板を護符や魔除けとして使うなどして、彼らなりの方法で仏教を信仰したことであろう。奉獻板は小さいためポケットに入れたりネックレスにつけたりして持ち運ぶことができる。チョーイ山出土奉獻板のほとんどは仏陀を中心として、その両脇に2体の菩薩を配したイメージを描いている。この論文において、奉獻板が示すように、この地域に9世紀から10世紀にかけて広がっていた仏教が大乗仏教であったことを論じる。さらに、類似するタイプの奉獻板がタイ、ミャンマー、インドネシアからも発見されていることに注目し、これら地域間の交流が中世初期の東南アジアにおける大乗仏教の展開に影響を及ぼした可能性について論じる。

キーワード

チョーイ山, チャンパ, 奉獻板

Ancient Champa kingdom (192–1832) was located on the central coast of Vietnam, separated from the rest of the continent by mountainous highlands in the West but connected with the other regional kingdoms by various sea routes traversing the South China Sea. At its height during the medieval period, the Champa territory covered roughly the area stretching from modern Đồng Hới (Quảng Bình province) in the north to Phan Thiết (Bình Thuận province) in the south (Fig 1). The extant Champa inscriptions, architectural monuments, and sculptures reveal that Brahmanism flourished in Champa, especially among royal families and elite classes.¹ The extant inscriptions and sculptures suggest Buddhism was also practiced in Champa. In the late 19th to early 20th centuries, French scholars such as Etienne Aymonier (1844–1929), Louis Finot (1864–1935), Henri Parmentier (1871–1949) and Charles Carpeaux (1870–1904) excavated and published on one of the most prominent Buddhist centers in Champa, at Đồng Dương (Quảng Nam).

This Đồng Dương sanctuary was the only Buddhist architectural monument remaining

on the soil of modern Vietnam. Indeed, the presence of Đồng Dương with its Buddhist inscriptions, together with the collection of Champa Buddhist sculptures currently on display at a handful of museums (Museum of Cham Sculpture in Danang, National Museum of Vietnamese History in Hanoi, Museum of Vietnamese History in Ho Chi Minh city), show that Buddhism was part of Cham religious world. In particular, this evidence points to the belief and practice of Buddhism among Champa royal families and elite classes mainly between the 9th and 10th centuries. Only the elite classes could afford the patronage to construct such a large-scale Buddhist sanctuary as Đồng Dương. Moreover, recent discoveries of terracotta Buddhist votive tablets found in central provinces of Vietnam strongly suggest that Buddhism was practiced not only among the Cham aristocracy in Đồng Dương but might also have been practiced in other regions among the lower classes.

In this paper, we focus specifically on the Buddhist votive tablets that were recently discovered through archeological excavations at Chối mountain in Quảng Ngãi province.

The fact that a large number of them were found in a kiln suggests their local production and leads to the conclusion that local people of this region might have practiced Buddhism. According to one of the main tenets promoted by Mahayanists, devotees may earn merit by producing a large number of tablets. As well, they might have also used these Buddhist votive tablets as amulets for protection from any negative influences. This is the first point stressed in this paper.

A second point is that the Buddhist votive tablets found at Chôi mountain reflect the kind of Buddhism that the locals adopted and practiced, and that was Mahāyāna with its strong emphasis on the concept of the bodhisattva. Aside from the Buddha as the main deity depicted in the center of the votive tablet, bodhisattvas were also prominently portrayed on each side of the Buddha. This reminds us of the chapter written by John Guy (2014) on Buddhism and Buddhist art in Champa where he states that in this climate of pan-Asian Mahāyāna expansion, the cult of the bodhisattva assumed a special position. In the second part of the paper, we put the Cham Buddhist votive tablets or what we call “motif Chôi mountain” in conversation with the same type of artistic motifs found in other parts of Southeast Asia, such as in modern Thailand, Myanmar, and Indonesia which suggests interregional connections in the medieval history of Mahāyāna practice. Indeed, with the favorable geographical position along the coastline, Champa became a transit point, a significant “entrepôt” for the maritime merchants between India and China and thus the emergence and popularity of these Chôi Buddhist votive tablets seem to be connected to Champa’s important geographical role in the Maritime Silk Road.

1. The collection of Champa Buddhist Votive Tablets at Chôi mountain

Chôi is a low mountain, emerging in the deltaic downstream area of the Trà Khúc river, in Kim Lộc village, Tịnh Châu commune, Sơn Tịnh district, Quảng Ngãi province. This mountain is located not far from Châu Sa citadel, an ancient city of Champa. (Fig. 1) Buddhist votive tablets were discovered at Chôi for the first time in 1993, after which the place was excavated in 1998 by Vietnamese archaeologists. Chôi Buddhist votive tablets have been interested by not only Vietnamese but also foreign researchers such as Skilling (2003, 2008), Guy (2011). However, they did not have any detailed archaeological information of the excavation in 1998. This year, when we conducted the research, we found out one article published in 2005 in local provincial journal which have rather detailed data of the past excavation (Đoàn Ngọc Khôi 2005: 3–7). Therefore, we can provide for the first time to other scholars who are interested in votive tablets of Chôi mountain.

According to the report, the excavated pit has an area of 9.2 m², located on a flat area of land on the top of the mountain. The excavation results revealed a kiln of an almost oval shape of 2.32m in length. The mouth of the kiln was constructed with 2 large pieces of stone facing east, while the auxiliary doors faced north and south. The kiln wall is lined with blue-gray stones. Due to the burning at high temperatures, many stones were melted and covered with a layer of white-gray stone powder. Many terracotta pieces were found inside the kiln. Due to the high fire resistance, those that were placed near the mouth of the kiln were hard and some of them eventually broke down, but those placed deep inside the kiln were not hard

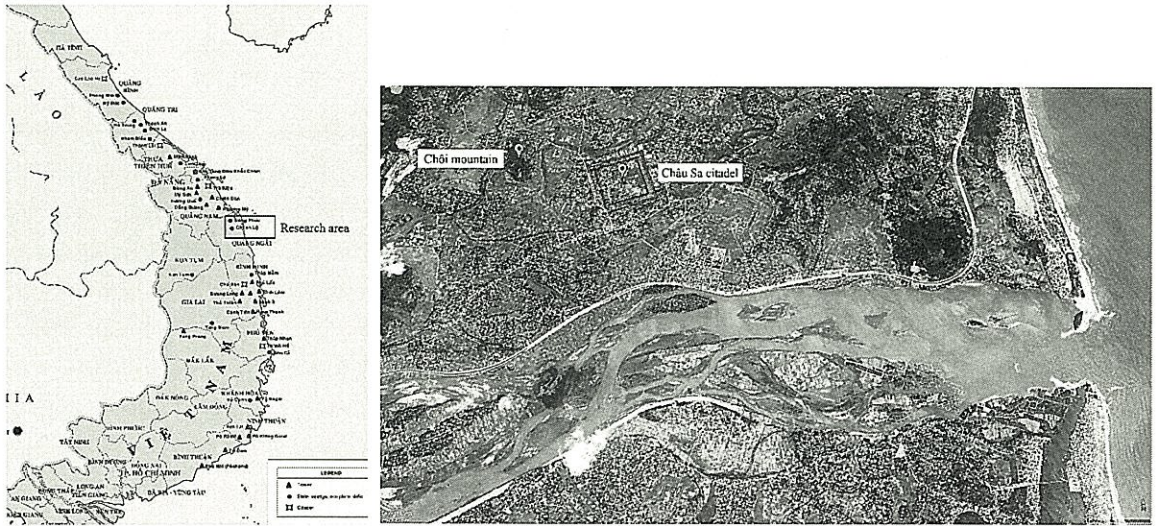


Fig. 1 : The location of Chôi mountain and Châu Sa citadel.

enough due to lower temperature (Đoàn Ngọc Khôi 2005: 4–5).

They collected 717 pieces of artifacts, including 35 intact votive tablets (Lê Đình Phụng 2003: 34). Although many artifacts are worn out, it is still recognizable that they have the same motif and size (6.5x4x1cm), which thus suggests that they were made from the same mold.

The shape of Chôi votive tablets are in the form of lotus petals in which Buddhist deities are depicted within a frame. In the center of the tablet is the Buddha with a halo behind his head. He sits on a throne, in the posture of *pralamba-pādāsana*, a popular posture in Western India, particularly from Ajanta and Kanheri caves. His legs are hanging and placed on a two-story lotus pedestal. The Buddha is wearing *uttarāsāṅga* (a robe) showing the right shoulder, and his right hand is raised high as if he is performing a *vitarka* mudrā (gesture of discussion and teaching) or *abhaya* mudrā (gesture of reassurance) while the left hand is resting on his thigh. On either side of the Buddha are two bodhisattvas standing in a

tribhanga position (three bends in the body) on a lotus pedestal. Both bodhisattvas have the hairstyle of *jaṭāmukha* (crown of matted hair) and halos in back of their heads. Each of their hands holds a lotus stem and a small water-flask. The upper part of the votive tablet depicted three Buddhas in *dhyana mudrā* or meditation with a halo behind their heads. In India, it was often that *Avalokiteśvara* and *Maitreya* were depicted as attendants of the Buddha in early Buddhist art (Fig. 2). Advocates of the bodhisattva notion associated this with the rise of Mahāyāna as was also emphasized in many Mahāyāna sutras.

Krairiksh Piriya (1980: 33) and Jacq-Hergoulch Michel (2002: 157) explain that these votive tablets depict the Buddha preaching the Law before an assembly consisting of buddhas and bodhisattvas, or it could illustrate the scene of the Great Miracle of Śrāvastī. Hiram Woodward (2009: 63–65) however, argues that they depict the scene of the Buddha visits the Kingdom of the Nāgas under the Rājāyatana tree, and this legend is mentioned in the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka-*

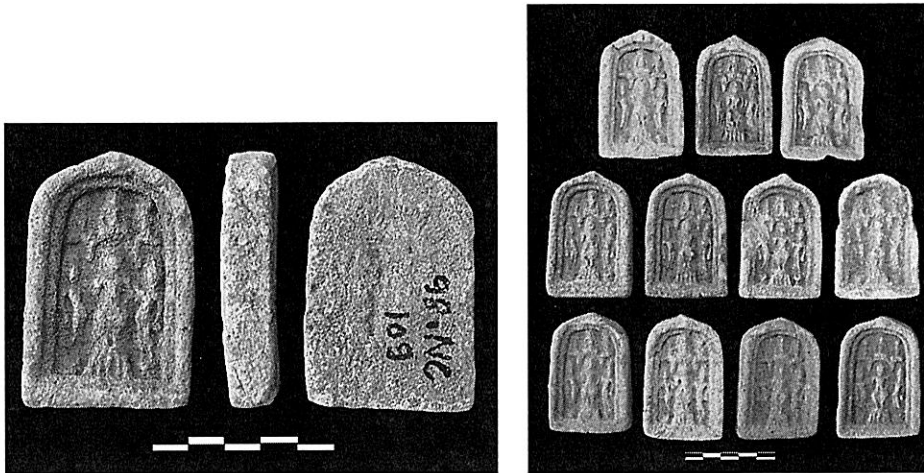


Fig. 2: Champa Buddhist Votive Tablets found at Chòi mountain.

sūtra (Lotus Sūtra), one of the most important sūtras of Mahāyāna. Thus, the depiction of these bodhisattvas suggest a strong Mahāyāna influence of these Chòi votive tablets.

The archeologists who excavated the site at Chòi mountain did not find any mold. However, they found many clay plates in various kilns, plates are about the same size as the Buddhist votive tablets showed in Fig. 2, suggesting that these votive tablets were a local product and not imported from elsewhere. As a matter of fact, Vietnamese archeologists just excavated a small area in Chòi mountain and they already discovered 717 artifacts (Lê Đình Phụng 2003: 34). This suggests that Chòi mountain could had been the home of large local production of Buddhist votive tablets. This leads to the idea that Buddhism prevailed in this area and it could have played an important role among the local populations. If the evidences from Đồng Dương showed us how the Champa royal families and elites worshipped Buddhist deities at Chòi mountain, the artifacts showed us another way of practice Buddhism, that is through the votive tablets.

We do not know how exactly the local

Champa at Chòi mountain used these terracotta votive tablets. However, we know that terracotta votive tablets were typical of early Indian Buddhism. There were different types of motifs and depictions on votive tablets but in general, they were all related to the four most sacred sites of Buddhists that is Lumbini (birthplace of the Buddha), Bodh Gaya (where the Buddha achieved enlightenment), Sarnath (where the Buddha gave his first teaching), and Kuśinagara (where the Buddha attained parinirvana). Many of the most popular Buddhist votive tablets depict the Buddha as seated in a stupa, conveying the idea of relic veneration. Some others depicted the Buddha with the bodhi tree behind him or with branches of leaves, symbolizing the moment when the Buddha achieved enlightenment, while the Buddha with a pair of deer representing his first sermon. The creation of Chòi votive tablets could derived from pure Mahāyāna motivation such as producing the image of bodhisattva for gaining merits as advocated in several fundamental Mahāyāna Sūtra such as the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka Sūtra* (The Lotus Sūtra), and the *Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā*



Fig. 3: Buddhist votive tablet from Shaanxi Province. (Leidy, Strahan 2010: 91)

Sūtra (The Diamond Sūtra). In China, Buddhist votive tablets were also found, for example, in Shaanxi Province, a 7th century tablet with inscription on the back read “大唐善業 泥壓得真如妙色身” (Fig. 3), meaning “a pressed clay work [...] made during the great Tang [dynasty] as an act of merit and in order to obtain absolute reality and a reward body (Leidy, Strahan 2010: 91)”². Thus, the worship of this sacred votive tablet seems to relate to the worship of stupas, in which relics of the Buddha and well-known monks were believed to be placed.

A votive tablet with the Buddha image could also become a talisman or an amulet. In Thailand today, it is common to have Buddhist votive tablets carried on one's body as an amulet for protection and good fortune. Such a votive tablet is small in dimension and light in weight and therefore, it is easy for people to attach it to necklaces and chains to wear around the neck or carry on themselves. For Buddhists, these votive tablets are sacralized objects that contain certain supernormal power and having them on their bodies brings luck and the feeling of safety (Soontravanich 2013: 179–215). It is very possible that the Champa at Chòi mountain manufactured hundreds of these votive tablets for the same reason, that

each individual could have one on themselves for protection. However, in order to make the newly made votive tablets into amulets or sacred objects, they need to go through a consecration rite (Buddhābhiseka) by famous monks or holy men so that the Buddha can be “immanent presence” in the tablets. These monks would touch the votive tablets with their hands and utter a few sacred words or a mantra as a kind of ritual to sacralize the votive tablets (Stratton 2004). This brings us to the question of whether there was any Buddhist sangha around Chòi mountain.

2. The votive tablets and Champa Buddhism in history

About 70 km north of Chòi mountain is the Đồng Dương sanctuary, the largest Buddhist center of Champa that was discovered and unearthed by French scholars, including Henri Parmentier, Charles Carpeaux, and Louis Finot in 1902 and 1904.³ According to the C. 66 Đồng Dương Stele Inscription of Indravarman II, dated 875 CE, “for the sake of Dharma, and not for revenue, a monastery has been founded for the community of monks. I have placed all necessities in the monastery for the enjoyment of the community of monks as well as other creatures. This monastery has been founded for the perpetual enjoyment of the community of monks, and not for the enjoyment of the king, nor as a permanent source of revenue” (Glozio 2004: 72).⁴ Thus, the community of monks at Đồng Dương could be the people who sacralized the votive tablets. Or at least, they could have had some connections with the people who produced those votive tablets. There must be some networks among the Buddhists since Đồng Dương and Chòi mountain are not far

from one another. In addition, Chôi mountain is quite close to Châu Sa citadel of Indrapura, the main center of Champa from about 875 CE to 1000 CE. Under the Indrapura dynasty, Buddhism was promoted and the discovery of Buddhist votive tablets on Chôi mountain show the extent to which Buddhism had spread under this dynasty. As a matter of fact, out of 130 Champa inscriptions discussed and translated in detail by Majumdar (1927) and Golzio (2004), there are 14 inscriptions mentioning the Buddha, Buddhist deities, or Buddhist doctrines explicitly, pointing to the idea that Buddhism was not only the religion of the royal family and elites at Đông Dương (Table 1).

There have been debates about the status of the people who made Buddhist votive tablets. Wales (1976: 196) suggests that it could have been the poor who wanted to produce them for the practice of accumulating merit and small terracotta votive tablets do not cost much compared to bronze or wood images. For Skilling (2008: 250), he maintains that terracotta votive tablets are not a product of the poor but rather of kings and mandarins because many of the Pagan Buddhist votive tablets contain inscriptions saying that they were crafted by the king's "own hands" for the sake of liberation. In Champa we do not know who were the authors behind these votive tablets.

Table 1: The Champa inscriptions mentioning elements of Buddhism

	No.	Name	Buddhist elements	Date	Donor	Province
1	C. 23	Bakul	Jina	829	Samanta, Sthavira Buddhanirvāṇa	Ninh Thuận
2	C. 66	Đông Dương	Lakṣmīdra-Lokeśvara, Lokeśa, Avalokiteśvara, Dharma, Nirvāṇa	875	Indravarman II	Quảng Nam
3	C.138	An Thái	Pramuditalokeśvara, Avalokiteśva, Lokeśvara, Lokanātha	902	Bhadravarman II Indravarman II	Quảng Nam
4	C.149	Nham Biều	Vrdhalokeśvara, Avalokiteśvara	911	Po Klun Pilih Rajadvara, Sukrti Po Klun Dharmapatha	Quảng Trị
5	C. 167	Kon Klor	Mahindralokeśvara	916/917	Mahindravarman	Kom Tum
6	C. 38 E	Po Nagar	Buddhist philosophy	918		Khánh Hòa
7	C. 171	Đại Hữu	Ratnalokeśvara	891-903	Jaya Simhavarman I	Quảng Bình
8	C. 89	Mỹ Sơn	Indralokeśvara, Paramabodhisatva	1088		Quảng Nam
9	C. 100	Mỹ Sơn	Buddha	1157	Jaya Harivarman I	Quảng Nam
10	C. 92	Mỹ Sơn	Buddha Lokeśvara, Jaya Indralokeśvara, Buddhaloka Buddhist Mahāyāna philosophy	1170	Jaya Indravarman	Quảng Nam
11	C. 55	Kim Ngọc	Buddha	1275/76	King of Ksatriya family	Bình Định
12	C. 134	Khánh Thọ Đông	Ye dharma			Quảng Nam
13	C. 150	Ròn	Avalokiteśvara		A king (name was lost)	Quảng Bình
14	C. 52	Kim Châu	Lingalokeśvara, Jinalokeśvara		Jaya Parameśvaravarman II	Bình Định

However, with their small size, they were easy to carry around. In fact, Chòi mountain was not the only place that votive tablets were discovered.

In Central Vietnam, Buddhist votive tablets have been found in various provinces for instance, Quảng Bình, Quảng Nam, Quảng Ngãi and Phú Yên provinces. French colonial Louis Finot (1901: 23–26) was one of the first scholars to mention terracotta Buddhist votive tablets found in Bia Ký cave of Phong Nha grotto in Quảng Bình province. He studied 35 objects and classified them into five types; unfortunately, all of them are now lost and we can only learn about them through his notes⁵. Moreover, Trà Kiệu, the capital city of Simhapura, and Hồ Sơn temple (Phú Yên)

were also home of some Buddhist votive tablets (Fig. 4); however, different from votive tablets from Chòi mountain, these tablets focus only on the Buddha in meditation posture, without two bodhisattvas standing on each side. Even though these votive tablets are different in motifs compared to the ones from Chòi mountain, finding them in various regions of Champa shows the popularity of Buddhism in this kingdom and emphasizes that Đồng Dương was not the only Buddhist sanctuary. Interestingly, Buddhist votive tablets with similar motifs and representations to those seen at Chòi mountain were found in other parts of Southeast Asia (Fig. 5).

3. The relationship of Champa and Southeast Asia through votive tables research

Different types from simple to complex Buddhist votive tablets have been found throughout Southeast Asia, most often near *stupas* in the plains and in caves. From the early 20th century, archeologists have discovered many votive tablets in caves in Thailand, such as Tham Khao Pra Song (Tha Chana), Tham Khao Krom (Chaiya), Khao Chom Thong (Nakhon Si Thammarat), Wat Rang, Tham Phra Chaison, Tham Khao Ok Talu, Wat Khuha Sawan, Tham Malai (Phatthalung). Thai Buddhist votive tablets were also found in temples Wat Doem Chao, Wat Lhong (Chaiya, Surat Thani), Ban Hua Khao/Khao Si Vichai, Ban Bôn Khuan (Phunphin), Wat Chom Thong (Sichon), Wat Khuha Sawan (Phatthalung), Khao Nui, Wat Thaw Khot (Nakhon Si Thammarat), Phra Prathon Chedi (Nakhon Pathom) (Michel 2002, Wales 1976, Revire 2015). In Myanmar, some 2,000 artifacts including 1,350 Buddhist votive tablets were

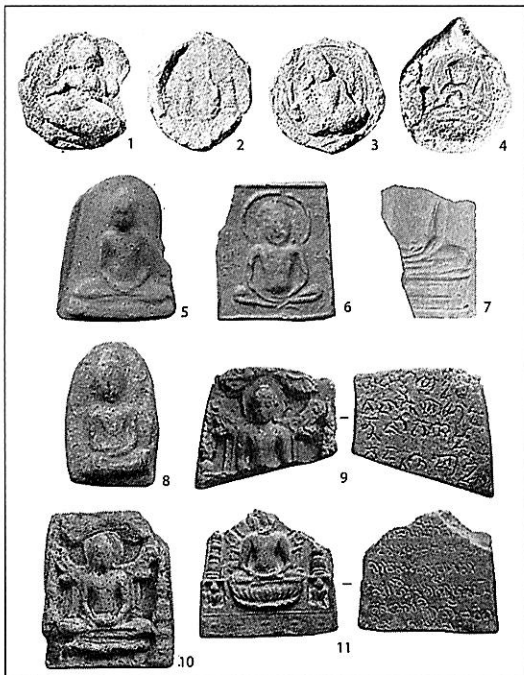


Fig 4: Champa Buddhist votive tablets

1-4: Phong Nha grotto, Quảng Bình province
(Finot 1901: 23-26)

5-8: Trà Kiệu, Quảng Nam
(Trần Kỳ Phương 1993: 301-303)

9-11: Hồ Sơn temple, Phú Yên
(Authors and Trần Kỳ Phương)

found at Catubhummika Hngak Twin in Thaton, Winda, and Sri Ksetra (Mu 2018). In Indonesia, Buddhist votive tablets were discovered in Uma Anyar (Bali), Batujaya (East Java) (Guy 2014). The discovery of Buddhist votive tablets in many regions suggests that they were popular in use, and that they are important in the practice of Buddhism. By surveying different styles of Buddhist votives tablets around Champa, we found that similar to Chòi motifs of votive tablets of the Buddha seated in the so-called “European fashion” in the middle with a bodhisattva on each side, were also present in Winda, Sri Ksetra of Myanmar; Wat Thaw Khot, Khao Nui, and Wat Khuha Sawan of Thailand and Batujaya and Uma Anyar of Indonesia. For a map of the locations of these Buddhist votives tablets, see Fig. 5. The fact that these similar votive tablets existed in different regions contributes to our understanding of the

link between them and the dissemination of Buddhist practices and art in Southeast Asia.

Examining Buddhist votive tablets in Southeast Asia, Skilling suggests that the type of votive tablets with the seated Buddha in the middle and a standing bodhisattva on each side is the “regional type” in Southeast Asia (Skilling 2011: 378). Images of a seated Buddha in this position found abundant in Ajanta, Ellora, Kanheri and other Western Deccan caves in India; however, most of time the Buddha is in *Dharmachakra* mudrā (Turning the Wheel of the Dharma) (Revire 2011: 38–42). The votive tablets from Chòi and elsewhere in Southeast Asia, as shown in Fig. 5 with the right hand of the Buddha raised in *vitarka* mudrā (gesture of teaching) or *abhaya* mudrā (gesture of reassurance) while the left-hand rests on his thigh, is especially typical of these maritime regions. This could be a trans-regional style in which medieval maritime trade routes had facilitated the adoption and influence of Buddhist motifs among these regions. Following the maritime trade routes, Indian culture and

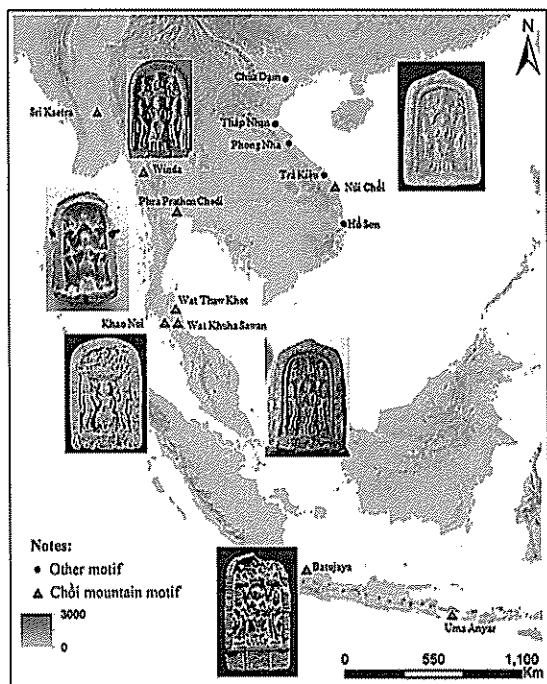


Fig. 5: Geographical locations of similar votive tablets to Chòi found in Southeast Asia



Fig. 6: The power of Srivijaya (Michel 2007:128)

religions reached Southeast Asia as early as the 4th century.⁶ Chinese Buddhist pilgrims such as Fa-Hsien (337?–422?) and Yijing (635–695), travelled between China and India with maritime merchant boats, and have left us some accounts of early Buddhist practices in the coastal polities, showing how they were interconnected and influenced one another's religious practices and art.⁷ K. R. Hall (2011: 39, 73) suggests that the coastal polities could be trading entrepôts developed along the trade routes as a response to the demand from international traders. Southeast Asian coastal centers facilitated this trade by providing suitable stopping places for sailors and traders. Stopping over at these centers for whatever reason and to wait for the right time for the monsoons to push the ship out again, traders and Buddhist pilgrims had enough time to show their votive tablets to the local and even to make one at the site.⁸ While small in dimensions, votive tablets were the most convenient object for maritime voyagers to carry for protection and luck, which all of them needed.⁹ This could also explain why Mahāyāna bodhisattvas were portrayed on these votive tablets as the saviors and protectors for everyone. Thus, the presence of similar motifs on votive tablets in these maritime regions indicate a link in religious practices among these polities.

Mahāyāna spread to Champa perhaps not only through one channel of monks and Buddhist traders who travelled between China and India on the southern maritime silk route.¹⁰ From the 8th to the 9th centuries, Srivijaya kingdom in Sumatra (Fig. 6) and Sailendra kingdom in Central Java came to power and strongly promoted Buddhism (Coedes 1968). These kingdoms also contributed to the spreading and circulation of Mahāyāna to Champa and other

Southeast Asian states. Similar characteristics of votive tablets found in coastal polities in what are now Thailand, Myanmar, and Indonesia testify to the mutual understanding of certain philosophical and artistic forms of Buddhism.

For the date of these votive tablets, Peter Skilling suggests that those found in Southeast Asia can be dated from as early as the 7th–8th century until the 14th–18th centuries (Skilling 2008: 248). The early Tang period (618–907) corresponded to the beginning date of the usage of these Buddhist votive tablets in China (and, consequently, in Japan). Hence, what is the date for the type that was discovered in Chôi?

Buddhism put its imprint on the history of Champa only from the end of the 9th century to the 10th century. We propose that the dating of Chôi votive tablets is connected to the Indrapura dynasty (875–982) which gave Buddhism great support in terms of consecrating a number of large Buddhist temples such as Đồng Dương, An Thái (Quảng Nam), and Đại Hữu, Mỹ Đức (Quảng Bình). In fact, the distance from Chôi to the largest Buddhist center of Champa–Đồng Dương—is only 70 km. Moreover, all of the Cham inscriptions that mention elements of Buddhism are dated from 9th to 10th centuries, therefore we suggest that Chôi votive tablets can also be dated around this period. In addition, those votive tablets that were found in Sri Ksetra (Myanmar) and share similar characteristics with Chôi are also dated to the 9th to the 10th centuries, according to Khin Mu (2018: 6) which further supports our thesis about the dating of the Chôi artifacts. One important note to make here is that Chôi mountain is adjacent to Châu Sa citadel, an ancient city of Champa which is located close to the large Trà Khúc river and the ocean. This river and the ocean facilitate

the development and the exchange between this region and the neighbors through international maritime trade routes. This explains the reason why the motif of Chồi votive tablets is similar to some of those found in Thailand, Myanmar, and Indonesia and not to those found in other regions of Vietnam. The wide distribution in Southeast Asia of similar types of votive tablets as found at Chồi points to an interlinkage between these medieval coastal polities where Mahāyāna was favoured in practice.¹¹

4. Conclusion

Buddhist votive tablets discovered at Chồi mountain are a valuable source for the understanding of artistic development and practices of Buddhism in central Champa from the 9th to the 10th centuries. This is a period when Buddhism hold a strong position, especially under the Indrapura dynasty with the establishment of Đồng Dương sanctuary. The large number of Buddhist votive tablets found at Chồi lead to the idea that perhaps Buddhism could have been practiced at the lower levels of this large population and was not just the religion of the royal family and the elites.

Since the very core of this religion is for everyone to follow and achieve nirvāṇa, especially with the help of a bodhisattva, Buddhism thus can attract a wide range of people, more than Brahmanism, for instance. With the evidence of votive tablets and kilns found at Chồi mountain, this advocates for the importance of this site for understanding the history of Buddhism in central Champa.

Actually, evidence of Buddhism in Champa is scattered, with Đồng Dương being the only remaining temple, a few sculptures in a handful of museums, and some 14 inscriptions,

do not provide a full image of how and to what extent this religion was embedded in the soil of Champa. Further excavation at the Chồi will certainly bring us more information on the subject. Chồi mountain is located very close to the Châu Sa citadel of the Indrapura dynasty and only 70 km away from the Đồng Dương sanctuary, suggesting a connection between this site and Đồng Dương. Moreover, Chồi mountain is not far from the ocean and thus connects to the maritime world easily. In short, with the number of kilns found at Chồi mountain, there is an indication that local central Champa actively participated in the history of Buddhist development and practice in medieval Champa and elsewhere in Southeast Asia.

Notes

- ¹ According to Griffiths et al. (2012), the total number of inscriptions that had been found prior to 2010 was only 233. They were written in Sanskrit and Old Cam, and dated mainly from the 7th to the 15th centuries. Brahmanism is considered as an early form of Hinduism, an umbrella term for beliefs and practices including Śaivism, and Vaiṣṇavism.
- ² For more details on the tablets of this kind Wong (2018: 34) offers a different interpretation of the same inscription: "Good-Karma clay [tablet] of the Great Tang, imprinted with the marvelous physical form [of the Buddha] that captures his true suchness."
- ³ Their notes on the archaeology and architecture of Đồng Dương sanctuary are extremely important because Đồng Dương was almost completely destroyed during the French war (1946–54) and the American war (1974–75).
- ⁴ Following Schweyer 2009, it is uncertain whether the Đồng Dương sanctuary was first built by Indravarman II in 875CE, or, in that year he just

only renovated and ungraded it exclusively for Lakṣmīndra-Lokeśvara.

- ⁵ In Thailand, Buddhist votive tablets also have different shapes, including 5 main formats: square or rectangular, 3 straight edges with a curved, egg-shaped, teardrop-shaped and circular edges (Ghosh 2017: 39).
- ⁶ One of the earliest Sanskrit inscriptions found in Southeast Asia is the Võ Cảnh Stele, dated 4th–5th century discovered in the Võ Cảnh village, Nha Trang, Khánh Hoà province, Vietnam. Monica Smith (1999: 11–12) suggests that from the 4th–5th century, concurrent with a number of political and cultural changes in the subcontinent such as the growth of the Gupta polity with a coherent system of political, social, and religious iconography, the Gupta dynasty became a prominent political and social model for the states of Southeast Asia. Thus, Southeast Asian political entities started to adopt Sanskrit for administration and religious establishments.
- ⁷ For a detailed discussion of maritime trade routes as early as the first century, see Wade (2010) as he provides various Chinese maps on the subject.
- For more information on accounts of Chinese pilgrims and their lives in *vihāra*, see for instance, Hazra (1983). For the transmission of Buddhism to Southeast Asia via maritime trade, see Ray (1995), Sen (2004), Neelis (2011).
- ⁸ The pre-modern sea trade in southern and south-eastern Asia depended strongly on seasonal winds known as monsoons. From various ports in the Indian Ocean, ships travelled across the Bay of Bengal with the southwest monsoon winds that started in January and came to peninsular Southeast Asia where north-western winds pushed them through the Straits of Malacca very quickly. Once they had rounded the peninsula, ships were obligated to await the southwest monsoon winds in July for the final sailing to China.
- ⁹ Praying to the Bodhisattva Kuan-yin for protection by Chinese maritime travellers was a common practice. In the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra*

(Flower Garland Sūtra), section “Entering the Dharma Realm”, Kuan-yin appears as a bodhisattva residing on top of Mount P’u-t’o (Potala), an island off the coast of Chekiang. In this form Kuan-yin was associated with the Daoist Niang-niang goddesses who act as guardians of the ocean, and hence, she became known as the guardian of the Southern Sea.

- ¹⁰ The term Silk Road, coined by Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen in 1877, was misleading because people did not only trade silk but ideas, religions, technologies, artistic motifs were transmitted as well between East and West.
- ¹¹ For a deeper understanding of Mahāyāna practices and the spread of Esoteric Buddhism in medieval maritime coastal polities of Asia, see Andrea Acri (2016).

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