



A Rich and Royal Ruin in the Heart of Hanoi

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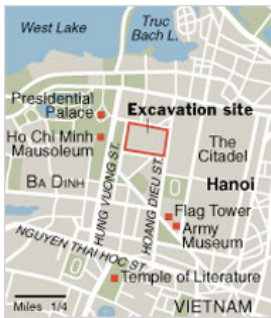


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Built To Last Excavation at Thang Long. In 1010 it became the capital of a country that had defeated China's Tang Dynasty less than 100 years before.

By JENNIFER PINKOWSKI
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HANOI, Vietnam — Nine hundred years before Ho Chi Minh declared Hanoi the capital of a newly independent Vietnam in 1945, the first king of the Ly Dynasty issued a similar decree.



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In 1010 King Ly Thai To picked Thang Long ("Ascending Dragon"), situated within present-day Hanoi, as the capital for a country that had defeated the Tang Dynasty less than a century before, ending a millennium of Chinese rule.

"It is situated at the very heart of our country," the king declared in Edict on the Transfer of the Capital. "It is equally an excellent capital for a royal dynasty for ten thousand generations."

The enormous royal complex that Ly Thai To built did last, not 10,000 generations, but 900 years, through three major dynasties and repeated foreign invasions. For the last five years, archaeologists from the Vietnam Institute of Archaeology have been slowly unearthing the remains of Thang Long, uncovering millions of artifacts and building features spanning 1,300 years. Hanoi is gearing up to celebrate its 1,000th anniversary in 2010, and Thang Long, a potential [Unesco](#) World Heritage Site, is its centerpiece.

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Archaeologists have found the remains of at least 11 palaces, drainage and sewage systems and what immediately became the largest collection of ceramics in Vietnam.

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Painstaking Yet Fruitful Work proceeds slowly and carefully at Thang Long.

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Sorting and cataloging.



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“The history of Thang Long citadel is the history of the Great Viet,” Bui Minh Tri, an archaeologist, said as he looked over the 7.3-square-mile site, thought to be the largest archaeological excavation in the history of Southeast Asia. The Great Viet are considered the founders of northern Vietnam. They probably descended from the Bronze Age Dong Son culture, which is famous for its enormous bronze drums. In 2002, the site, across the street from where Ho lies in state, was scheduled to be the new home of the National Assembly, the highest government body. Modern residences were razed. Archaeologists were called in to see whether anything remained of the citadel.

They had a good sense of where to look. The flag tower and Confucian university, the Temple of Literature, survive as tourist attractions. The area had also been mapped twice, by Vietnamese cartographers in the 15th century and by the French 400 years later. Earlier archaeological work had turned up a 13th- to 14th-century brick road.

One to four meters beneath the surface, the archaeologists found the foundations of at least 11 palaces, pillar bases, brick roads, drainage systems and deep wells. A dried riverbed held what immediately became the largest collection of ceramics in Vietnam, virtually all imprinted with imperial marks.

Terra cotta sculptures of five-toed dragons and coil-tongued phoenixes, symbols of the king and queen, eyed the excavators from the dirt. Similar artifacts had been found in the past at Buddhist temples built by Great Viet rulers. Now archaeologists had a confirmation of their royal origin.

After 1010, the Great Viet ruled the northern half of present-day Vietnam, continually expanding southward in wars against the Indian-influenced Champa state. The north-south divide witnessed in “the American War” had a precedent going back a millennium.

By the 18th century, the south was ascendant. The Nguyen Dynasty moved the capital to Hue in central Vietnam in 1802, and the Thang Long citadel fell into disuse. Shortly after Hanoi became the capital of French Indochina in 1887, the French destroyed it.

The royal complex once covered an area now home to Ba Dinh Square, the modern military citadel, the military history museum, the presidential palace and Ho’s mausoleum. It had dozens of palaces for the king, queen and royal family; pagodas and communal houses for the court and staff; and audience halls for government business.

As the military command center, it was enclosed by brick walls and guarded by armies who were also laborers.

From architecture to [diet](#), Thang Long was an imperial capital in the tradition of Beijing’s Forbidden City and Japan’s Heijo Palace. The court feasted on deer, pig, chicken, fish and shellfish. They drank clean water from nearly 12 wells, the earliest dating from the seventh century. The rulers commissioned artisans to create ceramics and sculptures with classic Chinese designs.

They surrounded the complex with walls and roads built from bricks made all over the state. Today, these bricks are stacked in the thousands at the site, imprinted with Chinese characters describing where and when they were made, and for whom.

The Vietnamese clearly inherited their royal tradition from the Chinese. Yet Thang Long shows evidence of singularly Vietnamese traits. Examples are on display in the small on-site museum. Among them

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are terra cotta tile caps on the roof tiles in the shape of Bodhi leaves decorated with dragons and chrysanthemums, and terra cotta phoenixes that once reared, gargoyle style, from palace roof corners. Neither have been seen before.

“We knew very well the architecture from the 15th to the 19th centuries, but until we found Thang Long, we didn’t know about architecture from the 10th to 15th centuries,” Dr. Bui said.

Some collections may need to be reassessed in light of Thang Long. At the Smithsonian’s Freer Gallery of Art in Washington, a 15th-century bowl long thought to be Chinese was recognized as Vietnamese only after nearly identical examples were found at the site.

These and other finds are discussed in the Vietnamese Institute of Archaeology’s bilingual volume “Thang Long Imperial Citadel.”

One percent of the site has been excavated. Archaeologists expect to learn more about individual dynasties as the dig continues over the next five years.

Today, the long pits excavated from 2002 to 2004 lie under corrugated metal roofs that channel heavy summer rain to be pumped out. Workers scrape the pottery-laden riverbed clear of moss that grows easily in the humid climate. In an adjacent closed area, some 200 more are excavating a section as large as the initial dig.

Only military officials, a handful of journalists and Vietnamese diplomats can visit Thang Long. Many people expect it to open to the public for Hanoi’s celebration in 2010. Although some of the festivities take the form of public works like industrial parks, high-rise housing and road improvements, Thang Long is central to the commemoration.

A museum planned for 2010 will trace the development of the city from its beginnings as Thang Long, and an effort to designate it a Unesco World Heritage Site is in the works.

“It’s very important to us that Unesco recognize Thang Long as a World Heritage Site,” Dr. Bui said. “Thang Long is a symbol of the country.”

Thang Long resonates today. (The city became known as Ha Noi, or between rivers, in the 1830s.)

It can be seen on shop signs for washing machines and on banners draped between sycamores greening the jammed streets. An oilfield discovered a few years ago off the southern coast of Vietnam was renamed Thang Long.

The city will have a second opera house, perhaps meant as an answer to the French-built Hanoi Opera House, by 2012. One guess what its name will be.

Thang Long may also develop as a case study in how archaeology can serve nationalistic goals, said Robert Murowchick, director of the International Center for East Asian Archaeology and Cultural History at [Boston University](#).

“This is not necessarily a bad thing,” Mr. Murowchick said. “It can promote tourism and economic development, and inspire national pride and unity.”

There can, however, be cause to worry if the information is distorted “to provide ‘concrete evidence’ of the glory of a particular culture, as we often see in Chinese archaeology,” he said.

So far, this doesn’t seem to be the case at Thang Long. Considering that the construction of the Parliament building was delayed by the discovery of the site, the finds could have been “disappeared,” as occurs in many countries, Dr. Murowchick said.

Instead, the project was moved to southwest of the municipal center, and Vietnam enacted its first heritage preservation laws. Unesco and foreign universities have been permitted to run field schools and conferences at the site.

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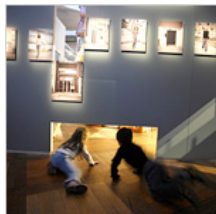
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