

# NSC HIGHLIGHTS

News from the Nalanda–Sriwijaya Centre

#4

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*The Overland Trading Route between  
the Khmer Empire and the Champa  
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World Heritage Initiative*

*Not Just 'Pots': Understanding Social  
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*2016 NSC Archaeological Field School*

*Circulating the Bay of Bengal,  
Miraculously*

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- *Public Lectures*

*Traditional earthenware firing at a potting village in  
Kampong Chhnang, Cambodia. Photo taken during a visit  
by the NSC Archaeological Field School in November 2016.  
(Credit: S. T. Foo)*

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### The Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre

The Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre (NSC) at the ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore, pursues research on historical interactions among Asian societies and civilisations.

It serves as a forum for the comprehensive study of the ways in which Asian polities and societies have interacted over time through religious, cultural, and economic exchanges, and diasporic networks. The Centre also offers innovative strategies for examining the manifestations of hybridity, convergence and mutual learning in a globalising Asia. It sees the following as its main aims:

1. To develop the 'Nalanda idea' of building for contemporary Asia an appreciation of Asian achievements and mutual learning, as exemplified by the cosmopolitan Buddhist centre of learning in Nalanda, as well as the 'Sriwijaya idea' of Southeast Asia as a place of mediation and linkages among the great civilisations.
2. To encourage and develop skills needed to understand the civilisations of Asia and their interrelationships.
3. To build regional research capacities and infrastructure for the study of the historical interactions among the civilisations and societies of Asia.

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# The Overland Trading Route between the Khmer Empire and the Champa Kingdoms: New Archaeological Findings from Northeast Cambodia

*By Tran Ky Phuong*

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Figure 1 - Prasat Ta-nang, as viewed from the southeast corner. The temple can be dated in the 8th to 9th century, based on its form, structural technique and design. (Credit: Tran Ky Phuong)

Researchers are constantly uncovering evidence to give us a fuller picture of the past. Recent discoveries, for example, have deepened our understanding of the relationship between the Khmer Empire and the Champa kingdoms.

The reassessment of recent archaeological sites between the Khmer empire and the Champa kingdoms suggests that physical geography and dynamic communities played a big role in determining the type and frequency of contact.

Based on the distribution of architectural sites recently recorded in Attapeu Province (Southern Laos), together with the other archaeological sites found in Steung Treng and Ratanakiri provinces in Northeast Cambodia (École Française d'Extrême-Orient et Ministère de la culture et des beaux-arts 2006; Davis 2001-05; Heng 2016), three major tributaries of the Mekong River—the

Sekong, Sesan and Sre Pok Rivers—were historically important to this particular region since the 8th century or earlier.

These three rivers greatly influenced: (1) resource distribution, extraction, and production; (2) settlement patterns; (3) value chain dynamics; (4) social network developments. Collectively, they not only shape our understanding of contact between the Khmer empire and Champa kingdoms, but also serve as socio-economic models of the time.

These three rivers have their headwaters in the mountain ranges of Vietnam which separate into eastern and western watersheds. The eastern watersheds flow from various passes, carving out short and small, but adequate river valleys and flood plains ultimately draining into coastal areas. These substantially contributed to the formation of the traditional historic Cham homelands, which begin from

northern part of central Vietnam and are found further south.

In terms of the cultural landscape, the region of northeast Cambodia from Steung Treng to the Ratanakiri Provinces and farther to the east, can be connected with the northern Central Highlands of Vietnam. This area consist of wide basalt plateaus that had no major obstructions in the form of overland passes.

Routes through several passes could easily have linked them with the Cham polities along the eastern coasts and a completely different and significant resource zone – particularly coastal strand and maritime environs. Interaction and exchange would have significantly benefited people on both sides of the mountain ranges as well as everyone in between – lowland and upland.

The routes were likely linked through several Muong (settlements)



Figure 2 - The map which presents the possible ancient routes of connection, joining the main ancient political and commercial centers/muong in relation to the ethnic communities in Cambodia, Laos and Central Vietnam who speak Mon-Khmer and Malayo-Polynesian languages. (Credit: Tran Ky Phuong)

built along the royal highways connecting the Khmer Empire and Champa kingdoms. It can be further hypothesised that many minority groups were involved in the interactions between the Austronesian Cham and the Mon-Khmer polities.

Stueng Treng was likely to have been the main centre which connected northeast Cambodia to the Central Highlands of Vietnam via the Sesan River, possibly mediated through Jarai communities – an Austronesian speaking people who worshipped the mysterious King of Fire (Patau Apui) and the King of Water (Patau Ia), to

whom all the former Khmer kings sent ambassadors to offer annual tribute in the early 17th century (Dournes 1977: 9-42; Tranet 1983: 75-107).

Anthropologists previously suggested that these mysterious Jarai kings were the chiefs of village alliances, united for defense and/or long wars related to controlling long-distant permanent trade networks (Nguyen Tu Chi 1996: 453- 55, note: 15).

One example in this east-west trade network that allows us to assert the historical and cultural connection between Stueng Treng to the Central

Highland of Vietnam is a newly found brick temple called Prasat Ta-nang (Yeak Naang) (see Fig. 1), situated in a Jarai ethnic village called Dor Touch/ Dor Pir Village, Northeast Cambodia. Located near a small river named O Tang, about 10km from the Cambodia-Vietnam border, the temple was fully covered by a dense forest and only identified and recorded in 2009.

During a site visit in March 2014, many large timber blocks were observed to be scattered throughout the temple area. This suggests that there was a large commercial centre for the



Figure 3 - Field research team in Attapeu province, Southern Laos in 2010. (Photographed by Thonglith Luongkhote)

exchange of goods in the vicinity of the Prasat Ta-nang temple.

The temple probably served as a religious centre for the traders who prayed and offered donations to the gods. The temple was also a symbol of the power of the local lord who controlled the trade route. Thus far, this monument represents the most vivid evidence yet of an early 8th – 9th centuries east-west network from the lowlands to the uplands of Mainland Southeast Asia.

In terms of architectural elements, the temple itself shows design elements of Pre-Angkorian Khmer temples in combination with many typical architectural features of contemporaneous Cham temples. For example, the three temple-group of Hoa Lai located near Phan Rang-Thap Cham City (formerly the Champa Kingdom of Panduranga) dating from the 8th - 9th centuries.

The conjectural map of the trade routes (see Fig. 2) connects the main ancient political and commercial centres in Mainland Southeast Asia,

namely the royal highway linking the Khmer empire and Champa kingdoms. This map is dynamic and presents a picture of fluid interaction between different cultures and linguistic groups over a long period of time instead of a geography of isolated settlements.

**TRAN Ky Phuong** was a curator at the Museum of Champa Sculpture in Danang, Vietnam, from 1978 until 1998. His recent works include *Crossing Boundaries – Learning From the Past to Build the Future: An Archaeological Collaboration Between Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam* (2013); a co-edited volume on *The Cham of Vietnam: History, Society and Art* (2011) with Bruce Lockhart; and the *Unique Vestiges of Champa Civilization* (2014 – 3rd edition). Dr. Tran gave several lectures for the 2016 NSC Archaeological Field School.

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