

The Royal Citadel of Thăng Long

From VNS

Part I

Vestiges of different historical periods

From 2002 to the end of 2003, an archeological excavation was carried out on the 40,000 square metres site at N018, Hoàng Diệu Street, Ba Đình District, Hanoi.

About 20,000 sq. m. were excavated and divided into 4 sections coded as A, B, C, D. The depth of each archeological lot is about 04 metres, which includes different cultural strata.

At the depth of about 01 metre from the ground there is the most recent cultural stratum which has been disturbed very much. Here artifacts of the 19th - 20th century (the Nguyễn dynasty) have been unearthed: two wells built of stone and bricks; ceramic bowls, plates, jars, containers, incense burners, bottles, etc. which were produced at Bát Tràng and Phù Lãng for daily use. They have different glazes (blue, white, grey, etc.) and different ornamental patterns (flowers, bamboo, lined dots, brown lines).

At the depth of from 01 to 02 metres, there is the cultural stratum of the Posterior Lê dynasty which lasted from the 15th to 18th century. In fact, this stratum also includes vestiges of the early Lê dynasty (circa 15th century), the Mạc (circa 16th century), the Restored Lê and the late Lê (circa 17th - 18th century) and even the Tây Sơn (about 10 years in the late 18th century).

The cultural stratum of the Lê time has exposed artifacts of the 15th - 18th century: fragments of the brick foundations of architectural constructions; bowls, plates, jars, jugs, cups, pots, food containers, lime-pots, etc. in white, turquoise and blue glazes. Many objects belonged to the king, royal family and aristocracy: they are ornamented with the five-clawed dragon, the Chinese character "Quan", characters Trýờng Lạc or Trýờng Lạc khố (the name of the Palace of the Queen of king Lê Thánh Tông, or king Lê Hiến Tông's mother (late 15th - early 16th century).

Vestiges of the cultures of the Lý - Trần and the Nguyễn are also present at this stratum. Apparently, this stratum may have been disturbed. However, it is typical of the Lê time.

At the depth of 2-3 metres, there is the cultural stratum of the Lý (11th - 12th century) and Trần (13th - 14th century) dynasties. These two historical periods represent a continuum, which shared many similarities and during which the Vietnamese civilization produced a brilliant culture known as Thăng Long culture...

This layer of the Lý - Trần period (in fact, the Đinh - Anterior Lê dynasties should be also included) dates back to the 11th - 14th century (and the second half of the 10th century should be included). The artifacts are abundant: the foundation of ancient constructions, the stone column bases with lotus decoration typical of the Lý - Trần sculpture; the foundations with brick-paved edges; red brick-built wells; a square pond filled up with construction materials, ceramic objects and potsherds. Many objects are almost intact and look beautiful, such as bowls; boxes with covers; lamp-plates; replicas of towers in white, turquoise, dark-green, yellow glazes; big jars, pots, basins in brown, patterned-brown, patterned-blue glazes with ornaments (lotus, chrysanthemum, dragon, phoenix, etc.). This fact shows that the objects belonged to the royal family and the aristocracy. Among the artifacts there are bricks carved with Chinese characters saying that they were produced in 1057, under the reign of the third king of the Lý dynasty.

At the depth of 3-4 metres there is the cultural stratum of the historical period named Đại La.

Đại La was at the same time the name of the citadel which started to be built in 866 by Gao Pian, the Tang governor in Việt Nam at the time. Đại La also referred to the area located within the citadel.

This stratum bears the cultural traits of the period when Việt Nam was under the Chinese Tang domination: 7th to 9th century, before king Lý Thái Tổ founded the Thăng Long capital in 1010 on this land. Therefore, this layer is still called the stratum of pre-Thăng Long culture.

In brief, the excavation at the Thăng Long citadel has revealed 4 cultural strata.

1/ Đại La or pre-Thăng Long period: 7th to early 10th century (primarily the 9th century).

2/ Lý - Trần period: 11th - 14th century (some vestiges of the Đinh - Anterior Lê dynasties in the late 10th century included).

3/ Lê period (early Lê, Mạc, Posterior Lê, Restored Lê, Tây Sơn): 15th - 18th century.

4/ Nguyễn period: 19th century, with the imprints of the French domination time (late 19th - early 20th century), and modern time (mid - 20th century up to now).

The site demonstrates a continuation of the 1,300-year course of development of Vietnamese culture. It is located next to the Hà Nội Citadel (built in 1805 and destroyed in 1897) and on the west to what used to be the axis of the Royal Citadel and the Forbidden Citadel of Thăng Long. It is an invaluable asset of the history-culture of Việt Nam in general and of Thăng Long - Hanoi in particular.

Part II

Palaces built atop mound Nùng (or the Dragon's Navel) within the Thăng Long Royal Citadel (Ancient Hanoi Citadel)

The Ancient Hanoi Citadel was built in the Vauban style in 1805 by the Nguyễn Court. At first, it was used as the "headquarters" of Bắc Thành (all provinces in North Việt Nam). Later, it became the center of Hanoi province which was composed of 4 prefectures when founded in 1831 by king Minh Mạng.

This citadel was located on the foundations of the previous Thăng Long Royal Citadel built by king Lý Thái Tổ in 1010 but was a little smaller than the latter.

Apparently, both the citadels were built around mound Nùng (Nùng means "prosperity", "thriving"), which was also named Long Đẽ (Dragon's navel).

This mound was a height on the stretch of silted land along the old river now called Tô Lịch. It existed in the first years of our era, when the name of the river itself was not yet recorded either in documents or in people's memory. Nowadays, scholars call this stretch of land "An indigenous Hanoi Village"; its popular name was the Dragon's Navel Village.

When king Lý Thái Tổ moved the capital city of Việt Nam from Hoa Lý to Thăng Long in 1010, he chose mound Nùng as center of the Thăng Long citadel. During the 2nd millennium AD (from 11th to 19th century), all the palaces of prime importance were built in this place by the successive royal dynasties, one as replacement for the other. Let us cite three representative constructions: Càn Nguyên, Thiên An and Kính Thiên.

* The Càn Nguyên Palace was the first construction to have been present atop mound Nùng. "Càn Nguyên" means "origins of all things". Set up in 1010 by king Lý Thái Tổ, it occupied the central place among the 8 palaces and 4 mansions which made up the architectural complex of the dynasty. According to historical annals, the construction of the Càn Nguyên palace was started in the seventh lunar month and finished in the eleventh lunar month of the same year, when the Thúy Hoa Mansion (residence for royal concubines) was also inaugurated. Thus, the Palace became the "focal point" of the complex.

Despite its great significance, the Càn Nguyên Palace existed only for 19 years, during the entire reign of king Lý Thái Tổ. It was razed to the ground in the second lunar month of 1028 as the consequence of the "three kings' riot": three king-titled persons vied with the crown prince for the throne, in the wake of king Lý Thái Tổ's death.

* The Thiên An Palace was built from the sixth lunar month of 1029 at the beginning of king Lý Thái Tông's reign as replacement for the Càn Nguyên Palace. Yet, it was bigger than the latter and faced in another direction.

Thiên An means "Peace from Heaven". During the reign of king Lý Thái Tông (1029-1053) and the subsequent period of the Lý dynasty (1054-1225), Thiên An continued its

role as the principal palace where the king and high-ranking mandarins would gather to discuss the matters concerning the nation.

According to the historical annals, on the 8th day of the fourth lunar month of 1072, king Lý Nhân Tông attended the Buddha-Statue washing ceremony and then granted an audience in the Thiên An Palace. In the spring of 1077, (the King) held the Buddhist festival of Nhân Vỹ ở here. On the 1st day of the eight lunar month of 1123, the king sat in the Thiên An Palace and granted autumn attire to the court mandarins.

At the end of king Lý Nhân Tông's reign and the beginning of king Lý Thái Tông's reign, the king usually sat at the Thiên An Palace to watch elephants' fighting or the Court Guard's parades organized by the Trần family.

The Palace had survived several damages before it was totally destroyed in the early 15th century when the Chinese Ming occupied Việt Nam for 20 years (1407-1428). They called the Capital of Việt Nam Đông Quan (Eastern Gate) and destroyed the royal architectural constructions. From then on, Thiên An was no longer mentioned in historical books. The Kính Thiên Palace emerged in its place.

* Kính Thiên means "Respect for Heaven". In the fourth month of 1428, king Lê Thái Tổ, who had defeated the Ming invaders, moved his thatch-roofed residence from BỒ ĐỀ on the other side of the Red River to the Royal Citadel. And in the eleventh month he began the construction of the principal palace to be named Kính Thiên.

From the maps of the 17th - 18th century - which are in fact copies of the Hồng Đức map in the 15th century - we can see that the Kính Thiên Palace was located on mound Nùng, inside the ancient Hanoi citadel.

According to the historical books of the Lê dynasty, the construction of this palace finished after 37 years (1428 - the third lunar month of 1465). In the eighth month of 1467, a stone balustrade was set up at this palace.

Nowadays, we can see that the balustrade in the form of four dragons includes nine steps (cửu trùng) divided into three sections. The two dragons at the central section are sculptural works in the "realistic style". The dragons coil from the top of mound Nùng, where there used to be the Kính Thiên Palace, down to Long Trì ("dragon floor"; under the Lê, it was called "purple floor").

The Kính Thiên Palace was where the king usually granted audiences and held meetings with the court.

However, it was also a center for cultural activities within the court during the 4 centuries (15th through 18th century), particularly under the reign of king Lê Thánh Tông (1460-1497) who was famous for his knowledge and high educational standard. On the 12th day of third lunar month of 1466; the 26th day of the second month of 1469; the 11th day of the fifth month of 1475; the 27th day of the fourth month of 1481, and the 19th day of the

third month of 1496, the king came to the Kính Thiên Palace to set topics for the royal exams. According to the rules, winners of the first round of the royal exam (thi Hội) were summoned to the Palace where they were required to write essays on the topics set by the king (usually on the philosophy of State governance). Then, they would be classified into different categories of laureates according to the scores they had earned. Royal exams were the means for the king to discover talents to be recruited to mandarinates.

The Palace hosted the last significant function on the 15th day of the seven lunar month of 1786. Having defeated the Trịnh Lord, Nguyễn Huệ, leader of the Tây Sơn uprising, paid a call on king Lê Hiển Tông in the Royal Citadel. He wanted to request the King to choose an auspicious day for carrying out a ceremony in which he would submit to the latter military and civilian registers to show his recognition of the king's power. The ailing King Lê Hiển Tông tried to meet Nguyễn Huệ at the Kính Thiên Palace and issued an edict on national unification. Then he conferred on Nguyễn Huệ the title of Duke (according to the book *Khâm định Việt sử thông giám cương mục*).

In the early 19th century, Kinh Gia Long, founder of the Nguyễn dynasty, moved the capital to Phú Xuân (Huế). The Thăng Long Royal Citadel of the Lê was diminished both in the size and significance to become the Ancient Hanoi Citadel. Material from the dismantled Kính Thiên Palace was transported to Huế for the construction of the Thái Hòa Palace in the Huế Royal Citadel.

In the place of the old Kính Thiên, the Nguyễn had another Kính Thiên built not as a palace but as a temporary residence (hành cung) for the Nguyễn Kings to stay when they were on inspection tours of North Việt Nam.

The Kính Thiên mansion no longer had the imposing outlook as before. Furthermore, it was demolished by the French in 1886 to give the site to the "Headquarters of the French Artillery Command", which would become later the "Dragon's House" of the Vietnamese People's Army as we see today. As for the Ancient Hanoi Citadel in the Vauban style, it was totally destroyed by the French in 1897.

Party II

Preservation of the relics in the Thăng Long Royal Citadel (Ancient Hanoi Citadel) and promotion of their values.

The term "Thăng Long Royal Citadel (Ancient Hanoi Citadel)" refers to the 40,000 sq. m. area (40ha) at N018 Hoàng Diệu street, Ba Đình district, Hanoi. As you know, the recent archeological excavation has drawn attention of many people. However, the scholars hold that the Thăng Long Royal Citadel was much larger than the present site (140ha versus 4ha); so was the Ancient Hanoi Citadel (about 100ha) which was built in the early 19th century on the same site. So, it is understandable that many people have proposed plans to expand the preservation up to 100ha - even 140ha -, i.e. the whole area surrounding the currently defined site.

In the framework of this international contest on discovery of Hanoi, we would like to draw your attention only to the 40,000 sq. m. site.

In 2004, 5 seminars were held by Vietnamese scholars and managers to discuss how to preserve the site. Many specialists in archeology and museum studies were invited from Japan, France, Australia, the US, Republic of Korea and Italia to visit the site and contribute ideas to this topic. Mention should be made of a group of six specialists from six research agencies of Japan who visited the site in June 2004. In August 2004, 17 specialists in historical sciences, archeology and museum studies came to Hanoi from France, Japan, Italia, Spain, Norway, the Republic of Korea and UNESCO (based in Bangkok), who took part in a conference on the question of preservation of the site.

The group of Japanese specialists had the following comment.

“The Ba Đình archeological site demonstrates the continuous 1000 years’ course of the history of Hanoi and the history of Việt Nam. At this architectural complex, the earliest vestiges date back to the period prior to the Lý dynasty (11th-12th cent.) which may have pertained to the stage of "An Nam đô hộ phủ" (7th - 9th cent. under Chinese domination). During more than 1,000 years of its existence, the citadel was apparently re-constructed many times, with the later construction grafted onto the earlier one. However, in general the archeological artifacts have been well preserved underground. In Asia, almost no archeological site of palaces is in a good condition like the Thăng Long citadel in Hanoi. Famous ancient royal citadels such as Fono Romano in Rome (Italia), Chang An in Xi An (China), Heijokyo in Nara (Japan) are recognized as cultural heritage of humankind and have been inscribed on the List of World Heritage. A site of equal - or even more - significance has been revealed lying underground in Hanoi, a big city. This fact shows that the area has been a political, economic and cultural center of Việt Nam over the past 1,000 years. At the same times, it demonstrates the height of development and strength of the Vietnamese people in the past".

Professor Yamanaka Akira stressed, "For understanding humankind’s history, the contribution of this archeological site cannot be neglected".

Dr. Shigeeda Yutaka said, “If the site and the Thăng Long royal citadel as a whole are preserved, they will definitely become a typical evidence of ancient urban areas in the world".

Professor Imaizumi Takao commented, “The Ba Đình site is the most important and valuable vestige site for the nations in Asia".

The 10-page report made by the French group of six specialists in historical sciences, archeology, museum studies, urban studies and architecture, comments, "Afte we examined the archeological site at N018 Hoàng Diệu street, we have come to the conclusion that this site represents a world heritage value of the highest significance. The entire world is happy at these rare historical lucks of Việt Nam” The French specialists

have listed eight general values of the Ba Đình site as well as of the Thăng Long Royal Citadel:

- Value for identifying Hanoi City: the preservation of the Royal Citadel will show the uniqueness of this city on the basis of the incorporation of ancient and modern elements.

- Values for identifying the Vietnamese nation: the preservation of the Royal Citadel will allow a tangible interpretation of the continuous development of the Vietnamese nation and history during more than 1,000 years.

- Values for identifying the Vietnamese State: this site allows a tangible interpretation of the continuity and peculiar features of the state organization of Việt Nam over the past 1000 years.

- Values for cultural development: this site will promote the visibility of Hanoi and Việt Nam as a cultural center of the world with great national and international interests.

- Value for economic development: this site will bring about large economic benefits, given the role of culture in the global economy.

- Value for tourist development: the system of Royal Citadel vestiges will turn Hanoi into a big tourist destination in the 21st century.

- Value for development of historical research: this site will provide original historical materials for defining the status of Hanoi as the capital of the Đại Việt kingdom.

- Value for educational development: this site provides a primary tool for educational purposes to be developed in connections with the teaching at schools, colleges and universities.

- Values for environmental development: the site will give Hanoi a unique opportunity to ensure environmental values for its inhabitants in the future.

- In early 2005, Việt Nam began taking necessary measures for the preservation of the site as follows.

- The Ministry of Culture and Information officially requested the Prime Minister to ratify "Plan 2" to preserve insitu some of the excavated lots, which have exposed the most important, representative and original artifacts. Such lots will be turned into an open museum to be combined with the display of materials, artifacts and replicas. The remaining lots will be scientifically investigated, technically treated, properly documented and then filled up with sand and turned into a "historical and cultural park" within the areas of the historic square of Ba Đình.

- The Hanoi People's Committee has allowed the City Culture and Information Service, the Institute of Archeology, the office of the Steering Committee for the 1000th

Anniversary of Thăng Long, and the Management Board of the Ancient Hanoi Citadel vestige site to carry out investigation measurement and drawing with regard to all the architectural constructions within 41,000 sq. m. of the Kính Thiên Palace area. This effort will serve the "Master Planning for the study, preservation, upgrading and promotion of the Ancient Hanoi Citadel vestige site" in the near future. The afore-said agencies are also assigned to propose plans to preserve, research and promote the section stretching from the Đuan Gate (Đoan Môn) to the Hậu Lâu Pavilion inside the Ancient Hanoi Citadel. Under the guidance of the Hanoi City People's Committee, documentation of the Ancient Hanoi Citadel will be made with a view to obtaining for it the status of "vestige site of national significance".

As a step in the master-planning of the historic-cultural vestige area of Thăng Long - Hanoi to be submitted to UNESCO, when possible, for the title of World Heritage Site, the Hanoi City People's Committee has suggested to the National Assembly, the Government and the Defense Ministry that the Defense Ministry hand over the whole present area of the Ancient Hanoi Citadel (200,000 sq. m.), which used to be its headquarters, to the Hanoi administration. This area contains five important constructions: the Flag Tower, the Đuan Gate, the Kính Thiên Palace vestige, the Hậu Lâu Pavilion and the Northern Gate. Currently, only 49,135 sq. m. are under the management of the Hanoi authority.

The Prime Minister of Việt Nam has presented his concluding remarks on the necessity to adjust the "Detailed Master Plan of the Ba Đình Political Center, Hanoi" in favour of Plan 2: no National Assembly hall will be built on lot D at N018 Hoàng Diệu street, which is left unexcavated; no museum of national history and of military history will be built in the Ba Đình political center (within the Ancient Hanoi Citadel). Authorized by the Prime Minister, the Minister of Construction has requested the Politburo of the Việt Nam Communist Party to decide that the Defense Ministry hand over the remaining 20ha section stretching from the west of Nguyễn Tri Phương street to Hoàng Diệu street - which used to be the axis of the Citadel - to the Hanoi City People's Committee before 2010 to be turned into a historical, cultural and revolutionary vestige site. The Head of the Cabinet has also assigned the Hanoi People's Committee to work out "a detailed master plan for the Ancient Hanoi Citadel" as basis for projects to preserve the site and promote its values.

Remains of ancient royal citadel found in Vietnam

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Excavation site of an ancient royal citadel dating back to the 7th century in Hanoi.
Image © 2003 AFP Photo/Hoang Dinh Nam

Construction of Vietnam's new parliament building in Hanoi has been halted after archaeologists discovered the ruins of a royal citadel dating back to the 11th century on the proposed site, state media said November 6, 2003. The Politburo, the ruling Communist Party's elite decision-making arm, has postponed further work on the new National Assembly pending further consultations, the party's Nhan Dan newspaper said. The move follows an appeal by archaeologists and historians in September for the government to put back the October 1 deadline for the official ground-breaking ceremony.

The Nhan Dan said the Politburo will consider whether or not to find a new site for the legislature. The 15-member body also ruled that a national conference centre, which was planned for the same site, will now be built on the outskirts of Hanoi near the recently opened My Dinh National Stadium.

Land clearance on the site of the proposed parliament, located in the heart of the capital near the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum and the existing legislature, began early last year. However, archaeologists called in to conduct a mandatory survey of the site discovered last December a wealth of relics from five feudal dynasties dating back to the 7th century.

"It is a surprising and priceless discovery. We uncovered the foundations of a big palace, a number of architectural works and millions of artifacts from the Chinese Tang dynasty

and the Vietnamese dynasties of Ly, Tran, Le and Nguyen," said Professor Phan Huy Le, chairman of the Vietnam History Association.

The prize discovery was the palace, the largest of its kind discovered in Vietnam, with foundations reaching 62 metres (203 feet) in length and 27 metres in width. This, he said, belonged to the western part of the **Thang Long** royal citadel, which was built in the 11th century when the monarch **Ly Thai To** moved the capital of Dai Viet state, as Vietnam was then known, from Hoa Lu, outside present day Hanoi, to the northern city.

Human remains dating back to the Ly dynasty (1010-1225) were also unearthed, including the bones of two children believed to be aged eight or nine-years old. Their skeletal remains were discovered near the palace's main foundation pillar.

"We think they could have been buried alive to ward off evil spirits," said Le. Although animals have long been substituted for humans, the practice is still believed to be carried out in remote, rural parts of Vietnam.

More than three million bronze, gold, porcelain and ceramic artifacts, some depicting dragon and unicorn heads, were also discovered, as well as a sophisticated drainage system, including some wells that still bear water. Le said some of the artifacts appeared to have originated from China, Japan and the Middle East.

For the moment at least, archaeologists have won the opening round to preserve Vietnam's cultural heritage against certain elements in the government dismayed by the financial costs of finding a new location for the legislature. But even Le acknowledges the enormous task he has on his hands to realise his dream of establishing an outdoor museum on the site. "Even if we don't have the funding and technology to do this now, at the very least we should preserve this site for future generations. If we destroy our heritage we are committing a big crime," he said.