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Introduction

Viet Nam's coastline extends 2,133 miles (3,451 kilometers) from north to south, narrowing at some points to as little as 37 miles (60 kilometers), then broadening in the north with the Hong (Red) River delta, and in the far south with the Mekong River delta. Mountains create its western border, while its eastern coastline links with China in the north and insular Southeast Asia to the south. As early as the first millennium B.C., ships bearing goods plied these waters; the region functioned as the conduit for trade goods arriving from ever-increasing distances. Ports along the coast supplied traders with forest products, sheltered ships from storms, and offered restocking of provisions and water. Along with the advantages of these commercial transactions came the exchange of technologies, ideas and beliefs, the introduction of foreign religions, and concepts of statecraft. The four sections of this exhibition explore the varying roles that trade and cultural exchange played in Viet Nam in the early cultures of Dong Son in the north and Sa Huynh in central and southern Viet Nam; the trading cities of Fu Nan; the polities of Champa; and the port city of Hoi An.

Though we know few details of trade during the prehistoric period, the widespread occurrence of rectangular stone adzes in insular Southeast Asia and Viet Nam in the second millennium B.C. indicates not only cultural affinities, but also the possibility of exchange. At the same time, trade between China and the Indus civilization of northwestern India and Pakistan probably took place overland, thus missing the Vietnamese coastline, although sea trade cannot be ruled out; alkaline etched beads produced at Indus Valley sites have been discovered throughout China and a single early one in Central Viet Nam.¹ We know of contact between India (and points west) and Southeast Asia through a few archaeological finds, such as those made at Ban Don Ta Phet, a fourth-century B.C. site in Thailand, where etched agate and carnelian beads and bronze containers of a type also found in India exist.² It has been proposed that some of the carnelian beads found in Southeast Asia were fabricated in India, but in forms found only in Southeast Asia. This suggests a more complex relationship between the elite of Southeast Asia and India than previously supposed for the early centuries B.C., as it would indicate an active role for the Southeast Asians in the trade if the beads were being made to order.³ Finally, the Austronesian (Malay)-speaking peoples who, by the first