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Champa: Riverine Polities, Ports of Call

“They were of the idolators, Natives of Champa, and some of the briskest, most sociable, without Fearfulness or Shyness, and the most neat and dextrous about their Shipping, of any such I have met with in all my Travels.”

—William Dampier, *A New Voyage Round the World*, 1697¹

Between the fifth and the early nineteenth centuries, the seafaring people of Champa (fig. 1) inhabited coastal kingdoms between Binh Thuan Province in the south and Quang Tri Province in the north. The Cham were concentrated in the river basins that reached inland to the mountains, providing access to the precious forest goods that formed the bulk of the export products of mainland Southeast Asia. Maritime trade provided their primary source of income, as the narrow river basins did not allow the development of an extensive agrarian economy as in most other parts of mainland Southeast Asia. The people of Champa spoke an Austronesian language of the Western Malayo-Polynesian branch, the language group that prevailed throughout insular Southeast Asia.²

The geography of central and southern coastal Viet Nam, with its fifteen major rivers often separated from each other by mountains, did not lend itself to the formation of a unified kingdom. Instead the region functioned like a series of islands, most easily accessible to each other by boat.³ The peoples who had migrated to this coastal region in the first millennium B.C. from island Southeast Asia found an environment like the one they had recently left, that is, like most of the coastline from South China to insular Southeast Asia, suitable to a seafaring way of life. The polities that arose in the various river basins waxed and waned, depending primarily on wealth deriving from trade and exchange.

Our primary sources of information about Champa are local inscriptions and Chinese and (north) Vietnamese chronicles and histories. The name “Champa” is first mentioned in two seventh-century Sanskrit inscriptions,⁴ but not until 877 by the Chinese. Earlier Chinese references to the kingdom of Lin Yi, from the second to the eighth centuries, have been interpreted as applying to an early kingdom of the Champa people.⁵ Lin Yi’s location is also disputed, though it seems to have been in either Quang Nam Province, the area around modern Hue, or slightly north of Hue.⁶

FIG. 1
Cham people.

