

6 THE LIVES OF TEMPLES IN CHAMPA

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Ancient Champa occupied large parts of present-day central and southern Vietnam, with its meandering coastline skirting the sea to its east. The Khmers dominated regions to its west and the Dai Viêts and Chinese ruled territories to its north. This unique geographical location and historical circumstance significantly contributed to the early emergence of Champa as a significant player in trans-Asian maritime and overland contacts (Fig. 1).¹ Its cultural links with India are particularly noteworthy: The assimilation of Sanskrit language, Indic scripts, religions, knowledge systems, art motifs, iconographic formulae, and architectural modes speak of a robust interface – directly with India and circuitously through the filter of intermediate Asian cultures. To this day, ruins of ancient Hindu and Buddhist temples dot the landscape of central and southern Vietnam (Fig. 2). The makers of Hindu-Buddhist temples in Champa translated and transformed Indic influences to create fresher modes of architectural expressions.

Art historians have focused on the comparative stylistics and formal details of Cham temple forms and imagery, giving less thought perhaps to the mentalities and processes that guided temple-making and helped shape the resultant architectural forms. Built mainly in brick with stone used sparingly for icons, pillars, pedestals, lintels and tympana, the surviving vestiges of these delicately rendered monuments at once evoke wonder and a desire to know more about their lived lives in the centuries gone by. How were these temples perceived in the Cham political and cultural imagination? What were the beliefs and thought processes that encouraged their persistent presence through subsequent cycles of destruction and restoration? How do these monuments relate to their Indian and other Southeast Asian counterparts? Answers to such questions can be sought as much in the temples' formal details as in the messages engraved on their surfaces. By populating the temples with narratives from their past and relating these to the formal

Fig. 1 Map showing the principal sites discussed in the paper. (Courtesy: Sanjay Dhar)



Fig. 2 A general view of the My Son valley of temples with BS prominently visible. (Photo: Parul Pandya Dhar)

