The path of Cham cultural heritage

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Abstract. This paper reviews and re-assesses the contemporary state of research on Cham cultural heritage sites, which are associated with the pre-modern Champa civilization in Vietnam. For this purpose, architectural heritage, sculptures, and museums related to the potential of common interests are taken into consideration across the intersection of the local Cham community, the Vietnamese government, and international scholars. There are some conflicts between these interested parties, which have resulted from unequal dynamics, which occasionally result in lasting tensions and errors in judgement. Our research findings result in an actionable plan with systematic solutions, which we outline in this paper. We argue the proposed plan will improve the management, conservation, and promote Cham cultural heritage sites more sustainably.

Keywords: Heritage, Champa culture, Cham culture, Management, Conservation

1. Introduction
The Champa site of Mỹ Sơn is located in Quảng Nam Province, in central Vietnam, 30Km southwest of Đà Nẵng city, in a valley surrounded by a ring of mountains [1]. Mỹ Sơn was discovered in 1885, during an exploratory mission, by a group of French soldiers. In 1897-1898, Camille Paris, a talented colonial official, surveyed the site and drew it to the attention of the scholars of the future Ecole Francaise d’Extreme Orient. In 1899, Luis Finot and E.E.L. de Lajonquière began the inventory of the inscriptions found at the site. In 1901-1904, the chief architect of EFEO Archaeological Service Henri Parmentier and his colleague Charles Carpeaux started their work. Their team carried out excavation, documentation, classification, inventory and consolidation work of some temples, removing...
vegetation and rubble. Camille Paris, Luis Finot, Henri Parmentier, and others studied this and other Champa temples along the central coastline of Vietnam from 1897 to 1904 [6,10]. However, WWII, the First Indochina War, and the departure of the French EFEO resulted in a gap in research on Champa for several decades. In 1955, the Second Indochina War began and an even more violent period stalled research. Furthermore, in 1969, the site became a military target as American intelligence argued NLF forces were hiding in the area, and it was bombed by a B52, causing irreparable damage to the archaeological record.

While mid-20th century wars impeded research, new advances came after 1975, with the formation of new international relationships. From 1981 to 1986, the Vietnam-Poland Cooperation worked at Mỹ Sơn. Kazimierz Kwiatkowski (1941-1997), spent his life from 1980 to 1997 completing research and conservation works at Mỹ Sơn Sanctuary [18, 22]. Then, in 1997, in the climate of newly emerging patterns of global cooperation, a trilateral agreement signed between UNESCO, the Ministry of Culture of Vietnam, and Fondazione Lerici of Politecnico di Milano University was signed. For two years, research focused on site surveys, hydrographic studies, and geomorphological mapping, with broader archaeological surveys and mapping of still mined areas. Finally, in 1999 Mỹ Sơn was recognized as a site of World Cultural Heritage by UNESCO [1].

2. Justification
Through 2015, UNESCO, Fondazione Lerici of the Politecnico di Milano University, and the Italian Development Cooperation Agency (IDCA) supported the “Safeguarding of Mỹ Sơn World Heritage Site” project. They spent 1.6 million USD in three phases over 10 years, with the aim to restore the site and create a self-sustaining tourist-based community. They inspired enthusiasm and passion for the works of local authorities, community members, and scholars, coming together in the spirit of international collaboration and heritage preservation, which enhanced friendly relations between the governments of Vietnam and Italy.

During the completion of Phase II, in 2010, organizers announced they had designed a “Cham Restoration Brick” and completed restoration of the Group G temples. The announcement surprised us. It left us wondering: was this the end of the road for restoring Champa architectural heritage or was the project headed an early grave?

![Figure 1. Restoration accomplished (G group) in Mỹ Sơn Sanctuary (Source: Lerici Foundation Archive, 2013)](image)

According to the MOU on “Vietnam-India Cooperation on the Conservation and Restoration of Mỹ Sơn World Cultural Heritage Area,” collaboration between the governments of India and Vietnam in 10th July 2014, the project Conservation and Restoration of Cham architecture in Mỹ Sơn was conducted by the Indian Institute of Archeology. From 2016 to the present, Indian experts have been working to restore Temple K and Temple H. The project is aiming to restore three temples (K, H, and A) with an estimated fund of 160 million rupees (approximately 53 billion VND or 2 million Euro). The 5 year-long-project (2016-2021) has focused on restoring “Đồng Dương Vihara” of Quang Nam province. However, this project outcome is already being analyzed in a critical fashion, due to an urgent need to revise the method of management, conservation, and promotion of these Cham heritage sites, including Mỹ Sơn and Đồng Dương respectively.
3. Present heritage management
Generally, pre-modern socio-political and cultural spaces are not physically concurrent with contemporary administrative borders in Vietnam. Pre-modern Champa was a coherent cultural space, extending from Quảng Bình to Đồng Nai provinces and into the Central Highland region in particular. This vast area covers at least 13 provinces, consisting of Quảng Bình, Quảng Trị, Thừa Thiên-Huế, Đà Nẵng, Quảng Nam, Quảng Ngãi, Bình Định, Phú Yên, Khánh Hòa, Ninh Thuận, Bình Thuận, Gia Lai, and Đắk Lắk. What this means for us, is that there are administrative offices from each of the aforementioned provinces involved in managing these cultural heritage sites. Each unit has its own managerial method of assessing value, resources, and ensuring their operations run more independently and effectively. Systematically, provincial departments of “Culture and Sports” practice professionally under the “Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism” and depend upon specialized research institutions, which are in charge of coherent assessment. For this reason, many research and conservation programs funded by federal funds are being conducted by institutionally affiliated researchers to meet desires of provincial managers.

Champa’s cultural heritage is currently fragmented. Different provincial authorities have adopted different standards. Hence there are no overarching standards of research applied across all sites. Research, management and preservation plans cannot be applied across provincial borders in many cases. This means that valuable promotion of these sites is limited within local hierarchies. According to our assessment of the existing situation, these provinces have only accessed a small portion of Champa sites and cannot make use of the expertise or the resources to complete assessments more systematically. Certainly, Champa culture and Cham cultural heritage are considerably significant enough to form a specialized agency of “Cham and Champa Cultural Heritage” as an independent legal entity. We suggest, such an agency should have appropriate rights and responsibilities of conducting relevant researches and conservation efforts before those are given to Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences; especially before granting it to provincial offices of the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism. Such an agency would systematize and unify management, conservation works and promote value of Champa relics better and better [18].

4. An update of preservation status
In terms of heritage conservation, it is necessary to stress the intrinsic value and beauty of Champa’s heritage sites, especially because existing programs mainly recognized architectural monuments, sculptures, and collection of inscriptions. While it is difficult to ascribe a universal standard to understand the beauty of these sites, from the perspective of local communities, it is in part their age, that they are relatively untouched by modern developments, perceived as wild, and even that they are discolored by the sands of time, which makes them attractive. Hence, efforts aiming to preserve such heritage must, in a sense, be in charge with keeping a sense of authenticity of age, even if a relic is renovated or reconstructed. Disturbing the order of relics is, in this sense, an anti-scientific, anti-aesthetic action, and therefore against preservation efforts. Uncovering the beauties of the past requires surveying the monuments and its elements [21]. This must be completed carefully, because surveying and excavating will inevitably cause parts of the monument to be permanently lost. In other words, it is easy for us to become criminals, in a sense, guilty of destroying the monument. Our best outcome, in some cases, can be to minimize harm to the original structures we are researching.

For instance, the work of preservation of Cham architectural monuments, especially in Quảng Nam, Bình Định, and Ninh Thuận, where many monuments are concentrated, needs more attention. Some restoration projects have built pieces of modern bricks into the structures of ancient temples. It is true that scholars carefully studied the restored building blocks to establish the proper materials, the ability to share, and support the load. Yet, the ancient historical vestiges in the temple have disappeared forever, impacting the natural beauty, architectural details, and sculptures negatively. We need to review the bearing strength and the structural stability of the new masonry, such that it is true to the original, and will help the temple stand for many more years, although we accept that it may not stand forever. Hence, from our perspective, it worth whatever budgetary measures is required to
accomplish such aims. Another approach, for example is to follow the methods used at the E7 temple (Figure 3) group in Mỹ Sơn to completely build new construction after dismantling old relics. Perhaps, there is nothing left to discuss about this case. After completion, it will be the temple of UNESCO not a Champa temple, a most frightening result for the local Cham community. According to media reports, they consider this restoration model to be applicable to other monuments in Mỹ Sơn [19, 20].

While preservation is necessary for us, and we should not bury our heads in the sand for decades worrying about whether we establish if a method of preservation is one hundred percent authentic or not, we should consider more important questions such as how to apply potential technology to the production bricks used to restore local heritage sites. Yet, we are currently faced with a circumstance where each restoration project is becoming more and more of an experiment, compromising the original structure with each new construction. Hence, the effectiveness of these efforts continues to be compromised, as insiders’ voices are left out of the process, despite the simple fact that they know much more about these sites and understand them much better than Vietnamese or international scholars. Furthermore, the preferences of the international community and Vietnamese authorities focused on sites that they thought they could capitalize upon for the tourism industry, while they simply ignored other sites, which are vital, based on the understandings from the Cham community. If degradation is persistent, but we replace and use only the modern material, are Cham temples still real Cham temples? Is conservation really conservation? [22].

5. Promoting value of monuments and local heritages
Champa’s cultural heritage is commonly viewed by bureaucrats as a budgetary cost (-), even though there is not a comprehensive summary to see how much of the national budget and funding are spent on the sites each year, compared to how much associated revenue these sites generate for the tourist industry. For the research, management, and conservation of such heritage, if these are the only matters described, there is an enormous budgetary deficit. Consequentially, bureaucratic minded assessments, which are not robust in their assessment of value, tend to view such heritage sites negatively. Nonetheless, numerous bureaucratic minded assessments strongly emphasize investment for the sake of tourist revenue and advocate for the exploitation of such heritage sites, and for Cham cultural heritage itself, to create profits and produce revenues for the national budgetary burdens. Working at the interstices, this creates opportunities for us to emphasize the nature of Champa heritage sites and promote their value. A culture with hundreds of phenomenal architectural monuments, hundreds of inscriptions, perhaps millions of smaller sculptural and archaeological artifacts of artistic and scholarly value, like those of Champa, can certainly be viewed as valuable, so long as they are visible.

To maximize the visibility of Champa culture, we must understand how to gather materials and link the value of this culture into a unified, digestible, whole, for outside interested bodies. Our studies will need to create a synergy that is strong enough to be competitive. They will also have to be attractive enough to entice the local community, with many scattered monuments and artifacts, which might not otherwise be viewed as valuable enough to be promoted by outside observers. Promoting the value of monuments is cannot be forced, in this sense. Additionally, such work often does not produce immediate revenue, instantly resulting in long-term construction processes including research and conservation. As we continue to develop our approaches, we must take sustainable development into account as well. If research and conservation are polluting to the land, and not completed sustainably, we would certainly lose local support and would also not be able to continue our efforts for many years into the future. While our standards at the present might not quite be ready to profit from the most sustainable and effective methods with respect to the preservation of relics, we are all aware that monuments are being exploited, at least in part, to create a reliable source of income for the tourist industry. We would argue that this income should be spent entirely on preserving such Champa associated objects, to further create a form of self-sustaining public education. Thus, the management of monuments is absolutely critical. We should remember that our main purpose here is research,
education, and the promotion of the understanding of culture, while promoting cultural exchanges, not profits [20].

![Figure 2. North-West (G group) views before and after the intervention in Mỹ Sơn Sanctuary (Source: Lerici Foundation Archive, 2005, 2017)](image)

![Figure 3. E7 views before and after the intervention in Mỹ Sơn Sanctuary (Source: Ngọc Đặng Khánh, 2011, 2015)](image)

6. Action plans towards a Path for the Future

For us to improve the path of preservation and conservation for the future, we have developed a summary plan including main points on how to manage, preserve, and promote the value of Champa’s culture, which we hope will help others engage with this discussion and establish methods for preserving the value of pre-modern heritage sites more broadly.

6.1. Digitizing all Champa monuments

Although at present there is no detailed and comprehensive database of Champa architectural monuments, relics, and sculptures, such an assessment would greatly improve our contemporary understandings. There are models to work from, such as the Zamani Project in the field of African Archaeology, built by the University of Cape Town is one such example. Additionally, one of our authors is currently working with the Database of Religious History, of the University of British Columbia to improve such resources for temple-tower complexes. Furthermore, we have evidence that local Cham communities would support such projects, as there has already been a rather successful digitalization of Cham manuscripts project with the British Library, with several stages of their project already completed. Importantly, these resources provide a form of “software backup.” Essentially even if the temples, sculptures, and inscriptions were to be destroyed, through environmental or other disasters, which we must recognize as an increasingly present threat, given the realities of climate change, there is a digital record that would remain for continued research. Furthermore, we would be able to better systematize the available data, to better understand which methods of preservation would infringe as little as possible upon existing structures. In other words, we would no longer be building houses without the blueprints.
In reality, we would be building upon two massive previous periods of scholarly study of Champa culture. The first was completed in the early years of the twentieth century by archaeologist and architect H. Parmentier. Most of the large and mid-sized monuments across the central region of what is now Vietnam were investigated under his direction. They created descriptions of the monuments, conducted excavations, and published a series of documents. Most importantly, he assessed the architectural and sculptural status of many of the Champa relics, and even drew out plans for potentially restored monuments, even as some of the architectural sites themselves were crumbling. His studies are collected in the tome *Inventaire descriptif des monuments Camb de L’Annam* and a series of subsequent published journal articles [10]. However, this was completed more than a century ago. There has not yet been such a systematic study since, although there have been numerous new discoveries. Additionally, H. Parmentier’s work was done entirely by hand, unassisted by the significant improvements in technology over the past several decades. There was no digital mapping. His study, in other words, could not emphasize true conservation work and was simply “temporary firefighting”.

A second period of systemic study of Champa cultural sites occurred under the project “Building techniques of Champa Temples: Service Restoration and Promotion of the Value of Religions” led by the Institute of Construction, Science, and Technology, which is subordinate to the Ministry of Construction in Vietnam. This new phase of research was quite large and focuses mainly on the structural and technical aspects of the work without intensive investment in the field of architecture, landscape, and sculpture. Additionally, it only focused on several temple-tower complexes, not the entirety of Champa sites. Although there was not nearly as complete a study as with H. Parmentier’s work, there were still a number of achievements. Nonetheless, as the project pursued older methods of restoration, there were many problems. New building blocks were inserted to reinforce towers, accepting the infringement of the foundation of the tower structure. The results obtained through the application of this method are clearly visible at the Khương Mỹ temples of Quảng Nam province [1, 21, 22]. Hence, we would argue that we need to establish standards and methods for the digitization of Champa architectural data. This will help us be much more pragmatic and we can then have methods that will truly build upon the results of H. Parmentier and later studies. This way, we can better cover landscape, architecture, sculpture, structure, and other technical categories. We must also emphasize that without one of these elements, we cannot have a complete set of documents for researching, preserving, and promoting the value of the monuments.

6.2. **Inventory, objects, and inscriptions, digitization of all Cham sculptures**

We have contemporary estimates of hundreds of thousands or even millions of small archaeological artifacts present at Cham heritage sites. These range from the size of portions of small pottery sherds and very small samples up through the size of independent sculptures, inscriptions, and monumental architectural complexes. Known artifacts are concentrated in provincial, district and specialized museums in Vietnam. Prized sculptures can also be found in other museums in Asia, Europe, and North America. However, the collection at the Đà Nẵng Museum of Cham Sculpture, of course, is the most notable. This said there is no program for the systematic assessment of Champa culture at the federal level in Vietnam, even though it should be possible to create such a program. Instead, there are many objects dispersed throughout provincial museums, which lack the resources to create systematic studies. How can our understanding be improved in these conditions? Given the current state of artifacts, an entire systematic study has yet to be completed, although it should be possible to build a database to inventory such materials.

Inscriptions face a similar fate. They are scattered across Vietnam and often only displayed in fragments. Linguistic records are a precious marker of the past, even as the Cham language has transformed across the epochs. In reality only a handful of scholars familiar with modern Cham have worked with experts in Sanskrit, especially in the early 20th century. Yet, we have also a number of records that have been discovered since that has yet to be translated [7]. One constraint is that the number of scholars qualified to translate documents is very small and hence, the work to preserve
these types of artifacts is often not given due attention. There are contemporary research programs for language study. However, they focus on “software” applications, texting, web programs, and so forth. What we require for translation efforts, by contrast is an emphasis on “hardware,” so to speak. We need more on the ground investigations, collections, digitalization efforts, and sufficient portions of time and resources devoted to such efforts. We should also note that there is a local understanding that we do not need to translate every line from every inscription. Why? Not doing so leaves some work for the next generation of scholars that we are currently training. However, complete systematic digitalization of inscriptions, following the Institute for the Study of the Ancient World-EFEO model, which is currently a partial record, would be a great improvement [7].

6.3. Plans preserving the monuments
After completing the systemization of data, we will have the basis for making a much more appropriate conservation plan. The first task of conservation is, essentially, to establish a safety belt, to set up a bounded plan for the surrounding landscape of a site. This work is relatively simple and almost anyone can complete it. Nonetheless, we see many inadequacies in more contemporary attempts at such work, resulting in the loss of landscape due to the failure to reinforce the surrounding ground around architectural sites, as well as the failure to establish clear regulations for such work. We need much more periodic assessments of surfaces around sites, made by archaeologists, more limited excavations, and the establishment of an understanding of the impact of excavations in areas that are affected, especially with regard to the foundations of remaining structures. When preserving and reinforcing architectural monuments themselves according to the old viewpoint, we ought to be reminded of the principles of conservation architects. Kazimierz Kwiatkowski has described this as, “Always strictly adhering to the principle of preserving intact original monuments and original components, not falsifying and not counterfeiting monuments, mainly using technical reinforcement measures to maintain the present status, only partially restored if there is a scientific basis, not to restore, not to mix the original with the new has been added to strengthen”. This should be our aim [1, 20].

6.4. Renovation of Cham museum and re-organization of managerial structure
Based upon our above assessment of the situation, renovating the Cham Museum and adding an additional building, along with re-organizing and federalizing management structures, would improve our systematic study of Cham heritage sites. We would propose a national level museum specifically devoted to the entirety of Champa, under the Ministry of Culture to focus on placing all of the evidence across 13 provinces into a single centralized area of study. Such a venture would require a sacrifice of time, effort and resources, but would result in great benefits for local, national, and global communities. Our proposal would be to solicit input from all provincial and district level museums, national and international research institutes, and most importantly the Cham community. Currently, provincial level museums only feature pieces of Champa history as they relate to provincial history. Yet, due to a lack of local expertise, funding constraints, inadequate facilities, and inability to manage traffic flow, they are simply empty storage facilities in several cases. Often they do not attract any visitors from inside their own provinces, let alone national and international visitors. Even the Museum of Cham Sculpture in Đà Nẵng, the largest Champa themed museum in the world, faces difficulties. Current facilities do not meet the requirements for research, visiting tourists and conservation work. We should note, the museum is very successful in that it has excellent staff and a reliable revenue stream from international visitors, although it is far from the largest contemporary Cham communities. Sadly, we do not believe we can redress the issue of location completely, although we can more easily address some of the weaknesses of the current facilities, which are, simply put, organized only at the provincial level and far too small.

Having considered sites throughout Vietnam, the most suitable location for new facilities to promote Champa and Cham culture in a single site is an area known as the “Golden Triangle” nearby the site of the current Đà Nẵng Museum at No. 02 – Street 2/9 – Đà Nẵng city, next to An Long
Pagoda. This location would allow new facilities to capitalize upon the expertise of local personnel easily. It would also provide an opportunity for the city of Đà Nẵng to build an architectural masterpiece, attracting international visitor, should the city desire to invest in such a structure, which is likely, given the importance of the tourist industry in the local economy. We would recommend that the new building should follow Champa architectural styles, adapted thematically to contemporary aesthetics, with rising towers to create highlights in the skyline, which would be an additional attraction, completing a new bridge to be completed in the city, creating an ideal destination for international visitors. Of course, we would only envision this as a final stage of our current plans, after the most critical “digitalization” and “research” stages, because an architectural and design team working on the planning of such a museum would need a concrete understanding of the requirements of the size of an onsite storage facility for research and archaeological remains from across the aforementioned 13 province region.

Allow us to qualify our assessment by stating the original Đà Nẵng Museum of Cham Sculpture is, of course, already a work of art. Yet, it cannot, after a century of work, meet the needs of the increase in size of displays, protecting objects, and the promotion requirements in the current building. The halls are cramped when large groups of international visitors appear. The sculptures themselves are beginning to crowd the halls, lack appropriate lighting, and visitation halls are simply too small. Our envisioned more expansive display hall would prevent the existing structure from being overwhelmed with the costs of renovation and repair as well. It would alleviate the displays, allowing us to organize them more appropriately, to better conceptualize the notion of harmonious balance so integral to the arts of Champa. Indeed, we would hope visitors come to view the new facilities as one of the most beautiful museums in Southeast Asia, although the new facility would also provide us with an opportunity to restructure the organizations managing Champa and Cham cultural sites under a single organization, meeting the needs of local, national and international communities. What we envision would be a specialized organization on Cham heritage, with an independent legal status, but perhaps working in collaboration with the federal – rather than provincial – offices of the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences and/or the Ministry of Culture. This would be an agency specifically empowered with the charge of unified management of the various organizations associated with the conservation and promotion of Champa monuments and Cham heritage sites across the entirety of Vietnam, as well as managing international collaborations. Yet the potentials of this new building and organization can only be realized if we begin to invest now in the concept of building a new museum upon the land in Đà Nẵng.

**In conclusion**, if we think that the study, conservation, and promotion of Cham cultural values must be further improved, it will be time for the Culture Departments of the provinces of Quảng Bình, Quảng Trị, and Thừa Thiên Huế to take up the mantel of engaging in this process as well. Đà Nẵng, Quảng Ngãi, Bình Định, Phú Yên, Khánh Hòa, Ninh Thuận, Bình Thuận, Gia Lai, and Đắk Lắk, along with research institutes and centers, and the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism of Vietnam should all sit together to come up with a long-term, overall plan for this project. Indeed, this is not simply provincial work that can be completed by individuals alone. It is a transnational and global project, requiring engagement from organizations and experts at all levels.

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