

Hoa Lu - The 10th Century Capital of Vietnam - An Abandoned City by the Sea

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ABSTRACT

The research aims to understand the impact of sea recession on the rise and fall of the Hoa Lu ancient capital city of Vietnam during the 10th-11th centuries. This is done by placing the city in its coastal context, which has been neglected in previous studies. Hoa Lu is currently the core zone of the UNESCO World Heritage Site: Trang An Landscape Complex, located 92km south of Hanoi. It was only used for 42 years (968-1010 CE) as the capital city of the Dai Viet Kingdom before the capital was moved to Thang Long (present-day Hanoi). We believe that one of the main reasons for this move was the sea recession. The available resources for this research include historical documents; geographical surveys using old maps and LiDAR images; archaeological surveys including surface ceramic collections and archaeological excavations. The research questions include: How did the sea and its recession affect the landscape change of the region in the 10th-11th centuries? How did it influence the water management system and the plan of the city? How did it affect the economic activities of the city? The results of the research project will give a more comprehensive understanding of the landscape of the region, including ancient shorelines located south of the city. The sea recession could be the reason why the 10th century seaport of Hoa Lu was abandoned, leading to the capital's move to Thang Long. Although there have been some good results in the early stages of the project, further research and collaboration with international researchers from various disciplines are still needed.

Keywords: Hoa Lu, Vietnam urbanism, ancient shorelines

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INTRODUCTION

We have been conducting a research project on the history and marine properties of Hoa Lu for nearly 10 years. Our preliminary research results show that Hoa Lu was located very close to the sea in the 10th-11th centuries and the sea was an extremely important factor affecting the history of the formation, development, and decline of the ancient capital. The proximity to the sea may have been one reason why Hoa Lu was chosen as a military capital and then was abandoned, as the army could move forward and backwards across the sea quickly and easily. The sea recession, however, made Hoa Lu far from the sea, and it was no longer easy to enter or escape from Hoa Lu by sea. The proximity to the sea has certainly influenced the water management system in Hoa Lu. The influence of tides and seawater certainly also affected the agricultural activities of this area. In addition, the speed of the sea recession in this area has also affected the reclamation and establishment of villages in this area, not only in the 10th-11th centuries but until today.

However, the above issues are only our initial observations. Further studies from different aspects, such as archaeology, geography, and environment, are still needed. This paper will present some preliminary results in the study of marine factors in Hoa Lu including: The change of the political centre of Hoa Lu from the 10th to the 13th century, which may partly show the influence of the sea recession on the political history of the region; Some preliminary information about the ancient shorelines in the south of Hoa Lu; The ancient shrines in the area of ancient shorelines and the relationship between the chronology of the shrines and the villages.

Brief historical and geographical context of Hoa Lu

Hoa Lu was the capital of Vietnam from 968 to 1010. It was the first capital of the independent Viet's kingdom after almost 1000 years of domination by the Han people. After Hoa Lu, the capital was relocated to Thang Long (present-day Hanoi). Hoa Lu played a pivotal role in Vietnamese history, as it marked the end of the Han colonisation era and the beginning of an independent era for Dai Viet. During the 13th century, long after the capital had moved to Thang Long, Hoa Lu was once again chosen as a military base for Dai Viet during the war with the Mongol army. The Tran army strategically chose the southern region of the capital Hoa Lu as the primary location for the king and the key army of the Tran Dynasty during the war.

Hoa Lu is now located in Ninh Binh province, 92km south of Hanoi, in the core zone of the Trang An UNESCO heritage site. The topography of Hoa Lu today shows that the area is low-lying and prone to flooding. At the beginning of the 21st century, before the construction and development of infrastructure and tourism, much of the area was still flooded, and transportation was mainly done by light boats. Currently, some areas in the region are still prone to flooding, particularly during the rainy season.

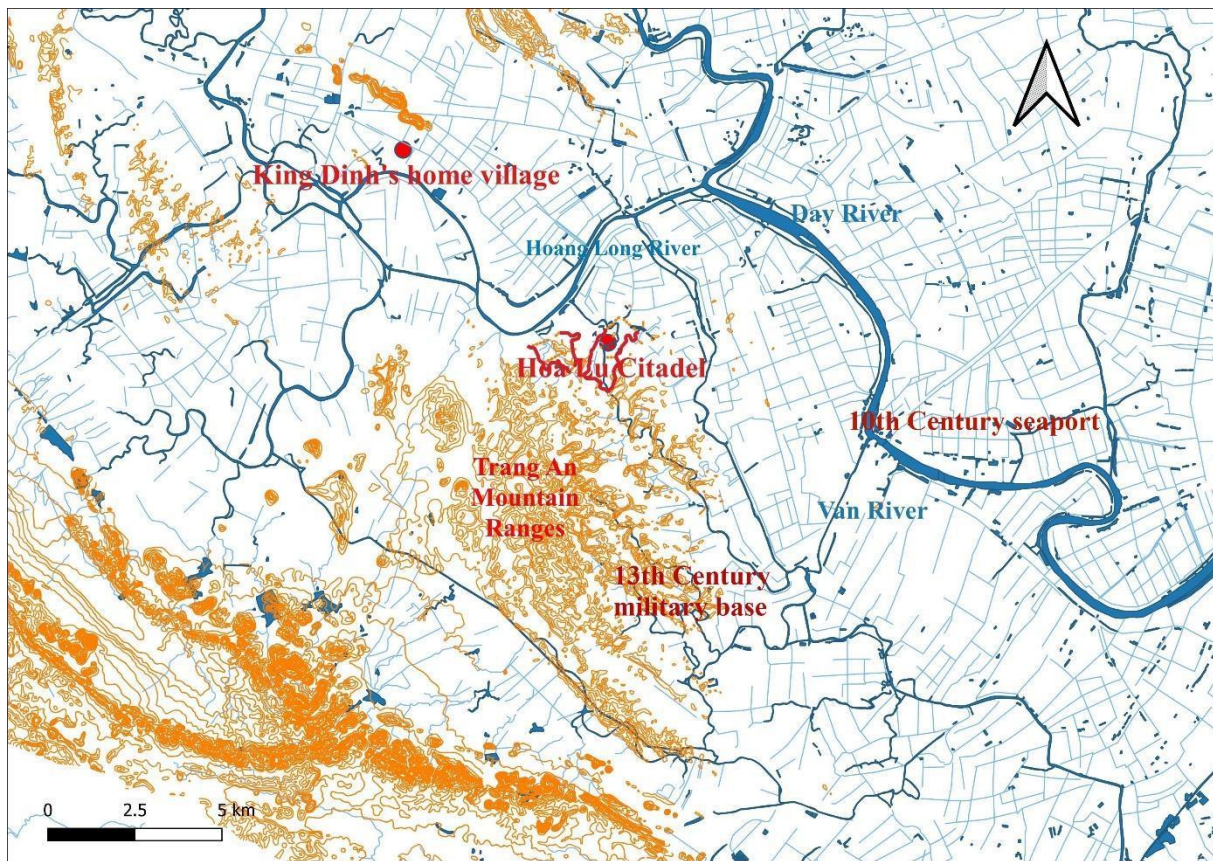


Figure 1: Landscape of the Hoa Lu area (Location names in red: King Dinh's home village, Hoa Lu Citadel, Trang An Mountain Ranges, 13th-century military base, 10th-century seaport; Location names in blue: Hoang Long River, Day River, Van River)

The city is situated on the eastern edge of the Trang An limestone mountain range and was formed by alluvium from two major rivers in the region, the Day River and the Hoang Long River (Figure 1). Additionally, the city is located not far from the coast. Although the exact location of the coastline in the 10th century is unknown, preliminary studies suggest that it was close to the capital. A seaport was built in the 10th century as the southeast gateway from the sea to the capital. The ancient coastline is believed to have run parallel to the dug river, which was the southeast boundary of Hoa Lu. The end of the dug river (the Van River) was the seaport.

The flooding and proximity to the sea are important factors in the birth, development, and decline of the Hoa Lu capital. The locals of Hoa Lu have adapted to the mangrove environment near the sea since prehistoric times, as evidenced by the SUNDASIA Project. When Hoa Lu was chosen as the capital, these experiences of the local residents were utilized, and there were many large reclamation and encroachment projects implemented by the court, especially in the 15th and 19th centuries. The sea dike from the 15th and 19th centuries still exists and serves as a testament to the feats of sea encroachment by the inhabitants of this area. Throughout the history of the indigenous people of Hoa Lu, adaptation to the coastal mangrove environment has been formed and existed. The current centre of Hoa Lu is about 60km from the coast. However, this area is experiencing a relatively rapid rate of coastal erosion. This is evidenced by the fact that the 15th-century sea dyke is only about 13km from the 19th-century sea dyke, and the 19th-century sea dyke is about 15km from the coast today. Historical records show that Hoa Lu was once much closer to the sea. There are traces of a large seaport on the present-day terrain, right at the gateway to the Hoa Lu boundary. (Figure 2)

Hoa Lu – a seaside capital city

To redefine the Vietnamese urban concept, we have situated Hoa Lu within the context of low-density large cities that bear greater resemblance to mainland Southeast Asian urban settlements than to cities in Europe or China (Vo et al. 2021). Previous studies mostly focused on the architecture and architectural materials of the central area of the Hoa Lu capital. They mostly did not mention the sea and the relationship between Hoa Lu and the sea. This makes our perception of Hoa Lu still one-sided and limited. Our revision of the concept and expansion of the research scope on Hoa Lu has led us to realise that without considering the city's coastal location, it would be impossible to grasp the nature of this urban area. Hoa Lu is not solely an urban area constructed in limestone mountains and surrounded by large rivers, but it is also a city in proximity to the sea. This realisation not only influences our comprehension of the urban plan but also provides insight into why it became the capital and why it was abandoned as such after only 43 years. To address these significant questions, more interdisciplinary and archaeological studies are necessary. Despite limited resources, our preliminary research on this matter has generated some preliminary findings over the years.

The 13th-century military base and the shifting of the central area

So far, despite numerous archaeological excavations in the central area of Hoa Lu, no research has been conducted on marine elements in the 10th – 11th centuries. However, based on available data, it can be concluded that Hoa Lu was originally chosen and constructed as a robust capital and military base primarily due to its strategic geographical location. The city is surrounded by mountain ranges, creating a strong protective boundary, and is located close to flooded valleys with many caves and rugged mountains, making it easy to withdraw troops in times of external attacks. Additionally, the large and small rivers in and around the city centre made transportation to the sea very convenient, with a distance of just over 10km from the city centre to the coastal port.

During the 13th century, when Dai Viet faced the Mongol army, Hoa Lu was selected as the Tran army's retreat base. However, this time, the base was moved south of the centre of Hoa Lu. In 2022, several excavations and archaeological surveys were carried out in the military base area, south of the centre of Hoa Lu (Vo 2022). Initial data was obtained on the size and nature of the foundations, archaeological artefacts found in the area, and information about the system of monuments and legends related to the site. These initial data suggest that this area was most likely a military base near the sea, acting as a strategic forward area to protect the Thang Long capital in the southern coastal area of the country.

Therefore, it can be assumed that Hoa Lu has always been an important military area near the sea of Dai Viet for centuries. The shift of military bases from the 10th to the 13th centuries towards the south-southeast may indicate a shift in the coastline, as the sea receded from the location of the 10th-century dug river and the 10th-century seaport to the location of the 13th-century military area after three centuries.

Ancient shorelines at the Southeast of Hoa Lu (Figure 2, 3)

The map below illustrates the simulated location of ancient coastlines using aerial photography, field surveys, and the locations of archaeological sites and sea dikes from the 15th and 19th centuries. Nevertheless, further research is required to comprehensively define and comprehend this matter.

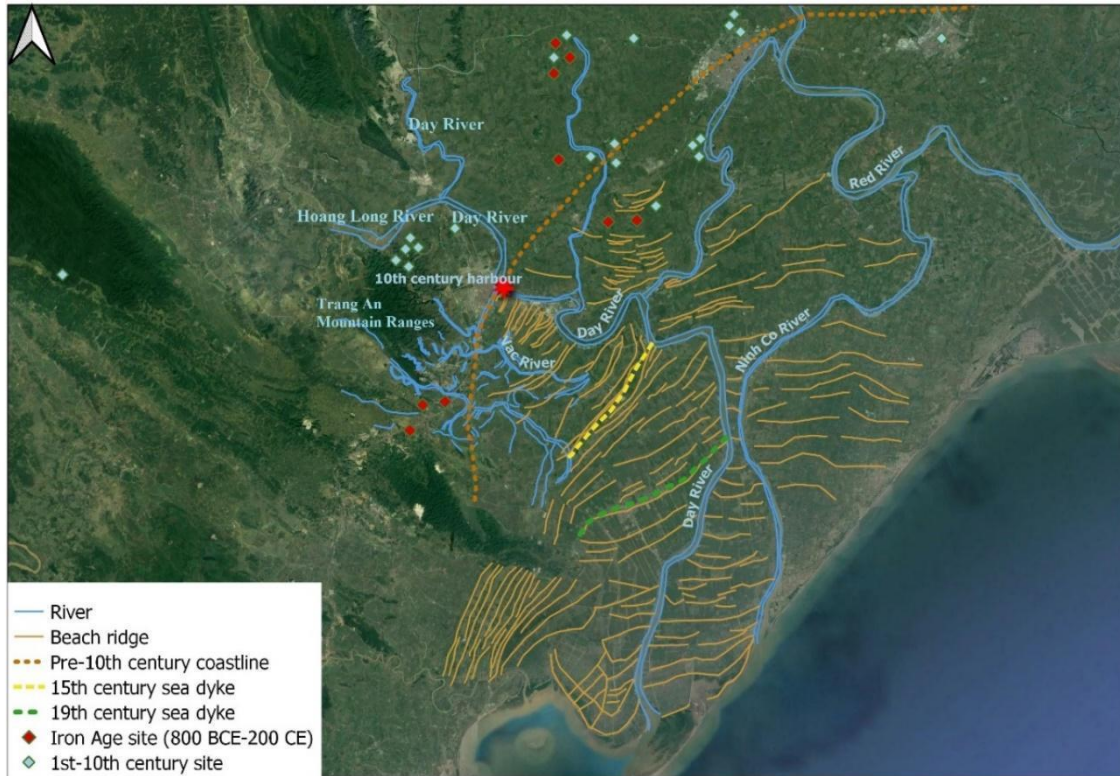


Figure 2: Hoa Lu in relation to the coastline in the 10th century (The pre-10th century coastline based on Van Maren (Van 2004, 12) and 1st-10th centuries and Iron Age sites based on Nishimura (Masanari 2005, 99-107).

After conducting surface surveys and examining Lidar images, we obtained primary results from three sediment hand cores. These samples contained mainly pure, salty sand, supporting our hypothesis about ancient shorelines in the southeast of Hoa Lu. However, this is only the preliminary result and further sediment sampling, and archaeological research is required to obtain more information. This task is essential for our upcoming research stages, as we aim to date the shrines in this area and examine the changes in ancient shorelines. Understanding the relationship between the shrines and the development of ancient shorelines will provide insight into the connection between Hoa Lu and the sea, and aid in comprehending the city's water control planning.

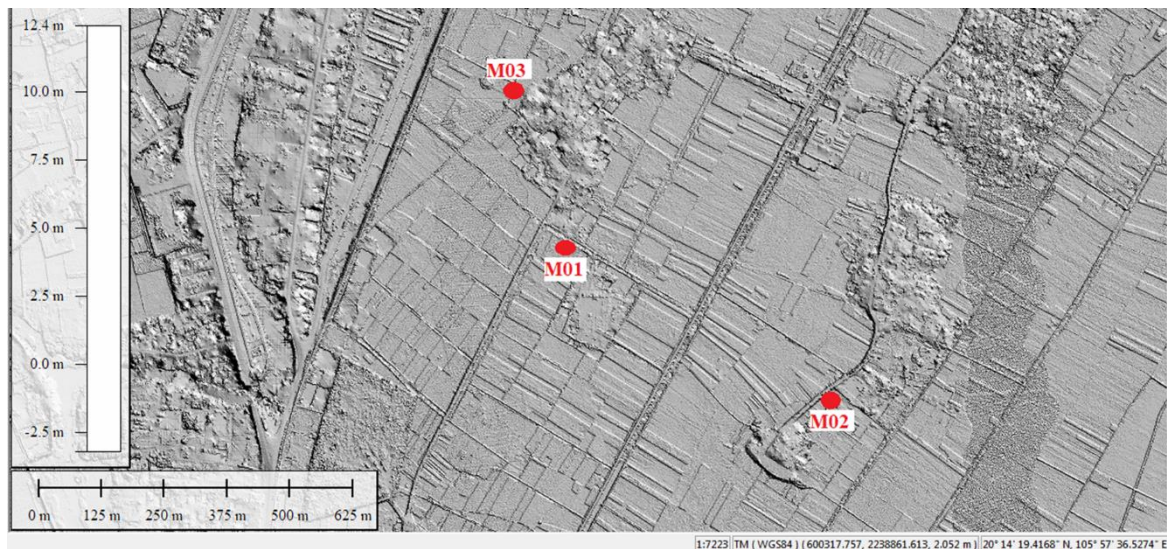


Figure 3: Location of the sediment hand cores (based on LiDAR image)

The ancient shrines at the South – East of Hoa Lu (Figure 4)

Based on field surveys and historical documents, we have compiled a list of 37 ancient shrines located in the South-East of Hoa Lu. We have divided the shrines into two groups: those inside the area enclosed by the Day River to the north of the Van canal (red triangles in Figure 4), and those to the south of the canal (yellow triangles in Figure 4). However, the shrines located south of Hoa Lu pose a problem, as they are traditionally dated back to the 10th century and are said to honour the generals of the Hoa Lu rulers. The issue with these shrines is that the dates do not align with the successive locations of the coastline from the 10th to the 19th century. These shrines lie between the location of the 10th century harbour and naval base and the 15th century sea dike. This means that if they were built during the 40-year duration of the Hoa Lu capital, the entire progradation of the coastline between the 10th century line and the location of the 15th century sea dyke took only 40 years, which is problematic.

There are two possible interpretations of this situation. First, the shoreline could have moved very rapidly since the 10th century, and the shrines were added at that time. However, this is geomorphically problematic because the Non-Nuoc inscription refers to the sea still being near Non Nuoc even in the 15th century. Alternatively, and we incline to this second interpretation - the shoreline prograded gradually between the 10th and the 15th century, and the shrines that are ascribed to 10th century warriors were added later in honour of 10th century warrior heroes. Additionally, we only found later ceramics in these shrines, not 10th century ceramics. Future research that involves excavating in the shrine enclosures will provide answers to this issue.

An important task in the next stage of the research will be to date these shrines and examine the change in the location of the former shorelines. Understanding the relationship between the shrines and the development of the former shorelines will provide insight into the connection between Hoa Lu and the sea.

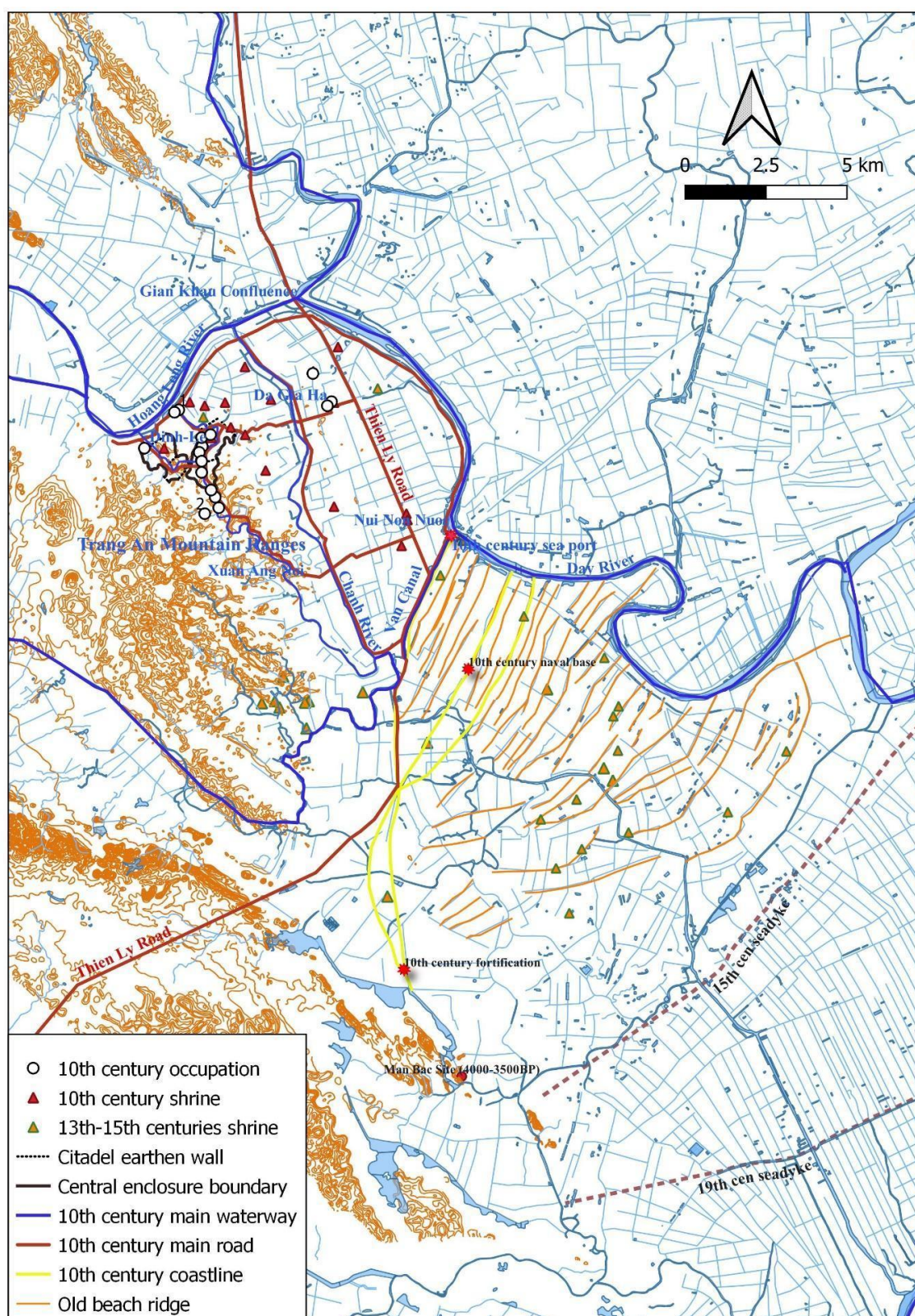


Figure 4: A comprehensive map of Hoa Lu with the location of 13th – 15th centuries and 10th century shrines. (Location names in blue: Gian Khau Confluence, Hoang Long River, Hoa Lu, Da Gia Ha, Trang An Mountain Ranges, Xuan Ang Noi, Nui Non Nuoc, Chanh River, Van Canal, 10th century seaport, Day River; Location names in black: 10th century naval base, 10th century fortification, Man Bac site (4000-3500BP), 15th century sea dyke, 19th century sea dyke)

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