

# National Territory of Đại Việt during the Lý Dynasty (1009 - 1225)

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**Abstract:** Following the establishment of the Lý Dynasty in 1009 (Kỷ Dậu), Lý Thái Tổ made a historical decision to relocate the capital from Hoa Lư to Đại La, renaming it Thăng Long. This move symbolized the aspirations of a newly unified state seeking to assert its sovereignty and foster long-term stability. It embodies the nation's ambitions for growth, strength, and resilience, aligning with the broader vision of consolidating a centralized monarchy and ensuring the enduring success of the Lý Dynasty. From the outset of his reign, Lý Thái Tổ undertook critical steps to refine the central and regional administrative structures, strengthen the military, and promote economic and cultural development, thereby laying the institutional foundations for a sovereign, self-reliant state. Most notably, under the reigns of Lý Thánh Tông (1054-1072) and Lý Nhân Tông (1072-1127), Đại Việt reached a period of significant development, achieving sufficient strength to resist external threats, maintain territorial integrity, and expand its borders. Based on historical records and research, this article aims to clarify the territorial evolution of Đại Việt under the Lý Dynasty, examining the political, military, and administrative structures that shaped its development during the period from 1009 to 1225.

**Keywords:** Đại Việt, territory, Lý Dynasty, 1009 - 1225.

**Subject classification:** History.

## 1. Introduction

The control of national territory has always been a central issue for any

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political system throughout the nation's history. Territorial boundaries are among the most critical factors affirming a nation's sovereignty and territorial integrity. In practice, territorial boundaries are variables, changing with the flow of history in response to the historical, political, economic, cultural, and social contexts of a given state. The study of Vietnam's territorial boundaries, borders, and sovereignty has attracted significant attention from both domestic and international scholars. Within the scope of this paper, we focus specifically on the territorial issue of Đại Việt during the Lý Dynasty (1009-1225), examining the political, military, and administrative factors that shaped the territorial landscape of this period.

The issue of national territory under the Lý Dynasty (1009-1225) is mentioned in several foundational historical texts, including the "*Việt sử lược*" (A brief of Vietnamese history, translated by Trần Quốc Vượng, 2005), "*Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*" - *The complete annals of Đại Việt*, and "*Đại Việt sử ký tục biên*" - *Supplementary edition of the annals of Đại Việt* (official histories of the Lê Dynasty), as well as "*Khâm định Việt sử thông giám cương mục*" - *The imperially ordered annotated text completely reflecting the history of Việt* (compiled by the National History Office of the Nguyễn Dynasty)... These works, primarily focused on political and military affairs and the actions of monarchs, often reflect the territorial evolution of Đại Việt only indirectly, capturing these shifts through the lens of political and military events. In addition to these official chronicles, numerous historical geography texts provide valuable insights into the territorial boundaries of the Lý era. Notable examples include Đặng Xuân Bồng's "*Việt sử cương mục tiết yếu*". Additionally, Đào Duy Anh (2017) also touches on territorial matters from this period. Over the past several decades, comprehensive histories of Vietnam have provided more generalized overviews of the Lý period's territorial boundaries, placing them within the broader context of Vietnamese history. One of the referenced works is from Phan Huy Lê (2004) with contributions from some other scholars. Specialized studies on the Lý Dynasty have expanded significantly, including monographs, journal articles and conference proceedings, signalling the growing academic interest in this particular period. Scholarly interest in the Lý Dynasty has steadily expanded, driven in part by pioneering works from the renowned scholar Hoàng Xuân Hãn (2003). It focused on the political and diplomatic relations between the Lý and Song dynasties, marked a turning point in the academic exploration of Lý-era politics. As interest in the Lý Dynasty's diplomatic history grew, so too did scholarly attention to the related issues of territorial boundaries and frontier management, leading to a broader understanding of the political and geographical landscape of Đại Việt during this critical period.

The issue of diplomatic relations between the Lý Dynasty and neighboring countries was studied in a number of articles in the proceedings of the conference “*1000 years of the Lý Dynasty and the capital Thăng Long*”, for example, that of Trần Thị Vinh (2009). Through diplomatic relations, we can see the policies and actions of the Lý Dynasty in affirming national territorial sovereignty.

Based on historical records and research on Lý Dynasty, by using scientific research methods, basically historical methods, logical methods, the territorial evolution of Đại Việt under the Lý Dynasty is clarified.

## **2. Historical context**

In the year 1009 (Kỷ Dậu), the Lý Dynasty was established. In the following year, which is 1010 (Canh Tuất), King Lý Thái Tổ made the decision to relocate the capital from Hoa Lư to Đại La, renaming it Thăng Long. This decision, aimed at “securing a grand legacy” and “creating a foundation for countless generations, in accordance with the will of Heaven above and the will of the people below, ensuring and enduring the nation’s prosperity and the flourishing of its customs” (National History Bureau of Lê Dynasty, 1993: 241). The name “Thăng Long” meaning “Ascending Dragon” symbolized the rising strength and aspirations of the Vietnamese people, aligning with the Lý Dynasty’s ambition to build a strong, centralized monarchy capable of enduring through the ages.

In 1054 (Giáp Ngọ), King Lý Thánh Tông further reinforced this vision by renaming the country Đại Việt, reaffirming the dynasty’s commitment to establishing a powerful, independent kingdom. This foundational principle appears to have guided the Lý rulers from the dynasty’s inception through the reigns of subsequent monarchs. From the beginning of his rule, King Lý Thái Tổ took steps to strengthen central and local government institutions, built a capable military, and foster economic and cultural development, creating the foundations of an independent, self-reliant nation. Especially, under the reigns of King Lý Thánh Tông (1054-1072) and King Lý Nhân Tông (1072-1127), Đại Việt experienced significant growth in all aspects, developing a formidable military force, capable of repelling foreign threats, preserve national independence, and expand its territorial boundaries, maintaining a prosperous peaceful era.

Directly linked to the territorial stability of Đại Việt during the Lý Dynasty (1009 - 1225) were the diplomatic relations with the Song Dynasty to the north and

the Champa Kingdom to the south. Shortly after establishing the capital at Thăng Long, the Lý King recognized the importance of diplomacy with the Song Dynasty. “In the summer, the fourth lunar month, [the Lý court] sent the officials Lý Nhân Nghĩa and Đào Khánh Văn on an courtesy mission to the Song to reciprocate formal courtesies” (National History Bureau of Lê Dynasty, 1993: 242). This early diplomatic mission reflects the Lý court’s awareness of the crucial role that formal relations with the Song Dynasty would play in securing its northern frontier. Over the 216 years of Lý rule, a total of 22 diplomatic missions were sent to the Song court (National History Bureau of Lê Dynasty, 1993: 240-340). In response, the Song Kings conferred royal titles upon several Lý monarchs, including Lý Thái Tổ, Lý Thái Tông, Lý Thánh Tông, Lý Nhân Tông, Lý Thần Tông, Lý Anh Tông, and Lý Cao Tông, demonstrating the effectiveness of Lý diplomacy in securing recognition from the powerful northern empire:

Lý Thái Tổ: The Song Dynasty bestowed upon him the title *Giao Chỉ Quận Vương* (Head of *Giao Chỉ* district) and appointed him as military governor of the *Tĩnh Hải* Army in the year *Canh Tuất* (1010). Later, he was granted the title *Nam Bình Vương* (Southern Pacifying King) in the year *Bính Thìn* (1016) (National History Bureau of Lê Dynasty, 1993: 242, 245).

Lý Thái Tông: The Song court conferred the title *Quận Vương* (Head of a district) upon King Lý Thái Tông in the year *Kỷ Tỵ* (1029), and later elevated him to *Nam Bình Vương* in December of the year *Mậu Dần* (1038) (National History Bureau of Lê Dynasty, 1993: 254, 259).

Lý Thánh Tông: In October of the year *Ất Mùi* (1055), the Song Dynasty granted Lý Thánh Tông the title *Giao Chỉ Quận Vương*, and in the year *Đinh Mùi* (1067), he was promoted to *Nam Bình Vương* (National History Bureau of Lê Dynasty, 1993: 271, 274).

Lý Nhân Tông: The Song Dynasty appointed Lý Nhân Tông as *Giao Chỉ Quận Vương* in the year *Quý Sửu* (1073), and later as *Nam Bình Vương* in the year *Đinh Mão* (1087) (National History Bureau of Lê Dynasty, 1993: 277, 282).

Lý Thần Tông: The Song Dynasty conferred the title *Giao Chỉ Quận Vương* on Lý Thần Tông in December of the year *Nhâm Tý* (1132) (National History Bureau of Lê Dynasty, 1993: 306).

Lý Anh Tông: In the year *Kỷ Mùi* (1139), Lý Anh Tông was titled *Giao Chỉ Quận Vương* by the Song Dynasty, and in July of the year *Giáp Thân* (1164), he was elevated to *An Nam Quốc Vương* (King of An Nam) (National History Bureau

of Lê Dynasty, 1993: 312, 323).

Lý Cao Tông: The Song Dynasty conferred upon Lý Cao Tông the title An Nam Quốc Vương in January of the year Bính Ngọ (1186) (National History Bureau of Lê Dynasty, 1993: 329).

A long-standing, respectful relationship was characterized by a mutual recognition of sovereignty, with the Lý court carefully maintaining a diplomatic stance that emphasized respect for the Song, reflecting a nuanced approach to foreign relations that balanced power and diplomacy.

Within a narrower scope, frontier disputes intermittently affected Lý - Song relations, although both courts generally exercised restraint in managing their shared borderlands. In the year 1022 (Nhâm Tuất), King Lý Thái Tổ ordered Dục Thánh Vương to carry out a campaign against Đại Nguyên Lịch; Đại Nguyên Lịch is a Di ethnic group living between two lands: Như Hồng garrison of Song and Triều Dương of Đại Việt (Triều Dương had the old name of Vĩnh An district, changed to Triều Dương in 1023 (Quý Hợi), now belongs to Quảng Ninh province and Lạng Sơn province). His forces penetrated into the Như Hồng garrison (then under Song control), burned its granaries, and withdrew swiftly (National History Bureau of Lê Dynasty, 1993: 246). Meanwhile, from 1034 to 1037, the Song court declined a local chieftain, Trần Côn Tĩnh, who sought admission of his 600 followers into Song territory - an overture intended to preserve the countries' amity. Nonetheless, unintended incidents continued to strain relations on both sides. The revolt of Nùng Trí Cao in the 1040s - 1050s epitomized how border unrest could complicate interstate ties. In 1062 (Nhâm Dần), another leader, Nùng Tôn Đán, petitioned Song authorities to recognize the cave-districts of Lôi Hỏa and Kế Thành - under his jurisdiction - as Song dependencies, receiving in return administrative charge of Thuận An prefecture and grants of oxen, salt, and silk. In the following year of 1064 and 1069 (Giáp Thìn and Kỷ Dậu respectively), Nùng Trí Cao's brother, Nùng Trí Hội, likewise sought Song investiture for Vật Dương prefecture and was granted official rank amongst the Song Dynasty (Nguyễn Quang Ngọc, 2022: 345-346). These events compelled the Lý court to re its frontier governance, strengthen measures against potential rebellion, and guard against Song ill-intent ambitions toward Đại Việt.

To the south, Champa suspended tribute and diplomatic exchanges with Đại Việt for sixteen years, from 1028 to 1043 (National History Bureau of Lê Dynasty, 1993: 264) and periodically raided Vietnamese borderlands. From the 1040s under Jaya Sinhavarman III (referred to in Vietnamese sources as “Sạ Đầu”), border and

coastal tensions escalated even further. Under his successor Rudravarman (“Chế Củ”), Champa not only refused tribute but also covertly rearmed for an offensive against Đại Việt while seeking an understanding with the Song court, nascently forming an alliance against Đại Việt.

Thus, Lý - Song and Lý - Champa relations experienced alternating phases of harmony and conflict, directly shaping Đại Việt’s frontier and territorial policies. Nevertheless, thanks to its internal reforms and military strength, the Lý Dynasty ultimately secured its sovereign borders and even expanded its sphere of influence among neighboring monarchies.

### **3. Establishing geographical boundaries and administrative organization**

The territorial boundaries of Đại Việt during the Lý Dynasty (1009 - 1225) were generally defined as follows: to the north, it bordered the Song Empire; to the south, it reached the territory of Champa; to the east, it extended to Biển Đông (the East Sea, also known as the South China Sea); and to the west, it bordered Ai Lao. The process of establishing these geographical boundaries was closely intertwined with the organization of administrative structures.

Alongside the establishment of territorial boundaries, the Lý Dynasty developed a central and local administrative apparatus to govern its territory. After relocating the capital from Hoa Lư to Đại La, renamed Thăng Long in the seventh lunar month of the year Canh Tuất (1010), King Lý Thái Tổ undertook the construction of a comprehensive palace complex. This included the Triều Nguyên Hall as the main structure, with the Tập Hiền Hall to the left and the Giảng Vũ Hall to the right. Behind these, the Càn Nguyên Hall was erected, along with the Long An and Long Thụy Halls. On either side, the Nhật Quang (Sunlight) and Nguyệt Minh (Moonlight) Halls were built, while the Thúy Hoa Pavilion stood at the rear. The complex also featured the Hưng Thiên and Thăng Nghiêm Temples and the Ngũ Phụng Tinh Tower. The following year, the Thái Thanh Palace, four additional temples, the Trần Phúc scripture repository, and the Hàm Quang Hall were also constructed. (*A brief of Vietnamese history*, 2005: 75).

The central administrative apparatus of the Lý Dynasty gradually matured over successive reigns. In the first two years of his rule, King Lý Thái Tổ conferred noble titles upon his close relatives, bestowing ranks such as Thái sư (Grand

Preceptor), Thái úy (Grand Marshal), Thái phó (Grand Protector), Thái bảo (Grand Guardian), Tổng quản (Chief Manager), Tướng công (Grand Commander), Khu mật sứ (Privy Councilor), and Viên ngoại lang (Gentleman of the Outer Court). By the reign of King Lý Thái Tông (1028 - 1054), the monarchy bureaucracy had become more fully established (Nguyễn Minh Tường, 2015: 73). The royal court was organized into two main branches: Văn (Civil) and Võ (Military), each led by the Tam thái (Three Grand Ministers) or Tam công (Three Dukes), consisting of the Thái sư (Grand Preceptor), Thái phó (Grand Protector), and Thái bảo (Grand Guardian). Supporting them were the Tam thiếu (Three Lesser Ministers), also known as the Tam cô, including the Thiếu sư (Lesser Preceptor), Thiếu phó (Lesser Protector), and Thiếu bảo (Lesser Guardian) (Nguyễn Minh Tường, 2015: 71-104). The civil branch included the Lục bộ (Six Ministries): Bộ Lại (Personnel), Bộ Hộ (Revenue), Bộ Lễ (Rites), Bộ Binh (War), Bộ Hình (Justice), and Bộ Công (Public Works). These ministries were supported by various offices, including the Thượng thư sảnh (Department of State Affairs), Trung thư sảnh (Secretariat), and Hàn lâm viện (Academy of Letters). Specialized institutions like the Quốc Tử Giám (National Academy) and the Thập hỏa thư gia (Office of Archives) also played significant roles (Nguyễn Minh Tường, 2015: 71-104). According to Đặng Xuân Bảng, the Trung thư sảnh (Secretariat) was headed by the Trung thư lệnh (Chief Secretary), who held a critical advisory role in deliberating major state affairs. Below this position were the Trung thư Thị lang (Assistant Secretary), Trung thư Xá nhân (Palace Attendant), and Tả hữu gián nghị đại phu (Left and Right Censorate Ministers), who specialized in providing counsel and remonstrance (Đặng Xuân Bảng, 2014: 502). The Hàn lâm viện (Academy of Letters) was the royal institution responsible for drafting imperial edicts, decrees, proclamations, and memorials. It was established in 1086 (Bính Dần), when the state organized competitive examinations to select scholars for the academy. Mạc Hiến Tích was one of the first to pass this examination, earning the title Hàn lâm Học sĩ (Academician of the Academy of Letters) (National History Bureau of Lê Dynasty, 1993: 281). Directly assisting the King was the Tể tướng (Prime Minister) and Á tướng (Deputy Prime Minister). The government also included the Khu mật viện (Privy Council), which oversaw military and civil affairs, alongside the Lục bộ (Six Ministries): Bộ Lại (Personnel), Bộ Hộ (Revenue), Bộ Lễ (Rites), Bộ Binh (War), Bộ Hình (Justice), and Bộ Công (Public Works). These ministries were led by officials holding the title Thượng thư (Minister). Historian Phan Huy Chú noted that while the title Thượng thư originated during the Lý Dynasty, the exact structure and naming of these ministries remain unclear (Phan Huy Chú, 2007: 555). In some

cases, the ministries were headed by *Thị lang* (Assistant Ministers) rather than *Thượng thư*. As he further explained, “In the early Lý period, positions like *Trung thư Thị lang* (Assistant Secretary of the Secretariat) and *Bộ Thị lang* (Assistant Minister of a Ministry) existed, though not all six ministries were fully organized at the time” (Phan Huy Chú, 2007: 528). According to Trần Thị Vinh, by the reign of King Lý Nhân Tông (1072-1127), the six ministries were firmly established, as confirmed by stone inscriptions from that period (Trần Thị Vinh, 2009: 286-287). Alongside the *Văn ban* (Civil Branch) was the *Võ ban* (Military Branch), which included titles such as *Thượng tướng* (Senior General), *Nguyên soái* (Marshal), *Đại nguyên soái* (Grand Marshal), *Đô thống* (Commander-in-Chief), *Đại tướng* (General), and *Điện tiền chỉ huy sứ* (Commander of the Palace Guard). Additionally, a dedicated group of *hoạn quan* (eunuchs) served in the inner court, attending to the personal affairs of the King.

King Lý Thái Tổ initiated the administrative reorganization of the entire kingdom by replacing the *Thập đạo*, i. e. 10 *đạo* (regional military districts) with 24 *lộ* and converting *Châu Hoan* and *Châu Ái* into military frontier regions known as *trại* (frontier outposts) (National History Bureau of Lê Dynasty, 1993: 242). The *Thập đạo* system had originally been established by the Đinh Dynasty, but under the Lý Dynasty, it was reorganized into 24 *lộ*, although historical records provide only partial lists of these. There are 12 *lộ*, including: *Thiên Trường lộ*, *Quốc Oai lộ*, *Hải Đông lộ*, *Kiến Xương lộ*, *Khoái lộ*, *Hoàng Giang lộ*, *Long Hưng lộ*, *Bắc Giang lộ*, *Trường Yên lộ*, *Hồng lộ*, *Thanh Hóa lộ*, *Diễn Châu lộ*. The Nguyễn Dynasty historians added a critical commentary, noting that the Đinh Dynasty had originally organized its territories into *Thập đạo quân* (Ten Military Districts), while the Early Lê Dynasty had later reorganized them into “*lộ*”, “*phủ*” (prefectures), and “*châu*” (sub-prefectures). The Lý reorganization into 24 *lộ* further complicated the administrative landscape, and the precise names and boundaries of these *lộ* remain unclear in historical texts. The Nguyễn scholars speculated that “*châu*” (sub-prefectures) were perhaps upgraded to *lộ* during this reorganization, while *Châu Hoan* and *Châu Ái* were designated as *trại* (frontier outposts) due to their position along the kingdom’s periphery, reflecting their strategic importance in defending the borders (National History Bureau of the Nguyễn Dynasty, 2007: 271).

According to the scholar Đào Duy Anh, the administrative structure of the Lý Dynasty likely drew inspiration from the Song Dynasty, as indicated by the presence of official titles such as *Tri phủ* (Prefect), *Phán phủ* (Vice-Prefect), and *Tri châu* (Sub-prefect). This suggests that the Lý Dynasty organized its territory into multiple *lộ*, each consisting of one to three *phủ* (prefectures) and numerous *châu*



(sub-prefectures) (Đào Duy Anh, 2017: 192-193).

In 1010 (Canh Tuất), the ancient capital Hoa Lư was renamed Phủ Trường An, while Bắc Giang became known as Thiên Đức Giang, and Cổ Pháp was renamed Phủ Thiên Đức (*A brief of Vietnamese History*, 2005: 75).

The scholar Đào Duy Anh reasons that the three *châu* of Bồ Chính, Địa Lý (renamed Lâm Bình in 1075), and Ma Linh (renamed Minh Linh in the same year), along with the Đạo Lâm Tây, when added to the already established 20 *lộ*, would indeed form the full set of 24 *lộ*. He further speculates that the figure of 24 *lộ* recorded in the *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* might actually reflect the administrative organization of the late Lý Dynasty, rather than the initial reforms of Lý Thái Tổ. This, he suggests, raises the possibility that the *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* compilers were retroactively applying the later territorial structure to the early reign of Lý Thái Tổ, even though the full 24 *lộ* system may not have been fully developed at that point (Đào Duy Anh, 2017: 193-194, 197).

At the administrative level below the larger *phủ* (prefecture) or *châu* (sub-prefecture), there existed smaller units known as “*châu bậc dưới*” (subordinate sub-prefecture). Historical records, such as the Complete annals of Đại Việt, indicate that these were typically governed by local leaders referred to as *thủ lĩnh* (chieftains). Most of these subordinate *châu* were situated in the upland regions, where governance was often in the hands of hereditary tribal chiefs or local clan leaders. In addition to these, there were other administrative units including “*hương*” (communes), “*giáp*”, “*trại*” (camp), and “*động*”. The “*hương*” and “*giáp*” functioned as administrative units roughly equivalent to districts or townships in the lowland plains, while “*trại*” and “*động*” were found mainly in mountainous or border areas. These latter units often had a more military or frontier-oriented role, reflecting the geographic and political challenges of those regions (Đào Duy Anh, 2017: 198-199).

According to the author Nguyễn Minh Tường, the administrative units in Đại Việt during the Lý Dynasty included *lộ*, *phủ* (prefectures), *châu* (sub-prefectures), *huyện* (districts), *hương* (communes), and *xã* (villages), with “*động*” used to refer to village-level units in mountainous regions (Nguyễn Minh Tường, 2015: 355).

During the Lý Dynasty, the territory and administrative units of Đại Việt expanded further south. In the year Quý Mùi (1043), Cham forces invaded and plundered the coastal regions of Đại Cồ Việt, an event recorded in Vietnamese chronicles as the “*giặc gió mùa*” (monsoon invaders). In the year Giáp Thân (1044), King Lý Thái Tông personally led the army to suppress the Cham forces (according

to National History Bureau of Lê Dynasty, 1993: 266-267), reestablishing tributary relations, which Cham thereafter observed until Ất Tỵ (1065). The Lý kings - Lý Thái Tổ, Lý Thái Tông, and Lý Thánh Tông - successfully maintained Đại Việt's southern frontier against Cham incursions. However, under King Rudravarman (called "Chế Củ" in Vietnamese sources), Champa neither submitted nor remained passive. Instead, they covertly prepared forces, allied with the Song Dynasty, and plotted to attack Đại Việt. To thwart this alliance, in the year Kỷ Dậu (1069), King Lý Thánh Tông appointed General Lý Thường Kiệt as the vanguard commander and marshal to lead an army of 50,000 troops against the Champa capital Vijaya (in Bình Định), capturing King Chế Củ and bringing him to Thăng Long (Hanoi) (National History Bureau of Lê Dynasty, 1993: 274-275). Chế Củ voluntarily ceded the territories of the châu Địa Lý, Ma Linh, and Bồ Chính. Thus, by 1069, Đại Việt's national boundaries extended southward beyond the Hoành Sơn range to include these three "*châu*" (sub-prefecture), corresponding to present-day Quảng Bình and Quảng Trị provinces. Despite this expansion, Champa frequently launched attacks during the 12<sup>th</sup> century to reclaim the three "*châu*" (sub-prefecture), forcing the Lý court to dispatch prominent generals like Lý Thường Kiệt, Lý Công Bình, and Grand Marshal Tô Hiến Thành to quell these incursions and secure the southern lands. The Lý Dynasty established local officials and administrative structures in these newly acquired châu to facilitate governance. In 1075 (Ất Mão), during King Lý Nhân Tông's reign, Champa again harassed the border; Lý Thường Kiệt led the army in a campaign that did not succeed militarily but took the opportunity to survey the geography of the three sub pre-fecture. Subsequently, "châu Địa Lý" was renamed "châu Lâm Bình", and "châu Ma Linh" became "châu Minh Linh", with efforts made to recruit and settle populations there (National History Bureau of Lê Dynasty, 1993: 278). Assigning officials and settling people in these regions was an effective strategy for the Lý Dynasty to assert territorial sovereignty.

During the Lý Dynasty, alongside the establishment of clearly defined territorial boundaries, Đại Việt effectively defended its sovereignty against northern invasions. The Song Dynasty harbored significant ambitions to invade Đại Việt as a solution to its internal political, military, and social difficulties at the time. Moreover, the Song found an ally in Champa's plans to seek a coalition, prompting the Song to actively prepare military forces to attack Đại Việt in the 1070s. Vương An Thạch's domestic reforms bolstered the Song's military capacity and centralized authority. As Phan Đại Doãn (1981: 37) notes, "The purpose of Vương An Thạch's reforms was to reorganize the central empire, enhance the economic and military strength of the Song Dynasty, thereby creating political prestige to resist the Liao

and Western Xia in the north and to invade Đại Việt in the south.” The Song’s invasion plan was further supported by officials such as Phan Bội and border administrators including Tưởng Khánh Du, Đào Bật, Tiêu Cố, Tiêu Chú, Thẩm Khởi, and Lưu Di, all of whom harbored expansionist ambitions (Nguyễn Quang Ngọc, 2022: 293-294). In 1072, upon the death of King Lý Thánh Tông, his six-year-old son Lý Càn Đức ascended the throne. The Lý Dynasty faced internal challenges and growing external threats from warlike forces eager to exploit the situation. King Tống Thần Tông expressed his ambition for the rich lands of Đại Việt: “It is said that the region of Khê Động (Giao Chỉ) holds many treasures. After Giao Chỉ’s defeat, it will be established as commanderies and counties and its wealth seized” (Phan Đại Doãn, 1981: 37). In preparation, the Song stationed troops at Ung Châu and along the border with Đại Việt, readying for invasion. In response, the Lý dynasty proactively adopted the strategy of *tiên phát chế nhân* (preemptive strike), meaning “it is better to attack first than to wait for the enemy’s arrival and be caught unprepared” (Lý Tế Xuyên, 1960: 30). General Lý Thường Kiệt, commanding over 100,000 naval and ground troops alongside Tống Đản, launched a swift and decisive assault directly into Ung Châu, Khâm Châu, and Liêm Châu. The campaign lasted over 40 days, resulting in the destruction of more than 100,000 enemy soldiers and the capture of inhabitants from the three sub-prefecture, who were brought back to Đại Việt (National History Bureau of Lê Dynasty, 1993: 278). Lý Thường Kiệt’s bold and rapid preemptive attack shattered the enemy’s forces and effectively quashed the Song’s invasion plans. Scholars have remarked that this offensive “placed the enemy in a passive position from the outset and created many advantageous conditions for the nation’s resistance against invasion” (Phan Huy Lê et al., 2004: 28). To further safeguard sovereignty and territorial integrity, the Lý Dynasty proactively constructed the Như Nguyệt defensive line, preparing for future conflicts. In March of the year Bính Thìn (1076), the Song allied with Champa and Chenla to invade Đại Việt. However, facing the Như Nguyệt defensive line and the determined spirit of the Vietnamese people, the Song’s forces were strategically disadvantaged (Phan Huy Thiệp, Trịnh Vương Hồng, 1977: 67). The Song army suffered over 1,000 casualties (National History Bureau of Lê Dynasty, 1993: 279). The people and soldiers of Đại Việt not only secured a great victory on the Như Nguyệt battlefield but also preserved the country’s territorial integrity and affirmed national sovereignty against northern expansionism.

In the northern border regions, the Lý Dynasty also had to suppress local separatist forces such as Nùng Tồn Phúc, Nùng Trí Cao, and some tribal chieftains to maintain the integrity and unity of the territory. The father and son from the

Nùng family took advantage of Đại Việt's loose control over the borderlands to build a strong force and develop ambitions to secede and establish their own state. Nùng Tồn Phúc, the leader of Thăng Do prefecture, killed his brothers Tồn Lộ (leader of Vạn Nhai prefecture) and Đương Đạo (leader of Vũ Lặc prefecture), seized these two areas, declared himself the Chiêu Thánh King, renamed the prefecture as the state of Trường Sinh, prepared military equipment, fortified the defenses, and stopped paying tribute or recognizing royal authority. King Lý Thái Tông had to personally lead a campaign, capture Tồn Phúc, and bring him to the capital for punishment. Nùng Tồn Phúc's wife, A Nùng, and their son Nùng Trí Cao managed to escape but still schemed to establish their own rule. In the year Tân Ty (1041), Nùng Trí Cao and his mother moved from Lôi Hỏa cave to seize châu (sub-prefecture) Thăng Do (A sub-prefecture during the Lý Dynasty, located in present-day Cao Bằng province), founded the state of Đại Lịch, and launched a rebellion to protect their "own kingdom," forcing the Lý court to send troops to suppress them. King Lý Thái Tông, out of sympathy since Nùng Trí Cao's father Nùng Tồn Phúc and his brother Nùng Trí Thông had been killed, pardoned Nùng Trí Cao and allowed him to retain control of châu (sub-prefecture) Quảng Nguyên, along with four other districts: Lôi Hỏa, a cave in a mountainous commune or fortified settlement, located in the northern area of present-day Cao Bằng province; the Bình, An, and Bà caves were also within today's Cao Bằng province (National History Bureau of Lê Dynasty, 1993: 259-260, 262) (Tư Lang prefecture: Presently located within Cao Bằng province). Thus, it can be seen that in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, although the Lý Dynasty had not yet been able to tightly control the borderlands, it had both firm measures and flexible, lenient policies to govern, thereby eliminating separatist tendencies and maintaining the unified territory of Đại Việt.

Đại Việt's sovereignty was not affirmed by administrative organization from central to local levels of the Lý Dynasty, but also focused on developing the territorial economy and territorial culture, paying attention to endogenous potential factors within the territorial scope that was established during the time Lý Dynasty governed the country (1009 - 1225).

#### **4. Territorial economy**

The economy is an integral component, an inseparable part of the territory of any nation. Within the established territory, the Lý Dynasty built an economy based on three sectors: agriculture, handicrafts, and commerce.

Regarding agriculture, the Lý Dynasty implemented several proactive policies to promote its development. To ensure sufficient manpower for production, immediately after ascending the throne in the year Canh Tuất (1010), King Lý Thái Tổ issued an edict ordering those who had fled to return to their original villages (National History Bureau of Lê Dynasty, 1993: 242). This aimed to manage local population effectively, actively support production, and enforce the state's military conscription system. The army operated under the principle of "soldiers returning to farming," meaning that military service was aligned with agricultural work. "The military system of the Lý Dynasty... called soldiers once a month for duty" (Ngô Thì Sĩ, 1960: 127). This system not only mobilized forces for the army and reduced the state's burden to provide food for soldiers but also allowed agricultural development to continue.

A significant feature of the Lý Dynasty period was the strict implementation of policies aimed at protecting buffalo and cattle. The prohibition against the slaughter of these animals was fundamentally a measure to preserve draft power essential for agricultural production. In the year Đinh Dậu (1117), Empress Mother Linh Nhân observed: "Recently, in the capital and surrounding villages, many individuals have resorted to evasion and have taken up cattle theft as a livelihood. The common people are destitute, with several households relying on a single buffalo for plowing. Although I previously addressed this issue and the state had issued a prohibition, the slaughter of buffalo has increased even more." In response, the king issued an edict stipulating that anyone caught stealing buffalo would be punished with 80 strokes and sentenced to forced labor as military servants; their wives would also receive 80 strokes and be consigned to labor in sericulture. Neighbors who were aware of the crime but failed to report it would receive the same punishment. In the year Quý Mão (1123), King Lý Nhân Tông issued a decree forbidding the slaughter of buffalo, declaring: "Buffalo are essential animals for plowing and bring considerable benefit to the people. Henceforth, every three households shall form a mutual guarantee group and shall not be permitted to slaughter buffalo for consumption. Any violation shall be subject to punishment under the criminal code." Similarly, in the year Quý Hợi (1143), King Lý Anh Tông reinforced this policy, stating: "Henceforth, throughout the realm, every three households shall form a collective guarantee unit and shall not independently slaughter buffalo or cattle. In cases of ritual sacrifice, prior approval must be obtained from the authorities. Any unauthorized slaughter shall be severely punished, and neighbors who fail to report the offense shall be considered equally culpable" (National History Bureau of Lê Dynasty, 1993: 287, 292, 315). These

state policies ensured the preservation of draft animals crucial for agricultural productivity and provided a regulatory framework to support the sustainable management of livestock husbandry.

In support of agricultural development, the Lý Dynasty placed considerable emphasis on the construction of dikes. In the year Đinh Tỵ (1077), the court ordered the construction of the Như Nguyệt River dike, which extended 67,380 bộ (an ancient Vietnamese unit of length). Later, in the year Quý Mùi (1103), King Lý Nhân Tông issued an edict requiring the construction of flood-control dikes both within and beyond the capital (*A brief of Vietnamese History*, 2005: 103, 110). In the year Mậu Tý (1108), the state commissioned the building of a dike along the Red River in the Cơ Xá ward, located near present-day Long Biên Bridge in Hanoi (National History Bureau of Lê Dynasty, 1993: 285). In addition to dike construction, river dredging and widening projects were undertaken. For instance, the Đản Năn River in present-day Thanh Hóa was dredged in the year Kỷ Tỵ (1029). The Lãn Kinh and Tô Lịch Rivers, located in what is now Hanoi, were similarly widened in the years Kỷ Tỵ (1089) and Nhâm Tý (1192). The monarchs of the Lý Dynasty also conducted ritual ceremonies such as rain-invoking rites and sacrifices at state altars to pray for bountiful harvests. Tax relief measures - including temporary exemptions from tributes - were also granted to the populace during difficult times. As a result of these comprehensive policies, agricultural production flourished under the Lý Dynasty. According to Complete annals of Đại Việt, in the year Bính Thìn (1016) under the reign of Lý Thái Tổ: “There was an abundant harvest that year. Thirty bundles of rice sold for only seventy coins. A three-year tax exemption was granted throughout the realm” (National History Bureau of Lê Dynasty, 1993: 245). Subsequent monarchs also presided over many years of good harvests, including the years Canh Ngọ (1030) and Giáp Thân (1044) during the reign of Lý Thái Tông; the years Kỷ Mùi (1079), Nhâm Thân (1092), Tân Mão (1111), Canh Tý (1120), and Quý Mão (1123) under King Lý Nhân Tông; the year Tân Hợi (1131) under King Lý Thần Tông; and the year Canh Thân (1140) under King Lý Anh Tông (National History Bureau of Lê Dynasty, 1993: 254-312).

The Lý Dynasty’s handicraft economy comprised both state-sponsored and folk-based production sectors. State-run handicrafts were organized within *quan xưởng* (official workshops), staffed by skilled artisans known as bách tác thợ. These craftsmen, selected from localities across the realm for their exceptional skills, operated under the supervision of the Cục Bách tác (Department of Hundred Crafts). The products they created were of high craftsmanship and intended exclusively for the royal court and government officials. These goods were not

permitted for commercial sale. Accordingly, the state issued explicit regulations prohibiting bách tác artisans from privately reproducing and selling state-style items to the general populace (National History Bureau of Lê Dynasty, 1993: 316). Folk handicrafts during the Lý period also experienced notable development, particularly in industries such as weaving and ceramics. In the year Canh Thìn (1040), King Lý Thái Tông ordered the distribution of all brocade fabrics imported from the Song Dynasty, which had been stored in royal warehouses, to his officials. This act signified his intention to cease using foreign (Song) brocades. Together with the imposition of taxes on mulberry plantations in the year Quý Sửu (1013), these developments reflect the growth and increasing quality of the domestic silk industry during this period. Ceramics industry also flourished, with the Bát Tràng pottery center emerging as the most prominent. In addition, various other craft industries were active among the population, including carpentry, metal casting, woodworking, and sculpture. These diverse artisanal activities indicate a vibrant and multifaceted handicraft economy under the Lý Dynasty.

Commerce during the Lý Dynasty encompassed both domestic and international trade. Internal trade was primarily conducted through a comprehensive network of local markets distributed across the country. A notable characteristic of foreign trade during this era was the active border commerce between Đại Việt and the Song Dynasty. Đại Việt demonstrated considerable initiative in establishing trade relations with the Song Dynasty; notably, in the year Nhâm Tý (1012), King Lý Công Uẩn dispatched ships to Ung Châu requesting permission to trade, although the Song Dynasty limited trade exclusively to Liêm Châu and Như Hồng. Diplomatic missions also served as a significant medium for international trade during this period. Diên Châu and Hoan Châu functioned as essential trading hubs in the southern regions, attracting merchants from China, Champa, and the Khmer regions, thus facilitating robust regional trade. Additionally, commercial activities at Vân Đồn trading port significantly contributed to the dynamic economic landscape under the Lý Dynasty.

To support the growth of commerce, in the year Nhâm Ngọ (1042), coinciding with the first year of the Minh Đạo reign era, King Lý Thái Tông commissioned the minting of Minh Đạo coins. The following year, additional coins were minted for distribution to civil and military officials (National History Bureau of Lê Dynasty, 1993: 263, 265). The minting of these coins was not only indicative of the reigning monarch's era but also symbolized a heightened sense of national identity, autonomy, and, particularly, the assertion of economic sovereignty by an independent and self-reliant state.

## 5. Territorial culture

The unification of national territory, political stability, and economic revitalization under the Lý Dynasty provided a crucial foundation for the development of a cultural legacy that scholars have described as the inauguration of “Thăng Long culture and Đại Việt civilization” (Nguyễn Quang Ngọc, 2022: 392). The Lý era marked the flourishing of Buddhism, which firmly established itself as the dominant religion. “In terms of spiritual and ethical dimensions, Buddhism undoubtedly exerted great influence. It transformed the rough and militaristic courts of the Đinh and Lê dynasties - once located at remote riverine outposts - into a centralized and ceremonious court situated in the plains, comparable to those of northern civilizations” (Hoàng Xuân Hãn, 2003: 393-394).

Immediately upon ascending the throne, Lý Thái Tổ initiated both the construction of the royal palace in Thăng Long and the building of eight temples in Thiên Đức prefecture. He also ordered the renovation of temples and shrines across administrative circuits, ordained commoners as monks, and allocated 1,680 taels of silver to cast a large bell for Đại Giáo Temple (National History Bureau of Lê Dynasty, 1993: 242). Temple construction and bell casting continued throughout the reigns of subsequent monarchs and in numerous localities across the realm. As a result, “Buddhist temples existed throughout the country, and monks comprised half the population” (Đặng Xuân Bổng, 2000: 89). Beyond their sheer number, Buddhist monks played an influential role in Lý society, often participating in state affairs and shaping political developments. This deep integration of the Buddhist sangha into the state apparatus is a distinctive feature that sets the Lý Dynasty apart from other dynasties in Vietnamese history.

In addition to Buddhism, both Daoism and Confucianism were present during the Lý Dynasty, although their influence was not yet as prominent as in later periods. The early impact of Confucianism can be observed through the establishment of Confucian education and the construction of the *Văn Miếu - Quốc Tử Giám* (Temple of Literature - Imperial Academy) in the year Canh Tuất (1070). This institution was intended as a school for the Crown Prince and symbolized the state’s nascent efforts to institutionalize Confucian learning. The Lý court also organized a limited number of imperial examinations. Due to the scarcity of historical records, current knowledge of these examinations is limited. Available sources indicate that from the first *Minh kinh bác học* (Enlightened classics and broad learning) examination in Ất Mão (1075) under King Lý Nhân Tông to the



reign of Lý Chiêu Hoàng, only eleven individuals are recorded as having passed the *đại khoa* (highest-level) examinations (Ngô Đức Thọ, Nguyễn Thúy Nga, Nguyễn Hữu Mùi, 2006). However, the documentation of only the top-ranked graduates does not fully reflect the broader outcomes or scale of Confucian education during this era. In practice, “Education at the time was primarily overseen by Buddhist monks who served as abbots in village temples or at central monastic institutions. This arrangement is clearly reflected in the *Thiền uyển tập anh* (Collection of outstanding figures of the Zen garden), a collection of Buddhist biographies compiled in the late 13th century” (Vũ Duy Mên, 2020: 100 - 101). These learned monks were often proficient in both Sanskrit and Classical Chinese (*Hán* or *Nho* characters), serving as instructors who guided students in understanding Buddhist scriptures and meditation techniques. Through such religiously based education, a segment of the Buddhist clergy was trained and imparted with scholarly knowledge. However, this form of instruction was not widespread among the general population; it remained primarily confined to Buddhist sects and was characteristic of the Lý period (1009 - 1225).

In the domains of literature and the arts, the Lý Dynasty achieved a number of accomplishments that bore distinctive characteristics of the period. Buddhist literature flourished, represented by prominent figures such as Zen masters Viên Chiếu, Không Lộ, Diệu Nhân (the Buddhist nun), Mãn Giác, etc. Their writings reflect a profound engagement with Buddhist philosophy and Zen thought, often conveying deep metaphysical and spiritual reflections. Among the significant literary contributions of the Lý period, the “*Chiếu dời đô*” (*Edict on the transfer of the capital*), authored by King Lý Thái Tổ, stands out. This document, issued upon the decision to move the capital from Hoa Lư to Đại La (later Thăng Long), articulates both political vision and cosmological justification. Another notable work is the poem traditionally attributed to divine origin, “*Nam quốc sơn hà*” (*Mountains and Rivers of the Southern Country*), which was reportedly recited at the shrine of Trương Hồng and Trương Hát to rally Vietnamese troops during the Battle of the Như Nguyệt River in the year Bính Thìn (1076). “*Nam quốc sơn hà*” is widely regarded as Vietnam’s first declaration of independence in poetic form - an enduring patriotic anthem and a powerful symbol of national sovereignty and territorial integrity. Beyond literature, the Lý period saw the development of architecture, visual arts, and various performance traditions, including *chèo* (traditional opera) and *múa rối nước* (water puppetry). These, along with other cultural and religious practices, contributed to the formation of a distinct indigenous cultural identity under the Lý Dynasty, marking the emergence of a coherent Đại

Viet civilization rooted in both spiritual and artistic expressions.

## 6. Conclusion

The Đại Việt state under the Lý Dynasty (1009 - 1225) inherited both political autonomy and the territorial sovereignty established by the Ngô, Đinh, and Early Lê dynasties in the 10th century. In the context of a rising dynasty with the aspiration to build an independent and autonomous nation, especially the demand to protect the nation from the power of the Song Dynasty, the Lý Dynasty demonstrates great efforts in affirming territorial sovereignty. The Lý Dynasty did more than merely preserve this legacy - it actively consolidated a centralized system of governance extending from the imperial court to local administrations, while fostering economic development and cultural flourishing. The Lý Dynasty built a prosperous economy and a unique culture. The solid potential nation created an important conditions for a strong military force and at times, the Lý Dynasty even had the military advantage in wars with the Song Dynasty. This was the essential foundation for the Lý Dynasty demonstrated strategic initiative and resilience in safeguarding national sovereignty, successfully defending its territorial integrity against northern incursions from the Song Dynasty and ongoing threats from the southern kingdom of Champa. Notably, the Lý Dynasty was the first among Vietnam's monarchical regimes to initiate territorial expansion to the south. This expansion laid the foundational groundwork for subsequent dynasties to continue the southward movement (Nam tiến), eventually shaping the unified and contiguous national territory of modern Vietnam.

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