

# History of Thái Bình Estuary as Seen from Sino-Nom Documents

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**Abstract:** The article is an interdisciplinary study, aiming to portray the historical geography and toponymy of the Thái Bình estuary, thereby expanding observations to reconstruct its 1,000-year history. Research results show that the Thái Bình estuary had the ancient name of Đại Bàng estuary. Since the 10<sup>th</sup> century, the estuary has been part of an important chain of estuaries ruled by coastal chiefs such as Trần Lãm and Đinh Bộ Lĩnh. During the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, when the mainstream of the Red River moved southwards, the Thái Bình River became the most important one for the region, especially with the route along Domea, Phố Hiến, and Thăng Long. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Hải Phòng was becoming an important seaport, the Thái Bình estuary played a minor role in water transport.

**Keywords:** Thái Bình estuary, sea capital, history, sea trade.

**Subject classification:** Sino-Nom studies

## 1. Introduction

The Thái Bình estuary is a river mouth belonging to the Thái Bình River system. The estuary was named Đại Bàng at the beginning of the Lý Dynasty because it was located on the land of Đại Bàng (People's Committee of Thái Bình Province, 2010, p.840). In 1057, King Lý Thánh Tông changed its name to Tường Long estuary. But during the Trần Dynasty, the name Đại Bàng was still the common name of this estuary. The name Thái Bình started to appear with the Mạc Dynasty, while Western documents called it the river mouth of the Tonkin. Under the Nguyễn Dynasty, it was called Ngải Am estuary because there were the Ngải Am village and Ngải Am dyke.

The Thái Bình estuary belongs to the Thái Bình River system and the Hóa River (i.e., the Luộc River), and is the boundary between Thái Thụy District, Thái Bình Province, and Tiên Lãng District in Hải Phòng Province. The Văn Úc estuary is situated in the northeast of the Thái Bình estuary, while the Diêm Hộ estuary and the Trà Lý estuary are in the

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south. Tiên Hưng, Đông Hưng, and Tây Hưng Communes of Tiên Lãng District are situated on the north bank, while Thụy Trường and Thụy Tân Communes of Thái Thụy District are situated on the south bank. Thụy Tân and Tây Hưng Communes provide a confluence of the Hóa River and the Thái Bình River, which flows into the sea. Trần Dương, Vĩnh Tiến, and Cổ Am Communes of Vĩnh Bảo District provide the third bank.

The Thái Bình estuary is the place where two main river systems - the Thái Bình River system (People's Committee of Thái Bình Province, 2010, p.840) and the Hóa River plus the Luộc River system - flow towards the sea. From the sea mouth, going through Thụy Trường and Thụy Tân Communes, it is about 3km to the confluence of rivers. On the right hand is the Thái Bình River, and on the left hand is the Hóa River. This river flows along the northeast of the Thái Thụy and Quỳnh Phụ Districts, with a length of 37km. Its upstream is the Luộc River. The length of the river flowing through Thái Bình is 51km, with a width of 200-300m, snaking through the communes of Quỳnh Lâm, Quỳnh Hoàng (with Trại Vàng on the other side), Quỳnh Giao, Quỳnh Hoa, Quỳnh Thọ, An Hiệp, An Đông, and An Khê. When in An Khê, one crosses the river to get to the centre of Ninh Giang. Quỳnh Lâm Commune is adjacent to Thanh Miện District (Hải Dương Province) and Phù Cừ District (Hưng Yên Province). From Quỳnh Lâm Commune, one goes upstream through the communes of Điệp Nông, Đoan Hùng, Tân Tiến, Hòa Tiến, Cộng Hòa, Canh Tân, and Canh Lễ of Hưng Hà District, then to the confluence of the Red River and the Luộc River. From here, one goes upstream further to the centre of Hưng Yên Province. From Hưng Yên Province, one goes downstream the Red River to the southeast to reach Nam Định City. Concerning this route, *Đại Nam nhất thống chí* (i.e. *Đại Nam Comprehensive Encyclopaedia*) described as follows: "From the Hàm Giang River one goes upstream 52 miles through the communes of Hà Hải, Tranh Xuyên, Quang Dục, and Phù Cừ to Bến Biện junction, Phù Cừ District, Hưng Yên Province, then crosses the Canh Nông River to An Nghiệp junction, Hưng Nhân District (the confluence of the Luộc River) which connects with the Vị Hoàng River in Nam Định and then flows out to the Liêu estuary (the Đáy estuary) (National History Bureau of Nguyễn Dynasty, 1912, p.1241).

As described in *Đại Nam nhất thống chí* (*Đại Nam Comprehensive Encyclopaedia*), the Thái Bình estuary is the mouth of the Ngải Am River in Vĩnh Lại District, whose upstream is a network of the Hàm Giang River. The Hàm Giang River in Cẩm Giàng District is about 1 mile northwest of Hải Dương provincial town. The river is 177 *trượng* (one *trượng* is equivalent to 4.0m) wide and 1.5 *trượng* deep, divided into two branches from the Lục Đầu River. One tributary is the Trác Châu River, which flows in the southeast direction. Another tributary is the Nhân Lý River, Thanh Lâm District, flowing in the northeast direction. These tributaries confluence in An Điền Commune. The mainstream continues to flow 4 miles to the south to become the Nhụy Châu River, then confluences with a tributary of the Bình Lao River whose upstream is Cẩm Giàng (i.e., the Sắt River flowing downstream from Kẻ Sắt). In the middle of the stream, the dunes emerged as the mouth of the Thiên Bồng River. The river continues to flow through Thanh Lâm District and then snakes through Thanh Hà, Gia Lộc and Tứ Kỳ Districts with a length of 63 miles,

This is a historical map of the South China Sea region, showing the coastlines of China, Indochina, and the Philippines. The map is labeled with various geographical names in Latin script, including 'I. Formosa', 'I. Taiwan', 'I. Luzon', 'I. Mindanao', and 'I. Palawan'. It also shows the 'M. Australis' (South Sea) and the 'M. Orientis' (East Sea). The map is oriented with North at the top.

In terms of tectonic history, the present Thái Bình estuarine area is the result of the alluvial process of accreting lagoons and mangrove tidal areas in the estuary in Tiên Lãng District and part of Vĩnh Bảo District. The ancient sea dunes range from Xuân Úc, Bạch Sa, Trung Nghĩa and Đường Đô Communes of Tiên Lãng District to Đoàn Xá, Đại Hợp, Bàng La (Đồ Sơn), Chấn Hưng, and Hùng Thắng Communes, allowing the dating of the ancient lagoons around the 12<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> centuries. Existing sediments are low-lying marshes and residual tidal creeks with an elevation of less than 0.5m. Geographers believe that three ancient lagoons once existed along the Thái Bình estuary. The first lagoon was located on a part of the land of the communes of Tiên Cường, Tụ Cường, Khởi Nghĩa, Quyết Tiến, and the Mối River. The second lagoon was located close to the south of Tiên Lãng District capital, extending from the northeast to the southwest, appearing at the same time as the dunes in the communes of Cáp Tiến, Đoàn Lập, Toàn Thắng, and Tiên Thắng. The third lagoon was located between such communes as Tiên Minh, Tiên Thắng, and Chấn Hưng, Hùng Thắng. The system of these lagoons can be visualised through the 17<sup>th</sup>-century map of the lower reaches of the Tonkin River by the British East India

Company (*Map 1*). These lagoons were blocked by dunes outside the estuary, so the influence of tides was relatively weak, in which river dynamics and alluvial deposition played an important role. Flora and river sediments have given rise to marshes for many centuries. In 1936, the Mỏi River was dug to connect the Văn Úc River and the Thái Bình River. From here, the water of the Luộc River and the Thái Bình River gradually transferred to the Văn Úc River, causing the water flow to the Thái Bình estuary to be severely reduced, leading to a rapid increase in the accretion process, filling the lagoons and making the creeks dry up before they could be filled (Nguyễn Hữu Cừ, 1987, pp.21-24).

Concerning the history of Thái Bình estuary (in the 10<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries), research had been done based on Sino-Nom (i.e., 漢喃) sources, documents and maps in old Dutch and old English combined with a survey of historical documents and chronological classification of historical documents as well as archived events.

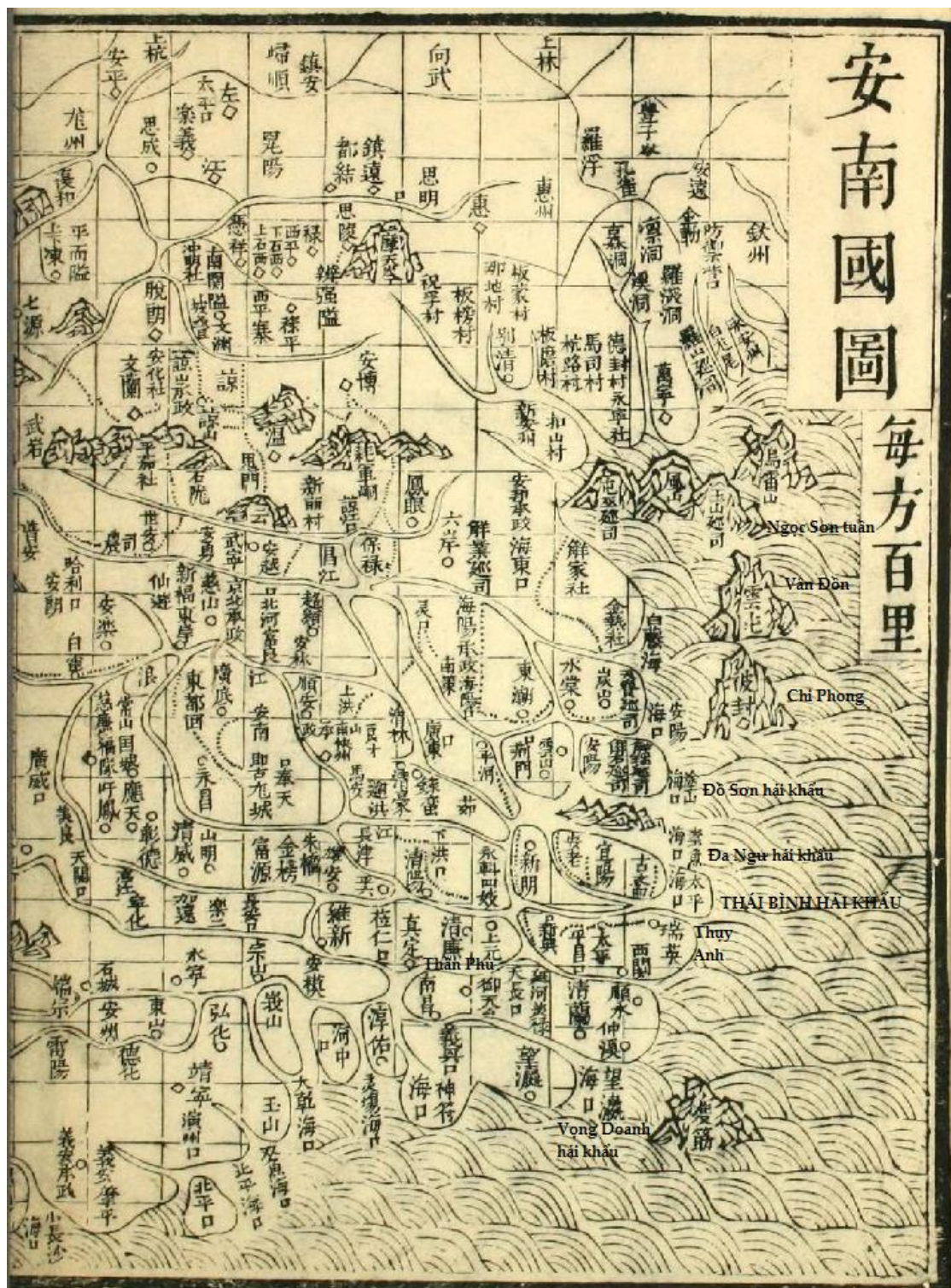
## 2. Thái Bình estuary from 10<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> centuries

In the 10<sup>th</sup> century, almost no historical records were made concerning the Thái Bình estuary, but on the administrative map of the Ngô Dynasty, the estuary was probably the natural boundary between Đằng Châu (the area corresponding to part of the provinces of Hưng Yên, Hải Dương, Hải Phòng) by Phạm Bách Hồ in the north and Trường Châu (equivalent to provinces of Thái Bình, Nam Định, Ninh Bình) by Trần Minh Công in the south. Trần Minh Công was a wealthy coastal patriarch with a family tradition of inter-regional trade and commercial exploitation based in the Bồ Hải Khẩu estuary (Trần Trọng Dương, 2019, p.148). In 965-968, Đinh Bộ Lĩnh's alliance with Trần Minh Công and Phạm Bách Hồ staged a political upheaval in the Ngô Dynasty: a coastal power won over the delta forces. When Lê Hoàn ascended to the throne in 981, the emperor continued to expand his rule from the Hoa Lư sea capital to reach out to the great seas, where there were inter-regional trade routes, to immerse himself in the international trade network substantiated with the Silk Roads, the Agarwood, and Pearl Roads.

In the 11<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries, the estuary was named Đại Bàng (大旁). In 1057, when King Lý Thánh Tông “visited the Đại Bàng estuary, a golden dragon appeared in the Kim Phụng boat, and then it was changed to Tường Long afterwards” (大越史略, p.34). Some researchers believe that the Đại Bàng estuary is now the Văn Úc estuary in Kiến An District, Hải Phòng (吳士連, 1479, p.54). The reason why the Đại Bàng estuary was changed to the Tường Long estuary corresponded to the Tường Long Tower of the Lý Dynasty in Đồ Sơn. This is an incorrect place-name conversion because the original historical data showed that a “renaming of the Kim Phụng boat to the Tường Long boat”, not a “renaming of the Đại Bàng estuary to the Tường Long estuary”. *Địa chí Thái Bình* (i.e., *Geography Book of Thái Bình*) converted correctly: from the 17<sup>th</sup> century backwards, the Đại Bàng estuary was the mouth of Thái Bình and Luộc Rivers (People's Committee of Thái Bình Province, 2010, p.840).



Map 2: Thái Bình Sea in Annam Country Map



Source: Zheng Rouzeng, 1570, code: 04 04709.

If we identify the Đại Bàng estuary as the Thái Bình estuary, then we will understand some important details related to the history of the estuary. According to *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* (i.e., 大越史記全, *Complete Annals of Đại Việt*), Đại Bàng estuary was adjacent to Long Hưng District (Long Hưng District belongs to Hưng Hà District, Thái Bình Province of today). In 1285 (the seventh Thiệu Bảo year), King Emeritus Trần Thánh Tông and King Trần Nhân Tông crossed the sea from the Nam Triệu estuary through the Đại Bàng estuary to arrive in Thanh Hóa Province to avoid the strong Yuan-Mongol invaders (吳士連, 1479, Trần kỷ, Nhân Tông, p.28b). In 1288 (the fourth Trùng Hưng year), Ô Mã Nhi (i.e., Omar) invaded Long Hưng District (龍興府), and military forces fought in the sea of Đại Bàng. About 300 sentry ships and thousands of enemy heads were captured while most of the Yuan-Mongol troops drowned<sup>1</sup>. Thus, the Đại Bàng estuary occupied an important position in the defence of the country against foreign invaders. The Đại Bàng estuary was the main one of the interlaced river systems on the territory of Long Hưng District, where the Trần clan rose.

In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, *Dư địa chí* (i.e., *Geography Book*) by Nguyễn Trãi recorded this river mouth as Ngải Môn, belonging to Đồng Lại District (Hải Dương Province). Đồng Lại District of the later Lê Dynasty included the south-eastern part of present-day Vĩnh Bảo District which was the lower part of the Thái Bình estuary (Nguyễn Trãi, 1435, pp.27, 88). In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Thái Bình estuary (太平海口) was highlighted and recorded in the *An Nam quốc đồ* (安南國圖 - *Annam Country Map*) by Zheng Rouzeng of the Ming Dynasty (Map 2). To the north were the Đồ Sơn estuaries (塗山海口) and the Đa Ngư estuary 多魚 (originally misspelt as Tố Ngư 素魚); in the south were such places as Thụy Anh, Thuận Thủy, and the Vọng Doanh estuary (望瀛海口, the Đáy estuary). Inside the estuary of Thái Bình, Cổ Trai, Nghi Dương, An Lão, the land below of Tây Quan, Thái Bình, Bình Xương, and Tân Hưng (Zheng Rouzeng, 1570) were recorded. The estuary of Thái Bình occupied an important place in the history of the Mạc Dynasty, being the arterial route to the south of Dương Kinh, while the Văn Úc estuary was located to the north. It can be said that Dương Kinh was a sea capital occupying a leading position in this century (Nguyễn Văn Sơn, 1996).

The land of Cổ Trai located “near the place where the sea waves resound and echo” was considered the land where the Mạc clan rose and the place where the Mạc clan’s ancestral grave was located. The growth of the Mạc clan was closely associated with the sea mouth

<sup>1</sup> Original: 壬子四年〈元至元二十五年〉春正月，烏馬兒犯龍興府。八日，官軍會戰于大旁海外，獲哨船三百艘、首級十顆。元人多溺死。(吳士連, 1479, Trần kỷ, Nhân Tông, p.29b). The original record is “10 heads”, which is suspected to be the Chinese character 十 was mistaken for the Chinese 千. The word “tian” (i.e. 千) also denotes an indefinite number, so it is translated as “thousands of enemy heads”. Now corrected.

and the coastal area of Hải Phòng (Hải Dương)<sup>2</sup>. In 1527, after entering the royal capital city and performing the Heaven and Earth Worshipping Ceremony, Mạc Đăng Dung ordered the construction of a palace in Cổ Trai land, and then later King Mạc Đăng Doanh built the palaces of Sùng Phúc, Phúc Huy, Hưng Quốc, and Tường Quang. Dương Kinh became the political centre, the place where the Mạc Dynasty's great ceremonies of throne hand-over took place. In 1529, Mạc Đăng Dung passed the throne to Mạc Đăng Doanh, and the latter in 1540 passed the throne to Mạc Phúc Hải in Dương Kinh. Through surveying the system of stele inscriptions of the Mạc Dynasty period and archaeological sites, Dương Kinh was identified as the most important capital city of the Mạc Dynasty, covering a large area from Thủy Đường, An Lão, and An Môn (belonging to Kinh Môn), Tân Minh (Nam Sách), Vĩnh Lại (Hạ Hồng District) to Cổ Trai centre and down to the Thái Bình estuary (Đình Khắc Thuần, 2013, pp.126-129).

The Thái Bình estuary together with the Văn Úc estuary formed a great position for Dương Kinh (a seaward capital city of the Mạc Dynasty) which was of great importance in domestic and foreign trade activities. Nguyễn Bình Khiêm (1491-1586) described the estuary area as the place where “thousands of water currents come together”, where “boats of all countries pass here to pay tribute” (潮宗悉會千流水、入貢皆通 萬國航) (Institute of Literature, 2014, p.850). When resigning as a mandarin and returning home to lead a reclusive life, he built Trung Tân tavern at the Tuyết Giang wharf, Nghinh Phong, and Trường Xuân bridges, a Buddhist temple, opened a village fair, and sometimes went sailing to contemplate the sea mouth (Trần Đạm Trai, 1811, p.100). Merchant ships from other countries such as Japan, Ryukyu [Kyuryu], and China entered the estuary from the sea. Products traded through the estuaries of Văn Úc and Thái Bình included silk, ceramics, and pottery. Chu Đậu ceramics and pottery (Hải Dương) became special and valuable export products of Đại Việt. According to Prof Trần Quốc Vượng, Chu Đậu ceramics and pottery of

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<sup>2</sup> The clan genealogy of the Phạm clan (a branch of the Mạc clan changed its family name) records the tomb of the Mạc family as follows: “The ancestral tomb of the Mạc family is in Cổ Trai Commune, Nghi Dương Canton, Kim Môn District, Hải Dương Province. The tomb is positioned in the northwest-southeast direction, in the territory of Mercury Stella, capturing (meteorologically) an entire area of 200 miles of mountains and rivers. Seven circuits are coming from Tượng Sơn Mountain, two of which cross the river and end at Hạ Long, near the place where the waves resound and echo, so that the five generations are destined to prosperity and wealthiness. Cổ Trai is indeed a land of sacred dragons, in both vertical and horizontal terms. There is Mẫu Sơn Mountain that absorbs water from Phụ Sơn Mountain, then flows into a big river, like a string of pearls going all the way to Đồ Sơn. The location of Đa Sơn Temple is a well-bestowed one, namely, in front of a cliff, rising high, with the grave of Đức Tổ in the middle of this plot, an exaltation of ultimate luxury. However, because it is located at a beachhead washed by waves and whirlpools, it cannot enjoy lasting happiness for more than seven generations” (*Phạm tộc gia phả - the Phạm Clan Genealogy*, Trường Yên Commune, Hoa Lư District, Ninh Bình Province, whose compilation started on October 10<sup>th</sup> of the year of Canh Tý - the third Vĩnh Thọ year (1660); former deputy village headman Phạm Văn Thân noted and added these things on this auspicious day of January in the 19<sup>th</sup> Thành Thái year (1907) (Nguyễn Phương Thoan & Phạm Bá Sơn, 1998, pp.82-83).

the Mạc Dynasty were found in 26 countries in Southeast Asia and were present in 40 museums around the world (Trần Thị Vinh, 2016, pp.186-200). The estuaries of Thái Bình and Văn Úc together with Dương Kinh existed as seaport capitals and became a mesh system in the upstream, downstream, and northern exchange system connecting with a series of Red River Delta provinces, especially Thăng Long and Bạch Hạc (Việt Trì) up to Yunnan, while the ocean would connect with vibrant trade routes in the Northeast Asian and South Asian markets. It can be said that Đại Việt during the Mạc Dynasty became an important focal point in the coastal trade network (Trần Quốc Vượng, 2015, p.198).

### 3. Thái Bình estuary from 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries

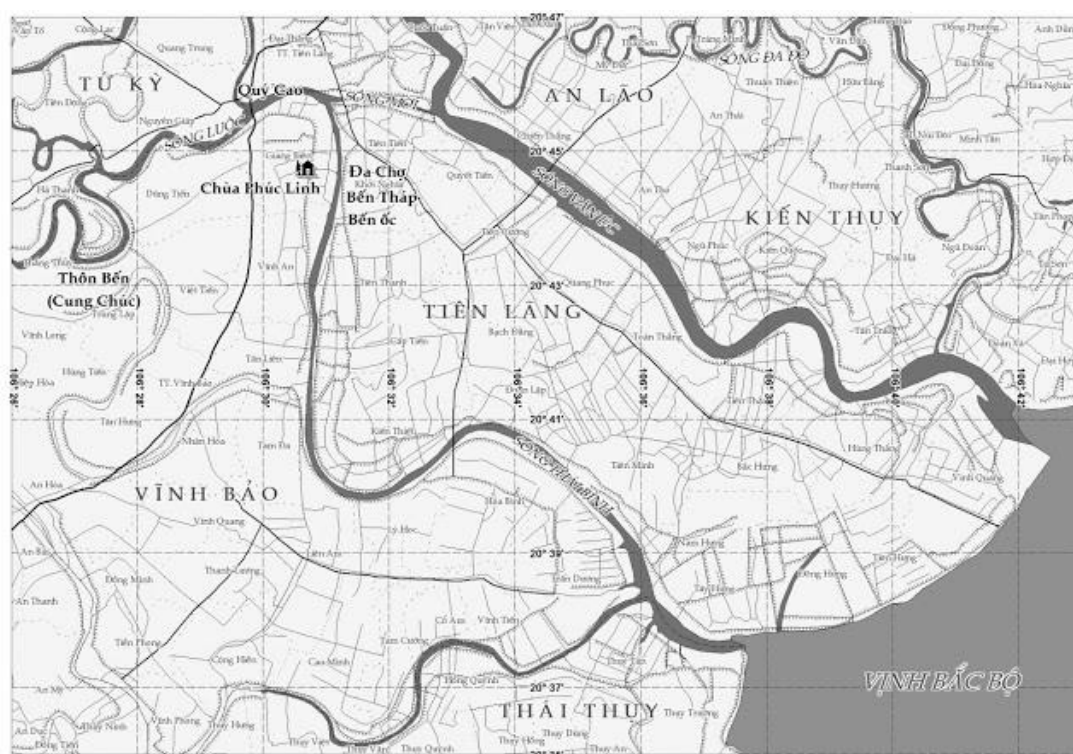
From the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Thái Bình estuary became an important waterway for traders in Europe (such as the Netherlands, Portugal, England, and France) and Asia (such as China, Japan, and Siam) to dock, exchange, and trade goods and weapons. Large tonnage boats all entered through this estuary, anchored at “Domea” (i.e., Đò Mè, An Dụ, Tiên Lãng, Hải Phòng). Goods were traded on the spot or transferred to smaller boats going up the Luộc River into the Red River, through Phố Hiến, and upstream to Thăng Long. A series of ancient Western maps show this as the mouth of the Tonkin river - as the most important upstream and downstream exchange route of Đại Việt in the 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries (Đỗ Thị Thùy Lan, 2017, pp.230, 259).

From the 1620s, Portuguese boats docked in the Tonkin seaport, and they were the earliest Westerners to dock at the Thái Bình River. In 1626, Italian missionary Giuliano Baldinotti described it as follows: “On March 7<sup>th</sup>, we arrived in Tonkin by way of a river upstream to 18 miles (about 28.8km) inland. The King (King Lê Thần Tông or Lord Trịnh Tráng) being informed of our arrival, sent four boats to the sea to pick us up, and these boats accompanied us along the river to protect us from plunder... It (a certain town) has a large and navigable river, whose mouth is 18 miles from the sea. The water in this river is very cloudy...” (Baldinotti, G., 1903, p.75; Đỗ Thị Thùy Lan, 2017, pp.276-277). On 1 March 1630, Alexandre de Rhodes returned to Tonkin with the missionaries André Palmeiro, Gaspar d’Amaral, Antonio de Fontes, and António Francisco Cardim on board a Portuguese merchant ship. In 1631, three Jesuit missionaries entered the seaport (Nguyễn Thừa Hỷ, 2010, p.81). In 1636, Nicolaas Couckebacker (East India Company, Netherlands) described that the Tonkin River was located about 201/30 north. The Japanese said that they came to Tonkin through this estuary. The average depth was 15, 16, or 17 feet (one foot is equivalent to 30.48cm). The transport from here to the “City of Tonkin” (i.e., Thăng Long) was very convenient. The city was located about 211/30 north (Hoàng Anh Tuấn, 2007, p.59). In 1638, the first Dutch merchant ship landed in Tonkin. In 1644, Anthonio van Brouckhorst sent ships into the mouth of the Thái Bình River, recording places around the mouth of the sea such as Đảo Ngọc (Pearl Island) and Mũi Hổ (Tiger Cape) (C. C. van der Plas, 1955; Đỗ Thị Thùy Lan, 2017, p.275). In 1688, British merchant ships also arrived



(Dampier, W., 1931, p.16). During 1647-1649, the route between Macao, Hainan, and the estuary of the Tonkin River (to the north was Thái Bình estuary, to the south was Roquebo/Rokbo/Độc Bộ estuary, i.e., Đáy estuary) was plotted in charts No. 17 and No. 18 (Pierre Yves Manguin, 1972, pp.103-106, 114). On 23 January 1647, Francisco Pires explored the mouth of the Tonkin river on the Salvador Coelho Moura (Manguin, P. Y., 1972, p.116). In 1653, Chinese merchant ships arrived at the mouth of the Thái Bình River, of which two were from Japan, three from Southeast Asia and China. In 1677, three Chinese boats and one Siamese boat arrived in Tonkin and entered through the Thái Bình estuary (Hoàng Anh Tuấn, 2007, p.59). In the Vĩnh Thịnh years (1705-1719) of King Lê Dụ Tông's reign, the governor Đỗ by family name ordered people to carry stones from Đông Triều to build a breakwater several miles long. Local people benefited from this work, so they called it Ngải Am dyke on the ancient Ngải Am land. The Ngải Am sea mouth was probably named after this (National History Bureau of Nguyễn Dynasty). In 1744, Johann Matthias Hase inscribed Domea and Kecho on the geographical atlas of the world. In 1753, the East India map indicated that Domea was located at the mouth of the Thái Bình River. Map 1760 showed Domea located on the left bank of the Thái Bình estuary with Hean (i.e., Phố Hiến) and Kesho (i.e., Kê Chợ - Thăng Long) (Đỗ Thị Thùy Lan, 2017, p.278).

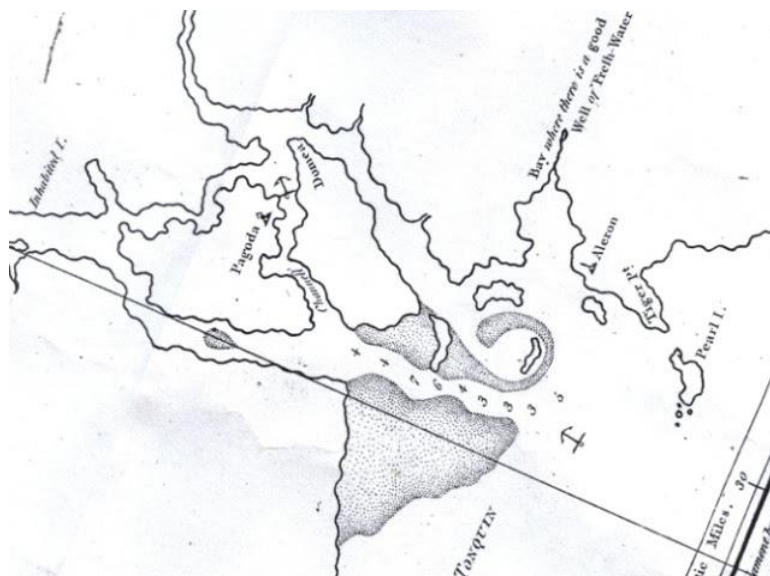
Map 3: Thái Bình Estuary, Domea Port



Source: Nguyễn Quang Ngọc, 2007.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, according to records in *Đại Nam nhất thống chí* (*Đại Nam Comprehensive Encyclopaedia*), the Thái Bình estuary was 20 miles from Vĩnh Am Commune, Vĩnh Bảo District (then belonging to Hải Dương land), and the sea mouth was named Ngải Am. The sea mouth is 582 *trượng* wide. High tide water was 18 *thước* (one *thước* is equivalent to 0.4m) deep, and ebbed tidewater was 12 *thước* deep. From the estuary upstream to Hải Dương Province, it took three days. The left edge was the boundary of Thụy Anh District, Thái Bình Province, Nam Định Province (now Thái Thụy District, Thái Bình Province). The right bank was the boundary of Tiên Minh District (now Tiên Lãng, Hải Phòng). The dyke here was built over many generations but was often eroded by seawater. During the Gia Long period (1802-1819), the Defence Command Governor (鎮守) built more stone embankments, making them more solid. According to the court rituals, a local mandarin came to set up the altar to worship the Sea God once every January (National History Bureau of Nguyễn Dynasty, 2012, pp.1248-1249). *Đồng Khánh dư địa chí* (同慶地輿志- *Geography of Đồng Khánh*) had a geographical record of this estuary that at the end of the Nguyễn Dynasty, Ngải Am Hữu Đồn - a new fortress - was built in the territory of Phương Đồi Commune, Tiên Minh District (National History Bureau of Nguyễn Dynasty, 1998, p.88).

Map 4: Lower Reaches of Tonkin River in 17<sup>th</sup> Century (Map of British East India Company)



Source: Nguyễn Quang Ngọc, 2007.

The *Geography of Đồng Khánh* recorded that the distance from the junction of Quý Cao (貴阜) to the fortress of Ngải Am (艾庵) was 30 miles, and it was 100 *trượng* wide. High tide water was 5 *trượng* deep, and low tide water was 4 *trượng* 5 *thước* deep. From Ngải Am

fortress to Thái Bình estuary, it was 4 miles long and 200 *trượng* wide. High tide water was 5 *trượng* deep, and low tide water was 2 *trượng* 5 *thước* deep (National History Bureau of Nguyễn Dynasty, 1998, p.129). This depth data shows that the Thái Bình estuary was filled up very quickly, making the estuary shallower than the inner river. The north bank was in Tiên Minh District, and the south bank was in Vĩnh Bảo District. On the map, the Ngải Am fortress was right at the confluence of the Hóa River and the Thái Bình River, the part on Trần Dương land.

Map 5: Thái Bình Estuary (Map of Tiên Lãng District)



Source: National History Bureau of Nguyễn Dynasty, 1887, p.30.

The description of the waterway route from Quý Cao to Ngải Am in the *Song of Hàm Giang River* was: “Quý Cao is at the end of Tứ Kỳ District, and Tiên Minh borders the middle of the fork confluence. Whenever the ferry Hải passes by, it goes downstream to get to Nội Đan. Then back to Hàn wharf, on that river, Tiềm Am Village appears. Then one gradually goes along to arrive at Ngải Am fortress. There, to the east is Vĩnh Bảo, to the south is Thái Bình. And there is the sacred altar Kỳ Phong to worship the heroic spirits, from where the Thái Bình estuary is not far away. Preparing and fixing the sails and boats then seafaring, the immense sea opens before one’s eyes. The Hàm Giang estuary appears stretching 94 miles - a long and deep one” (National History Bureau of Nguyễn Dynasty, 2012, p.1290). The survey on the route showed that the area was mainly characterised by wharves, yards, and boats at the last part of the Thái Bình River before emptying into the sea. Although the song was written at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it still reflects an old waterway, preserved from the 17<sup>th</sup> century commercial activity from “Domea” to the sea (where there was a series of interlaced wharves and yards, forming a seamless traffic network, convenient for people to travel for trade, exchange of goods, and cultural exchange).

#### **4. Conclusion**

The Thái Bình (Đại Bàng) estuary is an important estuary in Vietnamese history, an estuary in the Thái Bình River and the Red River system, which is the lifeline of traffic and trade. In the 10<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries, when the mainstream of the Red River system was still on the Lục Đầu River - Bạch Đằng River route, the Đại Bàng estuary existed as a defensive front line at the coastal area, together with Bồ Hải Khẩu (Thái Bình City) and Đại Ác (the Đáy estuary, Hoa Lư - Ninh Bình) forming a seamless network of ports running along the Đại Việt coast. During the Trần Dynasty, the Đại Bàng estuary became an important border seaport of Long Hưng District, the land of the Trần clan’s rising, occupying an important position in the wars against the Yuan-Mongol invaders. In the 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Mạc Dynasty turned the Thái Bình-Văn Úc estuaries into the sea capital city and integrated them into a vibrant trade route in the region. By the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when the mainstream of the Red River moved to the south, the Thái Bình estuary (the mouth of the Tonkin river) became the main lifeline for traffic, trade, and military actions of the Đại Việt under the Lê-Trịnh Dynasty, with the ports of “Domea”, Phố Hiến, and Thăng Long. From the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards, when the mainstream of the Red River changed to the Đáy estuary and the Ba Lạt estuary, Thái Bình estuary gradually lost its leading commercial position. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the French built Hải Phòng to become the second-largest seaport in Indochina. From then on, Thái Bình only functioned as a sea fortress-estuary to control and maintain security for people’s boats and ships. The Thái Bình estuary (the Thái Bình River) has always been there as a thousand-year downstream flow, in the same direction as the ups and downs of the country’s history.

**Note:** Translator: Lương Quang Luyện. Language editor: Etienne Mahler.

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