When Americans and other foreign visitors to Vietnam discuss vestiges of the wars there, they are generally concerned with a relatively thin layer of modern artifacts near the surface: concrete ruins, rusted metal debris, human remains, dog tags, unexploded ordnance, perhaps chemicals. Most Vietnamese war experts, too, focus on deciphering meaning from this near-surface layer. However, for many people living on the central coast today, there is a sense that today’s communities sit directly on top of more ancient layers, too, like so many European towns built on Roman ruins. Beneath the surface of many villages along Highway 1 is a subterrain of ruins dating back several centuries, if not even further to the pre-Việt past. Village communal houses (đình), temples, family shrines (lăng họ), and museums frequently incorporate elements derived from pre-Vietnamese layers. In some cases, modern excavations even lead to monumental discoveries. In 2001, for example, workers excavating sand along the coast unearthed a triad of Cham brick towers dated to the eighth century (figure 1.1). While the find of the towers was a surprise to researchers, it was not particularly shocking to many local residents. Local knowledge of Cham sacred sites and Cham occupants is frequently cited in histories of families, villages, and religious sites. This ancient cultural layer continues to inform the rich cultural life around Huế today. This pre-Việt history continues to figure into many of the region’s most famous tourist sites. One of the most photographed sites, Thiên Mụ (Heavenly Lady) Pagoda (c. 1601), was deliberately sited on the ruins of a popular Cham temple at a geomantic hotspot, a high point of land at a fork between two
rivers. The Vietnamese government at the time did this to shore up ethnic Cham support. The Nguyễn ruler reputedly ordered construction of the pagoda after a dream in which he was visited by the Cham deity Pô Nagar. Even the spatial logic of the region’s roads and the layout of its villages is tied in some senses to this pre-Việt past. Many villages that have been recognized in Vietnamese decrees since the late 1300s were built on or near Cham settlements. Village histories frequently note local Cham ruins, too, and archeological digs continue to turn up such ancient and prehistoric artifacts as Đông Sơn jewelry, Chinese porcelain, and Sa Huỳnh burial jars under existing villages.

While the main focus of this book concerns modern militarization in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a brief exploration of the region’s ancient and early modern past serves to dispel presentist notions that the landscapes of the central coast were especially peaceful or pristine before such baseline dates as 1960 or even 1800 CE. Military conflict in this region over centuries produced deeply inscribed pathways into the region’s narrow coastal spaces, which are divided by mountain passes and rivers. As modern armies beginning with colonial troops introduced more severe levels of ecological

Figure 1.1. Eighth-century ruins of Phú Dien Tower. This tower, built in the style of Cham temples at Mỹ Sơn, was discovered inside a sand dune about fifteen kilometers from Huế in 2001. Photo by author, 2014.
destruction, they also navigated historical subterrains of ancient trade routes, village shrines, and family tombs built to resist the destructive effects of military occupation. As village histories and the tombs attest, many inhabitants in the region traced their history to ancestors who migrated to the area to flee wars elsewhere or who claimed land there as a reward for military service. This chapter takes a deeper historical view of warfare on the central coast and considers how repeat conflicts shaped local physical and cultural landscapes. The slow-changing facts of the region’s geology and multiple experiences of war and military governance produced patterns of settlement and communities in which military service and a military economy became embedded in village work and family life.

THE ANCIENT CONFLICT ZONE

The geologic facts of the central coast and larger patterns in global trade produced a zone prone to conflict as ancient Việt, Chinese, and Cham peoples repeatedly crossed the area. Its narrow coastal plains are backed by steep, forested mountains, and its coast is easily penetrated via lagoons and navigable rivers leading to shipping lanes just offshore. The forested highland interior in the Southeast Asian massif once formed a kind of terrestrial sea, too, a highlands trading zone of dense forests and swidden plateaus populated by various ethnolinguistic groups. One can appreciate that for people occupying the coastal zone, there were rewards and hazards for those who ventured too far into either of these “seas.” For those who went uphill, benefits from trade in forest products included the highly prized eaglewood (Aquilaria spp.), as well as elephant ivory and metal ore. Enrichment required transporting these goods via rivers to traders on the coast, so villages in between often played a vital mediating role. There were obvious risks for those going seaward too. Wealth in coastal villages attracted raids from naval marauders. Survival often required protective walls, military patrols, or in the worst cases, retreat into the hills.

These hill-to-sea and north-south exchanges shaped the communities on this narrow coastal strip over several millenia. Prehistoric archeological sites near Huế in present-day Hương Xuân Commune show ancient layers with mixed artifacts derived from cultural centers north and south. It is one of the northernmost jar-burial sites associated with the pre-Cham Sa Huỳnh culture. Besides over two hundred burial jars and jade and shell ornaments
associated with Sa Huỳnh culture, the site also includes metallic rings associated with the bronze workshops of the Đông Sơn culture centered in the Việt ancestral homeland of the Red River delta. The presence of Đông Sơn objects in graves at a Sa Huỳnh site indicates an active north-south trade. Sites like this on the coastal plain also include objects associated with the interior trade for forest products. Local historians draw upon linguistic evidence to suggest that prehistoric inhabitants in this area may have first been Katuic speakers who, according to some legends, moved upriver to headwaters as Cham settlements expanded.

After the Han Empire conquered the Red River Delta in 111 BCE, the central coast entered Chinese historical accounts as a frontier zone beyond the Sino-Việt domains. Three mountain passes, Ngang, Lao Bảo, and Hải Vân, formed natural gateways that separated this zone from the Sino-Việt territories to the north and from Cham polities to the south (figure 1.2). People living in this coastal zone negotiated alliances and trade relations with a mix of Việt, Chinese, and Cham figures. The mountain pass to the northwest of Huế, Lao Bảo, marked another key barrier separating the coastal region from early kingdoms in the Mekong Valley.

In this regionally isolated strip protected by mountains on three sides, several rebellions in what Chinese historians called Rinan (Nhật Nam) were recorded in 39, 100, and 137 CE. The people leading these rebellions were elite children of mixed Chinese and Việt or Cham ancestry. Historic records identify one such elite, Khu Liên (Kalinga), who destroyed a Chinese outpost near present-day Huế in 190 CE and then proclaimed himself king of the coast, calling it Lâm Ấp (Lin-yi), with a center near Huế. Over the next several centuries, the territory of Lâm Ấp experienced more raids and rebellions. The coastal area from Ngang Pass to Hải Vân Pass, including Thừa Thiên–Huế, was frequently invaded by Chinese ships, and inhabitants were captured as soldiers, servants, laborers, and prisoners. Only near the end of this long era of Chinese imperial occupation (circa eighth century) did Cham rulers further south near present-day Hội An manage to establish more permanent infrastructure and monuments. The Cham brick towers discovered in the dunes in 2001 (figure 1.1) reflected these closer cultural and trade links between the Huế area and Cham sites near present-day Đà Nẵng and the pilgrimage site Mỹ Sơn.

In mainland Southeast Asia, the end of the Tang dynasty in China in the tenth century corresponds with the start of a golden age for the three
independent kingdoms of Đại Việt, Champa, and Angkor. During this early independent era, however, the central coast remained a contested frontier zone dividing the three kingdoms beyond the mountain passes. Việt and Cham rulers made repeated claims to the territory lying beyond their core areas. Communities on the central coast from the tenth to fourteenth centuries thus developed as culturally mixed spaces. They were rest stops for Cham fleets heading north and Đại Việt fleets heading south. Vietnamese sources identify one peace-making effort in 1306 CE that became a basis for successive royal claims to the Huế region. The Cham king at the time (Chế Mään, Jaya Simhavarman III) ceded his territorial claims to the Vietnamese emperor (Trần Anh Tông) as a wedding present for Tông’s daughter Princess Huyền Trân (Parameswari). This rare matrimonial union was recorded in chronicles as a decisive effort to resolve ancient differences after Việt and Cham
armies had fought together to repel repeat Mongol invasions. However, the peace deal crumbled only one year later when the Cham king died and the princess refused to die with him.

**EARLY MODERN MILITARY COLONIES**

The Vietnamese military’s more permanent presence south of Ngang Pass developed in the 1400s largely as a result of Đại Việt’s adoption of Ming dynasty military technology, especially firearms and cannons. During the early years of the Ming dynasty (1368–1400), it appeared as though Cham navies might defeat the Việts in the Red River delta and once and for all take control of the coast. Then in 1400 the Trần dynasty fell to a modernizing usurper (Hồ Quý Ly), and the Ming dynasty invaded Đại Việt in response. The Ming army occupied Thăng Long (Hà Nội) and the central coast for twenty years before a rebellion led by a commoner living near Ngang Pass reunited the kingdom and inaugurated the Lê dynasty in 1427. Historian Sun Lai Chen notes that this occupation by Ming riflemen and the guerilla-style rebellion helped produce the first Southeast Asian army capable of large-scale manufacture and use of firearms. After defeating Chinese forces on the battlefield, the Lê dynasty military turned its ship-based cannons and firearm-yielding infantrymen southward to wage war on Champa. In 1470–71 the Vietnamese fleet sailed to Vijaya and sacked it. This decisive victory moved the Việt border south to the Hải Vân Pass.

Even though the central coast was freed from its long history of Viêt-Cham wars, the region was governed as a quasi-military state from the late 1400s until the early 1700s. The Viêt lords who ruled this coastal realm built a regional variant of Vietnamese society that at times was at odds with the ancient capital in Thăng Long. Similar in some ways to Braudel’s *longue durée* view of landscape and history on the Algerian coast, this region’s long history of conflict shaped its politics in this early modern era too. Those who governed it spent much of their time on the water for commerce and defense. The Nguyễn lords who ruled it blended aspects of the older, Cham-influenced mercantile lifestyle with military rule. Historians of Nguyễn Cochinchina, this southern domain recognized by the Lê emperor in 1558 with its center near Huế, suggest that Vietnamese and their descendants who settled here blended older, non-Việt customs and produced a distinctly regional language, economy, and martial culture. Naval power remained key to the Nguyễn
family. (The name Thừa Thiên-Huế used today is derived in part from the military fighting units organized into boats [thuyền] in this period.)

The author of Ô Châu Cần Lục (1555), one of the first Vietnamese geographies dedicated to the central coast, remarks derisively on this mixed culture. In one coastal village north of present-day Đồng Hới, he found, people who still spoke Cham, while in another village near Huế he described girls dressing in Cham silk rather than Vietnamese tunics. People followed many Cham religious rites and adopted Cham artistic traditions too. Historian Hồ Trung Tú’s social history of the lands around Đà Nẵng suggests a similarly complex interweaving of Cham customs and political alliances south of Hải Vân Pass. As the Nguyễn navy expanded further south into Cham territory in the 1500s, people frequently rebelled. At Ba Đồn (near present-day Quy Nhơn), a rival Vietnamese clan banned together with Cham communities to oust the Nguyễn governor and declare independence. A Nguyễn general put down the insurrection and declared martial rule, his troops operating checkpoints to limit Cham movement in and out of the former Cham capital.

The Nguyễn lords’ expansion of trade along the coast from 1558 coincided with large investments in military fortifications to protect trade and local military governors. The family’s roughly two-hundred-year rule to 1775 coincided with a boom in sea-based trade at the Nguyễn seaport Hội An (formerly Indrapura) and a persistent emphasis on military readiness. Following the revolution in gunpowder technology in the 1400s, the Nguyễn lords continued to push for the latest advances in cannons and firearms. They traded Ming-era know-how for Portuguese in the 1600s. They employed these weapons in a fifty-year civil war with a Vietnamese clan in the north, the Trịnh lords. Ngang Pass again was a frontier dividing the warring factions.

Even after the Nguyễn-Trịnh war ended in 1673, villages on the central coast retained their martial customs and resisted efforts by the devoutly Buddhist Nguyễn lords to spread their preferred state religion. The region retained its reputation as the Ô Châu Terrible Lands (Ô Châu ác địa). The founder of the clan, Nguyễn Hoàng, had begun the family’s preference for Mahayana Buddhism as the state religion when he commissioned the Heavenly Lady Pagoda in 1601. Building it on the ruins of a much older temple to the Cham goddess Pô Nagar, this benevolent gesture was also a strategic attempt to win over Cham-heritage residents. The Nguyễn lords even gave official recognition for the Cham deity, renaming her Thiên-Y-A-Na while opening Buddhist monasteries and temples in the vicinity.
However, this wave of temple constructions and measures to pacify Cham peoples did little to “civilize” villagers in the “terrible lands.” Lord Nguyễn Đức Chu even brought in a celebrity, Zen Buddhist monk Thích Đại Sơn (Thạch Liêm, 釋大汕) from Jiangxi Province (China), to help him reform the local sangha (Buddhist clergy). Not unlike Jesuit travelers of his day, Thích Đại Sơn traveled the roads and waterways of Ô Châu keeping notes from his encounters in a travel diary. He often remarked on the people he met in the coastal villages, people he found wholly unfit for a civilizing mission but unparalleled in guerrilla warfare:

In some remote lands due to the isolation of high mountains and unfathomable seas, the greatest king could not send his troops to wipe out local conflicts. Also, his rites and rules could not be announced here; residents gathered naturally, they formed their own martial groups together, accustomed to uncivilized and old-fashioned habits. They did not know anything about the greatest king’s rites. They only know using power to conquer other groups; therefore, they were in wars frequently, but in war stratagems, it was necessary to use miraculous craftiness to gain the victory. As a result, residents were interested in discussion of martial-military matters, and they ignored moral-cultural values.  

The Zen master returned to China after one year, disappointed by the lack of political and religious will to reform in Ô Châu. 

Portuguese trade with the Nguyễn lords in the 1600s played a key role in spurring Nguyễn military readiness too. The Portuguese trade in weapons flourished in Southeast Asia through the 1600s, and it was vital to the Nguyễn during their civil war with the Trịnh. Christoforo Borri, a Jesuit priest and scientist who resided in the ports Hội An and Quy Nhơn from 1617 to 1624, described the Nguyễn lords’ hundred-galley navy and their imposing coastal batteries featuring hundreds of cannons. In his letters to Rome, he noted how Nguyễn troops became so expert in shore-based cannons that they excelled beyond the assault capacities of European ships. In one instance, a Portuguese ship fired a warning shot at the shore to test the defenses. Việt gunners responded by walking a series of cannon shots in a line ending just before the hull of the ship and then passing over it. This strong military presence in the ports protected trade with Portugal as well
as with Japan and China. It kept hard currency and especially weapons circulating on the central coast. Japanese merchants brought finely crafted steel swords that, like Portuguese cannons, served as models for local smiths. The Nguyễn army in the 1600s was one of the strongest in South-east Asia, but this constant military readiness took a heavy toll on the central coast’s villages and landscapes.

MILITARIZATION AND VILLAGE LIFE ON THE INNER ROAD

The process of Vietnamese settlement along the central coast from the 1400s onward involved not only responding to calls for military service or industrial materials but also a more personal ambition, staking a family’s claim to land that was already settled. The fertile village lands where Vietnamese troops landed were a beachhead not only for Đại Việt but also for Vietnamese families. These families facilitated the state’s territorial expansion as well as the creation of a new genealogical foothold in the frontier lands. Over several generations, these individuals and their descendants turned homesteads and farms into a kind of family-centered sacred land often marked by tombs and shrines. Genealogical histories even today pay special deference to these founding ancestors (thủy tổ) and founding sites where old family shrines continue to serve as focal points for annual gatherings of descendants. A genealogy website dedicated to Võ-Vũ Descendants, for example, documents the family’s origins with a Vũ Hồn who migrated from China to establish the family at Mộ Trạch Village in Hải Dương Province near the Red River delta. Members of the Võ family then moved south to Thần Phù Village near Huế in the late 1300s (figure 1.3). They settled on a spit of land extending into the lagoon with a tidal estuary ideal for rice cultivation. The family website features a recent video segment produced by Thừa Thiên–Huế TV documenting the annual return of descendants for a village festival.

While official and family records in Thần Phù are not clear on the exact date of this village’s formation or whether the Võ family founder was a soldier, records in nearby Thanh Thủy Thương Village are more precise (figure 1.3). Records from an ancestral shrine and accompanying genealogy of the Cham-heritage Phạm family note that the founding ancestor, Phạm Bá Tùng (b. 1399), joined Lê Lợi’s army in 1418 to fight the Ming occupation and then
participated in southern campaigns against Cham armies around Thuận Hóa (Huế) as a commander (chỉ huy sứ). A website organized by his descendants suggests that after a final campaign in 1446, he retired from military service and established his family’s presence in the village before his death in 1470.\textsuperscript{27} Perhaps it was deliberate on the part of the emperor or simply practical, but grants to found villages were extended to multiple families at a time. At Thần Phú, the Võ founders were accompanied by two other families, the Hồ and Lê. Three more families staked further claims sanctioned by the Nguyễn government in the 1600s.\textsuperscript{28} Phạm Bá Tùng was the seventh of thirteen founding ancestors in Thanh Thủy Thượng. Service to the state often continued in successive generations, too, and it not only applied to men but sometimes to women. Phạm Bá Tùng’s daughter, Ngọc Chân, at age eighteen became a consort of Emperor Lê Thánh Tông in 1471. The family celebrates her at a shrine beside that of her father.\textsuperscript{29}

This beachhead pattern of Vietnamese settlement and land titling on the central coast produced distinctive village groupings along an inside coastline that became the economic backbone of the Nguyễn domain (figure 1.4). Protected by shallow lagoons and backed by mountains, it was sufficiently protected that commerce and communications could thrive. This narrow strip of plains corresponds with the path of present-day Highway 1, and it gave the region its common name, Đàng Trong (Inner Road).\textsuperscript{30} While many historians have detailed the Vietnamese southward expansion (nam tiến) along this road, eastern and western expansions from these founding settlements were just as important. Descendants from these villages often pioneered new lower (hạ) satellites in the estuaries or upper (thượng) hamlets in the hills (figure 1.4). As scholars of ancient Champa and Sa Huỳnh culture have long suggested, this upland-lowland, east-west relationship was likely not a Vietnamese invention but rather followed older Cham (or Cham-Katuic) patterns connecting a rice-based estuarine economy with cottage industries in the hills and valuable forest products in the highlands.\textsuperscript{31}

In the twenty-first century, most of these founder-satellite relationships have been forgotten as village names have changed; however, many commune boundaries and a few of the old names retaining Hạ and thượng suffixes survive. The first colonial topographic map series published circa 1909 recorded many of the old names, showing more of these historic relationships. Figure 1.3 is a composite of three maps that show the 1909 topographic map with a selection of village names and family shrines highlighted. The dark gray
shaded areas indicate elevations from sea level to three meters above sea level, and the light gray areas show elevations from three meters to fifty meters. Areas in white depict hills above fifty meters. The third layer shows modern commune boundaries that in many cases retain the hills-to-estuary orientation. Key sites in these founding villages such as communal houses (đình), family shrines (lăng họ), and even rest stops (such as Eastern Wood, or Đông Lâm) were most densely clustered along this isocline at about three meters above sea level. The Inner Road followed this isocline, too, with its north-south paths bisecting the original village domains.
Descendants of the founding families and new arrivals expanded village domains outward, but the Nguyễn government pressed for publicly controlled land ownership to ensure continued loyalty, army conscripts, and revenues. As these villages expanded in the 1600s, the central government remained deeply resistant to recognizing privately held land. A rare set of documents from Dạ Lê Village suggests that public fields (công diên) made up the overwhelming majority of village land. It notes the village’s founding in 1460, its split into four separate villages in 1515, and a petition in 1671 for new land concessions in the hilly upland section. Nguyễn Đình Nghi, descendant of a founder, petitioned the Nguyễn government for permission to open up 862 acres (mẫu) of new rice paddy and 245 acres of fields in the upper section. This award was an especially large grant for a single individual, perhaps reflecting a high official status with the court. The state awarded him the land, but it required that he keep 90 percent of it as public field. These common properties were not hereditary. Instead, the state, via the village council at Dạ Lê Communal House, determined future tenants. If Mr. Nghi left the village, died, or fell behind in his taxes, the council could reassign these lands to others. This arrangement was, especially in the 1600s and 1700s, a highly effective tool for ensuring continued civil and military service while it prevented families from establishing private estates.

There is a popular proverb in Vietnam that “royal edicts submit to village custom” (phép vua thua lệ làng); however, this proverb should not be misconstrued to mean that village life existed separate from the state. Especially around the Nguyễn capital at Phú Xuân (Huế), the government and its military were deeply integrated into village life. The state depended on taxes, especially in-kind payments of rice and other materials for the army. Village lands formed a critical intermediary landscape for state-village negotiations. Processes of field maintenance, improvement, and abandonment depended on the willingness of cultivators to meet state requirements for rents or taxes. As the ranks of military and civil officers expanded in the late 1600s, the need for resources and land to reward loyal soldiers became more acute. During times of war, many people fled, died in military service, or took shelter in abandoned lands. After each regime change, one of the first campaigns of the new emperor was to resurvey village lands. Military service enabled access to one category of public land specific to veterans’ families, called salary fields (luong diên). Drawn from a village’s stock of public fields, these constituted a type of payment for military service or welfare for families who had lost
men in wars. Typically wives and ineligible relatives tended these fields. Thus the concentration of public lands was closely tied to military recruitment and social welfare for war widows.  

Besides this public-private rice economy, most villages developed a single village-wide industry, such as boat building or tool making, that figured into tax obligations and military preparedness. A few villages paid all of their taxes in such essential industrial materials as iron and enjoyed exemptions from military service. Phù Bài Village, by virtue of iron ore deposits in its upland hills, became one of the most important industrial villages on the central coast. Men, women, and children there worked in five family guilds that controlled the iron-making process from stripping ore in the hills to producing charcoal and running the furnaces. Family genealogies tracked with guild identities. Each guild possessed its own communal house, too, thus partitioning land management and cultural affairs by work. Phù Bài Village possessed a relatively large area of rice fields in its lower domain, but it paid most of its taxes in iron.  

Iron smelting and associated village industries were ecologically consumptive. Mining was dangerous work, stripping hills with deep pits that filled with rain and frequently collapsed. The village’s smelting kilns ran continuously, especially during rainy winter months. By the early 1700s, Phù Bài produced on average thirty metric tons of iron per year for its tax obligation and roughly equivalent amounts for private trade. This produced in turn many hundreds of tons of waste slag annually and consumed thousands of tons of wood for the charcoal fuels. Even in villages without such industries, upland areas were important for supporting an informal economy tied to grazing and wood collection. Geographer Nguyễn Đình Đầu notes that approximately 43 percent of the territory in Dạ Lê District by 1806 was recorded as “hilly, fallow,” meaning it was deforested and not farmed. These lands were nonetheless important for such communal activities as burials. For these communal lands, the government required fixed amounts of goods produced from them such as bamboo matting (tấm nạp), wooden furniture, and wooden boats. Despite the general trend of deforestation in this period, some villages maintained small areas of woods. Thần Phú Village kept several hills forested as a rest stop for travelers called the Eastern Wood. Royal officials, merchants, and others stopped here on the journey from the capital. The last independent Vietnamese monarch, Emperor Tự Đức, reputedly composed poems celebrating it.
This era of early modern industrial activity, expansion, and relative peace on the central coast ended abruptly in a devastating civil war, the Tây Sơn Rebellion (1771–1802), that exposed the ecological and political limits of Nguyễn authority. The rebellion drew widespread support especially from those living in upland settlements who chafed at the taxes they considered onerous given the ecological poverty in deforested lands. In the estuary fields, too, villages had expanded to the limit, forming a continuous patchwork of fields and canals across the estuaries. Trade and expansion south to the Mekong delta helped keep the capital’s growing population supplied with food. By 1773 in Thừa Thiên–Huế, the population topped 128,000 people while just 158,181 acres of land (approximately 0.6 hectare per person) were in cultivation. The hills at this time were mostly bare of trees, so imported rice and timber were essential to the capital region’s economy.38

When a tax rebellion in the southern territories cut off the regime’s access to imports, the central coast fell into a panic. Famine set in and land taxes rose as the Nguyễn government struggled to survive.39 The rebellion quickly drew supporters and overthrew Nguyễn governors, especially in the former Cham ports. Famines broke out along the Inner Road, and hungry villagers gleaned the hills, leaving vistas of scrub and eroded ravines in their wake. Many villagers voted with their feet, resettling elsewhere or joining the rebels. The Tây Sơn army established its base of operations near a former Cham center, Quy Nhơn. As the Nguyễn government fell apart, their northern rivals from Thăng Long invaded in 1775, throwing the old land and tax systems into chaos.40

The thirty-year period of devastating warfare and famine that ensued along the Inner Road played a pivotal role in emptying surrounding hillsides and ravaging village life. Outbreaks of famine from the mid-1760s led to the abandonment of thousands of acres of unsustainable farms, especially upland plots. Fewer fields in production meant less tax revenue, and fewer people in rural communities meant fewer military recruits.41 Nguyễn demands for military conscripts in the first years of fighting sapped essential labor from the fields. By 1773 villagers had abandoned more than 112,000 acres of fields in Thuận Hóa.42 In 1775 the year of the Trịnh army’s march into Phú Xuân, a military observer described terrible scenes of corpses stacked along streets and recounted tales of families eating one another to survive. A French
missionary in the area noted that during the worst years, rice was more valuable than gold. The military victors in Huế inherited this responsibility for feeding people, restoring infrastructure, and winning wars. However, with farm laborers conscripted in the army and the same degraded environment, little changed. In 1786 the rebel Tây Sơn troops invaded Huế and engaged in a scorched-earth policy that destroyed many cultural landmarks. They razed churches and pagodas, melting bronze bells and statues for cannons.

**NATIONAL SURVIVAL, MOVING INLAND**

This early modern era came to a violent close when a new military force, a Vietnamese navy featuring several French warships, launched a seaborne assault on Huế on June 12, 1801. This victory ushered in a new phase of Vietnamese rule with European military advisers. Loyalists of the old Nguyễn government, led by the surviving heir Nguyễn Ánh, incorporated European weapons, tactics, and cartographic practices in their years-long effort to defeat the Tây Sơn. As with earlier adoptions of Ming firearms and Portuguese weapons, their adoption of European warcraft helped the Nguyễn forces develop a new imperial government that finally stretched from the northern border with China to the southern tip of the Mekong delta. However, the Nguyễn dynasty (r. 1802–1945) continued to face the same environmental and land-based political challenges as had the regimes before them. Gradually, and especially under the reign of the second emperor Minh Mạng (r. 1820–41), this new government produced something of a neotraditional system that blended modern elements of military architecture and maps with Chinese as the language of the court and Confucianism as the state religion. On the central coast, this government’s rule effectively ended in 1883 when a French naval fleet invaded, sacking the same coastal defenses that had fallen in 1801 to the Nguyễns.

A closer inspection of the Nguyễn dynasty’s military government and struggles over demilitarization and land policies in the 1830s is instructive for foreshadowing the deep tensions that divided Vietnamese elites and commoners over land use and militarism in the twentieth century. The first era of Nguyễn imperial rule was one in which military officers managed much of the government’s administration. This era began on the central coast in 1801 with naval assaults that brought French military officers into key positions of the new government. These assaults bear some description for they
indicate the scale of destruction accompanying these battles. A Frenchman, twenty-four-year-old Laurent Barisy, accompanied the Nguyễn fleet as an arms dealer and described them in his letters. In the siege of the Tây Sơn port at Quy Nhơn, the Nguyễn fleet destroyed ninety Tây Sơn vessels and allegedly killed fifty thousand sailors and people on shore. Nguyễn Ánh lost four thousand of his own soldiers in the attack. The fleet then sailed north and attacked Đà Nẵng before preparing its invasion of Huế. On June 12, 1801, the fleet reached the inlet to the Perfume River at Thuận An, a coastal defense about fifteen kilometers from Huế. The Nguyễn flotilla attacked the coastal forts and the Tây Sơn fleet guarding the inlet. They broke through the defenses, and three days later, after heavy bloodshed, Nguyễn Ánh and his officers (including three French captains) walked the palace grounds that his parents had fled. In the ensuing days, he and the Vietnamese commanders commenced sentencing enemy commanders while simultaneously raising recruits for one final assault on the northern capital at Thăng Long. After that assault, Nguyễn Ánh returned to Phú Xuân in 1802 and was crowned Emperor Gia Long.

While many royal armies in Southeast Asia had employed European weapons and mercenaries since the 1500s, this Nguyễn campaign was one of the first to feature European officers commanding European ships under a Vietnamese flag. It marked a critical turn in naval technologies as European vessels expanded in size and replaced Chinese and Southeast Asian ships in much of the region’s long-haul trade. The French naval officers each commanded a thirty-six-cannon frigate with three hundred sailors. In the naval assault on Quy Nhơn in 1801, the French officers served as Nguyễn Ánh’s naval escort and supported the Vietnamese generals who led the landings. Once on the throne, Emperor Gia Long reorganized his military—and in some ways his government—along European military lines. He rewarded the French officers who served him, giving them official titles with salaries, grand houses, and security details, and he turned to his Việt generals to insure domestic security, appointing them as military governors. He also followed in the tradition of his ancestors by insisting on military rule. In Huế, French officer Jean-Baptiste Chaigneau served as a chief diplomat, receiving delegations of European visitors there. At the northern and southern regional commands (present-day Hà Nội and Sài Gòn), Vietnamese generals governed as viceroyos in French-style military fortresses. Sài Gòn’s rice granaries and port remained vital to the kingdom, so Emperor Gia Long named his most
trusted general, Lê Văn Duyệt, to govern there. Duyệt in turn pursued further military expansions into Khmer territory, establishing a garrison near the Khmer court at Phnom Penh.

Despite the creation of a new imperial government and its European-influenced military, the ecological poverty that had worsened during the Tây Sơn Rebellion continued. On the central coast, provincial military governments faced droughts, typhoons, infrastructure collapse, and more rebellions. Governors continued to complain about abandoned land, and the imperial government resumed high taxes and conscription demands. At a former Cham port, Quang Ngai, local protests coalesced into a series of full-scale battles where non-Việt, ostensibly highlander groups fought the Nguyễn forces, taking over some strongholds for a time. They had started this resistance in the 1750s and resumed it in 1803. These rebellions simmered into the 1850s. One estimate of this highlander army in 1844 figured several thousand soldiers manning a perimeter of hilltop forts around Quang Ngai. While military campaigns in the kingdom’s mountainous and southern frontiers may have advanced state aims to cultivate (giáo hóa) non-Việt peoples, the old troubles of abandoned fields and low productivity undermined the appeal of integration into a modern Vietnamese state.

Even in relatively wealthy villages such as Phu Bai, decades of war and environmental degradation left the old, guild-centered life in ruins. The surrounding coastal hills remained deforested and eroded with upland fields and mining areas largely untended. Without essential charcoal, iron production at Phu Bai ceased. The district administration even revoked the village’s two-hundred-year exemption from military service. In 1808 Gia Long requested five hundred soldiers from the village, sapping essential laborers from iron working and agriculture. When the government completed new land registers of the village, they described the majority of formerly titled public fields in the hills as “idle wasteland” (hoang nhan, thop phu).

Beside the political problems associated with abandoned fields, the spread of cholera in coastal communities added a new, frightening challenge from the sea. As European ships circulating between India and China made port calls in Vietnam, they unwittingly spread the bacteria (Vibrio cholerae) in their bilge water and via sick sailors who went (and often died) ashore. Cholera outbreaks ravaged Việt ports during each of the global pandemics. Populations near stagnant water were especially vulnerable; this may help to explain why the Vietnamese government restricted foreigners to the seaport in Đà...
Nạng and prevented most from traveling the road to Huế. In just one year (1820), over two hundred thousand people in the kingdom died from the disease. An outbreak in 1849–50 killed almost six hundred thousand people, and more outbreaks followed in the 1850s and 1860s. This terrifying disease was an imperial one, spreading from seaports along shipping lanes to people living on the water’s edge.

Considering the growth of European and American navies in the 1800s and troubles emanating from the sea, the decision of the second Nguyễn emperor, Minh Mạng (r. 1820–41), to abruptly cut ties with France and demilitarize his government signaled an important shift in tactics. Minh Mạng attempted to move away from his father’s system of military government while directly addressing the persistent problem of abandoned lands through an aggressive new land policy. These moves triggered a devastating insurrection in Sài Gòn and brought foreign condemnation for the execution of Catholic priests, but at least in landscape terms, Emperor Minh Mạng attempted to remedy the social causes of poor lands and to integrate the highland frontiers.

In the growing capital at Huế, no work of architecture better symbolized this emperor’s neotraditional transition than did the new palace. Construction of Huế’s fortifications started under his father in 1804; and the influence of famed military architect Sébastien Vauban is highly evident in the ramparts and walls. Inside the walls, however, Minh Mạng constructed a royal palace that followed a deliberately chosen model: the Ming dynasty’s Forbidden City in Beijing. One of the most ornate elements in the palace, the Noon Gate, was completed in 1833. Its tiled roofs, attention to feng shui, and many figurative elements signaled an intention to reorient the nation’s political culture along more traditionally Confucian lines.

As the palace was completed, Minh Mạng initiated one of the most ambitious land reform campaigns in the history of the kingdom. He ordered a comprehensive national land survey that would limit the size of private land holdings and reapportion excess lands through reclassification as public lands. This nineteenth-century land-to-the-tiller program and an accompanying mapping initiative triggered a three-year rebellion in the south that left the southern fortress at Gia Định (Sài Gòn) in ruins. A central cause for the rebellion was Minh Mạng’s accompanying cultivation policy. The emperor not only sought to boost agricultural cultivation but he also ordered Chinese and Catholic schools closed and aimed to “cultivate” the many non-Việt ethnic groups to a Confucian and Vietnamese standard.
Maps figured centrally in both of the emperor’s reforms, indicating non-Việt places as well as lands open for new tenants. While the kingdom struggled with local resistance in many centers of Khmer, Cham, Chinese, and highlander populations, the mapmaking effort over the years produced a valuable spatial record of the kingdom’s natural and cultural geography. The maps progressively expanded Vietnamese territorial claims deeper into the highlands too. Published from 1830 to 1882, these atlases and gazetteers offered a spatial platform for cultivation policies. On the central coast, this new wave of mapmaking extended the court’s imperial gaze much deeper inland, beyond the edges of the relatively bare coastal hills to steeper slopes and distant peaks inhabited by highlander groups. Nguyễn atlases and gazetteers detail this expanding westward gaze to the terrestrial “sea” of highland forests. One of the first nationwide atlases, published in 1832, shows a heightened attention to the hills—almost every peak and ridge appears named. The atlas presented a bird’s-eye view of Thừa Thiên–Huế Province with the coast at the bottom and the hills and the mountainous frontier at the top. This presentation directed the viewer’s gaze inland to the remote peaks (figure 1.4). The Inner Road running from north to south was just a dotted line that bisected the walled capital and district seats such as Hương Thủy (encompassing Phú Bài and Dạ Lê Villages). Another line at the top marked a relatively new feature in Nguyễn maps, a border delineating the kingdom’s claims to the upland domain from the terra incognita of the mountains beyond. Considering the map’s use of Chinese characters as well as traditional scale and symbolic conventions common to East Asian cartography, it also represents a deliberate stylistic shift away from European cartographic techniques that Vietnamese cartographers had experimented with before 1820.

After Minh Mạng’s death in 1841, his successors carried forward these policies but failed, like many of the region’s monarchs, to respond to the growing military power of European navies. However, while trouble and colonial wars erupted on the coastline, the Nguyễn monarchs continued to pursue expansion inland, above the hills. French naval forces had escalated attacks on Nguyễn ports beginning in 1847, and in 1859 a French fleet attacked and seized the royal citadel at Sài Gòn. Nguyễn maps and gazetteers produced in the 1860s mostly avoided this once-vital southern region; instead they expanded to include new mountainous realms that had previously fallen outside old mapped areas. A comprehensive historical geography of the kingdom completed in the early 1860s, Đại Nam Nhất Thông Chí, introduced the
terms dồng and cốc to signal non-Việt highland slopes. One of the last geographic publications produced before the French navy invaded Huế, it represented one last imperial push to the hills as European forces prepared coastal amphibious assaults. The last geographic volumes published by the Nguyễn even expanded the traditional idea of upper and lower settlements.
to include this new highlands zone. The final geography of the province was divided into three books describing lowlands, midlands, and highlands.\textsuperscript{61}

**BARE HILLS AND THE SPATIAL LOGIC OF COLONIAL CONQUEST**

Much has been written about what authors Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hémery describe as France’s “ambiguous colonization” of Indochina in stages from 1858 to 1884; however, little attention has been paid to the role that regional landscapes played in determining the spaces of this colonial expansion.\textsuperscript{62} The “idle wastelands” that had long exposed the economic and political weaknesses of the Nguyễn government beckoned to French cartographers and colonial speculators. Here were empty spaces of capitalist possibility with few preexisting claims. Meanwhile the agro-economic engines that sustained the Vietnamese kingdom, the estuarine rice fields and densely settled villages along the Inner Road, presented threats to colonial foot soldiers fearing ambush or disease. When French forces encountered a loyalist rebellion around Huế in 1885, these same bare hills offered new value as a strategic redoubt with clear sightlines and hillocks ideal for artillery.

For a colonizing France anxious to set itself in opposition to the Nguyễn regime, the bare hills represented something different: open space for capitalist enterprises. The ancient lowlands with densely populated villages and exposure to diseases presented multiple threats to French security and health, and the highlands, beyond roads and navigable rivers, were all but inaccessible. Had French planters or scientists been permitted to visit the intervening hills, they might have quickly realized why they were so underpopulated. French interest in this “idle wasteland” began out of unusual circumstances. In 1876 after a series of unequal treaties, the French government presented Emperor Tự Đức with a gift of five outdated French gunships to help the kingdom modernize its fleet.\textsuperscript{63} French naval officers traveled from the French camp in Đà Nẵng to deliver the ships and temporarily captain them.\textsuperscript{64} This gift of warships and a two-year contract funding a training mission brought a novel reconnaissance opportunity for the French military. Retired naval officer and amateur cartographer Jules-Léon Dutreuil de Rhins took the contract and spent two years captaining the gunship *Le Scorpion* while exploring the countryside around Huế. His detailed attention to Nguyễn coastal defenses informed the French naval assault there in 1883.
while his gaze from the coastal road into the hills rendered deforested hillsides into verdant spaces for new enterprises. His popular account of the journey, *Le Royaume d’Annam et les Annamites*, included two of the first detailed maps of the Huế area for Western readers. The maps and the travel diary hewed close to the genre of the day, functioning as both entertainment and promotional literature for colonization. He wrote that the lower reaches were “almost entirely deforested, uncultivated, [and] mediate between the mountain and the plain.” He described this area as ideal for “cash crops: sugar cane, coffee, tobacco, cotton, mulberry, cinnamon, pepper, etc.,” and he added that “the climate of this province is much healthier than Lower Cochinchina or the Tonkin Delta.” In light of the cholera epidemics raging in the delta regions, he believed that “Europeans could acclimatize, directing industrial and agricultural establishments and really do the work of colonization.” He addressed two vital concerns for the prospective European colonizer: potential for cash crops and the possibility of “acclimatizing” to this tropical locale.
His speculative geography also included many disparaging comments on the “disease-prone” coastal communities that suffered from the political repression of “rapacious mandarins.” Dutreuil du Rhins contributed many other common tropes, too, in particular descriptions of villagers as “lazy” given their apparent lack of interest in cultivating the hills.

While the explorer-author attempted to differentiate spaces in the landscape that might appeal to his European audience, his descriptions and maps in many senses continued the upward logic of the Nguyễn atlases and gazetteers. His maps detailed navigable waterways and the Inner Road but then followed royal tombs and gardens upstream to the kingdom’s rear gates where Việt hills (sơn) gave way to lands “inhabited by Moïs [savages]” (figure 1.5).

A closer look at this map in figure 1.6 and the descriptive text reveals a combination of purposeful erasures, elisions, and continuations. Dutreuil du Rhins marked in his maps key imperial sites such as “Annamite rear post” and “trạm” (a district-level administrative station), but he replaced the names of hilltops and hamlets with generic terms such as “uncultivated” and “abandoned,” conceptually clearing the hills for French ventures. Through a graduated stippling of pen strokes, he may have intentionally hidden some
ecological truths of this terrain, too; torrential rains had rent deep gullies through deforested slopes and left little if any topsoil. Places such as Phú Bài and the Eastern Wood melted into more generic terms—village, uncultivated plain, scrub.

Throughout the book, Dutreuil de Rhins contrasted the fallow hills and crowded villages to produce the specter of a space that might receive France’s mission civilisatrice. For those readers who might have questioned why the Vietnamese had not taken advantage of their bounty, he blamed the Nguyễn government’s corruption: “More than half of the arable land in the province of Huế is still uncultivated, due to different causes that we have already spoken, mainly the laziness of the Annamese [Vietnamese] and their pitiful government. . . . The Annamite, for whom foreign trade is prohibited, has no interest in the rich crops which would cost him too much fatigue, and it is not encouraged to produce cereals beyond the needs of his consumption because the mandarins, cowardly and crawling with their superiors and as hard and rapacious with their inferiors, they soon despoil his reserves.”66 The critique of “indolent poverty” was not unfounded. Rulers in Huế since the 1750s had struggled to fix the problem of abandoned upland settlements, and Minh Mạng had taken drastic measures to reappropriate lands, but to no avail.

Dutreuil du Rhins, however, missed one of the most important spatial facts with respect to the villages along the Inner Road. Far from being bastions of “the lazy,” these villages were communities of hardened survivors, families that had clung to ancestral lands, tombs, and homes despite waves of violent warfare. The common people he encountered along the road may have been grandchildren of those who had survived the Nguyễn collapse in 1773, the Tây Sơn’s rapacious rule until 1801, and life amid increasing military demands of the Nguyễn emperors. Many traced their ancestry to founding ancestors, soldiers who served Đại Việt’s armies in the 1400s and 1500s. The patchwork of fields and village courtyards bounded by hedges and dikes in the narrow plain was a model of resiliency. Over centuries, families negotiated with village councils and state authorities to preserve these landscapes and their lineages.

Finally, despite the French and imperial Vietnamese use of such terms as fallow, the hills behind these villages were not bare or abandoned. They had long played important roles in village life as zones for speculative industrial development or commons for less productive ventures. The scrubby trees provided essential fuel wood, and the grass supported grazing livestock.
Given the limited space on the plain, the hills provided an essential perch for tombs. Villagers could sleep easy knowing that the ghosts of their ancestors watched down from the hills.

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Despite Detreuil du Rhins's view on which lands had value and which did not, his travelogue came to several similar conclusions with the Nguyễn government. First, he recognized that the bulk of this region's population survived in a very narrow strip of villages and fields hugging the Inner Road, hemmed in by hills and estuaries. He also recognized that the strip was ancient, an economic backbone of the region and a challenge to colonial-style economic growth. As did the Nguyễn chronicles and maps, Dutreuil du Rhins also imagined potential riches that waited uphill. While he gazed on the hills, the Nguyễn government had set its sights higher. The forested, mountainous “sea” beyond the hills was the last outlet for Vietnamese exploration as French and European fleets dominated the coastal waters. This late nineteenth-century shift in territorial ambitions from the seas to the mountains anticipated the elevational logics that guided a later generation of Vietnamese revolutionaries in the twentieth century.