



THE HISTORICAL FORMATION OF THE TRUC LAM BUDDHIST SCRIPTURAL LANDSCAPE: THE RELIGIOUS TITLE OF EMPEROR-BUDDHA TRAN NHAN TONG AND THE CASE OF HUONG VAN PAGODA

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Abstract: This article critically reconsiders the long-standing “mountain-centric” paradigm that has dominated scholarship on the Trúc Lâm Zen tradition in Vietnam. Through a case study of Huong Van Pagoda in Kinh Mon, it argues that the religious significance of Truc Lam is not confined to ascetic reclusion on high mountain peaks such as Yen Tu, but also unfolds within “post-ascetic spaces” where moral and doctrinal values are enacted in everyday social life. Drawing on the theoretical framework of the “scriptural landscape” and an interdisciplinary methodology integrating spatial analysis, epigraphy, visual culture, and the ethnography of memory, the article demonstrates how Truc Lam teachings have been preserved through toponymy, riverine symbolism, and community memory. Under conditions of profound archival rupture, these spatialized and embodied forms of remembrance function as alternative repositories of religious knowledge, authority, and continuity within broader historical networks linking landscape, practice, devotion, identity, transmission, resilience, adaptation, and collective memory.

Keywords: Truc Lam Zen; Emperor-Monk Tran Nhan Tong; Scriptural Landscape; Post-Ascetic Space; Cultural Memory; Vietnam Buddhism; Yen Tu

1. INTRODUCTION: DECONSTRUCTING THE "MOUNTAIN-CENTRIC" PARADIGM

Truc Lam Buddhism was not conceived as a tradition of monastic withdrawal or secluded mountain asceticism in the conventional sense. On the contrary, from its foundational vision articulated by Tran Nhan Tong, Truc Lam explicitly advanced the principle of “engaged practice” (đạo nhập thế), in which awakening is cultivated within, rather than apart from, social life.

This orientation is articulated with particular clarity in Tran Nhan Tong seminal work “Cu Tran Lac Dao phu”(Living in the World while Joyfully Abiding in the Way), where spiritual realization is presented not as contingent upon physical retreat, but as achievable through disciplined practice amid everyday worldly conditions. The text frames engagement with society not as an obstacle to liberation, but as the very terrain through which ethical cultivation and insight are realized.

Within this doctrinal framework, Truc Lam practice cannot be reduced to a network of mountain monasteries alone. Lowland, riverine, and economically active spaces—where lay and monastic lives intersect—must be understood as integral to the tradition’s lived geography. From this perspective, identifying Huong Van as a Truc Lam scriptural locus situated in a lowland, riverine environment does not represent a deviation from Truc Lam ideals, but rather a faithful expression of its core principle of awakening within the world.

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Scholarly approaches to Truc Lam Zen Buddhism have long been shaped by a spatial imagination that privileges withdrawal, elevation, and monastic retreat. Yen Tu Mountain, where Tran Nhan Tong undertook intensive ascetic practice following his abdication, has consequently been treated as the primary—if not exclusive—locus of Truc Lam religious meaning. This mountain-centered paradigm, while historically grounded, has also produced a narrowed interpretive frame that risks obscuring the broader religious logic of Truc Lam as a lived Buddhist tradition. This fixation on vertical reclusion creates a hierarchical geography of the sacred that inherently marginalizes the lowlands as mere sites of secular distraction, rather than arenas of spiritual realization. The Truc Lam Zen tradition did not emerge as a monastic system oriented solely toward isolation or transcendence from society.

Rather, its foundational articulation by Tran Nhan Tong emphasized the integration of ethical discipline, political responsibility, and everyday life. The ideal of secular engagement - entering the world without being bound by it—constituted a defining feature of Truc Lam’s religious vision. Yet, despite the centrality of this ideal, scholarly attention has remained disproportionately focused on sites of ascetic retreat, leaving post-ascetic spaces underexamined. This scholarly bias not only restricts our historical understanding but also obscures the intricate spatial networks where Truc Lam’s teachings were actively put to the test. To remedy this oversight, it is imperative to shift our focus toward sites situated at cultural and commercial intersections, where spiritual cultivation remained inseparable from the flow of human life. Within this context, religious institutions such as Huong Van Pagoda emerge as vital coordinates for decoding how Truc Lam Buddhism sustained its profound vitality in the very heart of the secular world. This article argues that such an imbalance reflects not a lack of historical significance on the part of non-mountainous sites, but a methodological limitation within the study of Vietnamese Buddhism. By equating religious authenticity with monumental architecture or secluded geography, existing scholarship has overlooked how Truc Lam doctrine was enacted spatially in environments characterized by circulation, exchange, and moral testing. In response, this study proposes a re-reading of Truc Lam through the concept of scriptural landscape—a form of religious expression in which doctrine is articulated through spatial configuration, place-naming practices, and lived ethical engagement rather than exclusively through textual transmission.

The notion of scriptural landscape has gained increasing traction in religious studies as scholars seek to understand traditions whose material and textual records have been fragmented or disrupted. In such contexts, space itself functions as a medium of religious memory, encoding doctrinal values through geography, movement, and ritual practice. For Truc Lam Zen, this spatial mode of inscription is particularly salient, given Vietnam’s long history of archival rupture resulting from foreign domination, warfare, famine, and ideologically driven destruction of religious institutions.

Within this framework, the present study focuses on Huong Van Pagoda in Kinh Mon, northern Vietnam. Unlike Yen Tu, Huong Van is not situated in an isolated mountainous environment, nor does it possess monumental architectural remains. Instead, it is embedded within a riverine and market-oriented landscape historically characterized by dense human circulation. The persistence of the toponym “Huong Van ,” however, links the site directly to the ascetic title Huong Van Dai Dau Da adopted by Tran Nhan Tong following his renunciation of kingship.

Rather than attempting to establish direct residence or biographical presence, this article examines how the religious significance of Huong Van emerges through the convergence of ascetic identity, spatial symbolism, and community memory. By situating Huong Van as a post-ascetic sacred space—where Truc Lam ethics were tested and enacted amid the flux of social life—the study challenges prevailing assumptions about where and how Truc Lam Zen should be located historically.

Methodologically, the article combines spatial analysis, epigraphic interpretation, visual culture (notably the *Xuât Sơn* scroll), and ethnographic attention to local memory. This interdisciplinary approach reflects the necessity of working across fragmented sources in the study of Vietnamese religious history. It also underscores a broader argument: that absence of continuous textual documentation should not be conflated with absence of religious meaning.

By systematically foregrounding the frameworks of lived religion and spatial scripture, this study seeks to transcend traditional philological boundaries and engage directly with the most pressing debates in contemporary Buddhist Studies. It interrogates the long-standing, often artificial dichotomy between rigorous ascetic practice—frequently misinterpreted as a terminal state of reclusion—and the profound social engagement that characterizes the 'post-ascetic' realization of the Truc Lam tradition.

Furthermore, this inquiry addresses a critical yet under-theorized problem in Asian historiography: the mechanisms of cultural resilience, through which religious traditions maintain their doctrinal continuity even when subjected to systemic historical discontinuity, widespread archival destruction, and the traumatic fragmentation of material culture. By shifting the focus from the 'missing text' to the 'abiding landscape,' this research demonstrates how religious truth can be encoded into the very topography and communal memory of a people.

In doing so, this work offers more than a localized reinterpretation of Truc Lam Zen as a networked, mobile system of ethics; it articulates a robust methodological model for researchers across disciplines. By synthesizing epigraphic data, visual culture analysis, and the ethnography of memory, it provides a versatile template for approaching religious landscapes in post-conflict or post-catastrophic societies. Ultimately, this study posits that in environments where formal archives have fallen silent due to war or ideological shifts, the geography itself remains a resilient and sophisticated repository of spiritual legacy, awaiting a multidisciplinary decipherment.

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2. TRUC LAM AS A LIVING RELIGIOUS TRADITION: THE ETHICS OF NON-ABIDING PRESENCE

Truc Lam Zen Buddhism has often been interpreted through a framework that emphasizes withdrawal, meditation, and detachment from worldly affairs. Such readings, while not without textual basis, risk flattening the distinctive religious vision articulated by its founder, Tran Nhan Tong. Unlike many monastic traditions that valorize separation from society as an end in itself, Truc Lam emerged from a context in which kingship, governance, and ethical responsibility were inseparable from religious practice. As a result, Truc Lam cannot be adequately understood as a tradition of ascetic retreat alone; it must be approached as a form of lived religion in which spiritual cultivation continues within the social world. The "King-Monk" archetype is not a contradiction in terms but a synthesis; it suggests that the sovereign's duty to the people is the highest form of Bodhisattva practice. Consequently, Truc Lam cannot be adequately understood as a tradition of ascetic retreat alone; it must be approached as a form of lived religion in which spiritual cultivation continues within the social world.

The life trajectory of Tran Nhan Tong provides a crucial point of departure for this interpretation. His renunciation did not mark a rupture from political and ethical responsibility, but rather a transformation of it. Even as he ascended Yen Tu, Tran Nhan Tong remained an influential figure in the stabilization of the Tran state, guiding his successor and traveling throughout the realm to propagate the ten good deeds (thập thiện). This "active renunciation" challenges the Western binary of the active vs. contemplative life. His subsequent religious activity retained a persistent concern with social harmony, moral discipline, and the cultivation of ethical conduct among both monastics and lay practitioners, proving that the Zen master's staff was as much a tool of social order as the emperor's scepter.

Central to this vision was the principle commonly articulated as *nhập thế*, often translated as "entering the world." In Truc Lam thought, *nhập thế* does not signify unreflective immersion in worldly desire, nor does it imply the abandonment of ascetic discipline. Rather, it denotes the capacity to engage social reality without attachment, allowing ethical clarity to be tested and refined within lived experience. This orientation distinguishes Truc Lam from forms of Zen that prioritize either strict monastic enclosure or purely inward cultivation.

From this perspective, ascetic practice constitutes a phase rather than a destination. Withdrawal, meditation, and bodily discipline function as preparatory processes through which the practitioner develops the capacity to act ethically amid complexity. The culmination of practice is therefore not isolation, but engagement—an engagement shaped by restraint, humility, and moral discernment. In Truc Lam, enlightenment is not demonstrated by removal from society, but by the ability to remain unbound while fully present within it.

This understanding has significant implications for how sacred space is conceptualized within the Truc Lam tradition. If ethical realization is expected to unfold within the world, then sites of religious significance cannot be confined to remote mountains or secluded monasteries. Instead, everyday environments—markets, river crossings, travel routes, and communal gathering spaces—become critical arenas in which religious values are enacted. Such spaces subject practitioners to the pressures of exchange, desire, and impermanence, thereby transforming geography itself into a medium of spiritual testing.

The emphasis on lived religion also helps to explain Truc Lam's relative openness toward lay participation. Rather than establishing rigid boundaries between monastic and lay life, Truc Lam teachings often foreground ethical comportment as a universal responsibility. Moral cultivation is not restricted to ordained practitioners, nor is it confined to ritual contexts. Instead, it permeates ordinary activities such as trade,

travel, and social interaction. In this sense, Truc Lam articulates a vision of Buddhism that is simultaneously ascetic and social, disciplined and adaptive.

Within this framework, post-ascetic space assumes particular importance. Once the practitioner has undergone rigorous discipline, the world itself becomes the primary site of practice. The religious landscape thus expands outward from the mountain to encompass spaces of circulation and exchange. Rivers, roads, and marketplaces—far from being distractions—serve as environments in which non-attachment is continually rehearsed. Movement through these spaces mirrors the impermanent nature of existence, reinforcing doctrinal insights through embodied experience.

This spatial logic is especially relevant in the context of Vietnamese religious history, where the destruction or fragmentation of textual archives has rendered conventional forms of doctrinal transmission incomplete. In such conditions, religious meaning is often preserved through practice, place, and naming rather than through sustained textual continuity. Truc Lam's emphasis on ethical enactment within daily life makes it particularly amenable to this mode of transmission. Doctrine survives not solely in written form, but in patterns of movement, social engagement, and spatial orientation.

Understanding Truc Lam as lived religion also reframes the significance of ascetic titles within the tradition. Titles such as *Huong Van Dai Dau Da* function not merely as honorifics, but as condensed expressions of religious identity. They encode ideals of discipline, impermanence, and ethical diffusion, serving as symbolic anchors that link individual practice to broader spatial and communal contexts. The persistence of such titles within place names thus reflects an ongoing relationship between ascetic identity and lived geography.

By foregrounding lived religion, this section establishes the conceptual groundwork for examining sites that do not conform to conventional expectations of monastic seclusion. It suggests that Truc Lam Zen should be approached not as a tradition defined by singular sacred centers, but as a distributed religious system in which ethical practice unfolds across diverse environments. This perspective opens analytical space for considering how post-ascetic sacred spaces—particularly those embedded within everyday social life—participate in the articulation of Truc Lam doctrine.

The following sections build on this framework by examining how ascetic titles, spatial symbolism, and visual culture converge in specific contexts. Through this lens, sites such as *Huong Van Pagoda* can be understood not as anomalies or marginal locations, but as integral components of a religious landscape shaped by movement, impermanence, and ethical engagement.

Within this framework, post-ascetic space assumes particular importance. Once the practitioner has undergone rigorous discipline—symbolized by the mountain—the world itself becomes the "final exam." The religious landscape thus expands outward to encompass spaces of circulation and exchange. Movement through these spaces mirrors the impermanent nature of existence, reinforcing doctrinal insights through embodied experience. As pilgrims and traders moved along the rivers of *Kinh Mon*, they were not just traveling; they were traversing a landscape encoded with the presence of the Buddha-King, whose very title reminded them of the "fragrant clouds" of virtue that permeate the mundane.

3. RELIGIOUS TITLES, ASCETIC IDENTITY, AND THE SOCIO-CULTURAL LOGIC OF THE NAMING TABOO

Within the semiotic and ontological framework of the Truc Lam Zen tradition, religious titles function not merely as honorary labels or bureaucratic markers, but as condensed, performative expressions of a deep-seated ascetic identity. They serve as "embodied semantics" that encapsulate the practitioner's spiritual

realization. In the pivotal case of Tran Nhan Tong, his post-abdication adoption of the title Huong Van Dai Dau Da (The Great Ascetic of Fragrant Clouds) serves as a profound semiotic nexus. It materializes a complex convergence of three core elements: rigorous bodily discipline, the diffusion of ethical radiance, and the philosophical embrace of impermanence.

In the pivotal case of Tran Nhan Tong, his post-abdication adoption of the title Huong Van Dai Dau Da (The Great Ascetic of Fragrant Clouds) serves as a profound semiotic nexus. It materializes a complex convergence of three core elements: rigorous bodily discipline, the diffusion of ethical radiance, and the philosophical embrace of impermanence. The component Dai Dau Da (Sanskrit: Dhūta) signifies more than a religious rank; it designates a totalizing commitment to the thirteen ascetic disciplines aimed at stripping away the ego and all worldly attachments—a radical departure from his former identity as a world-ruling monarch (Cakravartin).

Furthermore, the evocative metaphors of Huong (Fragrance) and Van (Cloud) extend the title's meaning into the realm of spiritual influence and non-abiding presence. Fragrance represents the non-localized, pervasive radiation of virtue that can be sensed but not grasped, while clouds symbolize the fluidity, movement, and transience of an enlightened mind that refuses to dwell in fixed abodes (vô sở trụ).

Deciphering the multi-layered religious significance of this title is therefore essential for understanding how the Truc Lam identity transcends the static confines of textual doctrine. By becoming a 'spatial coordinate' through toponymic inscription—as seen in the naming of sites like Huong Van Pagoda—the title transforms a personal ascetic identity into a shared communal and geographic legacy. It allows the spiritual authority of the founder to be anchored within the social landscape, ensuring that his ethical vision remains present and active within the collective memory of the populace, even in the face of historical archival silence.

The term Dau Da (Dhūtaṅga) denotes a set of rigorous ascetic practices aimed at stripping away attachments to comfort, status, and permanence. Within Buddhist traditions, đầu đà signifies not only bodily austerity but also a heightened ethical vigilance, cultivated through sustained exposure to hardship and uncertainty. By adopting the designation Đại Đầu Đà, Tran Nhan Tong aligned himself with the most demanding form of ascetic discipline, signaling a commitment to moral clarity forged through deprivation rather than seclusion.

The accompanying elements of the title—Huong (fragrance) and Van (cloud)—further articulate this ascetic identity in symbolic terms. Fragrance, within Buddhist discourse, frequently operates as a metaphor for ethical diffusion: virtue spreads without physical grasp, perceptible yet intangible. Cloud imagery similarly conveys impermanence, movement, and non-abiding presence. Together, Huong Van evokes a form of ethical influence that circulates without fixation, leaving traces without claiming territory. The title thus encodes a religious ideal in which disciplined practice culminates not in withdrawal, but in non-attached presence within the world.

Crucially, religious titles of this nature carried specific cultural and political weight in premodern Vietnam. Titles associated with sovereigns—particularly those adopted after abdication—were subject to strict norms of reverence and taboo (kiêng húy). The appropriation of such titles outside authorized or longstanding contexts would have constituted a serious transgression, implicating both political loyalty and ritual propriety. As a result, the circulation of royal religious titles was tightly regulated, whether through court sanction, monastic lineage, or deeply entrenched communal memory.

This cultural logic has important implications for how place names bearing ascetic titles should be interpreted. The persistence of the toponym “Huong Van ” within a local religious site cannot be dismissed

as a later commemorative gesture or arbitrary naming practice. Rather, it suggests the endurance of an association that was sufficiently legitimate to survive across periods of political change, social upheaval, and religious suppression. In contexts where written documentation has been fragmented or destroyed, such toponymic continuity functions as a crucial indicator of religious memory.

From a methodological standpoint, this observation aligns with broader approaches in religious studies that treat naming practices as vehicles of doctrinal transmission. Place names often encode layered histories of devotion, authority, and ethical aspiration, particularly in societies where formal archives have been repeatedly disrupted. In the Vietnamese context, where cycles of foreign domination, warfare, and ideological reform have produced significant archival rupture, names frequently serve as one of the most durable carriers of religious meaning.

The association between ascetic title and place name does not imply direct biographical residence or sustained occupancy. Rather, it reflects a symbolic and ethical linkage, whereby the values embodied in an ascetic identity are anchored spatially within a community's religious landscape. In this sense, toponymy operates as a form of spatial scripture, inscribing religious ideals into geography without reliance on continuous textual corroboration.

The concept of taboo further reinforces this interpretation. Because royal religious titles were protected by cultural norms of avoidance, their preservation within local nomenclature presupposes a degree of legitimacy recognized across generations. A community lacking such recognition would have been unlikely to retain a name that risked transgression. The endurance of "Huong Van" therefore indicates not casual remembrance, but sustained acceptance of an ethical association grounded in Truc Lam religious consciousness.

This dynamic becomes especially significant when considered alongside Truc Lam's emphasis on lived religion. As argued in the previous section, Truc Lam doctrine prioritizes ethical enactment within everyday environments. Ascetic identity, once forged through rigorous practice, is expected to diffuse outward into social space. Titles such as Huong Van Đại Đầu Đà encapsulate this outward movement, translating personal discipline into a model of ethical presence accessible to the broader community.

Within this framework, the spatial persistence of an ascetic title reflects the continued relevance of its ethical content. The title does not merely commemorate an individual; it sustains a set of values that inform how space is inhabited and interpreted. A site bearing the name "Huong Van" thus signals a localized articulation of Truc Lam ethics, grounded in impermanence, humility, and non-attachment.

This understanding also helps to clarify why sites associated with ascetic titles may not conform to conventional expectations of Buddhist sacred space. Rather than occupying remote or monumental settings, they often appear within zones of circulation—near rivers, markets, or transit routes—where ethical discipline is most severely tested. The absence of architectural grandeur in such locations does not diminish their religious significance; instead, it underscores their alignment with Truc Lam's post-ascetic orientation.

By examining religious titles through the lenses of ascetic identity and taboo, this section establishes a critical link between individual practice and spatial memory. It demonstrates how Truc Lam values are transmitted not solely through texts or institutions, but through culturally regulated naming practices that embed ethical ideals within lived geography. This insight provides a conceptual foundation for the subsequent analysis of specific sites, allowing spatial associations to be evaluated as expressions of religious meaning rather than as claims of historical occupancy.

The next section builds on this foundation by turning to Huong Van as a post-ascetic sacred space. Through spatial analysis of its riverine and market-oriented environment, the study explores how Truc Lam ethics were enacted within everyday life, transforming circulation itself into a medium of religious practice.

4. HUONG VAN AS A POST-ASCETIC SACRED SPACE: LIMINALITY, POROSITY, AND THE ETHICS OF CIRCULATION



If the Truc Lam Zen tradition is fundamentally reconceptualized as a dynamic lived religious tradition—one primarily oriented toward active ethical engagement—then the prevailing paradigms governing sacred geography must be reconsidered. Huong Van Pagoda presents an exceptionally compelling case for this historiographical re-evaluation. Situated not in the isolated mountainous environments reserved for the early stages of asceticism, but instead deeply embedded within a riverine and market-oriented landscape, Huong Van materializes a distinctive form of post-ascetic sacred space. The riverine setting of Huong Van is not merely a geographic backdrop; it is an active participant in the site's religious meaning. The pagoda is strategically situated along the banks of the Kinh Thay river, a vital hydrological artery that served as the primary logistical lifeline for both the imperial military and civilian commerce during the Trần Dynasty. This river, with its deep and turbulent currents, connects the mountainous interior with the coastal plains, embodying the very principle of "circulation" that characterizes Truc Lam's post-ascetic engagement.

Huong Van Pagoda presents an exceptionally compelling case for this historiographical re-evaluation. By virtue of its unique topographical placement—situated not in the archetypal, isolated mountainous environments reserved for the early stages of asceticism, but instead deeply embedded within a riverine and market-oriented landscape—Huong Van materializes a distinctive form of post-ascetic sacred space.

This transition from the heights of Mount Yen Tu to the lowland currents of Kinh Mon signifies a shift from the formation of discipline to the enactment of wisdom. It is within this specific geographic intersection, characterized by the dense human transit of the river junction and the moral friction of the marketplace, that the core values of the Truc Lam tradition were not merely contemplated in silence, but were rigorously and publicly enacted. In such a setting, the 'sacred' is not defined by its distance from the world, but by its ability to maintain spiritual integrity amidst the fluid and often chaotic currents of everyday social circulation.

Historical memory and spatial remnants indicate that Huong Van was embedded within a dense zone of movement and exchange. The site lay adjacent to pathways of travel, near a river junction that facilitated commerce and communication, and in proximity to market activity that brought together diverse social actors. Rather than functioning as a refuge from worldly life, the spatial logic of Huong Van placed religious practice in constant proximity to desire, negotiation, and impermanence.

This configuration aligns closely with Truc Lam's post-ascetic orientation. Following the completion of rigorous discipline, the practitioner is expected to re-enter the world without attachment. The world itself—characterized by flux, uncertainty, and ethical ambiguity—becomes the primary site of practice. In this sense, spaces of circulation are not obstacles to spiritual cultivation but necessary conditions for it. Rivers, roads, and marketplaces continually expose practitioners to change, reinforcing doctrinal insights into impermanence and non-abiding presence through embodied experience.

The riverine setting of Huong Van is particularly significant. Rivers in Buddhist symbolism often represent transience, flow, and the impossibility of fixation. A site positioned near a river junction amplifies these associations, emphasizing convergence and divergence rather than stability. Movement through such a landscape mirrors the doctrinal emphasis on non-attachment, as individuals pass through without establishing permanent claims. Within Truc Lam thought, this dynamic resonates with the ideal of remaining ethically grounded while accepting the instability of worldly conditions.

Equally important is the proximity of the site to market activity. Markets constitute spaces where desire, exchange, and competition are most visibly concentrated. For a religious tradition oriented toward ethical clarity within the world, such environments present both challenge and opportunity. The presence of a sacred site near a market does not dilute religious discipline; instead, it subjects that discipline to continual testing. Ethical comportment must be maintained not in isolation, but amid negotiation, temptation, and interpersonal complexity.

Local oral memory has preserved imagery that reflects this ethical tension through aphoristic expressions such as “nhịn ăn để mặc” and “nhịn mặc để ăn.” While these phrases do not constitute doctrinal statements in a formal sense, they function as vernacular articulations of Truc Lam ethics. Each expression gestures toward a reversal of ordinary priorities, emphasizing restraint, adaptability, and moral discernment in contexts where material considerations are unavoidable. Their persistence within community memory suggests that Huong Van was perceived as a site where ethical practice confronted everyday necessity rather than transcended it.

From the perspective of religious studies, such vernacular expressions should not be dismissed as folklore detached from doctrinal content. Instead, they can be understood as localized translations of ascetic values into everyday language. They encode the same ethical logic articulated in Truc Lam teachings: that discipline must be sustained amid deprivation and abundance alike, and that moral clarity is demonstrated through conduct rather than withdrawal.

The absence of monumental architecture at Huong Van further underscores its post-ascetic character. In contrast to grand monastic complexes designed to demarcate sacred space sharply from the surrounding world, Huong Van appears to have operated within a porous spatial boundary. The sacred and the mundane were not strictly segregated; rather, they interpenetrated. This permeability allowed religious practice to unfold continuously rather than episodically, integrating ritual, ethics, and daily life into a single spatial field.

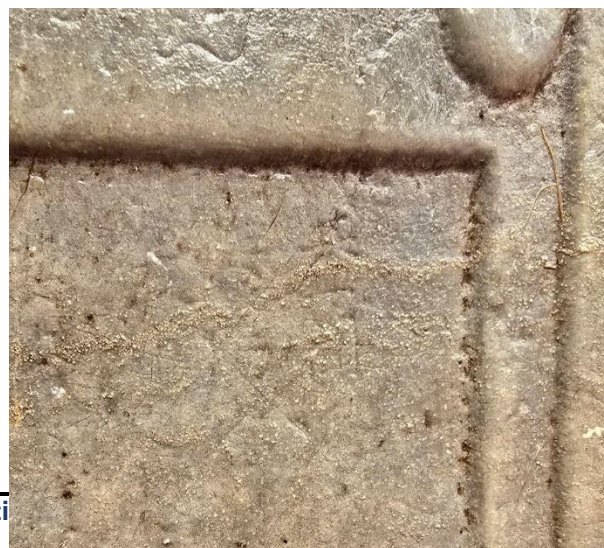
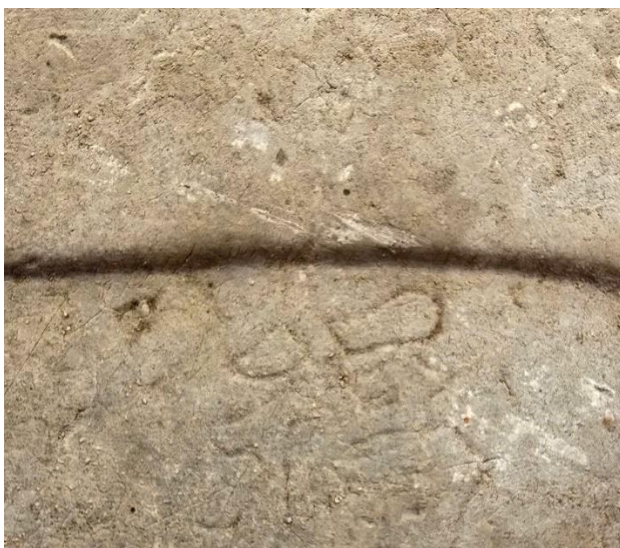
Such non-monumental sacred spaces are particularly vulnerable to historical erasure. Lacking imposing structures, they are more susceptible to destruction, neglect, and reinterpretation across periods of social

upheaval. Yet their very modesty also contributes to their resilience within lived religion. Because they are embedded within everyday environments, their significance is often preserved through memory, naming, and practice even when material traces are diminished.

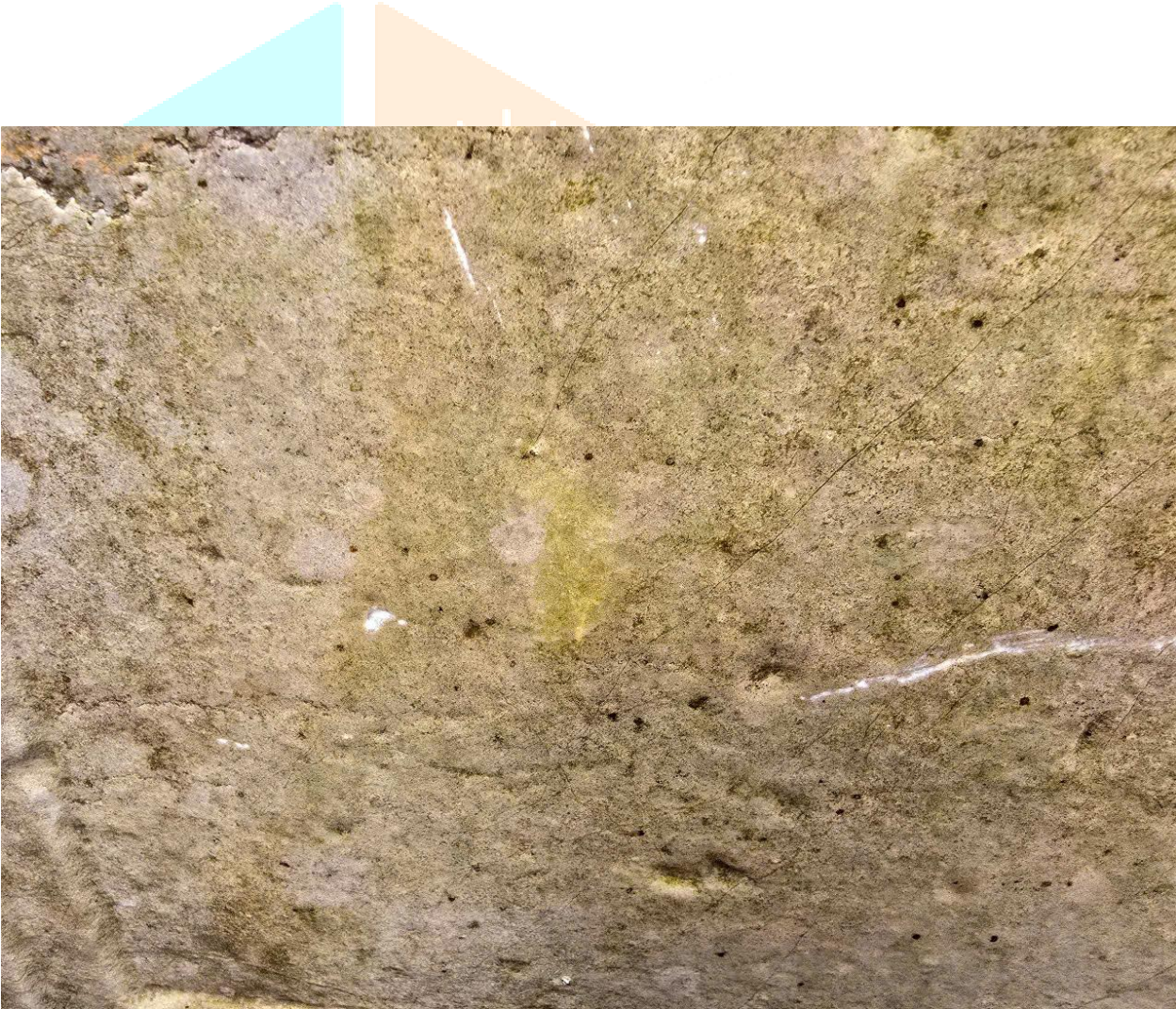
Understanding Huong Van as a post-ascetic sacred space thus requires shifting evaluative criteria. Instead of asking whether the site conforms to expectations of architectural grandeur or documentary abundance, the analysis must attend to how space mediates ethical practice. In Truc Lam Zen, the measure of a sacred site lies not in its separation from the world, but in its capacity to sustain non-attachment within it.

This perspective also clarifies why Huong Van should be considered integral rather than marginal to the Truc Lam religious landscape. Far from representing a deviation from ascetic ideals, its location within zones of circulation embodies the culmination of those ideals. The site materializes the moment when disciplined practice turns outward, engaging social reality without surrendering ethical clarity.

The empirical foundation for these spatial arguments is significantly fortified by the discovery of multiple ancient stelae within the precincts of Huong Van Pagoda. In a landscape historically characterized by the systemic erasure of paper archives, these lithic repositories function as 'petrified fossils' testifying to the site's enduring historical presence through successive eras. The discovery of this epigraphic corpus not only verifies the long-standing religious identity of the locale but also provides tangible material evidence of communal patronage and its foundational links to the Truc Lam lineage. These inscriptions transcend mere administrative record-keeping; they constitute declarations of spiritual sovereignty, firmly establishing that Huong Van is not an arbitrary toponym, but a critical node within the sophisticated scriptural landscape envisioned by the Emperor-Buddha Tran Nhan Tong.

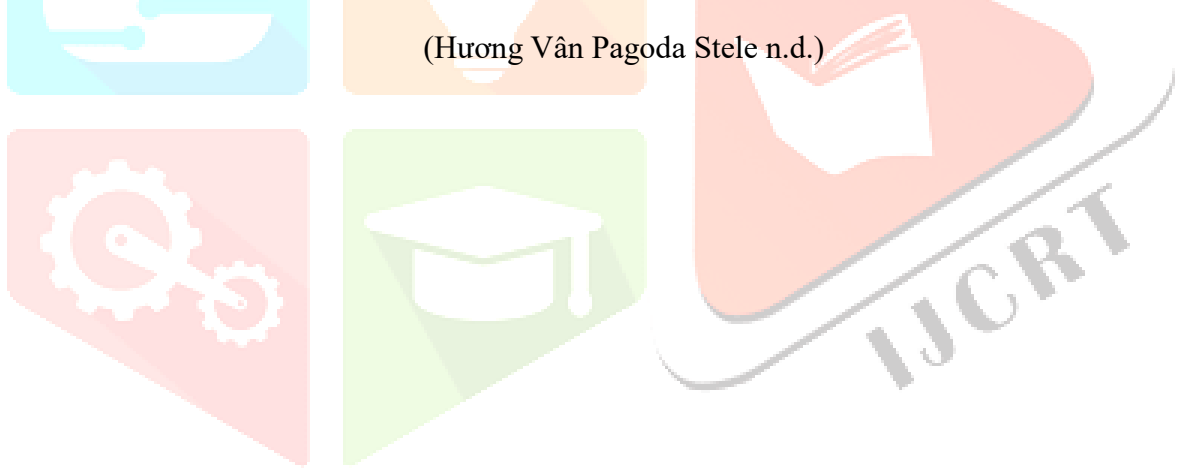


(Huong Vân Pagoda Stele n.d.)



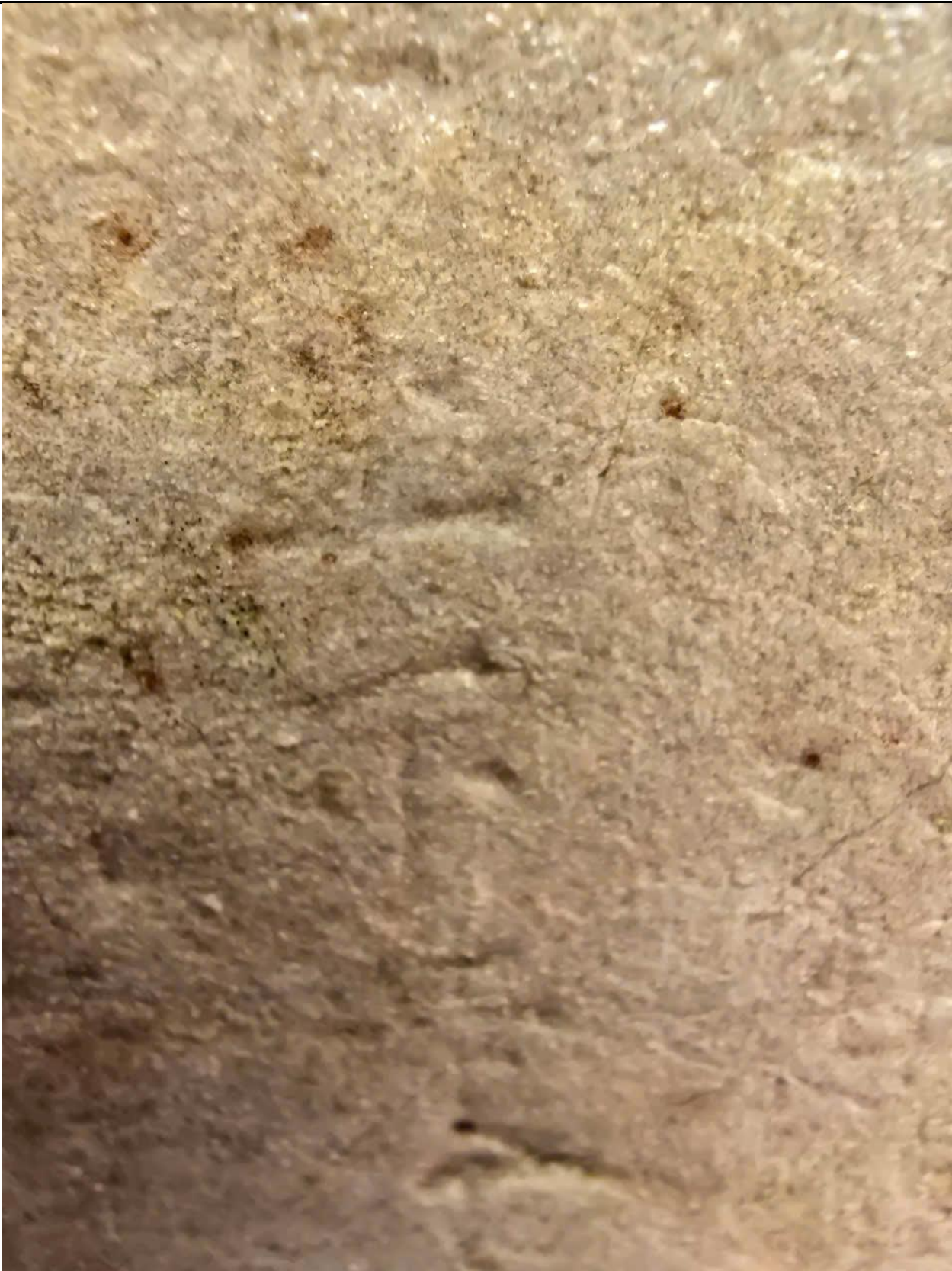


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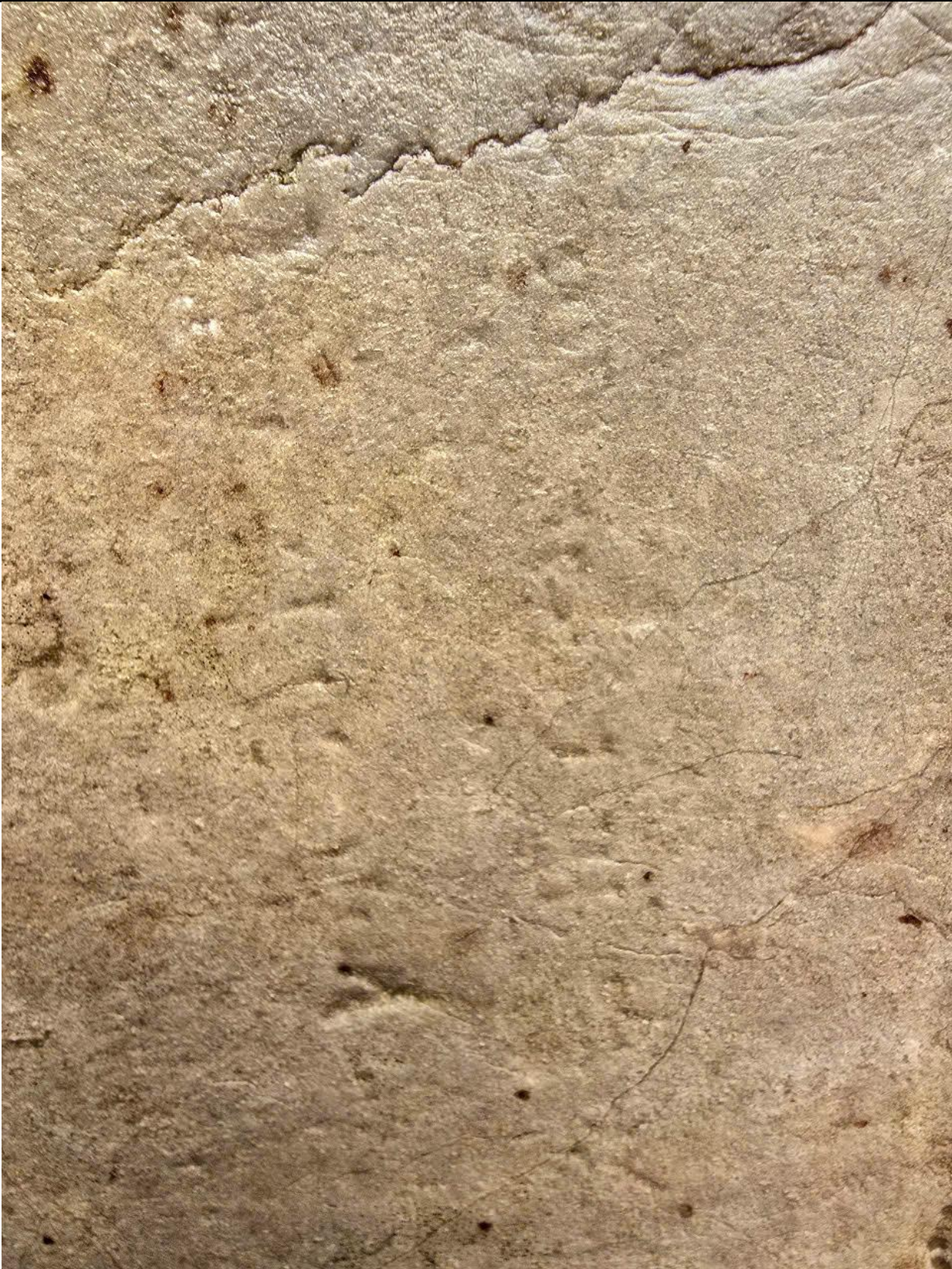




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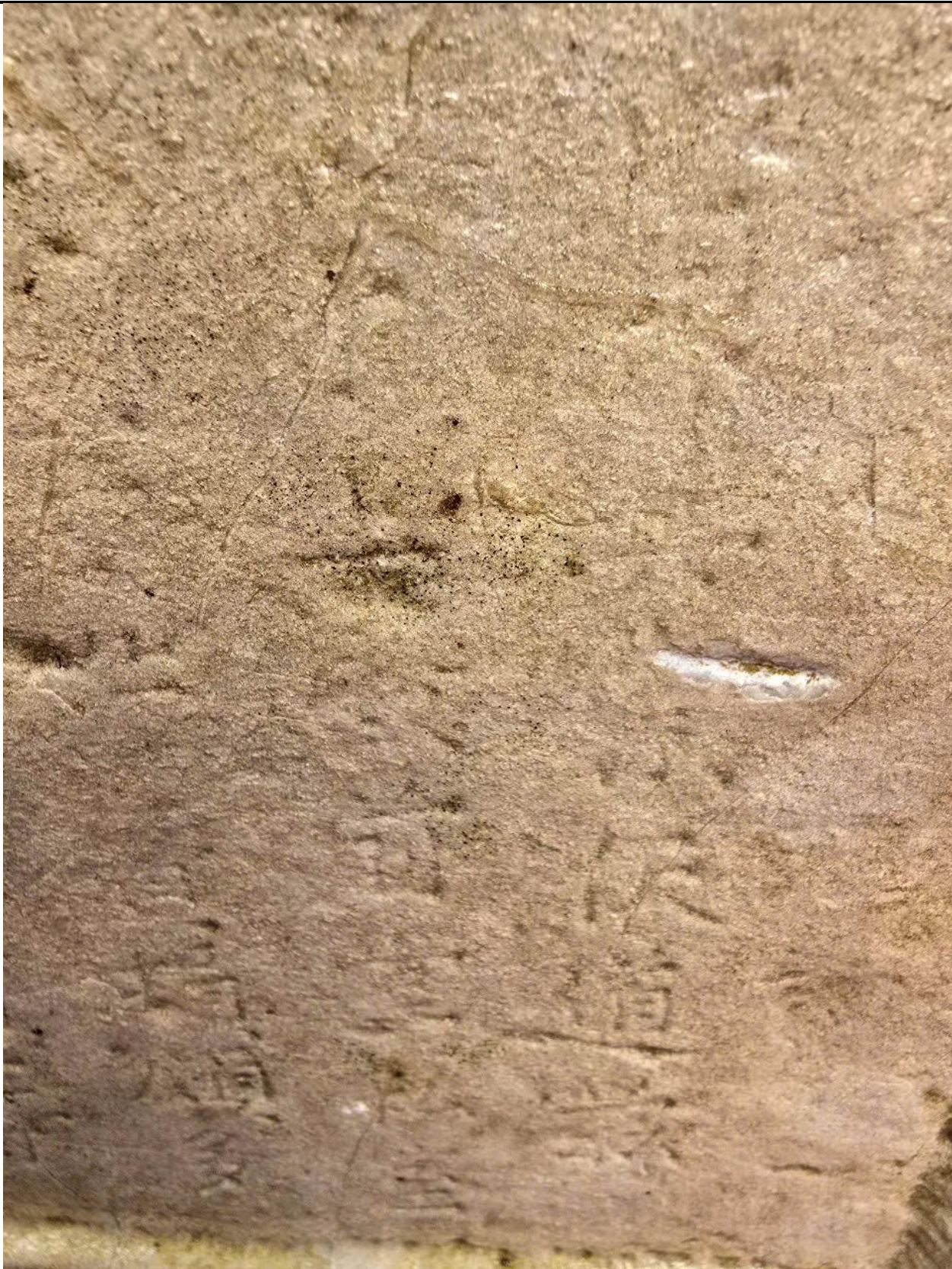
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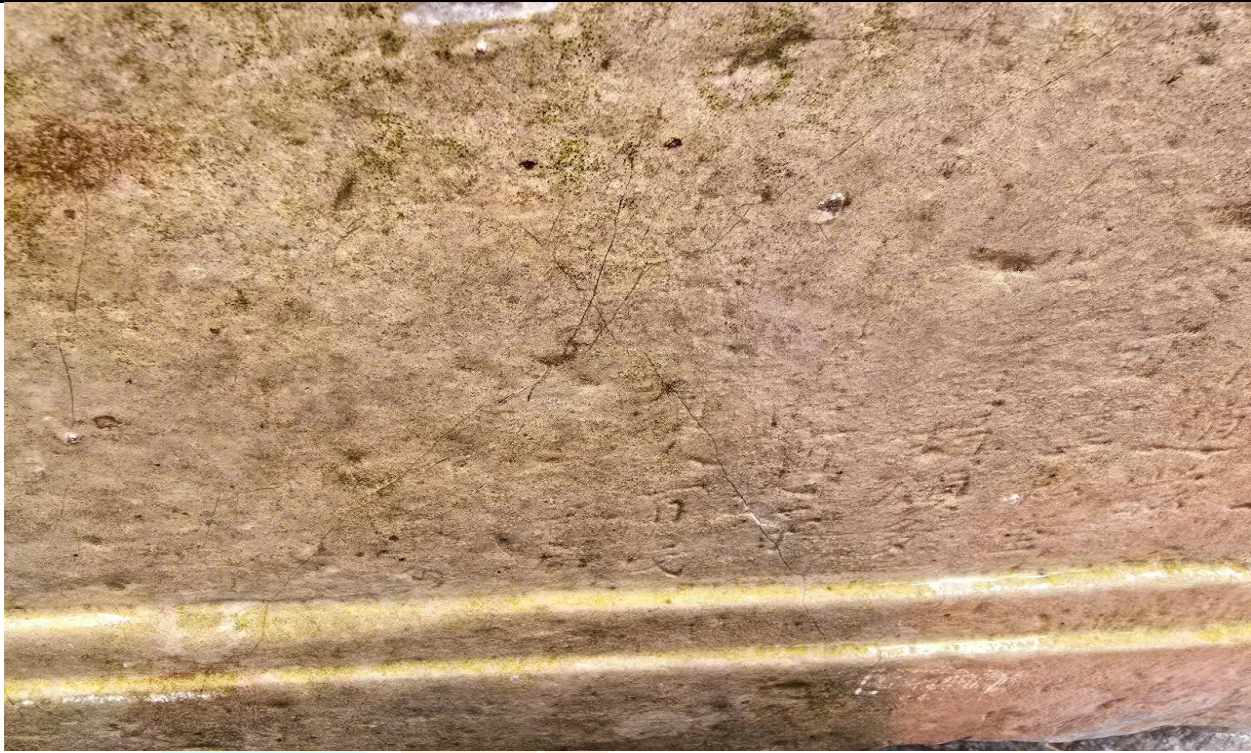
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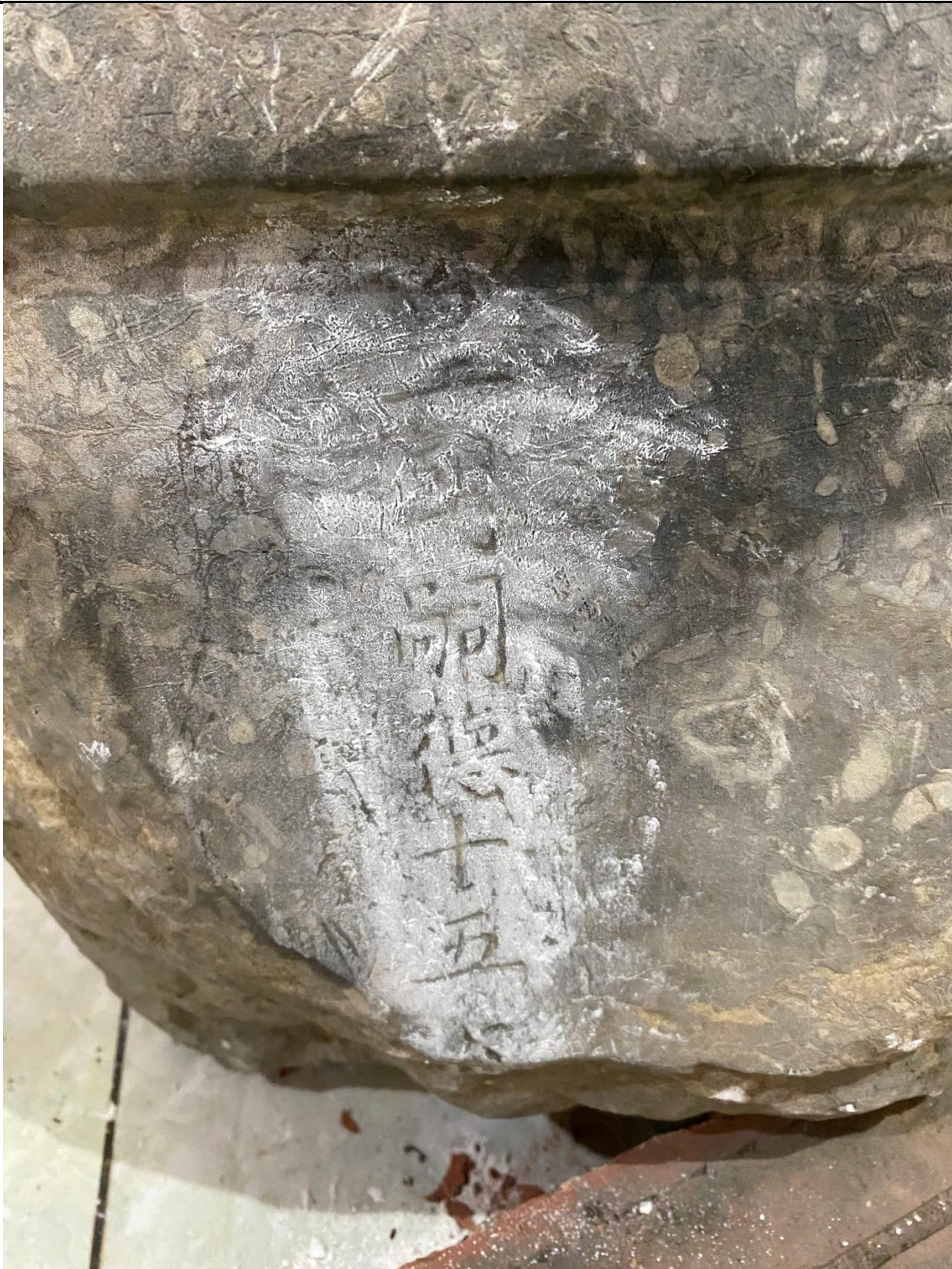
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5. VISUAL SCRIPTURE: DECIPHERING THE XUAT SON DO AS A NARRATIVE OF RE-ENTRY

Visual culture occupies a critical, yet often under-theorized, role in the transmission of Buddhist religious knowledge, especially in contexts where textual continuity is disrupted. Within the Truc Lam tradition, visual expressions do not merely illustrate doctrine; they function as **"visual scriptures"** that encode religious meaning through spatial composition, movement, and symbolic transition. The scroll painting **Xuat Son Do** (Descent from the Mountain)—which depicts the departure of Truc Lam practitioners from the forest—provides an exceptionally rich archive for examining how ascetic transformation and post-ascetic engagement are rendered in visual form.

5.1. The Dynamics of the "Downward" Movement

Visual culture occupies a critical yet often underexamined role in the transmission of Buddhist religious knowledge, particularly in contexts where textual continuity has been disrupted. In the Truc Lam tradition, visual representations do not merely illustrate doctrine; they function as visual scripture, encoding religious meaning through spatial composition, movement, and symbolic transition. The Xuát Son scroll—depicting the departure of Truc Lam practitioners from the mountain—provides a particularly rich site for examining how ascetic transformation and post-ascetic engagement are rendered through visual form.

Unlike iconographic depictions that focus on static enlightenment scenes, The Xuat Son Do emphasizes movement. Figures descend from elevated terrain, traverse intermediary landscapes, and approach zones of human habitation. This compositional emphasis reflects a doctrinal shift: the culmination of ascetic practice is not stasis, but return. The mountain functions as a formative environment, yet it does not represent the final destination of religious life. Instead, the scroll visually narrates a process of re-entry, aligning with Truc Lam's emphasis on ethical engagement within the world.

The spatial sequencing within the scroll reinforces this interpretation. Mountainous forms occupy the upper register, gradually giving way to flatter terrain, waterways, and clustered human activity. This downward movement does not signal spiritual decline; rather, it marks the extension of cultivated discipline into environments of circulation and exchange. The visual grammar of descent thus mirrors the Truc Lam conception of post-ascetic practice, in which enlightenment is tested and affirmed through social interaction rather than insulated withdrawal.

Particularly striking is the prominence of riverine imagery in the latter portions of the scroll. Rivers appear not as peripheral elements, but as central conduits connecting disparate zones. In Buddhist symbolism, rivers frequently signify impermanence, flow, and the continuity of transformation. Their presence within The Xuat Son Do underscores the transitional nature of post-ascetic space, where fixed identities dissolve into relational movement. The convergence of waterways with human settlement further emphasizes the inseparability of spiritual cultivation and social life.

This visual emphasis invites comparison with the spatial characteristics of sites such as Huong Van Pagoda. Located within a riverine landscape marked by circulation and exchange, Huong Van resonates strongly with the compositional logic of the Xuat Son Do. While the scroll does not function as a literal map, its spatial motifs—river junctions, movement toward inhabited zones, and the dissolution of rigid boundaries—parallel the lived geography of post-ascetic sacred spaces. Such parallels suggest that visual culture can preserve doctrinal insights about space even in the absence of explicit textual commentary.

From a methodological perspective, reading The Xuat Son Do as visual scripture requires moving beyond questions of historical depiction toward interpretive analysis of spatial symbolism. The value of the scroll

lies not in its capacity to document specific locations, but in its articulation of religious logic through visual means. By encoding doctrinal transitions into landscape form, the scroll serves as a pedagogical tool, guiding viewers to understand where and how Truc Lam practice unfolds after ascetic withdrawal.

This approach aligns with broader scholarship on Buddhist visual culture, which recognizes images as active participants in religious transmission. Visual representations shape perception, orient movement, and frame ethical imagination. In societies where literacy was uneven or archives unstable, such visual media often played a central role in sustaining religious knowledge across generations. The Xuat Son Do thus occupies a dual function: it memorializes a foundational moment in Truc Lam history while simultaneously instructing viewers in the spatial ethics of the tradition.

The final segment of the scroll, often overlooked in scholarly analysis, is especially revealing. Here, the visual narrative opens outward, dissolving the hierarchical separation between sacred and mundane space. The absence of a definitive endpoint reinforces the notion that post-ascetic practice does not culminate in a new enclosure. Instead, it unfolds continuously within the rhythms of everyday life. This open-ended composition mirrors Truc Lam's rejection of fixed abodes, emphasizing adaptability and ethical responsiveness over permanence.

Such visual openness has significant implications for how Truc Lam sacred geography is conceptualized. Rather than a closed network of sanctified monuments, the tradition emerges as a fluid landscape in which meaning is generated through movement and interaction. Sites embedded within zones of circulation—rivers, markets, crossroads—are not peripheral to this landscape; they are central to its religious logic. The Xuat Son Do thus provides a visual counterpart to the lived religious practices discussed in earlier sections, reinforcing the argument that post-ascetic space is integral to Truc Lam Zen.

When considered alongside epigraphic traces and community memory, visual culture adds a crucial dimension to the reconstruction of Truc Lam's scriptural landscape. It bridges the gap between doctrine and space, offering a mode of transmission that survives even when texts are lost or fragmented. In this sense, The Xuat Son Do exemplifies how visual scripture can sustain religious continuity under conditions of historical disruption.

The analysis of visual culture also underscores the necessity of interdisciplinary approaches in the study of Vietnamese Buddhism. By integrating art history, spatial analysis, and religious studies, scholars can recover dimensions of religious life that elude purely textual methodologies. The Xuat Son Do demonstrates that doctrinal meaning is not confined to words, but is actively produced through images that guide perception and movement.

The following section extends this discussion by situating Huong Van and related sites within Vietnam's broader history of archival rupture. By examining how religious memory persists amid textual loss, the study further clarifies why spatial and visual sources are indispensable for understanding Truc Lam's enduring presence within the Vietnamese religious landscape.

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6. ARCHIVAL RUPTURE AND RELIGIOUS MEMORY IN VIETNAM

6.1. From the "Gap" of Evidence to the Framework of Enforced Loss

The scarcity of original 13th-century manuscripts and the chronic discontinuity of archival records concerning localized religious institutions like Huong Van Pagoda are frequently dismissed by positivist historiographical methodologies as a mere "gap" in evidence—a void that renders the site historically "silent." However, within the traumatic historical trajectory of Vietnam, the silence of the text must not be misconstrued as an absence of significance. Instead, it is the direct and inevitable consequence of systematic, cyclical ruptures that have targeted the nation's cultural marrow.

To evaluate a monument's historical value solely on the abundance of extant paper trails is to succumb to a form of empirical rigidity that ignores the politics of the archive. This study argues that the history of Truc Lam cannot be written through a teleological accumulation of texts, but must be situated within an analytical framework of enforced loss. We must examine not just what remains, but the logic of what was destroyed, and the sophisticated alternative strategies of memory preservation—spatial, oral, and ritualistic—that arose as a communal response to cultural erasure.

6.2. Cycles of Cultural Erasure and the Creation of the Archival Vacuum

Vietnamese history is defined by a series of violent upheavals in which religious and educational institutions were the primary targets of cultural genocide. The most devastating rupture for the Truc Lam heritage occurred during the Ming occupation in the early 15th century. The Ming administration's explicit policy of "transporting all local records to Jinling" (vận chuyển thư tịch về Kim Lăng) was accompanied by the systematic burning of indigenous Vietnamese texts. This was a deliberate act of epistemic violence, intended to hollow out the intellectual foundations of the Trần Dynasty. As a result, the original sutras, monastic registers, and genealogical records of the Truc Lam Zen sect vanished into a historical "black hole."

The fragments that remain today are largely retrospective compilations from the Lê Middle-Restoration (17th century) or the Nguyễn periods (19th century)—vocalizations of the past that have already been filtered through the ideological lenses of subsequent generations. This rupture was further compounded in the 20th century by the intersection of colonialism, scorched-earth warfare, and radical socio-political shifts. Specifically, during the mid-20th century, administrative errors during land reforms and aggressive campaigns against "superstition" led to the dismantling of religious structures deemed to have no "productive value" or "revolutionary utility." In this precarious climate, rural pagodas like Huong Van, situated far from the protective gaze of urban centers or national monument designations, were particularly vulnerable to physical erasure. Therefore, the current lack of documentation does not reflect the site's original historical stature; rather, it serves as a material testimony to the sheer violence of the historical cycles it has survived.

6.3. Epigraphy and Toponymy: Mnemonic Anchors in a Fragmented Landscape

In an environment where paper records are fragile—falling prey to fire, dampness, and the humidity of the tropical climate—stone and speech become the primary vessels of history. Epigraphy (inscriptions on stone) at sites like Huong Van functions as the "petrified fossils" of the Truc Lam legacy. Even when a stele is eroded, fragmented, or reused, the surviving *minh văn* (inscriptions) provide immutable evidence of religious identity, land endowment, and the intricate networks of communal patronage. In this research, we treat epigraphy not merely as a passive text, but as a persistent ritual act—a claim of spiritual sovereignty that refuses to be erased by the passage of time.

Parallel to the stone record, toponymy (the study of place names) operates as a form of "vocalized scripture" with extraordinary mnemonic resilience. The survival of the name "Huong Van"—intrinsicly tied to the specific ascetic title of Trần Nhân Tông—is a semiotic phenomenon that demands decoding through the lens of naming taboos (húy kỵ) and ritual propriety. In pre-modern Vietnamese society, naming a village pagoda after a God-King was not a casual act; it was a highly regulated process of legitimation. The place name thus becomes an "oral archive" curated by the community. It functions as a lexical anchor, maintaining the site's sacred association even as dynasties fall and ideologies shift. Toponymy, in this sense, is the scriptural landscape's most enduring form of survival.

6.4. Landscape and Living Memory: The Vernacularization of Truc Lam Ethics

Religious memory is not a static deposit; it is encoded within the very spatial porousness of the landscape. At Huong Van, the pagoda's strategic location within a riverine circulation zone near commercial centers serves as a "spatial text" that materializes the Truc Lam strategy of social engagement (nhập thế). This geography does not require ink to articulate its meaning; the topography of the river junction and the proximity to the market speak to the operational logic of a Zen tradition that sought to sanctify the mundane.

Furthermore, Truc Lam memory persists through "Living Memory"—the habitus of ritual practice and folk traditions. Folk maxims in Kinh Môn, such as "nhịn ăn để mặc, nhịn mặc để ăn" (fasting to clothe, stripping to eat), are not merely colorful local proverbs. They represent the vernacular transformation of high Buddhist philosophy into everyday moral code. When the scholastic libraries were burned, the local populace "wrote" the teachings back into their stories, their labor, and their landscape. This form of memory is highly adaptive; it survives by blending into the rhythms of life, ensuring that the Truc Lam vision remains vital even when its formal institutions are obliterated.

6.5. Triangulation of Evidence and the Reconstruction of the Scriptural Landscape

This study advocates for a radical methodological shift: moving away from the hunt for a "singular, authoritative proof" (the imperial text) and toward a synthesis of "cumulative and triangulated evidence." Within the constraints of traditional academia, a single place name or a fragmented folk tale might be dismissed as anecdotal. However, when these fragments—toponymy, epigraphic shards, riverine topography, and folk maxims—converge and resonate at a specific spatial coordinate, they form an evidentiary structure of undeniable strength.

This convergence allows us to reconstruct the Scriptural Landscape—a multi-dimensional arena where ethics, history, and geography are inextricably interwoven. Within this landscape, archival rupture is transformed from a barrier into a narrative element of resiliency. Recognizing the historical value of Huong Van is an acknowledgment of a profound reality: that Truc Lam Buddhism did not merely exist in court-sanctioned sutras or remote mountain peaks. It was a diffused and pervasive presence within the mundane spaces of the lowlands, where the flow of communal memory proved more resilient than the paper archives of the state.

7. TRUC LAM, SCRIPTURAL LANDSCAPE, AND POST-ASCETIC SPACE: SYNTHESIS AND CONCLUSION

7.1. Historiographical Recalibration: From Peripheral to Pivotal

The investigation into Huong Van Pagoda invites a fundamental and necessary re-examination of how the Truc Lam Zen tradition is conceptually, spatially, and ontologically framed within both Vietnamese historiography and the broader field of global Buddhist studies. Rather than being dismissed as a historical anomaly or a peripheral site of local interest, Huong Van emerges as a crucial node—an essential pivot—

in a networked religious landscape. This landscape was not defined by static boundaries but was actively shaped by the confluence of ascetic discipline, the diffusion of moral radiance, and a profound commitment to post-ascetic engagement.

7.2. Deconstructing the Mountain-Centric Paradigm

By approaching Trúc Lâm as a vibrant and multifaceted living religious tradition, this research undertakes a radical deconstruction of the "mountain-centric" model that has historically and hegemonically dominated the field of Vietnamese Buddhist Studies. While the mist-shrouded peaks of Mount Yên Tử remain conceptually and historically indispensable for understanding the embryonic and formative stages of monastic sequestration and ascetic discipline, they absolutely do not—and ontologically cannot—exhaust the comprehensive spatial logic of Trúc Lâm practice as a whole.

In fact, this study posits a dramatic shift in perspective: we argue that the ultimate religious and social vision of Trần Nhân Tông finds its teleological and terminal fulfillment not on the summit, but in the so-called post-ascetic spaces of the plains and deltas. These environments, vibrant and tumultuous as they are, are characterized by dense human circulation, the moral friction of economic exchange, and the unrelenting and inherent impermanence of human affairs. In the Trúc Lâm worldview, these worldly elements are not viewed as mere distractions from the path; rather, they play an equally central and perhaps more challenging role in the tradition's ethical vision.

In this framework, the mountain serves as the "spiritual laboratory" where discipline is forged in isolation, but the lowland marketplace functions as the "proving ground" where that discipline is enacted and verified. Hương Vân Pagoda instantiates this logic with remarkable clarity through its specific riverine context—situated as a vital nodal point of fluvial transit and logistics—and its strategic proximity to the dynamic fluctuations of the marketplace. The site represents the "sanctification of the mundane," where the boundary between the sacred enclosure and the commercial wharf becomes porous.

Furthermore, the resilient survival of its ascetic toponym against the corrosive tides of time acts as a "topographic signature" of the founder himself. This placement signifies that Trúc Lâm Zen was never intended to be a religion of the elite few hidden in the clouds, but a pervasive and transformative force meant to navigate the very heart of the socio-economic currents that define the human condition. By existing at the crossroads of trade and travel, Hương Vân proves that the "Fragrant Clouds" of the Buddha-King were meant to provide shade for the merchant and the traveler as much as for the monk.

7.3. The Scriptural Landscape as a Living Archive

The theoretical framework of the Scriptural Landscape (Cảnh quan kinh điển) provides a potent and multidimensional analytical lens through which to integrate these diverse spatial dimensions into a coherent narrative of religious continuity. In historical contexts marked by systemic "archival rupture"—where the deliberate "epistemic violence" of foreign occupation, the attrition of a tropical climate, and the erosions of time have silenced official records—religious meaning is by no means extinguished with the loss of the physical manuscript. Instead, this meaning undergoes a process of spatial relocation; it is inscribed across the very geography of the land, the semiotics of visual culture, the ritualized durability of naming practices, and the fluid yet tenacious collective memory of the community.

This study contends that when the formal "Library of the State" is burned, the "Library of the Landscape" becomes the primary archive. At Hương Vân, the ascetic identity of the founder as the "Great Ascetic of Fragrant Clouds" was preserved not through a continuous and fragile paper trail, but through a resilient and overlapping convergence of "petrified" epigraphy, vocalized toponymy, strategic spatial configuration, and

intergenerational lived practice. Each of these elements functions as a distinct layer of a "mnemonic palimpsest"—a surface that has been written upon, erased, and rewritten, yet still retains the deep etchings of its original Trúc Lâm intent.

This convergence constitutes a legitimate and robust form of "triangulated" or "cumulative evidence," providing a new epistemological basis for modern religious studies that seeks to operate in the traumatic absence of traditional archives. By valuing the "site-as-text," we move beyond the "textual fetishism" of traditional philology—which often dismisses anything not recorded in an official chronicle as mere folklore—and instead embrace a more inclusive and resilient methodology. This approach recognizes that in the Vietnamese tradition, sacred truth is not a static object found in a book, but a dynamic resonance maintained through the constant interaction between a people and their environment. Ultimately, the scriptural landscape of Kinh Môn proves that a religious legacy can be more effectively preserved in the bend of a river or the naming of a temple than in the most carefully guarded imperial library.

7.4. Visual Theology and the Narrative of Return

Visual culture, specifically the scroll painting *Xuat Sơn Đạo*, further reinforces this spatial interpretation. The painting articulates what can be termed a "spatial theology of movement," depicting the ascetic's descent from the mountain not as an end point or a failure of reclusion, but as a deliberate transition toward moral engagement in the world. Its visual emphasis on rivers, roads, and communal settlements resonates profoundly with the geography of practice found at post-ascetic sites like *Huông Vân*. Read as a visual scripture, the painting complements fragmented textual and spatial sources, providing a vivid narrative of how Truc Lam teachings were transmitted, internalized, and performed across generations of practitioners and laypeople alike.

7.5. Decolonizing Methodology and Mnemonic Continuity

Crucially, this research does not seek to establish direct biographical residence in a positivist sense or to make exclusive historical claims that rely on singular proofs. Instead of engaging in a hunt for the "smoking gun" of historical certainty—an endeavor that is often frustrated by the inherent fragility of the Southeast Asian archive and the systemic erasures of war—we shift our focus toward the lived reality of the religious imagination. Instead, it foregrounds association, moral resonance, and symbolic continuity as legitimate and vital modes of religious connection.

In the realm of lived religion, the "truth" of a site is not found in a dated ledger of imperial travel, but in the enduring semiotic affiliation between a community and its spiritual progenitor. This study recognizes that for the local populace of Kinh Môn, the presence of the Buddha-King is a social and spiritual fact, reinforced daily by the very landscape they inhabit. This approach deliberately avoids the pitfalls of a narrow, positivist historiography that often silences sites lacking "official" documentation. Such a rigid adherence to textual verification—a legacy of nineteenth-century European historicism—tends to delegitimize sacred spaces that exist outside the protective gaze of the metropolitan center or the court-sanctioned archive. By refusing to equate "lack of text" with "lack of significance," we open a space for the "subaltern" geography of the lowlands to speak, ensuring that rural sacred nodes are not written out of the history of Truc Lam Buddhism simply because their records fell victim to the humidity of the climate or the fires of occupation.

Furthermore, it aligns with broader global efforts to decolonize methodology in the study of Asian religions by acknowledging uneven patterns of preservation and valuing "site-as-memory." Decolonizing the study of Vietnamese Buddhism requires us to move beyond an archival-centric model that inherently favors the narratives of the elite and the conqueror. "Site-as-memory" functions as a robust theoretical tool that

acknowledges the land as a primary witness. In a nation where history has been repeatedly rewritten by successive dynasties and foreign powers, the topographical and toponymic record provides a rare form of mnemonic durability. We argue that the landscape itself is an active agent in the preservation of spiritual legacy. It is not a passive backdrop for human events, but a "mnemonic palimpsest"—an active participant that encodes, carries, and transmits the ethical vision of the Truc Lam tradition across generations. By treating the landscape as an agent rather than a stage, we recover a dimension of religious continuity that is more resilient than stone and more enduring than the most carefully preserved scroll.

7.6. Final Synthesis: A Networked Vitality

In final synthesis, these findings suggest that the ontological reality of the Truc Lam Zen tradition must be understood as a rhizomatic and dynamic, networked religious system that transcends the singular architectural monument or the geographic isolation of the peak. It is not merely a collection of static, isolated sacred centers frozen in time, but a fluid semiotic web that blankets the landscape, connecting the heights of reclusion with the depths of social reality. Its ethical ideals—encapsulated in the evocative and pervasive metaphors of "fragrance" and "clouds" found in the imperial ascetic title of its founder—circulate through diverse and often "messy" environments characterized by the clamor of the market and the flux of human transience.

The "fragrance" of virtue radiates outward without fixed boundaries, permeating the social fabric without the need for institutional enforcement, while the "clouds" of wisdom drift through the lowlands, providing moral shade and spiritual nourishment to the community. These ideals have shown a remarkable capacity for mnemonic resilience, adapting to catastrophic historical upheavals while maintaining a profound and unshakeable doctrinal consistency. Hương Vân, viewed through this rigorous interdisciplinary lens, is far from being a marginal anomaly or an isolated ruin; rather, it functions as a vibrant archaeology of the spirit and a living testament to the spatial and moral transformative power of Trúc Lâm Buddhism within the very heart of the social order.

It proves that the highest realization of Zen in the Vietnamese tradition is found neither in the sterile silence of the cave nor in the flight from society, but in the profound, unattached, and compassionate engagement with the fluid and often painful realities of the human condition. The "scriptural landscape" of Kinh Môn thus serves as a perpetual reminder that enlightenment is not a destination to be reached on a remote mountain peak, but a mode of ethically-grounded presence to be maintained in the middle of the river of life. Ultimately, Trúc Lâm survives not because its books were preserved, but because its landscape—exemplified by sites like Hương Vân—continues to perform its teachings for every generation that walks its paths and rows its waters.

8. CONCLUSION: TRUC LAM AS A NETWORKED RELIGIOUS SYSTEM AND THE RESILIENCE OF THE SCRIPTURAL LANDSCAPE

In summation, the investigation into Hương Vân Pagoda and its intrinsic association with the title Hương Vân Đại Đầu Đà necessitates a fundamental paradigm shift in our conceptualization of the Truc Lam Zen tradition. By systematically moving beyond the "mountain-centric" bias—which has long privileged Mount Yên Tử as the sole locus of religious authenticity—this study illuminates a tradition that is fundamentally networked, mobile, and profoundly engaged with the secular social order.

The research posits that the religious essence of Truc Lam is not exhausted by the initial stage of ascetic reclusion. Rather, it finds its ultimate spiritual and social fulfillment in the **post-ascetic sacred spaces** of the lowlands—sites such as Hương Vân—where the rigorous discipline forged in the mountains is put to the test amidst the riverine currents and commercial frictions of everyday life. The persistent survival of

the "Huong Van " toponym, protected by the cultural logic of naming taboos and deep-seated communal memory, serves as a powerful spatial scripture. It ensures that the ethical vision of Tran Nhan Tong remains anchored within the geography of the people, even when formal textual archives have been silenced by centuries of systemic historical upheaval.

Furthermore, this study offers a critical methodological template for approaching religious history in contexts of severe archival rupture. By synthesizing epigraphic fragments, visual culture analysis (specifically the *Xuat Son Do*), and the ethnography of lived religion, we can reconstruct "scriptural landscapes" that remain resilient where paper and stone have failed. This approach demonstrates that the absence of singular textual proof should not be misinterpreted as an absence of religious meaning; instead, the site itself becomes a living archive.

Ultimately, "Thien phai Truc Lam" emerges not as a static relic of the 13th century, but as a resilient religious system whose vitality is sustained through its capacity to interpenetrate the mundane. The "fragrance" and "clouds" of its founder's title continue to circulate through the landscape of Kinh Môn and beyond, proving that the highest form of Zen is not found in the avoidance of the world, but in the profound, compassionate, and unattached engagement with it. This study is an invitation to listen to the "silent voices" of the landscape, for they carry the echoes of a wisdom that no fire can consume and no empire can truly erase.

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