

Excerpts from the “Text of the Stone Inscription for the Duke of Lý, the Thái Úy of Cự Việt Kingdom (Đỗ Anh Vũ)”

Introduction

The Tang dynasty collapsed at the beginning of the tenth century and was replaced, fifty years later, by the Song. In the meantime, Vietnamese localities in and around the Red River delta struggled for control. Gradually, through the tenth century and into the eleventh, the realm of Đại Việt began to emerge. More powerful chieftains rose to consolidate control and to resist Song attempts to re-conquer it and its southern rival Champa (now central Vietnam) to raid it.

The Lý monarchy of Đại Việt with its capital at Thăng Long (Emergent Dragon, now Hà Nội) in the middle of the Red River delta developed strongly through the eleventh and twelfth centuries. After three strong Lý kings, power devolved to queen mothers, their kin, and strong court ministers. In the middle of the twelfth century, that minister was Đỗ Anh Vũ (1114–1159). Here an inscription carved in stone tells of his rise to power in the royal court and his valued government service inside the land and against its rivals.

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It has been said: “Among birds there is the phoenix and among fish there is the leviathan.” It is the same among human beings. Concentrating the powers of mountains and rivers such as happens but once in five hundred years, [a man was] born predestined to occupy the position of general and minister of state and to be the master of a hundred thousand households. With martial sternness worthy of fear and ritual behavior worthy of emulation, manifesting orthodoxy and giving form to propriety, [he] assisted his age by establishing a foundation for peace and order. At court [he] revealed a lofty and upright purpose, comparable to Hậu Tắc [Hou Chi, Shun’s minister of agriculture]; [he] can be regarded as equal to Y Doãn [I Yin, the minister of Shang, famed for righteousness] and Chu Công [Chou Kung, the Duke of Chou, famed for loyal service]. In life, [he] was honored; in death, [he] was mourned. From the time that people have appeared upon the earth, there has never yet been anything like this.

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[This man] we recognize [as none other than] Anh Vũ, styled Quán Thế, [from the line of] the Thái Úy [highest military court title] Duke of Quách from Lũng Tây. His [Anh Vũ's] ancestor was the Duke of Quách, originally from Câu Lậu District in Tế Giang, who served as Thái Úy at the court of [Lý] Thái Tông (1028-1053) and begat Thường Kiệt who served the court of [Lý] Nhân Tông (1072-1127) as Thái Úy and upon whom was bestowed the national surname of Lý. [Đỗ Anh Vũ's] deceased father [was named] Tường of the Đỗ family and was a sister's son of the Thái Úy Duke of Lý [Thường Kiệt]; his family dwelled in Tây Dục village. In his youth, [Đỗ Tường] went to the capital and saw the daughter of an honorable family; her thoughts were pure and dignified, her nature was gentle and chaste, her smile surpassed the blossoms of spring, and her behavior was like beautiful jade. Tường loved her elegant beauty and accordingly sent bridal gifts and inquired of her name to fix a betrothal; they gave birth to two children. The son [Anh Vũ] was called Duke; the Thái Sư (highest non-military court title) Duke of Trương [Lê Bá Ngọc] observed his rare strength of character and recognized his ability to serve the kingdom, so brought him up as his own son. The daughter was called Quỳnh Anh and was given in marriage to the Thị Trung [a court title] of the Phạm family.

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From his youth, the Duke [Đỗ Anh Vũ] was slender and graceful with a snowy pure complexion and a radiant countenance. In the year of Giáp Thìn, the fifth year of the Thiên Phù Duệ Vũ reign period (1124), Emperor Nhân Tông, noticing [Đỗ Anh Vũ's] godlike demeanor and perceiving his intelligence, selected him to dwell in the imperial compound. The Duke was eminent in dancing upon embroidered cushions with shield and battleaxe and in singing "The Return of the Phoenix" while dancing with supple elegance. Merchants arriving from afar and those traveling for pleasure never failed to attend his performances. In the year of Đinh Mùi (1127), Thần Tông's court chose him to serve in the pavilion; he was ranked in a capped position [i.e. wearing a cap marking him as an "adult"] over the six lords-in-waiting to administer the women's apartments of the inner court. He governed every kind of affair; the Emperor entrusted everything to him. When it came to writing, numerical calculation, archery, chariot driving, medicine, acupuncture, and diagnosing illness by taking the pulse, there was nothing in which he was not proficient. As for geomancy, military tactics, hu bồ [a game of throwing pieces of wood, often used in gambling], and bác dịch [a type of chess similar to Japanese *go*], there was nothing about these that he did not study. It can be said: "The gentleman is without mere abilities."

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In the first month of the third year of the Thiên Chương Bảo Tự reign period (1135), in a time of long-lasting peace when the four directions were calm. Văn Đan [Vientiane; “Land Chen-la,” as distinguished from “Water Chen-la”] invaded the southern border towns. The Emperor sent the Duke and the Thái Phó (a senior military title) Lý Công Bình to mobilize 300,000 soldiers; they followed the seacoast and arrived at Âm Dã in Nhật Nam [a jurisdiction during the Han period that covered the modern provinces of Quảng Bình, Quảng Trị, and Thừa Thiên Huế; in the twelfth century it lay on or beyond the southern frontier]. The Duke gazed at the encampment of the invaders and said: “The soldiers of the Son of Heaven quell rebellion; they do not offer battle in contestation as between equals. The vulgarity of presenting oneself naked [as the invaders do] will surely be eradicated by Heaven.” Thereupon, wind shook the mountains and the islands. The invaders were immediately thrown into a panic; they accordingly dispersed and went back the way they had come. The Duke with his soldiers pursued the routed foe, beheaded the enemy leaders and took captives; they went as far as Vụ Ôn and returned.

Also in that same year [the Duke] received [another] command to punish rebels. The Sơn Liêu [mountain dwellers] held the passes and refused to come to court and submit. The Emperor thereupon commanded the Duke and all the generals to lead soldiers out to subdue them. Only the Duke returned with captives; no one was equal to his stratagems. Consequently, people gave thought to his indomitable courage. All affairs both within and without the inner palace were accordingly entrusted to him.

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In the year of Đinh Tỵ, the ninth month of the first year of the Thiệu Minh reign period (1137), the Emperor was not well. He washed his face, leaned upon a table, and said: “There is no one but the Duke to whom we can entrust the Lý family.” When the Emperor died, the Duke, together with the Hiến Chí Empress Dowager, went to Thượng Thanh Lodge to greet [Lý Anh Tông, the two-year-old son of the just-deceased emperor and the Empress Dowager] and to advance [him] up the imperial stairs. [The Duke] upheld the laws of the court, and all the officials behaved with discipline and followed orders; he attended to the numerous affairs of the kingdom, and all the people looked up to him with respect. The Empress Dowager rewarded him for his service to the state, commending his meritorious efforts. [She] promoted the Duke to Kiểm Hiệu Thái Phó. Then, in the ninth month of the year of Mậu Ngọ (1138), [she] promoted [him] to Phụ Quốc Thái Úy, and conferred [on him] the imperial surname Lý. Military affairs were completely in his hands.

At that time, in the region of Kê Động on the northern border, a strange lad called Suy

Vi¹ caused great excitement by declaring himself to be the orphaned son of [Lý] Nhân [Tông] the deceased emperor; he assembled his truculent partisans and usurped the title of Bình Nguyên Great General. The Emperor commanded Tả giám nghị ڀại phu Lưu Cao Nhĩ to go out and subdue [Suy Vi], but the rebels increased even more. During those days, the Duke lay down to sleep but could not rest; he went to meals but had no taste for food. So, he appealed to the Emperor, saying: “I have heard it said that, when the sovereign worries, his minister is humiliated, and when the sovereign is humiliated, his minister is dead. When barbarians trouble the realm it is the fault of the minister.” The Emperor allowed the Duke’s request, whereupon [he] was made supreme commander of all the armies, received the imperial battleaxe, and administered the oath to all the soldiers. [He] took command of the soldiers and marched to Nam Khoáng river-crossing. The Duke then divided the soldiers to go by ten different routes and prepared for the unexpected. Everyone saw that the rebel troops [were as numerous] as [trees in a] forest, but with a single drumroll the insurrection collapsed and the rebellious clique was forthwith captured. The soldiers were withdrawn, returning victoriously in good order. War captives were presented in the courtyard. The Sovereign bestowed upon [the Duke] an abundance of gifts as reward. Historians and record keepers recorded [the Duke’s] martial valor and loyalty to the state. He was further awarded a three-layer hat. The Sovereign showed public affection and honor to [the Duke’s] relatives and bestowed rich gifts to praise him. The three jurisdictions of Nghệ An, Thanh Hoá, and Phú Lương were all bestowed [upon the Duke] in fief. [The Duke] prohibited barbarism and eradicated vulgarity, [forcing violators] to salute with folded hands and to endure the punishment of being tattooed on their faces; pirates, rebels, and frontier people lost courage and returned to obedience to the imperial court.

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In the year of Giáp Tý [1144], the Duke addressed the Emperor saying: “The soldiers do not practice or drill, so [we] have no means with which to suppress disorder; the people do not train for war, so how can we keep the barbarians of the four directions in awe of us?” The Emperor thereupon commanded the Duke to clear land in the West Garden [for a drill field] so that the kingdom could be put in order and the senses could be excited by banners and drums. From that time were clearly fixed and implemented the eight tactical dispositions of troops according to Chu-ko Liang and the nine conditions for applying punitive action. Furthermore, from that time were made known the three orders and the five injunctions.” It was then that the Empress

¹ The source gives him a title that indicates he was a rebel chief.

and Emperor, considering that the Duke's literary accomplishments were sufficient to govern the kingdom and his virtue was sufficient to arouse demons and deities, and [considering that] his sense of purpose was [as constant as] a spring of water and that his doctrine was as precious as gold and jade, and [further considering] that he was able to be a teacher worthy of emulation, therefore commanded [him] to assume the responsibility of overseeing the teachers and to discuss with them the principles for governing the country, to take charge of and scrutinize the plans and criticisms in the memorials and dispatches of all the scholars, and to insure that everything be done with the utmost of care and attention to detail with regard to the judging and recommendations for the three competitions in poetry composition.

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In the year of Canh Ngọ [1150], the Emperor was not well, so the Duke fasted and bathed, selected a place to erect an altar, instituted ritual, lifted a jade tablet, and prayed that he be substituted [i.e. that the Emperor's illness be placed upon him instead of the Emperor]. The Emperor of Heaven was moved by his loyalty and filial devotion and graciously bestowed a divine potion; this elixir of immortality immediately yielded an efficacious result [i.e. the Emperor was healed]. [The Duke was] accordingly rewarded with one thousand strings of silver cash and thirty-four [rolls of] silk.

Also this year, the Duke's paternal cousin, the Thị Trung with the surname Đổ, had two daughters: the eldest was named Thụy [a character is missing here], the younger was named Thụy Châu. The Emperor at this time prepared festive ceremonies in order to receive them as wives. Both sisters were without jealousy and were zealous to increase in virtue. They worked together with vegetables and were very industrious. They served at bathing and washing without weariness. In the year of Giáp Tuất [1154], Thụy Châu gave birth to Crown Prince Thiên Bảo. In the year of Bính Tý [1156], [she] gave birth to a second prince. In the year of Mậu Dần [1158], [she] gave birth to a third prince. Consequently, the Duke day by day increased in honor. His position excelled all other ministers. In the whole kingdom, seldom has there been anyone able to equal him.

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In the eighth month of the year of Mậu Dần [1158], the Duke was bedridden with illness at his private house in Điển Lệnh village. The Emperor and the Empress Dowager daily summoned the eminent physicians of the kingdom to administer medicine and acupuncture, and [they] commanded the Trung Sứ [the title of an officer] of the inner palace to inspect and taste his food; [they] emptied the inner storehouse of its treasures [in search of a remedy]. A sacrificial mound was raised for the Ngưu Thủ

ceremony. Brush-and-ink men together with fierce warriors all assembled for the Thái Lao sacrifice and proceeded to the altars of state and the ancestral temple of the ruling family to beg for [the Duke's] life. [But] when it was understood from consulting [the Duke's] pulse that recovery was unlikely, preparations were made for funeral rites.

On the twentieth day of the first month [of 1159], the Duke died. He had assisted his sovereign for twenty-two years and attained the age of forty-six. The Emperor and the Empress Dowager wept bitterly for seven days, lamenting [the collapse of] the ridgepole and roof tiles of the kingdom. Delicacies were banished from palace meals and court business was postponed. Gifts to assist with funeral expenses and rules of abstinence exceeded the usual custom. [The Duke was] buried at Sùng Nhân lane in An Lạc village on land belonging to the ancestors of the Duke's mother. The Thái Phó Duke of Tô [Hiển Thành], in accordance with an imperial decree, assisted with the mourning [i.e., the funeral and burial arrangements]. Chu Trung was in charge of the ceremonies.

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He who is buried here is concealed and can no longer be seen. Years pass to eternity, ages shift and change; [but] an engraved stone will last a long time to make manifest these words so that [readers can] contemplate this man. That is why it is unthinkable to neglect raising this inscribed stone tablet at this man's tomb.

Eulogy: A god descended from a mountain peak; Thereby was born this sage. [He] carried himself with dignity; [He] combined elegance with the essentials. [He] had both wisdom and courage; [He] assisted his generation and soothed the people. [He] encouraged poetry and established good manners; [He] trod the way of morality and dwelled in the house of humanity. [He] descended from highest-ranking ministers of state; [He] became the master of both humans and deities. [He] went in to decide ten thousand affairs; [He] went out to proclaim the Five Injunctions. The Văn Đán invaders were scattered and went back; The border towns were swept of strange customs. Thượng Suy was killed without delay; Dust was no longer stirred up at the frontier passes.

His merit occupies the first place; Among those of his rank, who has there been to equal him? His vitals were suddenly struck with disease; Drugs and acupuncture were without effect. He flew far away to the palace of the immortals; The Emperor wept, soaking his handkerchief with tears. Gifts presented at his funeral were abundant and excellent; His burial ceremony was prepared with full honors. This stone is engraved to record his merit; For all eternity.