

millennium, had settled in Madagascar off the east African coast suggest the extent of overseas trade during this early period.⁴

One of the strongest indicators of widespread trade throughout Southeast Asia during the second half of the first millennium B.C. is the broad distribution of bronze drums of the characteristic Dong Son type, which were produced in large numbers mostly in north Viet Nam and south China, and probably in some areas farther south as well.⁵ These elaborately decorated drums, generally believed to have been used as regalia, have been found in the Malay Peninsula, Thailand, Cambodia, and throughout Indonesia. The nature of exchange with insular Southeast Asia can only be hypothesized, but the occurrence of Austronesian loan words—from the language group spoken in the islands, the Malay peninsula, and southern Viet Nam—in the Vietnamese language that developed in the north of Viet Nam and is of the Austroasiatic (Mon Khmer) language family, gives further proof of early contact.

The Vietnamese believe that they are descended from Lac Long Quan, a prince who arrived from the sea, and Au Co, a princess of the mountains. According to legend, eighteen generations of their descendants, the Hung kings,⁶ lived in the Hong River valley. Archaeological excavations have revealed that communities of hunter-gatherers thrived in the region from at least 10,000 B.C. By the second millennium B.C., the earliest agricultural settlements began to appear on the Bac Bo plain, and archaeological excavations there have documented a series of cultures, beginning with the phase named after the site of Phung Nguyen (first half of the second millennium). Axe molds found at the site of the Dong Dau phase of development (from approximately 1,500 B.C.) indicate that bronze was locally produced, while the Dong Son period, which arose in the seventh century B.C. and lasted through the second century A.D., saw the culmination of the Bronze Age in this region.⁷

Dozens of excavations undertaken in the past few decades attest to a stratified society in the region traditionally identified with the dynasty of the Hung kings. Bronzes of many forms—ploughshares, axes, and the massive bronze drums representative of the culture—have been found in large numbers at these sites. In the Co Loa area, many sites have been excavated since the 1960s, and Co Loa is believed by some to have been a capital of the Hung kings in the third century

FIG. 1
Detail of *Drum*, 5th–3rd century B.C.,
Bronze, H: 48 cm x D: 72 cm, National
Museum of Vietnamese History, Ha Noi,
LSb 5724.

