

Early Cultures (first millennium B.C. to second century A.D.)

The first millennium B.C. is not the starting point of cultural history in Viet Nam, but rather the first “Golden Age” in the true sense of the term. After many millennia in the development of a series of mainly hunter-gatherer cultures using tools made from stone, wood, bamboo, or other organic materials,¹ huge environmental and technological changes occurred in the second millennium B.C. They provided the basis for the creation of separate cultural regions with local populations along the east side of the Southeast Asian mainland. Numerous new archaeological discoveries of the last decades show an impressively fast cultural-economic development in this region, particularly after 400 B.C., between the powerful empires of China and India.

LACK OF WRITTEN RECORDS: MESSAGES OF ARTIFACTS

Unfortunately, the people living between the Red (Hong) River and the Mekong delta have left no written reports from before the first centuries A.D., and the Chinese, who were otherwise eager chroniclers of their own sovereigns and deeds in the Middle Kingdom, have passed on from these “barbarous” people only selective details in the context of their own political or commercial processes in their southern border region. Unlike the Romans in Europe, who two thousand years ago tried to describe the Germanic tribes with an almost ethnographic attention to detail, the Chinese give the impression that the most interesting aspects of their southern neighbors are ivory, feathers of rare birds, pearls, or forest products. Besides these, we find in the Chinese annals of this early period some information on the tributary willingness, or rebelliousness, of the southern people, and we can read some reports on punitive expeditions or export prohibitions designed to break the resistance of the tribes in present northern Viet Nam. We find, however, no useful facts in Chinese records on the inhabitants of south or central Viet Nam in the B.C. periods.

In addition, the ancient Sanskrit inscriptions found in central Viet Nam, dating back to the third/fourth century A.D., betray no useful details on the history or everyday life of the people living in this region some centuries earlier, but are mostly short accounts of religious donations made by the local Cham sovereigns.²