

MAP

Location of archaeological sites in Viet Nam that are referenced in this essay.

Despite the lack of written records, however, we can reconstruct many details of these early “Golden Age” cultures on the basis of the archaeological artifacts discovered from about a thousand sites of this period across the whole of Viet Nam.<sup>3</sup> Of course, new influences did not change archaeological cultures overnight. Archaeological finds barely betray the beginnings of Buddhist influence, of Chinese administration, or the opening of new trade routes to the communities along the South China Sea. Some decades would have passed before these new influences or contacts could have caused such enormous cultural change that they would begin to appear as settlement refuse, or as grave offerings in the earth. At first, only some individual elements of the former culture might have changed at a few sites, or in some regions. Then, at a later time, when these changes had extended over more and more living spheres and over larger areas, their impact would have reached such an advanced stage that they would become archaeologically visible in settlement layers or burials. Therefore, if today we talk about the earliest glass bead, the first iron tool, bronze mirror, or other new invention, then the real causes for most of these phenomena can surely be dated back to even earlier times.

**WATER — PROSPERITY OR RUIN, FOOD OR FAMINE**

In the first millennium B.C., the subsistence and prosperity of the inhabitants in the plains beside the great rivers and along the coast of present Viet Nam were based on a symbiosis of wet-rice cultivation, stock-farming, and fishing, which enabled specialized handicrafts and a flourishing exchange about the middle of the last millennium B.C. At that time, as in the present day, the main proportion of the whole population and economic power was concentrated in these plains along the three-thousand-kilometer coastline on the eastern seaboard of the Southeast Asian mainland. The colonization of the majority of these coastal plains was only possible from about 1000 B.C., after the highest Holocene sea level in the third millennium B.C., some meters above that of the present, gradually fell and oscillated to nearly the current shoreline. The Red River delta in the north and the coastal plains to the south up to the Dong Nai River formed roughly their present shape and outline at this early time. A colonization farther south, in the area of the present extremely low and flat Mekong delta, took place presumably only during the first millennium A.D.<sup>4</sup> After the coastal plains were abandoned by the sea, the density of settlements and population increased rapidly, especially during the last half of the first millennium B.C.

From the beginning, the life and economy of the villagers along the South China Sea and the great rivers were bound up with water. As today, water could bring prosperity or ruin, food or famine; it demanded the management of irrigation or drainage, and allowed the laying out of rice fields or—in the last three hundred years—of salt fields (figs. 1a–b). Rivers opened paths and channels through the closely wooded Truong Son range, serving as routes of communication between coastal Viet Nam and inland Laos, Cambodia, or Thailand. Boats were used as vehicles for travel or transport, as a home, rescue base, or coffin—this is demonstrated, for example, by boat pictures on bronze drums or by tree coffins to be used as “boats in the other world.”

Coastal traders sailing between China and South Asia at the end of the last millennium B.C. found potent trading partners along the Vietnamese coast, and the key trade positions of later ports such as Faifo/Hoi An in central Viet Nam certainly became important at this early period.<sup>5</sup> This

FIGS. 1a–b

Water — prosperity or ruin.

- a. Tilling the rice fields before sowing. Quang Nam Province in central Viet Nam in March of 2000.
- b. Rainy season in Ha Noi — the work must go on.

