

range of offerings, and social differences. Bodies were usually buried stretched out on their backs, or occasionally in a crouched position, although partial burials, burials without the skull, or jar burials of children have also been documented. From the fifth century B.C. to the second century A.D., some socially prominent individuals were inhumed in wooden coffins. These are also called boat burials, and often contained rich offerings. Up to now, about 150 boat coffins of the Dong Son culture have been uncovered at more than 50 sites in 8 provinces in northern Viet Nam, and were probably located close to the former coastline at that time. The wood from a boat coffin from Dong Xa in Hung Yen has been identified as iron wood (*Erytrophloeum fordii*), which is resistant, hard, and heavy and is still used in Viet Nam today for house pillars.¹³

The great quantity of bronze weaponry in Dong Son burials, such as swords or daggers with hilts in human form (fig. 14), spear or arrowheads, and breastplates, demonstrate the rise of social conflict in this period—an impression supported by many illustrations on bronze drums of fighting scenes, fully armed warriors, or captives.

From many excavations, we have evidence for local bronze-working, particularly crucibles for bronze smelting and bivalve molds for the casting of tools, weapons, and ornaments. Through analysis, about 10 percent of objects assumed to be bronze were identified as copper, among them ploughshares and arrowheads.¹⁴ A spectacular bronze hoard was discovered in 1982 at the center of the fortification system of Co Loa, about thirty kilometers northeast of Ha Noi: inside a bronze drum, 143 bronze and copper ploughshares or hoes and more than 50 implements and weapons were found, including axes, spearheads, and daggers.¹⁵

At present unexplained is the fact that, in the Dong Son culture, iron artifacts are only rarely uncovered, while bronze objects are dominant. Thus, during the excavation of a rich boat burial at Viet Khe in Hai Phong Province in 1961, 107 bronze offerings (cat. no. 9) were found and radiocarbon-dated to the fifth to third centuries B.C., but not a single iron sample was uncovered.¹⁶ The cemetery of Lang Vac, located in the Nghia Dan district in Nghe An Province near the Ca River, has provided the greatest quantity of artifacts from the Dong Son culture: excavations in an area of more than 1,000 square meters undertaken between 1972 and 1991 revealed over 300 inhumations and jar burials with about 650 bronze offerings, all dating to the second and first centuries B.C. Only two iron objects were found, however.¹⁷ Until 1994, just 40 of all Dong Son sites excavated had provided a mere 143 iron artifacts.¹⁸ This is barely the total found from one Sa Huynh jar-burial site newly excavated at Lai Nghi in Quang Nam Province, where sixty-three graves revealed more than a hundred iron offerings. The argument that iron is rarely uncovered “on account of the high humidity and acidity of the soil”¹⁹ can only partly explain this strange situation, as Dong Son sites have been excavated over a large area with many different soil types. Was iron in northern Viet Nam during the last two centuries B.C. too valuable and indispensable to be used in burial offerings, as a result of the trade embargo imposed by the Han Empress Lü (Gaohou, 187–180 B.C.) on the Nan Yue tribes in 183 B.C., which included iron?²⁰ Another explanation could be that many Dong Son sites are dated incorrectly to a later period, and that possibly a great part of the whole material has to range in the period before 300 B.C., which means before iron spread out. Nevertheless, some burials dated undoubtedly in the first/second centuries A.D., such as Xuan La in Ha Tay Province, or Kiet Thuong in Hai Duong Province, have provided iron offerings.²¹