

The relationship between the Dong Son culture and other peoples in the southern Chinese part of the Nan Yue area is largely recorded by finds of similar bronze artifacts.²² The Dian culture around Dian Lake in Yunnan Province, about six hundred kilometers northwest of the Dong Son tribes in the Red River delta, is one such cultural connection. Their bronzes (in particular the drums and their decoration and function in the burials, but also daggers, battle-axes, and so forth) have, on first appearance, much in common with the Dong Son culture, but they possess some clearly distinctive characteristics, above all in special funerary practices and in the forms of dress and the arms of the human figures displayed on the bronzes.²³

Vietnamese archaeologists see the origin of the Dong Son culture as the result of a long and continuous development by the local population of their own cultural elements in the Red River delta, from the late Neolithic—early Bronze Age cultures of Phung Nguyen (first half of the second millennium B.C.) and Dong Dau (second half of the second millennium B.C.) to the Go Mun culture (c. 1100–700 B.C.).²⁴ For this interpretation, more detailed and well-documented studies on the substantial basis of their arguments should be promoted in order to estimate the proportional balance between earlier, traditional, or local roots and new innovations possibly introduced by newly immigrated groups during the last millennium B.C. In the introduction to this catalogue, the legends and early historical sources on the origin of the Viet people in the Red River delta have already been summarized.²⁵ Archaeologically, it is not really possible to substantiate these legends in any detail. We should be able to step closer to the reality by obtaining more precise dates for the beginning, the different periods, and the local groups of the Dong Son culture. At present, a few dozen radiocarbon dates and imported Chinese artifacts give us a time span of 700 B.C. to A.D. 200 for the Dong Son period.²⁶

SA HUYNH CULTURE: RICH GRAVES AND PLENTIFUL ORNAMENTS IN CENTRAL VIET NAM

For a long time, Central Viet Nam remained untouched by the radical changes in the north and south. There, a few isolated dates (for example from the Binh Chau or Long Thanh site in Quang Ngai Province) suggest a late infiltration of small bronze-making groups, but at present, no real Bronze Age culture is visible in this area before the earliest Sa Huynh culture sites from the middle of the first millennium B.C.

The first burials of the Sa Huynh culture were discovered in 1909 in the sand dunes between the sea and the lake of An Khe near Sa Huynh in Quang Ngai Province.²⁷ In this idyllic community of paddy and salt-field farmers, further excavations by Madeleine Colani and Olov R. T. Janse in the 1930s revealed jars and offerings that clearly differed from the remains of the contemporaneous Dong Son culture in the north.²⁸

The Sa Huynh people buried their dead in a crouched position in upright jars up to 1.3 meters high, within large cemeteries (cat. no. 14; fig. 8). The burials were endowed with a wide range of pottery vessels, with weapons and implements more frequently made from iron rather than bronze, and with beads and distinctive earrings made from semiprecious stone (such as carnelian, agate, nephrite, or rock crystal), glass, or gold. The offerings were placed beside the body in the jar, although small ceramic grave goods were sometimes laid around the hat-shaped cover that sealed the jar completely. Over the course of time, the covers were often broken and fell down into the jar together with the ceramic offerings on top. Burials of children are often identifiable by the use of smaller jars, although the