

DONG NAI CULTURE: LOCAL BRONZE CASTING AND EARTHWORK CLUSTER IN SOUTHEAST VIET NAM

Farther to the south, in "Dong Nam Bo," a bronze industry flourished from the end of the second millennium B.C., and is well documented by evidence from about a hundred settlements and cemeteries, forming the most intensively occupied area during this period in the whole of central and southern Viet Nam.³³ Dong Nam Bo extends from the southern foothills of the Truong Son range in the east to the edge of the Mekong delta plains in the west. Three great rivers, the Dong Nai, Be, and Sai Gon, with their tributaries flow through it toward the seacoast in the southeast, forming an important traffic network and the economic basis for the development of this Bronze Age cultural unity.³⁴

Excavated sites such as Doc Chua³⁵ in Binh Duong Province, Bung Bac³⁶ in Ba Ria-Vung Tau Province, or Cai Van in Dong Nai Province have provided important evidence on the rise of a local bronze-casting technology between 1000–500 B.C.³⁷ Numerous sandstone or clay molds and bronze artifacts—above all, graceful socketed axes with a wide, semicircular cutting edge, and spearheads in different forms, but also other implements and ornaments—show clear similarities with bronzes found on sites farther up the Mekong River and in Northeast Thailand, and clearly differ from bronzes of the Go Mun or Dong Son cultures in the Red River delta (fig. 18).

The most important site in the Dong Nai area is Doc Chua, situated about forty-five kilometers north-northeast of Ho Chi Minh City. Excavations undertaken in the late 1970s uncovered 550 square meters, and revealed 40 graves and settlement layers that should date to the first half of the last millennium B.C. With 450 spindle whorls and 80 sandstone molds, this site has provided one of the greatest collections of these implements in Southeast Asia. In addition to them, the majority of the 68 bronzes, mostly socketed axes and spearheads, were found in burials (fig. 19).

One of the finest collections of bronzes in the Dong Nai area from the late first millennium B.C. was undoubtedly found at Long Giao in Dong Nai Province, about eighty kilometers east of Ho Chi Minh City. During fieldwork in the 1980s and early 1990s, the local people discovered nineteen halberds with more fragments, one socketed axe, and two strange bronze pangolin figures (cat. no. 22). It is quite possible that all these objects belonged to one bronze hoard because no other indications of a burial were reported.³⁸

From the fourth/third century B.C., some influences from central Viet Nam arrived in the Dong Nai area and combined with elements of the local culture to form a southern variant of the widely distributed Sa Huynh culture, with type sites such as Hang Gon, Phu Hoa, Suoi Chon, Giong Phet, and Giong Ca Vo.

Following the Be River upstream some sixty to eighty kilometers to the north of Doc Chua near the border with Cambodia, one finds a group of two dozen circular earthworks in the western part of Binh Phuoc Province, with dozens more on the Cambodian side of the border. These earthworks could be Bronze-Iron Age settlement enclosures, but their exact dating and function has not yet been fully discussed and requires an expansion of field research and excavations in this area.³⁹

PRE-FU NAN CULTURE: "WHITE GOLD" IN SOUTHWESTERN VIET NAM

Southern Viet Nam around the Mekong delta has an extremely low gradient, ranging from zero to four meters above sea level, and is very vulnerable