

Tra Kieu, are only fifteen kilometers to the southwest of Lai Nghi and should fall within the same period of the last century B.C.⁵⁹ After analysis of the rich ceramic collection excavated at Tissamaharama in southern Sri Lanka, it is suggested that these diagnostic dishes were first brought by missionaries or officials of the Mauryan Emperor Ashoka (272–231 B.C.) as gifts on their missionary voyages to Southeast Asia and even as far as central Viet Nam during the last centuries B.C.⁶⁰

From the last century B.C., after the Chinese had extended their empire over northern Viet Nam, trade and diplomatic contacts with central and southern Viet Nam were intensified, as is evident from finds of bronze mirrors or vessels of the Han period or ring-handled iron knives.

Gold jewelry became more common at the end of the first millennium in the Thu Bon valley. This might be explained by increased contacts between the inhabitants of the coastal plains and the miners of alluvial gold in the mountains. Thus, the gold objects found at Lai Nghi and at about half a dozen Sa Huynh sites in Quang Nam Province may have been derived from the still-used gold-mining area around Kham Duc, lying in the mountain territory of the Co Tu minority about eighty-five kilometers southwest of Hoi An, or near Bong Mieu, where, not many years ago, industrial gold exploitation was started.

Gold beads are widely distributed at this time, but the four gold earrings discovered in a jar burial in Lai Nghi are rare (figs. 5a–b). A set of four gold earrings of the same type was excavated in a burial in 2003 in Giong Lon near Vung Tau/southern Viet Nam, more than six hundred kilometers from Lai Nghi to the south. Apparently, the burial site of Giong Lon lies near a similarly important early trade center along the coast's sailing route. Among the rich offerings found in fifty-four graves at the Giong Lon site are the first two gold masks of human faces ever found in Viet Nam and a coin of the Western Han period. Two additional gold earrings of the same type were found about six hundred kilometers southwest of Lai Nghi by looting activities in Bit Meas in Prey Veng Province, Cambodia. This site and the above-mentioned Prohear burials are so rich in gold offerings that some of the numerous local resources in Cambodia could also have been exploited—sources from which several deposits were recently documented.⁶¹

Of course, the cultural activity and economic prosperity of this first "Golden Age" in the Vietnamese plains was not based solely on influences or imports from outside, but on a profitable agricultural surplus combined with hunting, fishing, and an intensive exploitation of all the local resources in the surrounding jungle, mountains, rivers, and sea, creating the impetus for innovative local handicrafts. Only in this way were the ancient trade sites or ports along the Vietnamese coast able to offer more than merely fresh drinking water or a safe anchorage.