Historical Overview

The origins of nationhood in Vietnam began over 4000 years ago in the northern and north-central regions of the country. Significantly, this period coincided with the establishment and development of the Bronze–early Iron Age in Vietnam and the emergence of the Dong Son culture. The earliest historical texts referred to a loose federation of tribes, called Van Lang, that was established about 2000 years prior to the Chinese invasion and colonisation of Vietnam in 111 BC. Unfortunately, the 1000 years of Chinese rule over Vietnam, with its policy of assimilating Vietnam politically, socially and culturally into the Chinese empire, long blurred the origins and cultural development of the Vietnamese people and nation. This situation changed in 1924 with the discovery of the Dong Son culture site in Vietnam.

The historical process which culminated in the discovery of the Dong Son culture began during the Paleolithic period. In recent years, Vietnamese archaeologists have conducted investigations at several Stone Age sites in Thanh Hoa province in north-central Vietnam. At one site, Nui Do mountain, the large quantity of stone axes and other stone tools found there indicates the area was not only a tool-making site, but perhaps the first known Paleolithic settlement in Vietnam as well. Nui Do mountain is located along the bank of the Chu River and not far from that river’s confluence with the Ma River, the main waterway of the province. Many Neolithic and Bronze Age cultural sites have been discovered near these two rivers, providing evidence of the continuous development of human settlements in Thanh Hoa since the Stone Age. It is no coincidence that the Dong Son culture had historical roots in this province.

The French Colonial Period

The history surrounding the discovery of the Dong Son culture in Vietnam began during the period of European colonisation of Southeast Asia in the 19th–20th centuries. In 1902, the historian Franz Heger published a review of 165 bronze drums that had been found throughout Southeast Asia. Heger proposed a system to classify these bronze drums into four basic types (1). The oldest, most elaborately decorated, and most elegantly shaped drums were classified by Heger as Type 1.

In his 1902 publication, Heger described two of the most important Type 1 bronze drums which had been found in Asia. One was a large drum bought in 1883 by E. Moulié, a French government official. Moulié purchased the drum from a Vietnamese minority family in Vietnam’s Hoa Binh province. In 1889, the “Moulié drum” (2, 3) was sent to Paris and displayed at the Indochina Pavilion of the World’s Fair. This bronze drum was never returned to Vietnam. Note that the “Moulié drum” is called the “Song Da drum” by Vietnamese scholars. The Da River (Song Da in Vietnamese) flows near the village where Moulié found and bought the drum. The other important Type 1 drum reviewed by Heger had been purchased by L. Gillet in Hanoi. This drum came from Yunnan province across the northern border of Vietnam. The “Gillet drum” (called the “Khai Hoa drum” by Vietnamese scholars after the name of the district in Yunnan where it was found) also was shipped to Europe prior to 1900. In 1940, the French archaeologist, Victor Goloubew, noted that the “Gillet drum” was in the possession of the Museum of Trades and Industry in Vienna. A more recent Vietnamese publication also reported this drum was in a Vietnamese museum.

In Vietnam, French officials and private traders had been collecting and selling bronze wares, including bronze drums, since at least the 1880s. Two of them, d’Argence and Demange, reportedly had the largest and most diversified collections in Vietnam at the time. They sold many of their bronzes to museums in Europe and to the Mission Archeologique d’Indochine (MAI), which had been established in Hanoi by the French government in 1898. In 1900, the name of MAI was changed to L’École Française d’Extreme-Orient, or EFEO. Later, EFEO opened the Louis Finot Museum to display their growing collection of artefacts. This building is now the National Museum of Vietnamese History colloquially called “Nha Bac Co” by the Vietnamese.

In late 1902, soon after Heger’s work was published, perhaps the best-known Type 1 bronze drum of them all was discovered in Ha Nam province, south of Hanoi. The story of this discovery is well documented and interesting. A French artist was said to have been sketching the Long Doi Son pagoda near Ngoc Lu village in Ha Nam province.
when he saw a large bronze drum in the pagoda. He advised the local provincial officials, who took the drum to EFEO in Hanoi. (It is currently in the possession of the National History Museum in Hanoi). In fact, this bronze drum was not found at Ngoc Lu village. It was unearthed around 1893 or 1894 by Vietnamese construction personnel working near the Red River at Nhu Trac village in the same province. Nhu Trac is about 30 kilometres from Ngoc Lu village. As the workers who found the drum workers who found the drum were residents of Ngoc Lu, they secretly took the drum to the village’s communal house. At the time, the “history” of this bronze drum might not have been known by the French, so the EFEO in Hanoi simply referred to it as the “Ngoc Lu drum”. Since 1954, Vietnamese scholars have continued to refer to it as the Ngoc Lu bronze drum (rather than the Nhu Trac drum), perhaps to prevent confusion over its identification [4, 5]. Although the French colonial government had estab-
Side view detail of Ngoc Lu drum, similar decoration composition to the Song Da drum with ceremonial boat crews on the shoulder and processional human figures holding banners and musical instruments/axes on the barrel.
lished the EFEO in 1900 and later opened the Louis Finot Museum to organise displays of artefacts, including bronzes, that were found in Vietnam, there are no reports of archaeological excavations of Bronze Age sites by EFEO in the first two decades of the 20th century. In 1918, the head of the EFEO Archaeological Service in Hanoi, Henri Parmentier, did publish a bulletin entitled “Ancient Bronze Drums”. Utilising Heger’s classification system (Types 1–4), Parmentier described in great detail the Ngoc Lu drum, comparing it to the Type I Moulé and Gillet drums previously reviewed in Heger’s work. Parmentier also described other bronze drums that randomly had been found by antique traders and government officials since Heger’s 1902 publication.8

In 1924, a Vietnamese farmer found some bronze artefacts in a small village along the bank of the Ma River in Thanh Hoa province. A French customs official working in Thanh Hoa at the time, L. Pajot, learned of the discovery and purchased the bronzes. The name of this village was Dong Son. Pajot subsequently requested permission from the EFEO Archaeological Service in Hanoi to investigate the site.9 From 1924 to 1932, Pajot conducted several “excavations” at this village. He recovered a large quantity of stone, pottery, bronze and iron objects, including Han and Tang dynasty wares. In addition, burial tombs and wooden beams thought to be the remains of stilt house structures were found. It should be noted here that Pajot did not publish the results of his excavations.10

In 1929, Goloubew published an EFEO bulletin reporting that Pajot had found a total of 489 bronze objects during the latter’s excavations in the 1920s.11

Although bronzes randomly had been found in Vietnam before 1924, the discovery of the Dong Son site was the single most important archaeological event in Vietnamese history. It provided conclusive evidence of the existence of a well-developed Bronze–early Iron Age culture in Vietnam. The news of the discovery of the Dong Son site drew the attention of Western scholars of Southeast Asia. Following Goloubew’s 1929 report, European archaeologists arrived in Vietnam to conduct subsequent excavations. In 1934, one Austrian scholar on Southeast Asia proposed the name “Dong Son culture” to describe this Bronze Age period.12 Most notable was the work of the Swedish archaeologist, Olov Janse. During 1935–1939, Janse excavated the Dong Son site three times. He collected bronze artefacts from other sites in Thanh Hoa and neighbouring provinces as well. The final results of his work, published only after World War Two, reported that he found 700 bronze artefacts in the 1935 excavation alone. Janse found at Dong Son the same type of wooden/bamboo support posts that Pajot reportedly saw in the 1920s. Janse also believed these wooden structures were remains of stilt houses that are still common among the minority ethnic groups in Vietnam today. Other interesting discoveries by Janse at the Dong Son site included remnants of Han and Tang dynasty burial tombs from the Chinese colonial period.13

Following the discovery of the Dong Son site, most Western scholars accepted the fact that a well-developed Bronze Age culture had existed in Vietnam. What was debated among them, however, was when this culture had been established and its origins. The generally accepted view at the time was that the indigenous Vietnamese learned the art of bronze making from foreign countries, primarily China.14 Regarding the dating of the Dong Son culture, foreign researchers generally believed it began only after the invasion of Vietnam by the Han dynasty in the 2nd century BC.

Another area of debate revolved around the meaning of the designs portrayed on the bronzes (particularly on the large bronze drums). The interpretation of these designs remains a topic of debate among Vietnamese researchers.

12 The most noted of these collectors were A. d’Argence, Demange, Moulie, Gillet, and Besson.
15 O. Janse, Bi Mat cau Cay Den Hinh Nguo, Chuong 12, trang 151, Ha Noi, 2001; Janse criticised Pajot’s crude and un-scientific “excavations” at the Dong Son village site.
16 Ha Van Tan, Van Hoa Dong Son o Viet Nam, trang 9, Ha Noi, 1994.
18 Ha Van Tan, Van Hoa Dong Son o Viet Nam, trang 1, Ha Noi, 1994.
19 This was a curious conclusion, particularly as it pertains to the bronze drums. One of the earliest references to bronze drums in Chinese historical texts was written in “Hou Han Shu” (Annals of the Late Han Dynasty), which appeared only in the 5th century AD. Specifically, there is one chapter dedicated to the famous Chinese general, Ma Yuan (Ma Vien in Vietnamese), who led a massive Han expeditionary force through what is now southern China and Vietnam “to bring the rebels under control”. Hou Han Shu described his campaign in 40–43 AD against “the rebels in Jiao Zhi”, the Han name for what is now northern Vietnam. In Vietnamese, Jiao Zhi is rendered as “Giao Chi”. This Han invasion was in reaction to the rebellion by the two Vietnamese Trung sisters (Trung Trac and her younger sister, Trung Nhi), who led a Vietnamese resistance that had destroyed more than fifty strongholds of the colonial Chinese government in an effort to expel them from Vietnam. After Ma Yuan’s overwhelming force defeated the Trung Sisters’ rebellion, he reportedly melted down the bronze drums that he had found in Vietnam and made horse statues as presents to the Chinese emperor.

We would like to comment further about bronze drums and the Han culture. First, there was a reference in the Ma Yuan passage that these bronze drums were special to the “southern regions” (Ling Nan in Chinese, including Jiao Zhi) where the bronze drums were found. Second, the earliest known Chinese text mentioning bronze drums in Yunnan province, which was the most important bronze drum production centre in China, was “Song Shi”. This text contained a passage mentioning that in the year 990 AD tribal leaders in Yunnan province had bronze drums made for themselves. Finally, there is no indication that bronze drums were used in Han Chinese regions north of the Chang Jiang, or Yang Zi, river) before the Han defeat of the southern China regions. Rather, Han drums commonly were wooden with leather faces.
1954–Present

Since the end of French colonial rule, Vietnamese archaeologists have focused much of their attention on the Dong Son culture. Beginning in 1959, archaeological research was expanded beyond Thanh Hoa province, specifically to regions further north in the Red River delta area northwest of Hanoi and to the south of Thanh Hoa in the Ca River delta of modern-day Nghe An province. Discoveries from ongoing excavations in these regions have not only expanded the geographical boundaries of Bronze Age Vietnam, but have also revealed a direct cultural progression from the early Bronze Age (called the Pre-Dong Son period by Vietnamese researchers) to the Dong Son culture.15

The majority of Dong Son culture sites identified in Vietnam are located near major rivers or the confluences of rivers. For example, most of the Dong Son sites found in Thanh Hoa province are within a ten kilometre radius of the confluence of the Ma and Chu rivers.16 Similarly, Dong Son culture sites in the Red River delta region often have been discovered near the confluence of the three main rivers in this region (the Da, Thao, and Lo rivers). This suggests that the Dong Son people had established a riverine society, using boats for transport, ceremonial and military purposes. Designs on the large Dong Son drums and storage jars, which we will review later, support this view.

Based on current archaeological evidence, the early Bronze Age, or Pre-Dong Son period, began in Vietnam about 3800–4000 years ago. The Dong Son culture probably reached its peak of development during the period from the 6th–7th century BC until perhaps the 1st century BC, i.e. before the Han colonisation of Vietnam.17 However, production of Dong Son bronzes, including bronze drums, continued until the 2nd–3rd century AD, although styles and designs on these “late” Dong Son bronzes now were influenced by the Chinese occupation of Vietnam.

15 Based on their research in recent years, Vietnamese archaeologists have found evidence of a direct succession from the Pre-Dong Son period to the Dong Son culture. An estimated time line dating of the Dong Son Bronze Age follows:
   Early Bronze Age: 2000–1600 BC (Pre-Dong Son period)
   Mid Bronze Age: 1500–800 BC
   Late Bronze–Early Iron Age: 700 BC–100 AD (the Dong Son bronze drums)


17 See footnote 15.

Cultural Site Visit

Travelling about 40 kilometres northwest of Thanh Hoa city, the authors had the opportunity to visit a very important cultural site in Yen Tho village, Yen Dinh district (the historical name of Yen Tho village is Dan Ne). At Yen Tho, along the bank of the Ma river, is an ancient temple that local residents believe dates from the Van Lang era (4000 years ago) (6). The significance of this temple lies in its name, the legend attached to it, and some historical facts that seem to support the legend.

In the 11th century, following the establishment of Vietnam’s independence from China and the founding of Thang Long, now Hanoi, in 1010 as the nation’s capital, Ly Phat Ma (son of the first Ly king) was leading his troops southward from Thang Long to attack the Champa kingdom in what is now central Vietnam. Historical texts note that the prince stopped overnight at Dan Ne village. According to the legend, that evening he dreamed of seeing a genie who identified himself as the genie of the bronze drum mountain (Dong Co Son Than). The genie offered his assistance to the prince in defeating the Champa kingdom. Taking this as a positive omen, Ly Phat Ma was victorious and upon returning to Thang Long had a temple built in honour of the bronze drum mountain genie.18

Local folklore in Thanh Hoa tells of a very large bronze drum, dating from the Hung king era of Van Lang, that had been in the temple dedicated to this genie (hence the names Dong Co genie, Dong Co mountain and Dong Co temple). The temple itself is located adjacent to the Ma river at the foot of the three-peaked Dong Co mountain, which locally is called Tam Thai or Kha Lao mountain.

*Dong Co, or Tong Go in Chinese,* is the Sino-Vietnamese word for “bronze drum” (7). As a result of the 1000 year period of Chinese colonisation and its policy of assimilating Vietnam into the Chinese empire, all temples, pagodas, steles and other structures carried Chinese character inscriptions and names (8).19

During the Tay Son Movement in the late 18th century to unify the divided country, Nguyen Quang Ban, the son of the Tay Son leader Nguyen Hue, passed through Dan Ne on his way northward to attack the Trinh lords. He visited the Dong Co temple and was told it was dedicated to the bronze drum genie. He was also told that there once was a large bronze drum in the temple that had since disappeared. One story holds that Nguyen Quang Ban found another bronze drum nearby and placed it in the temple for the villagers. He also wrote an inscription and left it at the temple, detailing the account of his visit. This temple inscription was recorded in Vietnamese and French historical texts but has since been lost.20 During the French colonial period, at least two French scholars visited the Dong Co temple. They described Nguyen Quang Ban’s inscription in the temple and a very large bronze drum that they saw there, which they said was a Type 2 drum.21

To our knowledge, Vietnam is the only country that has temples dedicated to the bronze drum. In addition to the temple at Yen Tho and the one built by Ly Phat Ma in Thang Long–Hanoi, there is reportedly another temple dedicated to the bronze drum in Hoang Hoa district in Thanh Hoa. The significance here is that the Vietnamese people from the time of the Dong Son culture had considered the bronze drums sacred objects, not simply tribal leaders’ symbols of wealth and power as Chinese texts recorded was the case in southern China. The Dong Son drums often were kept in Vietnamese temples/pagodas and were played at important ceremonies and festivals (as depicted in scenes on the large Dong Son drums). Moreover, in addition to the drum in Dong Co temple, recall also that the villagers who found the magnificent Ngoc Lu drum at Nhu Trac village took it 30 kilometres back to their communal house at Ngoc Lu village! There reportedly were bronze drums in other Vietnamese pagodas/temples as well, such as Dau pagoda and Mieu Mon temple in Ha Tay province.22
Dong Co temple (right foreground) viewed from the peak of Dong Co mountain, Ma River directly to the north and the “Half-Moon Lake” (Ho Ban Nguyet) in front of the temple, Yen Tho village, Yen Dinh district, Thanh Hoa province. Photograph by the authors.

Sign at entrance to Dong Co temple reads “National Historical Site- Dong Co Mountain and Temple”

Han character inscription in temple reads “Ben Miao Tong Gu” (Dong Co Temple)

18 Nguyen Thanh Hien, Den Dong Co, Co Vat Van Hoa Dong Son o Thanh Hoa, trang 136, So Van Hoa Thong Tin, Thanh Hoa, 2004; Nguyen Duy Hinh, Trong Dong Trong Su Sach, Khao Co Hoc, So 13, So Dac Biet: Trong Dong, trang 18, Ha Noi, 1974.

19 Aside from the smattering of French and English words that have entered the Vietnamese language in the past 150 years, the 1000 year Chinese domination of Vietnam had a major impact on the Vietnamese language. Vietnamese essentially is now comprised of indigenous Vietnamese words (Pre-Han) and Sino-Vietnamese words. The Sino-Vietnamese words (“chu Han-Viet” in Vietnamese) are loan words from the Chinese language. Thus, the Chinese “tong gu” is rendered as “dong co”. Other examples are “she hui”-“xa hoei” (society) and “fo jiao”-“phat giao” (Buddhism). In addition, in the 13th century the Vietnamese developed a writing system (Nom) that modified the Han characters to make the spoken and written systems compatible to the Vietnamese language. This Nom script was utilised until the 18th–19th centuries, when Portuguese and later French missionaries began the process of Romanising the Vietnamese language.


22 Dao Tu Khai, Chim Lac hay Con Co?—Ngoi Sao hay Mat Troi?, Khao Co Hoc: So Dac Biet—Trong Dong, Tap 2, trang 31, Ha Noi, 1974.
Dong Son Bronzes: Types and Designs

Dong Son bronzes can be classified into five major groups: household wares/tools; weaponry; ornaments/jewellery; figurines/statues; and musical instruments.

Household Wares/Tools

After weaponry, this group accounts for the majority of Dong Son bronze wares found to date in Vietnam. Household objects include oil lamps (9) and storage jars (10), basins (11) and ladles (12), as well as vases, bowls, cups, pitchers, and cooking pots. The quantity and variety of bronze household wares that have been excavated indicate a well-developed and stable Bronze Age society.

Regarding tools, Dong Son bronze axes, files, plow blades, hoes, and spades have been found throughout northern and north-central regions of the country. Axes included both work axes (chopping wood/bamboo) and elaborately designed blades that probably were used in ceremonies or warfare. The designs on these axe blades were often similar to those depicted on other Dong Son bronzes, particularly the bronze drums (13).

The large quantities of agricultural tools, in particular plow blades, that have been found at Dong Son archaeological sites clearly reflects the establishment of a highly-developed agrarian society in northern and north-central Vietnam during the Bronze Age. The discovery of rice grains at several Pre-Dong Son and Dong Son sites also indicates that rice production had been established during this period.23

Weaponry

Weapons, including axes, spearheads, swords, arrowheads, daggers and crossbow triggers, account for the majority of bronzes found at Dong Son culture sites. Vietnamese archaeologists have reported that about 50 per cent of all bronzes excavated in Thanh Hoa province were various types of weapons. At one Ha Tay province cultural site, 70 per cent of bronze wares excavated there were weapons.24 Most interesting are the ceremonial/military axes mentioned above and daggers with handles in the form of human figures (14–17). These will be discussed in more detail later.

Considering the substantial quantity of weapons found at Bronze Age Dong Son sites, one can assume that military conflicts were common among the various ethnic groups in the region.


11 Dong Son bronze storage jar, Thanh Hoa province, height 21.5 cm, diameter 18 cm, geometric decorations, a pair of ear handles, circa 500 BC

12 Dong Son bronze ladle, end of curved handle decorated with figure playing the Vietnamese “khen”, circa 500 BC. Photograph courtesy of Thanh Hoa Provincial Museum

13 Dong Son bronze axe blades, Thanh Hoa province, top two blades with round bottom shapes and green patinas, one decorated with two rows of sitting boat crew and two crocodile-like creatures facing each other on blade handle, the other with deer and typical Dong Son “rice grain” patterns, bottom “foot-shaped” blade with decorative scene of a flying bird, a dog, and a deer, golden patina, length of round-bottom blades 14 cm, foot-shaped blade length 16 cm, all circa 500 BC
17 Bronze spearhead/dagger found in Bac Ninh province, grey-black patina, rectangular handle with decorations of standing human figures wearing conical hats and animals (dogs?), possibly Chinese origin (Warring States period), height 22 cm

16 Dong Son bronze dagger, Thanh Hoa province, grey-black patina, figure wearing a loin cloth, oversized earrings and multiple bracelets, hair raised in a bun, arms akimbo, height 27 cm, circa 500 BC

15 Small Dong Son bronze dagger, Thanh Hoa province, green patina, handle in the shape of a figure wearing a loin cloth, hair raised in a bun, and arms akimbo, figure wearing oversized earrings and arm bracelets, height 14.5 cm, circa 500 BC

14 Dong Son bronze sword, Thanh Hoa province, greyish-black patina, decorative handle in the form of a figure with skirt, arms akimbo and hair covered with a headdress, figure wearing long necklaces, oversized earrings, and arm bracelets, length 29 cm, circa 500 BC

Ornaments/Jewellery

The Dong Son people attached much importance to decorative art, and this was reflected in the several kinds of ornaments/jewellery that they produced. For example, bracelets and anklets, often with small bells attached to them to create a musical accompaniment when dancers performed at ceremonies, have been found throughout the Dong Son culture regions (19). Some bracelets had animal and “rice-grain” designs, decorations that were common to Dong Son bronzes. Earrings were made in the shape of round, small bells to create rhythmic sounds when dancers performed (title page). Other adornments included hairpins and necklaces.

It should be noted that many of these ornaments, such as necklaces, bracelets and earrings, appeared as designs on other bronzes as well, in particular on the human figures depicted on bronze drums and on the human figurines which formed the handles of daggers.

Figurines

These bronzes were usually humans, animals, and birds. In addition to appearing as individual objects, they often were “attached” to other wares, such as frogs on the bronze drums; men/women on large Dong Son storage jars; and men/women in the form of handles on the elaborate daggers. Many bronze figurines provide insights into the customs and cultural activities of the Dong Son people, such as the figurine of two people riding “piggyback” while one of them plays the khen, a musical instrument that is still popular among ethnic minorities in Vietnam (20).

Figurines served either a utilitarian purpose, such as oil lamps (18), or simply a decorative use as in the case of the handles of the daggers mentioned above.

Musical Instruments

Based on decorative scenes on Dong Son drums, village festivals and ceremonies were an integral part of Dong Son culture life, and musical instruments played a major role in these activities. Bronze instruments included drums, bells, and gongs.

Bells included small types that were affixed to bracelets and anklets, as well as larger hand-held bells. The larger bells often were decorated with typical Dong Son scenes such as boats with crews, animals (21), and birds.

The bronze drums are the largest and most elaborately decorated of the Dong Son bronze wares, and as such have come to symbolise the Dong Son culture and the ori-
18 Dong Son bronze for an oil lamp in the shape of a kneeling figure holding a staff, top of the figure’s head in the form of a bronze drum, Thanh Hoa province, circa 500 BC

19 Dong Son bronze arm and leg bracelets, small bells attached to provide musical accompaniment during ceremonial dancing, Thanh Hoa province, green patina, diameters 6–7 cm, circa 500 BC

20 Dong Son bronze figurine in the shape of one person riding “piggyback” on the other and playing the “khen”, circa 500 BC. Photograph courtesy of the Thanh Hoa Provincial Museum

21 Dong Son bronze bell, Thanh Hoa province, grey-green patina, vertical panels of circles surrounding a crocodile-like creature with fishbone pattern on body, height 20 cm, circa 500 BC
gins of nationhood in Vietnam. It is believed that the drums were used in social/ceremonial activities as well as in military conflicts (as a means of communication). As previously mentioned, F. Heger proposed the earliest classification system for bronze drums in 1902. He named the largest, oldest and most elegantly shaped drums, with their three distinct sections (shoulder, barrel and foot), “Type 1” drums. Scholars later referred to Type 1 bronze drums as “H 1" to acknowledge the contribution made by Heger in the classification of bronze drums. To date, about 300 Type 1/H 1 drums have been found in Vietnam, by far the largest quantity of this type discovered in Asia.

As the majority of the known Type 1 bronze drums in Vietnam have been discovered in Thanh Hoa province, Vietnamese scholars refer to them simply as “Dong Son drums” (Trong Dong Son) after the name of the village in Thanh Hoa where this Bronze–early Iron Age culture was first discovered.

Curiously, the largest and most elaborately decorated of the known Dong Son drums (Ngoc Lu, Hoang Ha, Song Da, Co Loa) until recently had not been found in Thanh Hoa province, but rather further north in Ha Nam, Ha Tay, and Hoa Binh provinces, and near Hanoi. However, in late 2004 Vietnamese archaeologists reported the discovery of a large Type 1 Dong Son drum, similar to the Ngoc Lu and Hoang Ha drums, in Thanh Hoa.

In recent years, Vietnamese scholars have introduced new Dong Son drum classification systems (with subgroups), taking into account the large number of newly found drums that do not fit clearly into Heger’s classifications. In particular, on many of the late Dong Son drums frog figurines began to appear as a decoration on the outer rim of the faces of drums. These frogs often were intricately decorated themselves (22). In addition, the human figures on the late Dong Son drums became highly stylised and appeared as abstract figures rather than naturally-depicted humans as seen on the early Dong Son drums noted above.

Drums of large size, but with less-defined shapes compared to the Type 1 (Dong Son) drums, were classified by Heger as Type 2. On the Type 2 drums, unlike the Dong Son drums, the frog figurines arrayed on the drums’ faces were more simply decorated. We now also see small frogs standing on the back of larger ones, a design not found on the early Dong Son drums. In addition, the face of these Type 2 drums usually extended beyond its shoulder, unlike the Dong Son drums. As most of the Type 2 bronze drums have been found in regions inhabited by the Muong ethnic minority, they are often referred to as “Muong drums”.

Type 1 (Dong Son) and Type 2 are the most commonly found bronze drums in Vietnam. The Type 3 drums appeared later, probably no earlier than the 2nd century AD. These drums were often smaller than the Type 2 drums and had many non-Dong Son decorations. Similar to the Type 2 drums, the frog figurines arrayed on the outer rim of the face of Type 3 drums included small frogs positioned on the back of larger ones. As most of the Type 3 drums have been found in regions outside Vietnam, they have often been called “Karen” or “Shan” drums.

The Type 4 drums probably appeared only after the 2nd century AD. These drums no longer had defined shapes. They were initially also called “China” drums, as most of them were found in southern China. These “China” drums are to be differentiated from the bronze drums of the minority Dian culture in China’s Yunnan province, which borders Lao Cai province in Vietnam’s northwestern region. In Yunnan province several Type 1 (Dong Son) drums, with drum shapes and designs similar to Vietnam’s Dong Son drums, have been found at Dian cultural sites. This suggests contacts between the Dian and Dong Son cultures prior to the Han domination of southern China and Vietnam. In addition, the Dian culture produced its own distinct type of bronze drum. Although the shapes of the Dian drums were undefined like Type 4 drums, the faces of these drums were often very elaborately decorated. Figurines depicting scenes of farmers, carts and cattle and kneeling human figures making ceremonial offerings were common.

The Dong Son bronze drum is a source of immense pride to the Vietnamese people, and the face of the most prized drum of them all, the Ngoc Lu drum, is ubiquitous in Vietnam—on lead-ins for various television programs; as advertising motifs; as part of logos; and even on the aprons worn by Air Vietnam female flight attendants!


Note that this estimated figure of 300 Dong Son drums does not include those which are unknown (in private hands) or have been un-recorded and taken out of Vietnam.

Hoang Xuan Chinh and Doan Anh Tuan, Lai Them Mot Trong Dong Nhong Ngoc Lu-Hoang Ha Duoc Phat Hien o Lang Coc (Thanh Hoa), Khoa Co Hoc, So 4, trang 85–90, Ha Noi, 2004.

Pham Minh Huyen, Tham Luan Hoi Thao Khoa Hoc-Ky Niem 80 Nam Phat Hien va Nghien Cuu Van Hoa Dong Son (1924–2004), trang 104–114, So Van Hoa Thong Tin, Thanh Hoa, 2004; one system now used by Vietnamese researchers classifies bronze drums into five groups (A, B, C, DZ, and D) with numbered subgroups. For example, the Ngoc Lu, Song Da, and Hoang Ha Dong Son drums are classified as A 1; the late Dong Son drums with the four frogs arrayed on the face of the drums and highly-stylised human figures depicted, such as the Huu Chung drum, are classified as Group C Dong Son drums.

**Designs**

The designs and decorations on bronze wares reflected the natural and spiritual world of the Dong Son people. Simple working tools and utensils, such as plow blades, hoes, spades, bowls, etc., which served entirely utilitarian purposes, mostly were not decorated. However, many bronzes had patterns depicting people, animals, birds or other objects that were common to the countryside and everyday life of the Dong Son people. These decorated bronzes, which included figurines, drums, bells, knives, swords, axes, bracelets, and belts/belt buckles, probably were the possessions of tribal leaders or were objects used in ceremonial activities.

In general, the designs/motifs on Dong Son bronzes can be divided into three major categories: geometric designs; depictions of objects; and figurines.

**Geometric Designs**

By the late Stone Age–Pre-Dong Son period, decorative geometric designs were common on pottery wares. Various patterns such as “S” shaped figures, vertical and diagonal
Detail view of a toad affixed to the tympanum of a late Dong Son bronze drum (circa 100 BC–100 AD), decorated with typical Dong Son geometric designs. Photograph courtesy of Thanh Hoa Provincial Museum.

Dong Son bricks with geometric patterns (concentric circles, connecting circles) also commonly portrayed on Dong Son bronzes. Photograph courtesy of Thanh Hoa Provincial Museum.

Dong Son bronze drums, including one miniature drum, and a bronze basin, Thanh Hoa province, the bronze drum in foreground, with four toads arrayed on the tympanum and the bronze basin circa 100 BC–100 AD, the two Dong Son drums in rear of photo circa 500 BC, heights of drums 7–62 cm, diameters of tympanums 6.5–77 cm.
parallel lines, and connecting circles evolved during this time. When the Dong Son Bronze Age culture was established and reached its peak, many of the geometric designs that first appeared on pottery were “inherited” for use as decorations on bronzes (23). This provides evidence of the development and transition from pottery production in the Stone Age-Pre Dong Son period to bronzes in the Dong Son culture. Moreover, with the transition to the Bronze Age, patterns/designs on pottery became simpler (or wares were left undecorated). Bronze wares had become “king” in the Dong Son culture.

Geometric patterns were a common decoration on all types of bronzes during the Pre-Dong Son and Dong Son periods.

**Depictions of Objects**

The depiction of objects on Dong Son bronzes was a revolutionary advancement in the history of Vietnamese art. In the first millennium BC, the Dong Son people had learned how to use moulds and other bronze production techniques to shape bronzes and symmetrically portray on them scenes of their social activities (ceremonial dancing; crews on boats; people beating bronze drums; couples pounding rice—gia gao in Vietnamese) as well as patterns of animals, birds, boats, houses and other objects that were all part of their world.29 Aside from the impressive technical achievements in bronze production, these designs tell us much about Dong Son society and culture.

We will review these designs and identify the specific types of bronzes on which they appeared.

Sometimes referred to as a star, the sun was commonly used on Dong Son drums (including miniature drums) and on basins that were produced in the late Dong son period (4, 24). The suns were always placed in the centre of the face of the drums, where the drum was struck, and in the centre of the base of basins. There were generally two types of suns, distinguished by their rays: on Dong Son drums, the rays of the suns were relatively thick and often had fan-shaped patterns between them (long cong in Vietnamese). Beginning with Type 2 drums, the rays generally became needle-shaped and fewer in number (usually eight rays) (25). With few exceptions, the number of sun rays was an even number. In the case of the large Dong Son drums, there were usually twelve, fourteen, or sixteen rays (4, 26). Although there are different opinions as to the significance of the sun on the drums, we believe it simply reflects the sun’s importance to the agricultural life of the Dong Son people.

There were two types of houses, both on stilts, depicted on bronze drums: one shaped with its roof ends curved upward and the other with a round roof, which some suggest was a granary. Standing on the roofs of these houses were creatures such as chickens and peacocks, usually depicted in exaggerated size. It should be noted that only a small number of the largest Dong Son drums had house designs.

Most of the boats portrayed on Dong Son bronze wares were round-bottom and curved upwards at the two ends, similar to the roofs of the house mentioned above. These boats were seen mostly on the large and elaborate Dong Son drums and on storage jars. Boat scenes were usually depicted on the shoulder sections of the drums, and in the mid-area (27) or shoulder of the storage jars. It is interesting that there were no patterns of water or waves beneath these boats. Rather, sea birds were shown flying above the boats, or standing on them, to indicate a seascape. This is a very important point, as it suggests that these boats were built not only for river transport but also for sea travel. If so, such a capability must have enhanced the diffusion of the Dong Son culture from Vietnam to Southeast Asia and other Asian regions.

Another interesting use of the boat design can be found on round-bottom axe blades, which have been found at many Thanh Hoa province Dong Son sites. These blades took the shape of the curved boats mentioned above (28, 29).

Explanations for the meaning of boat designs on Dong Son bronzes vary greatly among scholars. Based on the type of clothing worn by the people on these boats and on the weapons they are carrying, some appear to be warships; other boats seem to be festival or ceremonial ves-
sels. One French researcher during the colonial period suggested that the scenes on the boats represented the “seeing off the dead” ceremony that was common among the Dayak people of Borneo.\textsuperscript{30} Considering the proximity of rivers to most of the Dong Son cultural sites discovered in Vietnam, boats would have been the primary means of transport in Dong Son society.

A pattern of flying crane-like birds on Dong Son bronzes was common, signifying the importance of this creature to the agricultural life of the Dong Son people. The sight of storks/egrets in their fields is still a sign of happiness to farmers in Vietnam. Most Type 1 (Dong Son) drums had this band of crane-like birds flying counter-clockwise on the face of the drum. These birds varied in shape and size (wing type, length of beak, etc.) according to the whim of the producer of the drum. Crane-like flying birds are also seen on some axe blades and on large bells.

People were portrayed in many ways on bronze wares. On the face of the largest Dong Son drums, decorative bands of ceremonial dancers were depicted in various types of dress (skirts with two flaps; loincloths). They can be seen carrying spears, axes, banners or musical instruments. Boat scenes on the drums included people dressed both in ceremonial and simple clothes. Many of these boat people are seen carrying weapons such as spears, crossbows, and axes. Others are clearly oarsmen directing the movement of the boat. On a few drums, we also can see what appears to be a warrior holding down a prisoner with the latter’s hands behind his back.

The scenes on the faces and shoulders of the large Dong Son drums also show men and women in pairs pounding rice, which is still a common practice among minority groups in Vietnam. In addition, there are scenes of several people sitting in stilt houses and beating in unison a series of bronze drums. We can assume that this coordinated arrangement of drum beating was organised for ceremonies or festivals.

Fish, deer, cattle, dogs, peacocks, chickens, crocodiles, and fox/weasel-type creatures were all depicted on Dong Son bronzes. Regarding deer, only two known drums, Ngoc Lu and Mieu Mon, had a decorative band of deer walking around the face of the drum. On the other hand, deer and dogs were often present in scenes on some types
Very large Dong Son bronze storage jar found in the northern Vietnam village of Dao Thinh, four pairs of mating couples on the lid, central band of Dong Son boat scenes with ceremonial/military crews, circa 500 BC. Photograph courtesy of the National Museum of Vietnamese History, Hanoi.
of the decorated axe blades. Crocodiles were common on the round-bottom type of axe blades, appearing as a pair facing each other at the neck of the blade.

The turtle, a common creature in Vietnam which is revered in two well-known Vietnamese legends that date to the 3rd century BC and the 15th century, was often used as a decoration on Dong Son bronze belts and belt buckles. These turtles were usually decorated with the geometric designs commonly found on Dong Son bronzes, such as the pattern of connecting concentric circles.

As mentioned above, Dong Son bronze producers also made human, animal and bird figurines to serve either utilitarian or ornamental functions. These figures were also affixed to other bronzes, in particular the bronze drums and large storage jars.

The artistic handles of knives in the form of standing men and women provide insights into the life of the Dong Son people. These human figures can be seen in their traditional dress (skirt or loincloth), wearing their hair in various styles (buns, braids), and wearing necklaces, bracelets, and oversize earrings. In some cases, they are seen carrying weapons. Some of the knives were very large and others were small, the latter probably made for women or children. The elaborate knives probably belonged to tribal leaders and their families, as the majority of Dong Son knives found to date have simple handles.

We should also mention the human figurines affixed to one very large storage jar (Dao Thinh jar on exhibit in the National History Museum). There are pairs of couples who are seen mating, suggesting a fertility scene common among ancient agrarian societies (30).

Some human figurines were made for artistic as well as utilitarian purposes, such as kneeling figures holding oil lamps or wearing oil lamp trays on their heads in the form of hats. To this day in Thanh Hoa province there is a dance ceremony with women wearing hats in the form of lit lamps. Other figures included the two people riding piggyback with one of them playing the cymbal, and another of a man with his two arms around two standing dogs. With the exception of the knife handles, however, human figurines were not common Dong Son bronze wares.

The animal figurine often seen on bronze drums is the frog, or as some have suggested, the toad. The frogs/toads, four of them standing in a counter-clockwise position, are arrayed as a decorative band near the outer rim on the face of many bronze drums. They first appeared on some of the “late” Dong Son drums (for example, the Huu Chung and Thon Bui drums). The designs on the frogs/toads themselves change as we move to the Type 2 and Type 3 drums, becoming less artistic and undecorated.

The toad/frog probably was a very important creature to the Dong Son people. The Vietnamese still believe these creatures make clicking sounds with the approach of rain. There is also a saying in Vietnamese, Con coc la cau Ong Troi (The toad is the nephew of God). Predicting rain would have been a valuable tool for the agricultural Dong Son society. Once again, we see the Dong Son people decorating their prized bronze possessions with respected symbols of their natural world.

Rarer animal figurines included the weasel/fox-like creature (chen/cao in Vietnamese). The delicate shape of this animal, including its stylistically upturned tail with a fish caught in its jaws, gives it a particularly life-like appearance. Note also the typical Dong Son treatment of concentric, connecting circles arrayed on the bodies of creatures and forming their eyes (31).

29 Bronze moulds in Vietnam, often using the “lost-wax” method, were only used once, which explains why no two Dong Son drums were identical in size, shape or decoration.


31 Tran Thi Lien, Mua Den Cua Cu Dan Nong Nghiep Dong Son, Co Vat Van Hoa Dong Son o Thanh Hoa, trang 147–148, So Van Hoa Thong Tin, Thanh Hoa, 2004.

**Conclusion**

The establishment of the Dong Son Bronze–early Iron Age culture in Vietnam was not a random historical event. It was the pinnacle of early human development in northern Vietnam. The bronzes produced during the Dong Son period were the artistic products of an evolutionary process that began during the Stone Age when pottery first appeared. As one Vietnamese author on the subject of the Dong Son bronze drums aptly wrote: “These drums did not just fall from heaven, nor were they imported from outside Vietnam. They were a part of the foundation of Dong Son art that included pottery and bronze wares. The bronze drum is the quintessence of an art form from a given historical period.”