

DEVELOPMENT OF ARCHAEOLOGY IN VIETNAM

BY HA VAN TAN

In Vietnam all archaeological researches before 1945 only involved French archaeologists. In 1945, when the Democratic Republic of Vietnam was founded, archaeological research became a focus of attention. But the war of resistance against French colonialism completely disrupted these efforts. Vietnamese archaeology, in fact, has only existed since 1954, when peace was restored in North Vietnam. From 1975, archaeological activity began to be conducted systematically on a nation-wide scale.

The most important institution in this field is the Vietnam Institute of Archaeology, affiliated to the National Centre for Social Sciences. Members of the Institute are active throughout the territory of Vietnam. The Institute of Social Sciences in Ho Chi Minh City, also belonging to the National Centre for Social Sciences, comprises a group of researchers in charge of archaeological sites southern Vietnam.

Archaeological researches are also conducted at a number of museums, particularly the National Museum of History in Hanoi. These museums are under the portfolio of the Ministry of Culture and Information.

Archaeology is taught at the faculty of history in the various universities, but only the University of Hanoi has a Department of Archaeology which is specialized in training archaeologists. Every year, from 6 to ten students-archaeologists graduate from the University. In Vietnam universities are affiliated to the Ministry of Education and Training.

In their activities, archaeologists at the Institute of Archaeology, the National Museum of History and the University of Hanoi usually cooperate in conducting excavations.

Artefacts found from excavations, once having been studied, are stored and preserved at the National Museum of History or in the various provincial museums. At the provincial museums, there are also some archaeologists who are in charge of

research and preservation of historical relics in their localities.

The Vietnam Institute of Archaeology now employs 45 archaeologists and 15 technicians specialized in photography, drawing and restoration. It has now 5 research departments: Department of Stone Age Studies, Department of Metal Age Studies, Department of Historical Archaeology, Department of Ancient Technology, Department of Ancient Environment and Man. It also possesses a number of laboratories, but at present they are still very poorly equipped. Many analyses of archaeological artefacts should be carried out at laboratories of the other scientific centres.

In the past, Vietnam had to send samples abroad for C14 dating but we have now have a radiocarbon laboratory at the Institute of Energy in Ho Chi Minh City.

In Vietnam underwater archaeology is still non-existent. But with a country having such a long sea coast and a good number of islands, it is an urgent task to build this branch of archaeology.

The Institute of Archaeology publishes the quarterly "Khao co hoc" (Archaeology) in Vietnamese with summaries in English. The National Museum of History also occasionally issues a review entitled "Thong bao khoa hoc Vien Bao tang Lich su Viet Nam" (Scientific Communication of the National Museum of History).

Archaeologists throughout Vietnam get together at an archaeological conference held annually in

September at the Institute of Archaeology. The papers presented at the conference, usually up to a hundred in number, are made public in a proceedings volume entitled "Nhunh phat hien moi ve khao co hoc" (New Discoveries in Archaeology). So far 18 such volumes have been published.

Since 1985, many foreign archaeologists have collaborated with their Vietnamese colleagues in excavating archaeological sites in Vietnam. A group of American paleontologists and archaeologists have joined the Vietnam Institute of Archaeology in excavating Lang Trang Cave in Thanh Hoa Province.

Japanese archaeologists from the University of Tokyo and Sophia University have also joined us in excavating Lang Vac, a site of the Dong Son Culture in Nghe An Province. Together with Australian Archaeologists, we have excavated some medieval sites of ceramics in Hai Hung Province.

In February and March 1993, a joint team of Vietnamese and British excavated a site in Tra Kieu, the ancient capital of the Champa Kingdom, now situated in Quang Nam Da Nang Province. Another group of Japanese archaeologists, including Professors G. Hasebe and Y. Aoyagi, are joining us in excavating Cham ceramic kilns in Binh Dinh Province.

NEW DISCOVERIES AND RESEARCHES

The earliest traces of prehistoric man found so far in Vietnam belong to

Homo erectus. Teeth of *Homo erectus* have been discovered in caves in Lang Son and Nghe An Provinces, from Middle Pleistocene deposits.

Recently, the Lang Trang Caves in Thanh Hoa Provinces were excavated by the joint Vietnamese-American team and yielded a Pleistocene fauna with hominid dental remains. Electron spin resonance procedures were employed for dating the stratigraphic levels of four caves, the chronology ranging from 480,000+/-40,000 years BP to 146,000+/-2000 years BP. Within the rich faunal deposits, the hominid specimens (two molars, one premolar, one canine and one incisor) are likely attributable to *Homo cf. erectus* based more on temporal context than on morphological criteria.

As for stone tools used by *Homo erectus*, none have been found in those caves where the teeth come. The handaxes, choppers and chopping-tools discovered at Mount Do in Thanh Hoa Province and at Xuan Loc in Dong Nai Province are regarded by some archaeologists as tools used by Early Paleolithic man. Many other researchers, however, are still doubtful because there is no way to date these artefacts with any degree of accuracy.

Our picture of the Late Pleistocene has been changed radically by the discovery of the Son Vi Culture in 1968. So far traces of this culture have been found in more than 120 sites located an ancient alluvial terraces and in caves, as far up north as Lao Cai and Ha Giang Provinces and far down south as Nghe An

Province.

Recently, a wide open site of the Son Vi Culture has been investigated by the joint Vietnamese-Japanese archaeological team in Lang Vac Village, Nghe An Province, under a Dongsonian site. The Son Vi Culture is characterized by end-choppers and side-choppers (or scrapers) made from waterworn quartzite pebbles. Sumatraliths are absent from the Son Vi sites. The Son Vi Culture dates between 23,000 to 13,000 years BP.

After the excavations at Mieng Ho Cave in 1972 and the Nguom rockshelter in 1981, a flake industry was known to our archaeologists. Most of the artifacts are amorphous flakes with marginal retouch. This flake industry is estimated to be from 30,000 to 23,000 years BP, existed before the Son Vi Culture. Thus, in Vietnam, the flake industry of the Late Pleistocene has been replaced by the core pebble industry. Researchers have tried to explain this by suggesting a change in the ecological environment from a dry, cold climate to a hot, humid one. Sparse subtropical forests were narrowing down while dense tropical rain forests were spreading, hence the replacement of one tool-kit by another, which is proof of the adaptive behaviour of prehistoric man.

Vietnamese archaeologists have good reasons to think that the Hoabinhian has its origins in the Son Vi Culture. Now, we have collected firm evidence to show that the Hoabinhian in Vietnam extended back earlier than the Pleistocene-Holocene boundary. The Xom Trai

Cave contains classic Hoabinhian artefacts, including sumatraliths, short axes and edge-ground tools, but twenty C14 dates from this cave ranged between 17,000 and 18,000 years BP.

Recently, the joint Vietnamese-Bulgarian excavation at the Dieu rockshelter in Ba Thuoc District, Thanh Hoa Province has entered the final phase. Radiocarbon datings show that human beings already existed in this region from 8,000 to 25,000 years ago. With many stone tools and large quantities of animal bones, several aspects of the natural and cultural evolution from Pleistocene to Holocene and from Paleolithic to Neolithic Ages have been observed and identified.

In Vietnam we can see the law of unequal development in prehistoric culture. In this area, the Hoabinhian began but in another, the Sonvian not yet came to an end. Similarly, the Bac Son Culture makes its appearance in the Lang Son area when the Hoabinhian continued its existence in other sites.

The Institute of Archaeology published a book "The Hoa Binh Culture in Vietnam" in 1989.

In Vietnam alone, archaeologists so far have noted at least four lines for the development of post-Hoabinhian culture:

1. The Da But Culture in Thanh Hoa Province. This culture is represented by round-bottomed pottery. At the beginning, axes were ground on the edge only. Later, axes had an oval section and were entirely polished. In

1990, the Lang Cong site, Thanh Hoa Province, was excavated and adds more light to our knowledge of this culture.

2. The Quynh Van Culture in Nghe An and Ha Tinh Provinces. Unlike Da But tools, stone tools used in the Quynh Van Culture were flaked not polished. Quynh Van pottery was of the pointed bottom type.

3. The Cai Beo site on Cat Ba Island, Hai Phong. The lower layer consisted of coarse pottery, flaked stone tools and edged axes. The upper layer contained finer pottery and entirely polished axes and adzes.

4. The Bau Du site on a sand dune in Quang Nam-Da Nang Province contains a lithic industry very similar to the Hoa Binh, with sumatraliths and short axes. On the basis of the late dates of this site (5036-60 BP and 4510-50 BP), we considered Bau Du to be an epi-Hoabinhian site.

The splitting of the Hoabinhian into small post-Hoabinhian cultures may be explained by local adaptations, sedentism and/or agriculture.

In the Late Neolithic, the cultural mosaic became all the more varied with the addition of new fragments and new colours. There was the Ha Long Culture on the northeastern coast characterized by shouldered and stepped adzes. The area of central Vietnam was represented by the Bau Tro Culture known for its shouldered axes. In the valley of the Dong Nai River, the main stone tools were broad hoes and reaping knives. In recent years, the Late Neolithic period in mountainous areas has

received intensive study. The Ha Giang Culture in Ha Giang Province identified by our archaeologists in 1990 shows many similarities with some neolithic sites in south-eastern Yunnan (China). What is most striking is the new discoveries in the Central Highlands. Along Dak Ke spring in Dak R'lap District, Darlak Province, a stone axe workshop site was found in 1991. Bien Ho, a rich neolithic site, in Gia Lai Province was investigated in 1992.

During the past thirty years, Vietnamese archaeologists have devoted a considerable amount of their effort towards the study of the Metal Age. Our archaeologists have discovered the pre-Dong Son Bronze Age cultures in Northern Vietnam. We have reconstructed the process of the cultural evolution over two thousand years from pre-Dong Son. Today, we think that the mystery of the origins of the Dong Son Culture can be solved. In our opinion, the Dong Son Culture directly evolved from pre-Dong Son cultures. It is certain that the process was an unbroken, continuous and indigenous one, although possible outside influence cannot be discounted.

The Bronze Age cultures in northern Vietnam finally culminated in the Dong Son, a splendid culture widely distributed, covering over half of Vietnam's current territory, as can be seen from Table 1.

Recently, the joint Vietnamese-Japanese excavation at the Lang Vac site, Nghia Dan District, Nghe An Province, shed more light on the Dong Son Culture. On an acreage of 156 square metres, 93 burials of

various types have been found: stone-covered, pottery-covered, and jar burials. On this site, we also found artefacts of the famous Dong Son Culture, including daggers, situlae, arm and leg rings attached with tintinnabulas. One of the most remarkable finds is a bronze pick axe bearing both Central Asian characteristics and a Dongsonian decoration pattern.

In 1991-1992, many boat coffins with bronze artefacts have been discovered at Uong Bi Town, Quang Ninh Province. These coffins give further evidence to the expansion of the Dong Son Culture. After the book "Dong Son Drums in Vietnam" was published (Tokyo, 1990), many drums were also found in different provinces.

The most important achievement of archaeology in Vietnam recently is the discovery of sites belonging to the earlier phases of the Metal Age within the territory of the Sa Huynh Culture. These sites are considered by some archaeologists to belong to the Early Sa Huynh Culture or the Sa Huynh Culture of the Bronze Age, whereas some other archaeologists define them only as of the pre-Sa Huynh Culture. In the eyes of these scholars, the Sa Huynh Culture belongs to the Iron Age only.

Despite these different opinions, all Vietnamese archaeologists are of the same view that the Iron Age Sa Huynh Culture has roots in the culture represented by these earlier dated sites (such as the Long Thanh site (Quang Ngai Province) with two C14 dates: 3370 +/- 40 BP and 2875 +/- 60 BP). So far we are able to

REGION AGE	THE RED RIVER VALLEY	THE MA RIVER VALLEY	THE LAM RIVER VALLEY
EARLY BRONZE AGE	THE PHUNG NGUYEN PHASE	THE CON CHAN TIEN PHASE	THE DEN DOI PHASE
MIDDLE BRONZE AGE	THE DONG DAU PHASE	THE BAI MAN PHASE	?
LATE BRONZE AGE	THE GO MUN PHASE	THE QUY CHU PHASE	THE RU TRAN PHASE
EARLY IRON AGE	THE DONG SON CULTURE		

TABLE 1

REGION AGE	PHU YEN-THUAN HAI	QUANG NGAI-BINH DINH	QUANG NAM-DA NANG
EARLY BRONZE AGE	XOM CON, HON DO	LONG THANH	BAU TRAM (LOWER LAYER)
LATE BRONZE AGE	?	BINH CHAU	BAU TRAM (LOWER LAYER)
IRON AGE	CLASSIC SA HUYNH CULTURE (JAR BURIALS AND SETTLEMENT OF IRON AGE)		

TABLE 2

give a sketch about the successive phase of the Sa Huynh in *lato sensu* in the Metal Age, as shown in Table 2.

In 1990-1992, some Sa Huynh sites with jar burials were excavated in Thua Thien, Hue Province. A book on the Sa Huynh Culture has been published in 1991.

In South Vietnam, since 1975, Vietnamese archaeologists have investigated and excavated many Metal Age sites in the Dong Nai river valley. The excavations of Doc Chua site in Song Be Province have contributed greatly to the study of the Metal Age in this region. Nearly 100 moulds and 100 Bronze artefacts have been found within an area of 432 m². Bronze axes have similar shape to the ones in Non Nok Tha (Thailand). The culture in Doc Chua also developed through different stages. It has two C14 dates: 3145 +/- 130 BP and 2495 +/- 50 BP.

In 1990, for the first time, human skeletons, stone and bronze axes and stone and ivory beads were found at the site of Rach Rung in the Mekong delta. Rach Rung has two C14 dates: 2800 +/- 45 BP and 2780 +/- 40 BP.

Recently, research on historical archaeology also counts some new findings.

In 1991, the excavation at Hoa Lu, the royal city of the Dinh Dynasty in the 10th century, unearthed a large architectural structure in brick. This structure is laid on a foundation made of several layers of large and flat lumbers. A remaining portion of the citadel rampart is also built on a wooden foundation.

At Thang Binh, Thanh Hoa Province, a graveyard with dugout wooden coffins have ceramics which bear the brown decorative patterns of the Tran Dynasty (13th-14th centuries). Some ceramic kilns of the Le Dynasty (15th-18th centuries) have been excavated in Hai Hung Province.

More relics of the Champa Culture were found recently in Central Vietnam. In Thuan Hai Province, we find two new groups of stupa-temple structures in the dense jungles: the Ba Chan Re and Lang Go. Champa relics and inscriptions are also found in Ea Knuech Village, Darlak Province in the Central Highlands. A Buddha statue with sanskrit inscription is found in a

Champa site in Gia Lai Province. In particular, the excavations of a kiln site at Go Sanh, Binh Dinh Province gave specimens of Cham ceramics. A significant number of bowls, plates, cups, tiles and architectural decorative pieces were probably made in the 14th century.

The Oc Eo Culture, supported by new discoveries, was evidently spread over the Mekong Delta: statues of Vishnu, terracotta articles and gold pieces found in Cuu Long Province, a stupa-styled structure in Tay Ninh Province, as well as various statues of gods, linga and yoni. Along both sides of Dong Nai River, in Lam Dong Province, 13 sites were investigated. They include brick or stone temples, shrines and statues built on hilltops.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to gratefully acknowledge the invaluable support and encouragement I have received from the Seameo Regional Centre for Archaeology and Fine Arts and Japan Cultural Centre in Bangkok and from Prof. M.C. Subhadradis Diskul and Mr. Pisit Charoenwongsa.