

# Prehistoric Pottery in Viet Nam And its Relationships with Southeast Asia

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HA VAN TAN

## EARLY PREHISTORIC POTTERY IN VIET NAM

ARCHAEOLOGISTS OFTEN FIND potsherds in the upper Hoabinhian levels in caves in Viet Nam. Among them occur incised and cord-marked sherds which are considered to belong to later periods, and which have been disturbed downwards into the Hoabinhian cultural layers. Other sherds are very coarse and thick, of a dark-grey color and tempered with sand and laterite. These were made by hand without wheel-turning, and shaped by a paddle wrapped with vine or bark, not twisted cord. They are, therefore, not true cord-marked pottery. Some scholars have suggested cord-marked pottery to be the earliest type in Southeast Asia, dating from the Hoabinhian, but we now know that the genuine cord-marked pottery with imprints of two- or three-strand twisted cords only appeared later.

The coarse vine or bark-impressed pottery found in Hoabinhian caves in Viet Nam bears a strong resemblance to pottery discovered in sites of the Da But culture. Sites of this culture have to date been discovered only in Thanh Hoa Province and are shell middens or open-air sites strewn densely with pottery. The Da But culture developed from an early phase represented by the site of Da But itself, excavated by the French archaeologist Patte in 1923, to a late one represented by the site of Go Trung excavated in 1977 by Vietnamese archaeologists. The Da But site has a radiocarbon date of  $6095 \pm 60$  B.P. (Bln 1407), and Go Trung has a radiocarbon date of  $4790 \pm 50$  B.P. (Bln 2090). At Da But there occur pebble edge-ground axes like those of the Bacsonian, while the stone axes at Go Trung are completely polished. The most common type is the "round axe" with an ellipsoid cross-section (type 2G of Duff, Walzenbeil of Heine-Geldern), without shoulder or stepped grip.

While stone tools developed considerably between the early and late phases of the Da But culture, the pottery of both phases remained almost the same, that is, handmade, low temperature fired, and of a coarse texture tempered with sand grains of various sizes. All vessels are round-bottom pots and bowls with straight or slightly flaring rims, without ring feet. Decoration includes only basket-like impression made by a wrapped paddle,

Ha Van Tan is associated with the Department of Archaeology, University of Ha Noi, Viet Nam.

and there is no cord-marking. Similar pottery has also been discovered at the Cai Beo site in Hai Phong Province, dated to  $5646 \pm 60$  B.P. (ZK 328.0).

Another type of early prehistoric pottery occurs in the Quynh Van culture of Nghe Tinh Province, central Viet Nam. The Quynh Van eponymous site has radiocarbon dates of  $4785 \pm 75$  B.P. (Bln 914/I) and  $4730 \pm 75$  B.P. (Bln 914/II). All the stone artifacts of the Quynh Van culture are flaked and no polishing occurs. The pottery comprises pointed-bottom vessels fashioned by the coiling method, with combed decoration on both outer and inner walls. To date, pointed-bottom vessels have not been found in other sites in Viet Nam.

The early prehistoric pottery of Viet Nam can therefore be categorized into two complexes: that of Quynh Van with its pointed-bottomed vessels and combed patterns, and that of Da But with its round-bottomed vessels with patterns from basketry-wrapped paddles.

### LATE PREHISTORIC POTTERY IN VIET NAM

The period from the end of the third millennium to the middle of the first millennium B.C. contains the increasingly sophisticated pottery of the pre-Dongsonian cultures of northern Viet Nam and the pre-Sa Huynh cultures of southern Viet Nam. Wheel-made pottery made its appearance during this period, although the use of the paddle and anvil remained important in manufacture. Vessel surfaces are usually smooth, often polished, and red slipping is common. Cord-marking is present in all cultures and forms a fairly high percentage of sherdage. Complex incised decoration also developed with rich ornamental designs, and it is on the basis of incised decoration that Vietnamese archaeologists distinguish the different cultures and phases one from another.

Best known is the pottery from the sequence of cultural developments in the Red River Valley. Vietnamese archaeologists here discern three pre-Dongsonian cultures: Phung Nguyen, Dong Dau, and Go Mun.

The *Phung Nguyen culture* dates from the end of the third millennium to the middle of the second millennium B.C. Bronze artifacts make an appearance but remain rare, and polished stone tools continue in widespread use. The pottery is distinguished by its variety, elegance of form, and the richness of the decorative motifs. Many vessels have a high ring foot, made separately and added to the upper vessel during manufacture (Fig. 1). The most representative decoration on Phung Nguyen pottery consists of patterns of regular dots impressed with a comb or a roulette, flanked by incised lines (Fig. 2).

The *Dong Dau culture*, subsequent to Phung Nguyen, develops from the fifteenth to the eleventh centuries B.C. Bronze artifacts now develop vigorously, and in 1983 at Thanh Den, a Dong Dau site in Hanoi, we excavated 37 molds and many crucibles within 50 m<sup>2</sup> alone. Dong Dau pottery differs little from Phung Nguyen in form, but the decorative style changed to parallel lines drawn by a 4- or 5-toothed comb (Fig. 3). Many vessels also carry decoration on the insides of their rims.

The *Go Mun culture* succeeded the Dong Dau, and continued into the early first millennium B.C. Bronze artifacts became very widespread and many types bear a close resemblance to the later Dongsonian bronzes. Go Mun pottery was fired to a higher temperature than Dong Dau, and carinated forms now appear. Rims are often broad and out-turned, with decoration on the insides. The comb-incised decoration of the Dong Dau culture is now replaced by simple incised patterns, mainly built up of short lines and small circles, and including rectangular meanders, some of which occur in relief (Fig. 4).

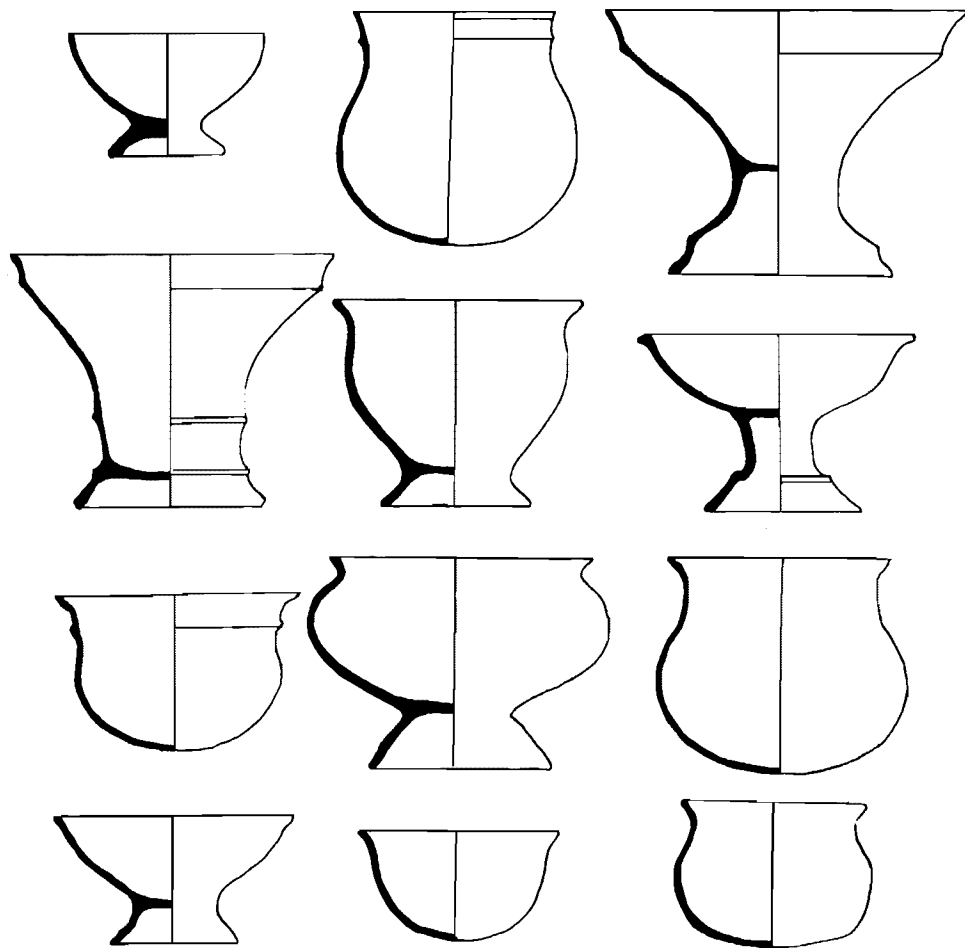


Fig. 1. Vessel forms of the Phung Nguyen culture (not to scale).

The pottery of the three above-mentioned cultures, despite the use of different decorative styles, has features that suggest a continuity of cultural development in the Red River Valley.

In the Ma River Valley in Thanh Hoa Province Vietnamese archaeologists also recognize three pre-Dongsonian periods of cultural development: *Con Chan Tien*, *Dong Khoi* (or *Bai Man*) and *Quy Chu*. *Con Chan Tien* pottery resembles its Phung Nguyen counterpart in the Red River Valley. Both are decorated by patterns of dots between incised lines or curves, and only differ from each other in terms of ornamental motifs. *Dong Khoi* pottery consists mainly of everted-rimmed and round-bottomed vessels, some with a ring foot (mostly 2-3 cm high). Check-stamped patterns from carved paddles account for up to 90 percent of decorated sherdage, and about 3 percent are cord-marked. Incised patterns, less complex than in the preceding period, consist mainly of parallel lines created by a 3- or 4-toothed comb. The *Quy Chu* pottery is well-fired, and carinated shapes appear. Incised patterns often adorn shoulders and the inner sides of rims.

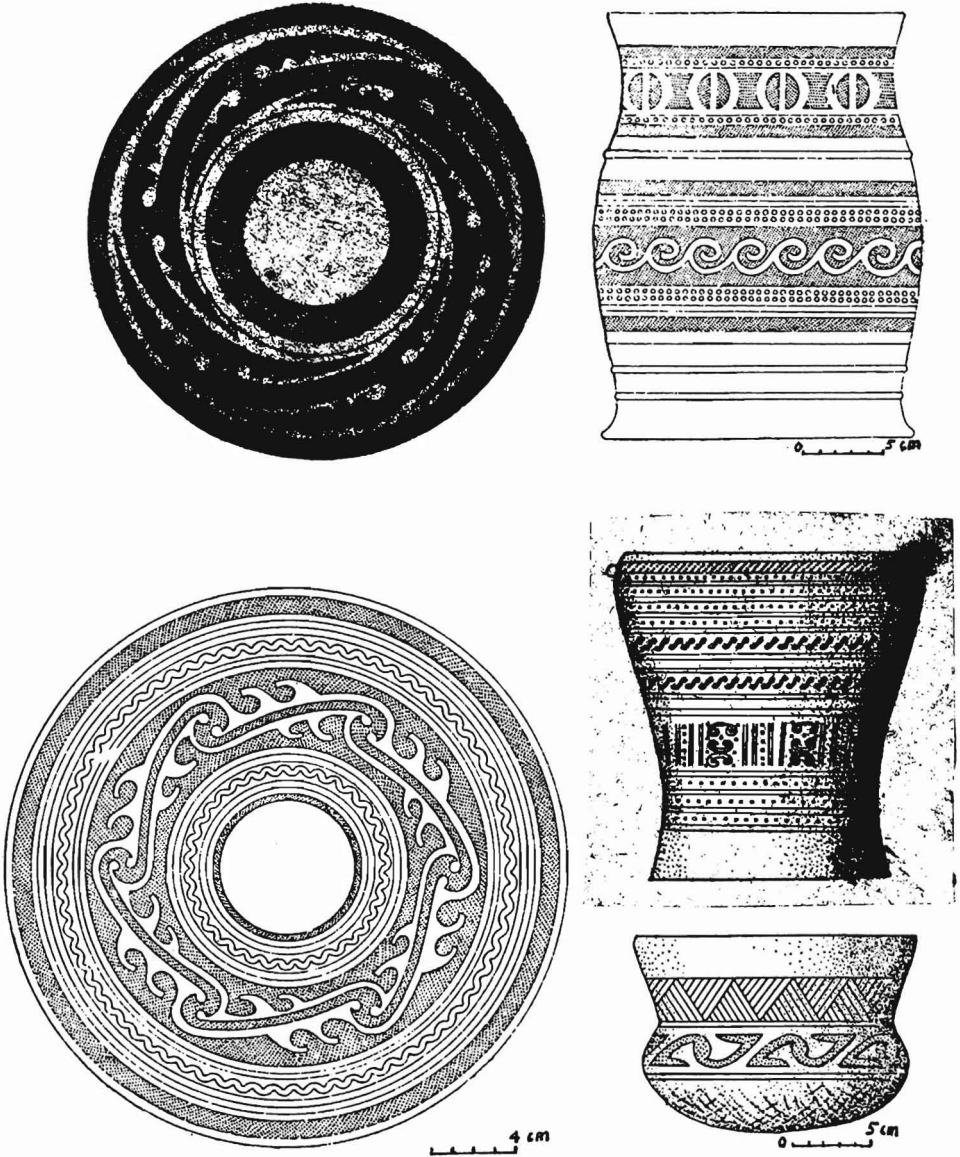


Fig. 2. Incised pottery of the Phung Nguyen culture.

As far as dates are concerned, Con Chan Tien corresponds to Phung Nguyen in the Red River Valley, Dong Khoi to Dong Dau, and Quy Chu to Go Mun. On the whole, pottery in the Ma Valley has decoration much less variegated than that of the Red River Valley.

In the coastal areas of Thanh Hoa Province there occurs another noteworthy pottery complex, the *Hoa Loc culture*, which corresponds in date to Phung Nguyen in the Red River Valley. Vestiges of bronze have been found at sites of the Hoa Loc culture, but polished stone tools were still in widespread use. Hoa Loc pottery (Fig. 5) is quite remark-

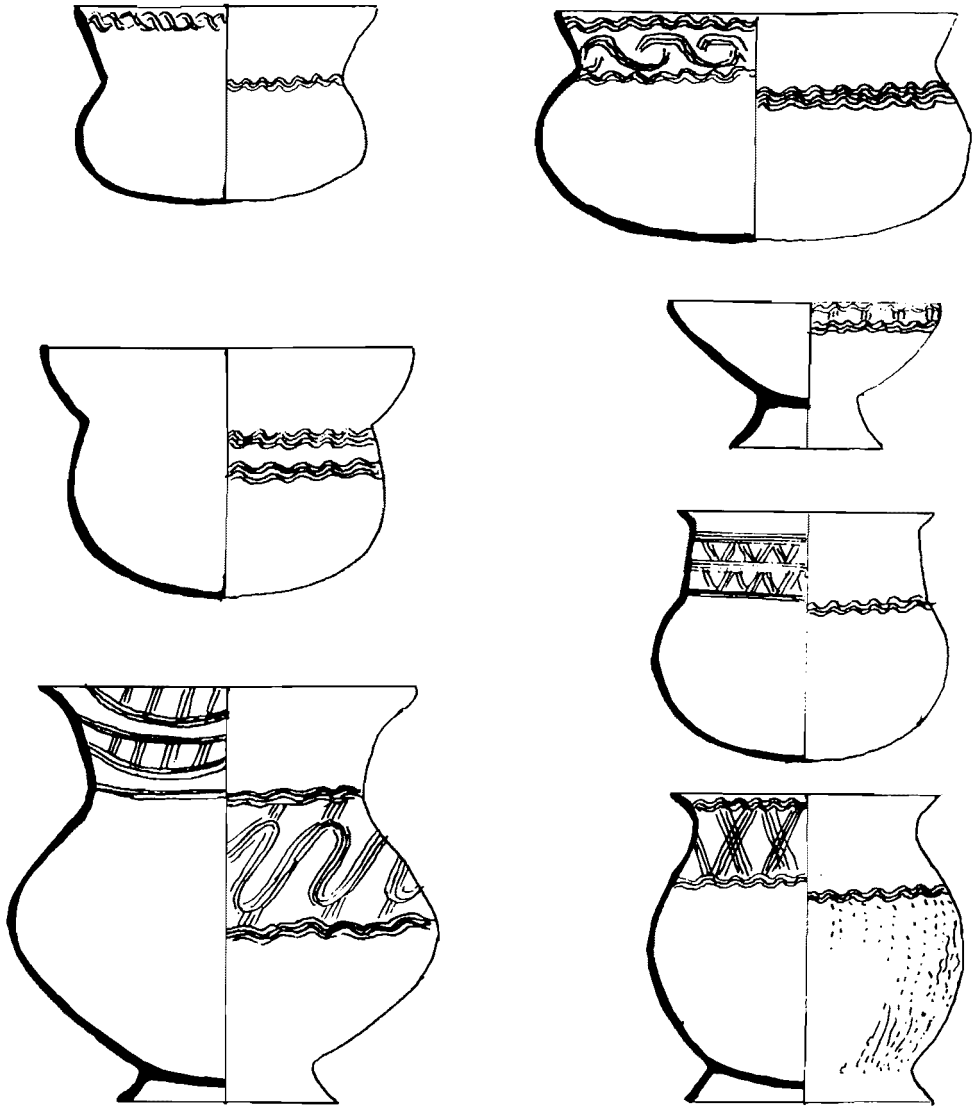


Fig. 3. Pottery of the Dong Dau culture (not to scale).

able for its variety of forms, many vessels having quadrangular or octagonal rims of types not found in other cultures in Viet Nam. Decorative patterns include designs created by incised curves and impressions of the edges of *Arca* or *Cardium* shells. A few ring feet also have triangular cutouts. In addition, many seals and a roller of baked clay are known from Hoa Loc sites.

In the Lam River Valley the *Bau Tro* culture (Thach Lac type) succeeded the Quynh Van. The pointed-bottomed pottery with combed decoration was replaced by cord-marked, round-bottomed vessels. Incised decoration appears in a late phase of the *Bau Tro* culture, and in Nghe Tinh Province the sherds from the Den Soi site contain much

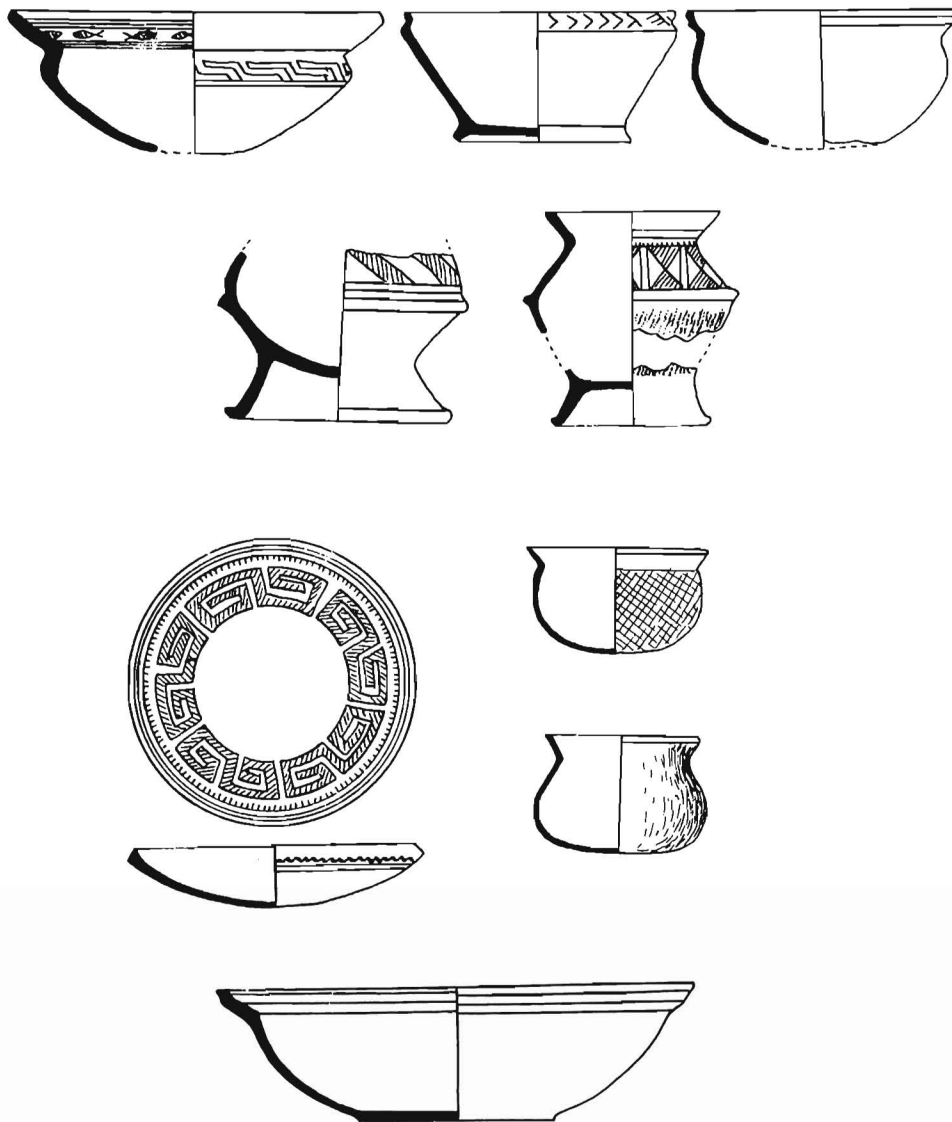


Fig. 4. Pottery of the Go Mun culture (not to scale).

incised decoration with fine and original designs, similar to that of the Phung Nguyen style. Den Soi is believed to be approximately contemporary with Phung Nguyen.

The site of Ru Tran in Nghe Tinh Province may also represent a pre-Dongsonian period in the Lam Valley. Many bronze artifacts and crucibles have been found at this site, and Ru Tran pottery is varied in form, with many carinated vessels with everted rims and ring feet. The decorative patterns on them consist mostly of cord marks, but a number of carinated pots bear small decorative dots on their shoulders. Ru Tran is believed to be contemporary with the Go Mun culture.

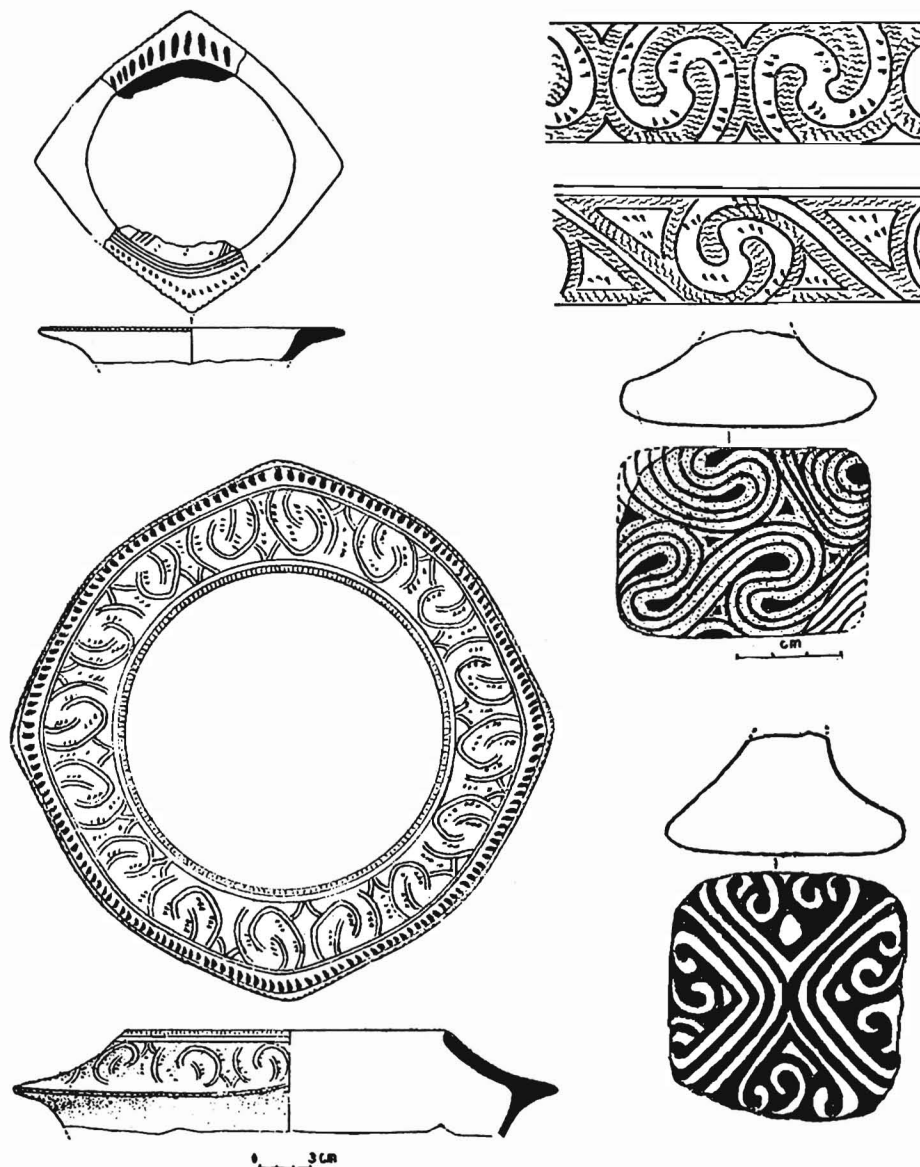


Fig. 5. Incised pottery and seals of the Hoa Loc culture.

In the regions discussed so far, from the Red to the Lam river valleys, all the local cultures eventually developed into the *Dong Son culture*. This spread over an area much larger than that of any previous culture and Vietnamese archaeologists believe that it had multiple regional sources. For instance, while *Dong Son* bronzes are much the same in different regions of northern Viet Nam, the regional characters of the pottery are fairly marked. On the whole, *Dongsonian* pottery has a high firing temperature and is varied in form, but decorative patterns are much reduced in comparison with preceding periods,

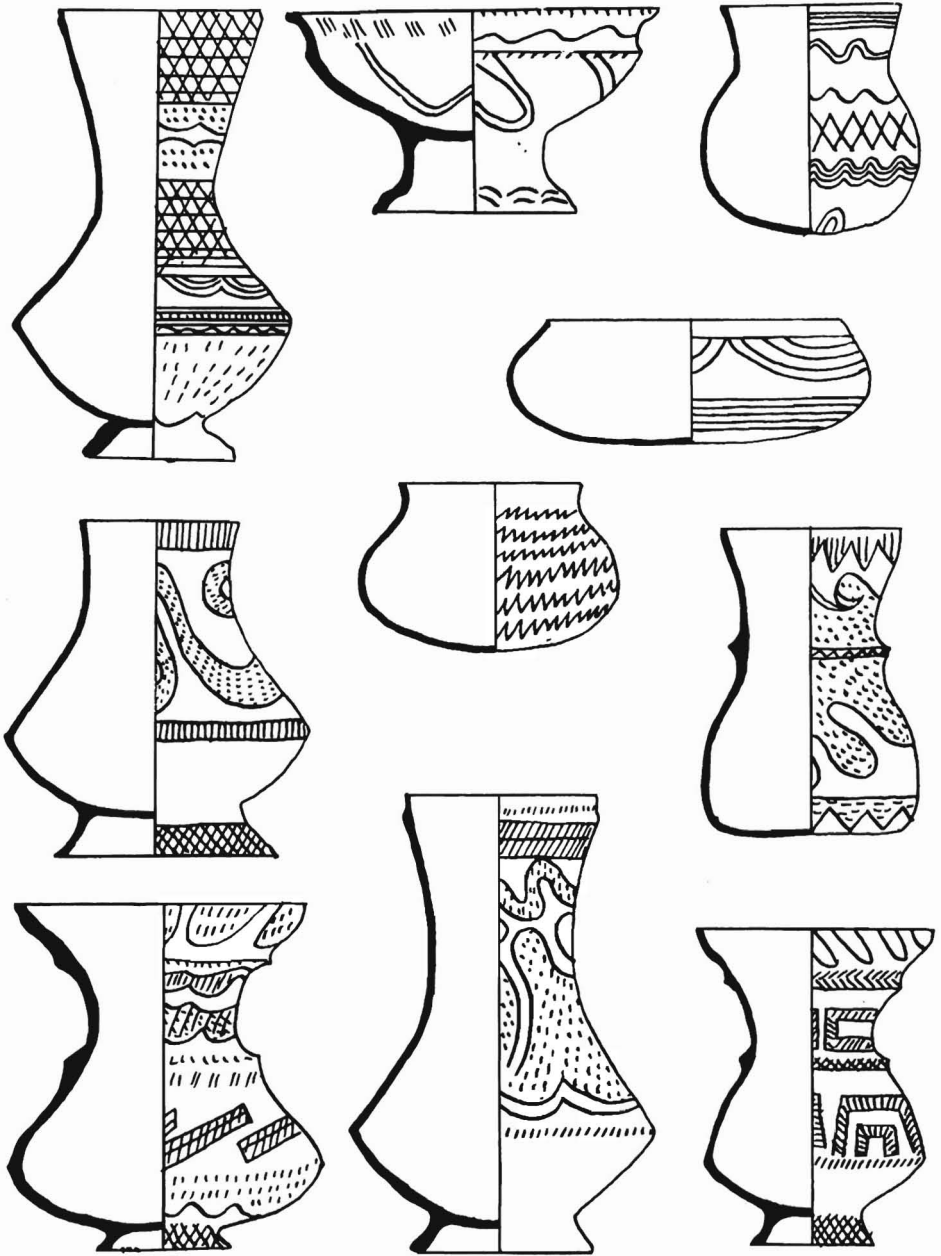


Fig. 6. Pottery from Long Thanh (not to scale).

and consist mainly of impressions from cord-wrapped or carved paddles. Incised decoration is virtually absent.

While the Dongsonian culture was developing in northern Viet Nam the *Sa Huynh culture* was developing in the south, from Binh Tri Thien Province to the Dong Nai River Valley. To date, Vietnamese archaeologists have discovered a number of pottery complexes of pre-Sa Huynh date. One of these is from Long Thanh in Nghia Binh Province,



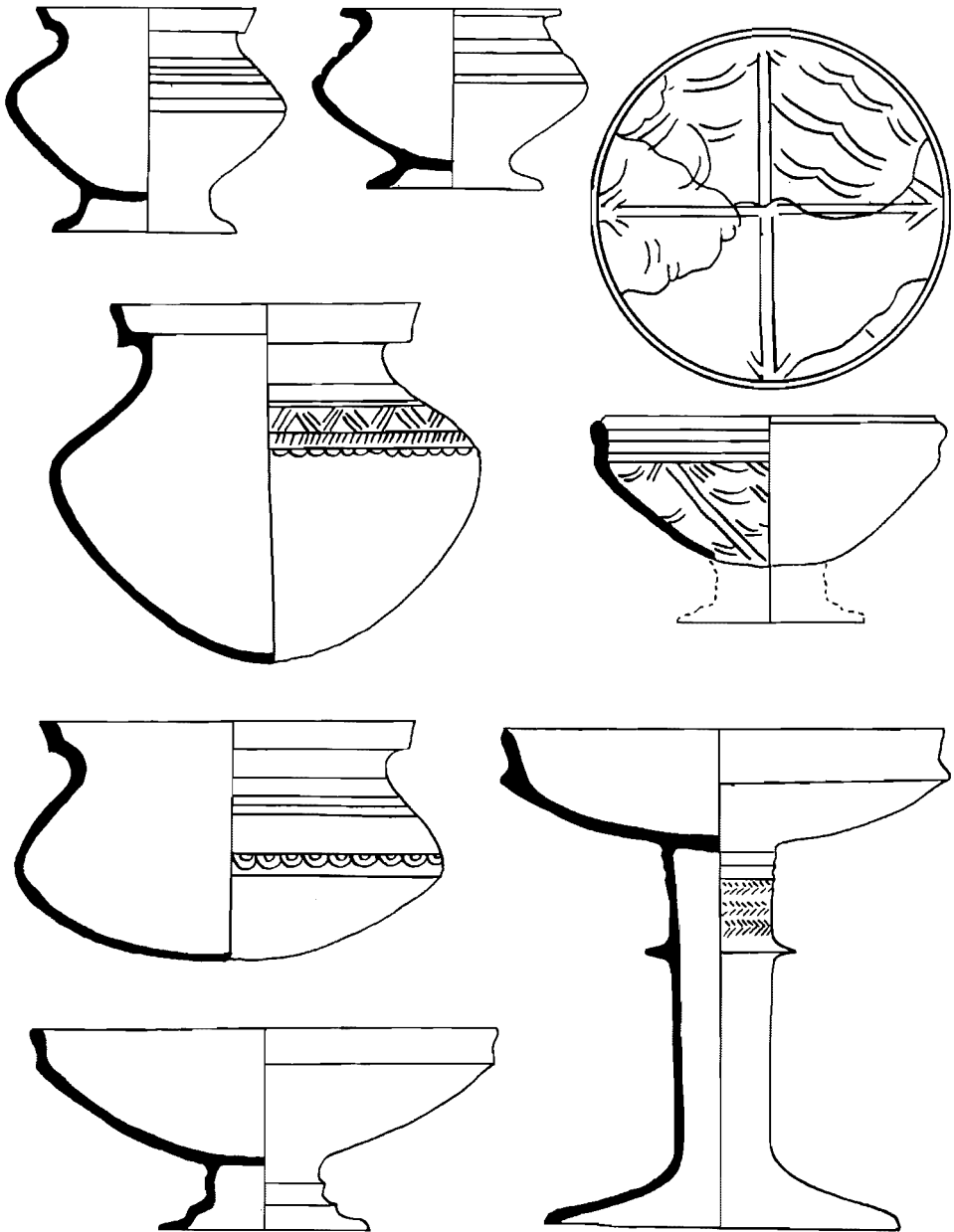


Fig. 7. Pottery from Binh Chau (not to scale).

a site which has yielded pre-Sa Huynh habitation materials and jar burials in association with two radiocarbon dates of  $3370 \pm 40$  B.P. (Bln 1972) and  $2875 \pm 60$  B.P. (Bln 2094). The pottery vessels placed in the Long Thanh burial jars are very well finished and finely decorated, and the most typical forms are flower-vase shaped, low-bellied, high-necked and ring-footed pots decorated with curvilinear scrolls and wave-like designs created by punctuation between curved incised lines (Fig. 6).

Binh Chau in Nghia Binh Province is also believed to be of pre-Sa Huynh date. This site has tombs but no jar burials, and bronze artifacts such as axes and arrowheads have been found together with molds and crucibles. The most common pottery vessels (Fig. 7) are everted-rimmed, round-bottomed and carinated pots, and ring-footed globular bowls. Incised and impressed punctate decoration is fairly common, and some Binh Chau pottery is also painted in red and black, with occasional yellow and white on ring feet and rims. White generally occurs in groups of parallel lines on a red background. In the inside bases of some bowls there are designs painted in black. The painting is also combined with cord-marking, impression, and incision, as in the later Sa Huynh culture.

It is believed that Binh Chau is older than Sa Huynh and younger than Long Thanh. Many archaeologists accept a southern Vietnamese sequence of development from Long Thanh through Binh Chau to Sa Huynh.

In the Dong Nai River Valley, before the appearance of jar burials of the Sa Huynh culture, there existed an entity referred to by some Vietnamese archaeologists as the *Dong Nai culture*. The early phase of this culture corresponds to the *Phuocanien* of Henri Fontaine, and has varied incised pottery. In a later phase when molds and bronze artifacts began to appear, as at the Doc Chua site, pottery became less decorated.

#### RELATIONSHIPS WITH SOUTHEAST ASIA, AND THE PROBLEM OF THE SA HUYNH-KALANAY POTTERY TRADITION

The continuous ceramic development from early to late prehistory in Viet Nam is conspicuous throughout the country. For instance, it is apparent in the Quynh Van and Bau Tro cultures (Ha Van Tan 1980:122), as also in the Cat Beo site in Quang Ninh Province (Ha Van Tan 1976:163-164). In the Red River Valley there was continuous development from Phung Nguyen through the Dong Dau and Go Mun periods to Dong Son. Likewise, in the Ma River Valley, pottery developed continuously from Con Chan Tien to Dong Son, through the intervening Dong Khoi and Quy Chu cultures. In the south, the development from Long Thanh through Binh Chau to Sa Huynh was also continuous.

However, in delineating such lines of local cultural development we should not overlook reciprocal influences between the different regions of Viet Nam, as well as cultural intercourse between Viet Nam and the rest of Southeast Asia.

Late prehistoric pottery in Viet Nam bears many features akin to those of other pottery complexes in Mainland and Island Southeast Asia. For instance, the decorative style peculiar to the Phung Nguyen pottery (small regular punctations impressed by combs or roulettes within incised lines) also occurs at the site of Gua Cha in West Malaysia (Sievek- ing 1954:Fig. 9, 2) and at Samrong Sen in Kampuchea (Mourer 1977:Pl. 1). A number of vessels from Non Nok Tha in Thailand are also close to the Phung Nguyen pottery in decorative style and motif (Solheim 1970a:Pl. 1; Solheim 1970b:Pl. Id). The patterns which occur in other pottery complexes in Viet Nam, such as Go Mun, Hoa Loc, and early Dong Nai, are also paralleled in other Southeast Asian sites including Samrong Sen, Mlu Prei and Laang Spean in Kampuchea (Lévy 1943; Mourer 1977), Kalumpang in Sulawesi (Heekeren 1972:Pl. 102), and Tres Reyes and Batungan in the Philippines (Solheim 1959, 1968). In terms of vessel shape there are also similarities between Vietnamese late prehistoric wares and other pottery complexes in Southeast Asia (Bayard 1977; Peacock 1959; Solheim 1964).

In studying the prehistoric pottery of Southeast Asia, Solheim has advanced the concept of a *Sa Huynh-Kalanay Pottery Tradition* (Solheim 1967a, 1967b). According to the

characteristics of this tradition as defined by Solheim (1967a:16–17), we may consider all the late prehistoric pottery complexes in Viet Nam to belong to it. Impressed pottery does exist in many pottery complexes in Viet Nam, especially with square-impressed patterns, but it never occurs alone. Therefore, there is no prehistoric pottery complex in Viet Nam which belongs to what Solheim (1967a:20) has called the Bau-Malay Pottery Tradition.

In many of his writings, Solheim has related the Sa Huynh–Kalanay pottery tradition to the Austronesian-speaking peoples referred to by him as Nusantao (Solheim 1975, 1976a, b). He further believes that the place where early Sa Huynh–Kalanay pottery made its first appearance corresponds to the homeland of the Austronesians.

Recently, however, Solheim has modified slightly his concept of the Sa Huynh–Kalanay Pottery Tradition. He now regards a pottery tradition as a set of pottery forms and decorations, distinct from any other sets of forms or decorations, that continues through time for many generations. Nothing in this definition says anything about the ethnolinguistic background of the makers and uses of a pottery tradition, and although Solheim believes that probably most people who made and used Sa Huynh–Kalanay pottery were Nusantao, he accepts that the correlation need not necessarily have been one-to-one (Solheim 1981:49). Such a concept is, I believe, more easily acceptable.

Obviously in Viet Nam it is impossible to attribute all prehistoric pottery complexes to the Austronesian-speaking peoples. To my mind, only the Sa Huynh culture can be attributed to an Austronesian-speaking group, namely the Proto-Chams. Furthermore, Sa Huynh pottery still retained many decorative characteristics found in older pottery complexes such as Long Thanh and Binh Chau.

In northern Viet Nam, the pottery of the Dong Son culture was not as richly decorated as that of the pre-Dongsonian cultures. This circumstance also arrested Solheim's attention. At the site of Dong Son, he wrote, the pottery is not of the Sa Huynh–Kalanay tradition, but belongs to the Geometric Pottery Tradition of South China (Solheim 1967b:163). In reality, however, Geometric pottery only appeared in the late Dong Son sites when Han culture began to exert its influence. In the early Dong Son sites it was absent, and in the early burials at the Dong Son site on the Ma River bank there occurred incised pottery of the Quy Chu culture, an immediate predecessor of Dong Son.

Vietnamese archaeologists believe that the Dongsonian people did not pay much attention to decorating pottery because they focused on the decoration of bronze vessels. All the decorative motifs used on bronzes originated in the pre-Dongsonian pottery complexes (Ha Van Tan 1974). Thus, cultural developments from Phung Nguyen to Dong Son were continuous, and we believe that the bearers of the Dong Son culture were the forefathers of the Vietnamese. Obviously, the bulk of them were not Austronesian-speaking people.

The Sa Huynh–Kalanay Pottery Tradition of Solheim was therefore merely the pottery of a particular period of development in Southeast Asia, when pottery complexes in different regions all had similar characteristics. The formation of those similar characteristics was due to population movements, cultural contacts, and also cultural convergences. We know that pottery decorated with scrolls and meanders has appeared among many sedentary agricultural peoples in the world (Schlette 1962), and late prehistoric pottery complexes with variegated incised decoration also characterise this period in Southeast Asia. This is simply a development which succeeded the early prehistoric pottery complexes in a natural and continuous way.

It is hardly possible, therefore, to track down a discrete homeland for the so-called Sa

Huynh-Kalanay Pottery Tradition. Different ethnic groups, no doubt, contributed to its formation, and Solheim stresses the role of the Austronesian-speaking peoples. To my mind, many complexes of Sa Huynh-Kalanay pottery can also be attributed to the Austroasiatic-speaking peoples (Ha Van Tan 1978).

In brief, it is not advisable to relate the question of the origin of the Austronesians to that of the rise of the Sa Huynh-Kalanay Pottery Tradition.

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