

Some Archaeological Questions of the Northern Vietnamese Coastal Areas in Relation to Austronesian Origins

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IN 1906, in his study of the Austroasiatic languages, P. Schmidt (1907:234) proposed to replace the then universally-used term Malayo-Polynesian by *Austronesian*. Only around two decades later, however, did the new term become widely known and introduced into the Southeast Asian prehistoric vocabulary. One of the first to apply linguistic results in the field of prehistory was the Austrian scholar R. Heine-Geldern. In his earliest works (1927, 1928) he noted that the mainland of Southeast Asia was characterized by the existence of shouldered axes, whose area of distribution coincided with that of the Austroasiatic languages. Subscribing fully to Schmidt's viewpoint of a common origin for the Austroasiatic and Austronesian peoples, Heine-Geldern maintained that the Austronesians must have split off from the Austroasiatic bloc before the appearance of shouldered axes, perhaps around 2000 B.C.

In his "Urheimat" (Heine-Geldern 1932), an impressive work which had a great influence on subsequent Southeast Asian archaeologists, Heine-Geldern proposed a radical change of orientation. If previously he had based his theories on the presumed inclusion of the Austroasiatic and Austronesian peoples in a unified Austric bloc, he now turned to the opposite of that very conception. I am not going to linger on this already widely-known framework, since I have criticized it before in another paper (Ngo The Phong 1976). In a nutshell, Heine-Geldern oriented his quest for the origins of the Austronesians outwards. Consequently, many cultural elements linked to those peoples were claimed as introduced into Southeast Asia from outside sources. According to Ha Van Tan (1983:19), "Heine-Geldern could be considered as the most extreme diffusionist among contemporary Southeast Asian prehistorians."

In recent decades, with improved conceptions of the Southeast Asian past and accumulated archaeological data, Heine-Geldern's framework has faced real challenges. Directly or indirectly, Vietnamese archaeologists have made remarkable contributions to these challenges, and it is unfortunate that their works are so little known to the wider world of Southeast Asian prehistorians.

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Before proceeding further I would like to mention the recent viewpoint of W. G. Solheim II. It must be said that in some of his earlier writings Solheim was still under Heine-Geldern's influence. For instance, he considered coiled pottery and flaked triangular projectile points with concave bases as elements introduced into Island Southeast Asia and Oceania from Japan or nearby areas (Solheim 1963:48). This was also Heine-Geldern's opinion. Further, in discussing the spread of the Sa Huynh–Kalanay pottery tradition, he wrote "Heine-Geldern's hypothesis of the spread of the Vierkantbeil Culture could well apply, with some possible variation" (Solheim 1964).

Recently, however, Solheim (1975a, 1975b, 1976a, 1976b) has advanced new explanations for the origin and spread of the Austronesians, and proposes to replace the term Austronesian by the term Nusantao. The earliest archaeological evidence presented for these peoples is a shell and stone tool tradition in the southern Philippines and eastern Indonesia. From that region the Austronesians moved in various directions and at different periods of time. Solheim has also applied these ideas to his previous models of Southeast Asian prehistory, and now divides the Extensionistic Period in Island Southeast Asia into the following phases: Proto Nusantao (8000–5000 B.C.), Early Nusantao (5000–2000 B.C.), Middle Nusantao (2000 B.C.–500 A.D.), and Late Nusantao (500–1511 A.D.) (Solheim 1979:195). The idea of linking shell tool industries to the earliest period of Austronesian settlement was also set forth by P. Bellwood in his *Man's Conquest of the Pacific* (1978:208).

The above suggestion clearly has a positive significance in its support for Austronesian development within Southeast Asia itself. However, many points need stronger supporting evidence. For instance, I think the use of shells to make tools and ornaments constituted an important element of the early Austronesian cultural repertoire, but this only reflects a marine orientation and can hardly be considered as something representative of any specific linguistic group. Moreover, flake and blade tool industries existed contemporaneously with the shell tool industries, and recent authors (Glover 1973, 1977; Hutterer 1976; Fox 1970) have shown that these were already developing much earlier in the Holocene period. It should be noted that the making and use of stone flake tools did not rule out the use of shells and bones as raw materials. In a recent outline (Phong 1983) I maintain that these island industries followed a different path of development from the Hoabinhian, a macro-industry widespread on the mainland of Southeast Asia.

After the Hoabinhian the cultural differences between Island and Mainland Southeast Asia became more and more blurred, especially when stone polishing was perfected, pottery began to flourish, agriculture developed and sea navigation became more reliable. Contacts between the two areas favored the development of such techniques, and it cannot be denied that the Austronesians played an important role in those contacts.

In the past decade, as a result of immense efforts, Vietnamese archaeologists have discovered a series of sites along the northern Vietnamese coast, about which the French archaeologists previously knew nothing or very little. These sites not only throw light on Vietnamese archaeological problems, but also have great significance for the question of Austronesian origins. The northernmost site of the series is Cai Beo on Cat Ba Island, Hai Phong. Two excavations in 1972 (Chinh and Sù 1974) and 1981 (Tieu and Can 1983) have revealed a multilayer stratigraphy, of which the lowest layer is characterized by flaked and polished pebble tools of developed Bacsonian-Hoabinhian type, with hand-made thick pottery. The pottery is very thick (0.8–1 cm on average; Dung 1983:26); dark grey and brown, with straight or simple outturned rims. There are neither ring feet nor cord-marking. The radiocarbon date for the Cai Beo lower layer is 5645 ± 115 b.p.

(ZK 328.0). Basing their opinions on the dates for sea coast positions determined by Men and Hao (1976), Tieu and Can (1983:20) hold this date to be sensible, but the stratigraphy is no less than 3.5 m thick and the age of the deepest layer might be more ancient.

The second group of sites, lying along the coast of Thanh Hoa province, belongs to the Da But culture named after the site discovered and excavated by Patte (1932). Patte included Da But in the Bacsonian culture, and after renewed excavation (Tieu 1971) and the discovery of new sites (Vinh and Dung 1977; Vinh 1980) we can confirm that the Da But culture existed later than, and developed from, the Hoabinhian and Bacsonian. Da But stone tools, like those at Cai Beo, were worked from pebbles. However, through time the sizes and forms of the tools changed visibly. During the earlier Da But period tools were still made on large edge-ground pebbles, while in the later Go Trung period stone axes became smaller and thinner, and were often wholly polished with ellipsoid or quasi-quadrangular cross-sections (Vinh 1982:24). New elements such as ornaments and net-sinkers also appeared in the later period, the latter marking conspicuous progress in the exploitation of sea resources.

Despite marked differences between the stone tools of the early and late periods, we can still classify them in a common archaeological culture in terms of pottery. The Da But pottery was handmade using the paddle and anvil technique, with surfaces and rims covered with mat-impressed patterns. Though the radiocarbon date determined from Con Co Ngua (2600 ± 80 b.p. ZK 375) does not tally with expectations, the dates for Da But (6095 ± 60 b.p. Bln 1407) and Go Trung (4790 ± 50 b.p. Bln 2090) show that the Da But culture existed between the end of the fifth millennium and the beginning of the third millennium B.C. Nguyen Kim Dung (1983:29) has also noted similarities between the pottery of Da But and Dang Cave—a late Hoabinhian site with dates of 7665 ± 65 b.p. (Bln 913/1) and 7580 ± 80 b.p. (Bln 913/2).

The third group of sites consists of shell mounds of the Quynh Van culture along the coasts of Thach Ha and Quynh Luu districts. The first vestiges of this culture were discovered in the early 1960s (Chinh 1966), but only after large-scale excavation was its significance fully understood. Among the most important sites are Go Lap Bac (Hao 1979), Con Dat or Quynh Nghia (Vinh and Chien 1981), Bai Phoi Phoi (Ha Van Tan 1976), and Phai Nam (Ngo The Phong 1974; Vinh 1978). At present, questions of the date of the Quynh Van culture and of its relationships with other contemporary and later cultures remain controversial. The characteristic feature of Quynh Van pottery is its pointed bottom, a very rare type in Viet Nam and Southeast Asia. The pottery has a finer temper than that from Cai Beo and Da But, and was made by the coiling technique. Decorations comprise oblique lines from base to rim at angles of 50° to 60° , possibly made by bamboo or wooden combs. The Quynh Van stone tools are different from those of Cai Beo and Da But and are made of large flakes, worked on both sides, without polish. Despite their differences, many Quynh Van tools demonstrate the Hoabinhian and Bacsonian technique of step-flaking concentrically from the edge so that the form is almost oval. The radiocarbon dates for the Quynh Van culture are fairly late compared to estimates based on typology, and it is generally assumed that it dates between 5000 and 4000 b.p.*

*Radiocarbon dates for the Quynh Van culture are as follows:

Quynh Van: 4785 ± 75 b.p. (Bln 914/1), 4730 ± 75 b.p. (Bln 914/2);

Phai Nam: 4030 ± 45 b.p. (Bln 2089/1), 4120 ± 60 b.p. (Bln 2089/3), 4160 ± 70 b.p. (Bln 2089/2);

Quynh Hoa: 4380 ± 90 b.p.;

Con Dat (Quynh Nghia): 3010 ± 90 b.p.

All the above-mentioned cultures have two common characteristics: they represent developments from the Hoabinhian and Bacsonian, and they mark noteworthy progress in the exploitation of marine resources. We know that many problems of early pottery in Southeast Asia are still not satisfactorily solved, and one popular belief is that the cord-marked pottery of the Hoabinhian is the oldest type. I have recently rejected this idea and demonstrated that the cord-marked pottery in some Hoabinhian sites may be late Neolithic or even Bronze Age in date (Phong, n.d.). The earliest pottery in Viet Nam has no ring feet and no cord-marking. Similarly, the earliest pottery in Island Southeast Asia (outside Taiwan) is plain and sometimes red-slipped, and dates for this type of pottery from sites in the Philippines may be older than 4000 B.C. (Solheim 1981). Solheim (1981:32) also believes that “the manufacture of plain and red-slipped pottery began to spread through the Philippines and Eastern Indonesia between 3000–4000 B.C.”

Despite the lack of reliable data, it is possible that the plain pottery appeared in the islands as a result of early contacts with the northern Vietnamese coast. I have examined a number of sherds of the Quynh Van culture with red-slipped surfaces, and red-slipped pottery is also a characteristic feature of Bau Tro, a later site close to Quynh Van. May one suppose that peoples from the northern Vietnamese coast, in the process of mastering the sea, carried knowledge of pottery-making to the islands and became an important element in the early formation of the Austronesian peoples? It is also very likely that pottery was taken to Island Southeast Asia before the appearance of cord-marking, which often depends on weaving and spinning techniques. In Viet Nam and Mainland Southeast Asia spindle whorls are commonly found with cord-marked pottery. On the contrary, in Island Southeast Asia the making of bark-cloth was more widespread; thus cord-marked pottery is rare, as are spindle whorls south of the northern Philippines.

Besides pottery, the polishing technique may also have been imported from the coast of Mainland Southeast Asia into the islands. Some of the stone and shell tools found in the islands (Fox 1970: figs. 19a, 19b, 20, 55; Solheim 1981: figs. 9, 10) are very similar to stone tools from the northern Vietnamese coast, especially those of the Da But culture. These tools are clearly prototypes of later adzes with quadrangular and oval cross sections.

It is therefore likely that contacts took place between the fourth and second millennia B.C. between the Southeast Asian islands, especially the Philippines, and the Vietnamese coast. The initiators of these contacts were the bearers of the Cai Beo, Da But, and Quynh Van cultures, who might possibly be considered as Proto-Austronesian speakers. They carried knowledge of the manufacture of pottery and polished stone tools to the islands, and after these first contacts continuing intercourse took place in both directions. Hence, the continuing similarities—stepped adzes, bark-cloth beaters, double-headed and lingling-o earrings, and pottery with shell-edge impressed decoration—found in later periods.

In an article summarizing the state of study on Austronesians, Cao Xuan Pho (1978:131) concluded: “Surely excavations in the Vietnamese coastal area will contribute many documents on Austronesian culture.” Though dealing with only a part of the area and one archaeological period, this article has attempted to concretize Pho’s conclusion.

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