

A Brief History of the Dongson Concept

Received 6 July 1989

WILHELM G. SOLHEIM II

THE TERM *DONGSON* brings to mind the large bronze drums that have taken the name of Dongson drums. The typical drum, with decoration on its tympanum and sides showing boats loaded with people wearing spectacular feather headdresses, has become the symbol of Viet Nam and is displayed in many public places. These drums have been central to the Dongson concept since its beginning. For over 100 years from the first display of these drums at exhibitions in Europe, they were a mystery. No one knew their place of origin, whether from Europe, the Americas, the Middle East, or Asia. Finally, in 1902, a book by Franz Heger located them as coming from Southeast Asia.

The first excavated drums came from the site of Dong Son, in Thanh Hoa Province south of Hanoi, excavated by M. Pajot in 1924 and reported by V. Goloubew in 1929. Goloubew (1929:11, 1932:139; Karlgren 1942:2–5; van Heekeren 1958:92–93) dated the early type of drum (Heger Type 1) to the middle or the second half of the first century A.D. Once it became known where they came from, numerous Dongson bronze drums were reported from South China, Thailand, Laos, West Malaysia, and Indonesia as far east as western Irian Jaya. The largest concentration of the drums is from northern Viet Nam (Kempers 1988).

Argument soon developed over the dating of the Dongson Culture and of its origins. The primary protagonists were Robert Heine-Geldern and Bernard Karlgren. I have analyzed this disagreement in some detail before (Solheim 1979:69–172, 1980*a*), so I present no more than a brief summary of it here. Heine-Geldern hypothesized that “elements of the Dongsonian and of the late Chou art style originated in eastern Europe in the Hallstatt Cultures of the Bronze and early Iron Age of the Caucasus, and the Bronze Age of Transylvania and eastern Hungary” (1937:186–191); that “these elements were brought to the Orient by Thraco-Cimmerian tribes between about 800 and 600 B.C.” (1937:191–194); and that “the Dongsonian art style (the ornamental art style) was introduced into Indonesia by a colonization of the Yueh of South China and northern Vietnam; from there it continued to be spread by Indonesian tribes” (1937:197; see Solheim 1979:170).

Karlgren disagreed with both this dating and origin, hypothesizing instead that

Wilhelm Solheim is a professor in the Department of Anthropology, University of Hawaii–Manoa, Honolulu.

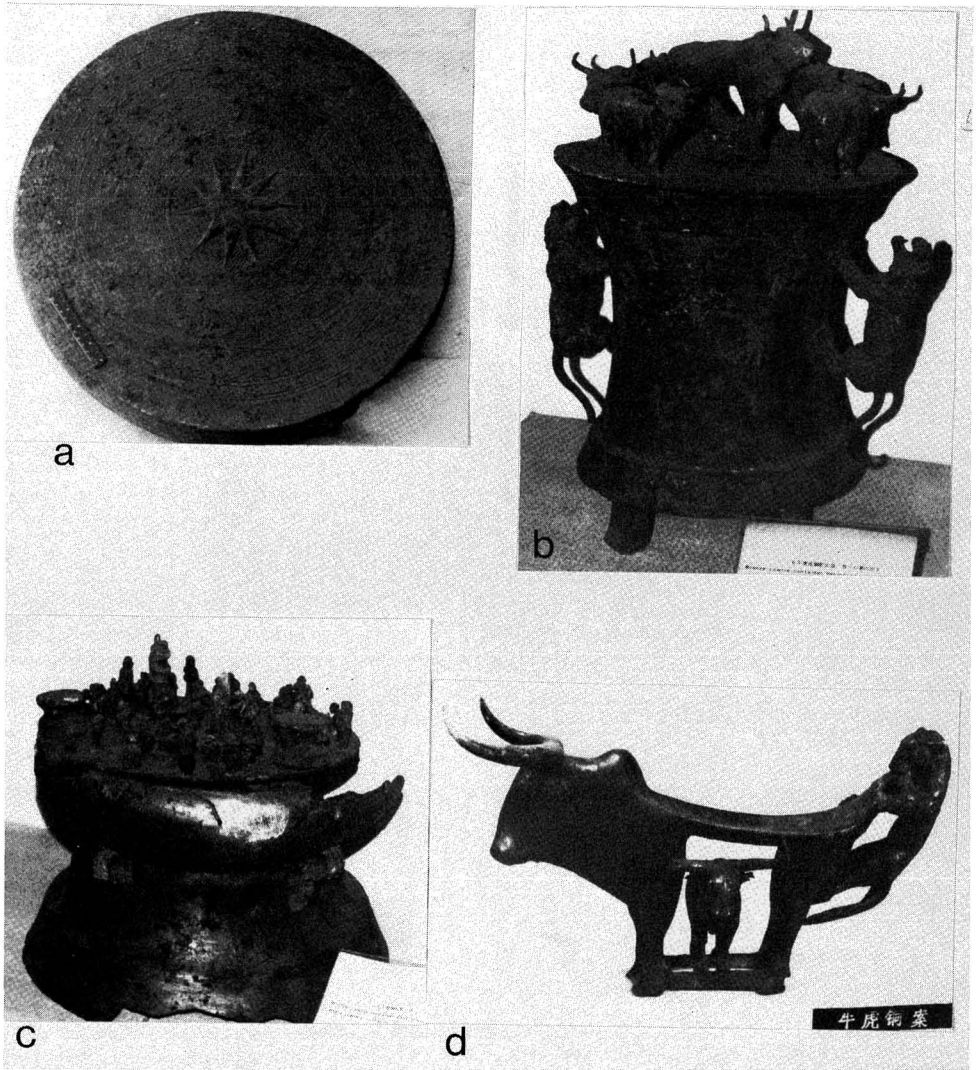
the early Dongson Culture dated to the fourth–third century B.C. (1942:5–25) and that “the early Dongson culture was neighbor of and closely related to—certainly to a large extent influenced by—the Huai style of Central China” (1942:25). While both arguments, in their differing interpretations, were based on the style of decoration and the geometric elements of this decoration as it appeared on the Dongson bronzes, both were in agreement that the knowledge of bronze manufacture entered the Dongson Culture with the art style.

Olov Janse made several excavations at the Dongson site from 1934 to 1939, but the final report on these excavations, in three volumes, did not come out until after World War II (Janse 1947, 1951, 1958). While these publications presented a great quantity of new data on the Dongson Culture, they settled neither the dating nor the origin problems. Janse excavated a number of brick tombs which contained artifacts obviously dating to the early Han dynasty of China (vol. 1). Several apparently earlier tombs were also excavated, some of these containing typical Dongson bronze artifacts, including drums. Janse noted similarities between the Dongson decoration and the Huai art style, as referred to by Karlgren, but he also noted the Dongson decoration’s similarities with the Hallstatt Culture, as pointed out by Heine-Geldern (Janse 1958; Malleret 1959). He did not take a stand on either side of the argument.

Excavations in Island Southeast Asia, Viet Nam, and Thailand since the early 1950s have required totally different interpretations of both the origins of the Dongson Culture and its dating.

The first threat to either suggestion for dating of the Dongson Culture came from excavations in the Philippines. There a distinctive pottery tradition became evident that incorporated the style and many elements of decoration of the Dongson bronzes. It soon became evident that this pottery tradition started earlier in the Philippines than the earliest dating for Dongson proposed by Heine-Geldern (Solheim 1959*a*, 1959*b*, 1964, 1967, 1980*a*; Fox 1970). It became apparent that this pottery tradition was not directly related to the Dongson Culture. Nonetheless, both Heine-Geldern and Karlgren had used specifically the geometric decoration and the style of its use as shared by the pottery tradition and the Dongson bronzes to hypothesize both the dating and relationships of the Dongson Culture to the Hallstatt Culture or the Huai art style of China. All publications on the spread of Dongson into the rest of Southeast Asia from northern Viet Nam had used this art style as their basis for hypothesizing the Dongson spread—but here it was as part of the Sa-huynh-Kalanay Pottery Tradition, already widespread in the Philippines and much of Island Southeast Asia (Solheim 1979:180–184) before the hypothesized beginning of the Dongson Culture. It became apparent, to me at least, that the art style and the geometric elements used in it required a common ancestor of the styles as found on the pottery and on the Dongson bronzes (Solheim 1967:172, n.d.).

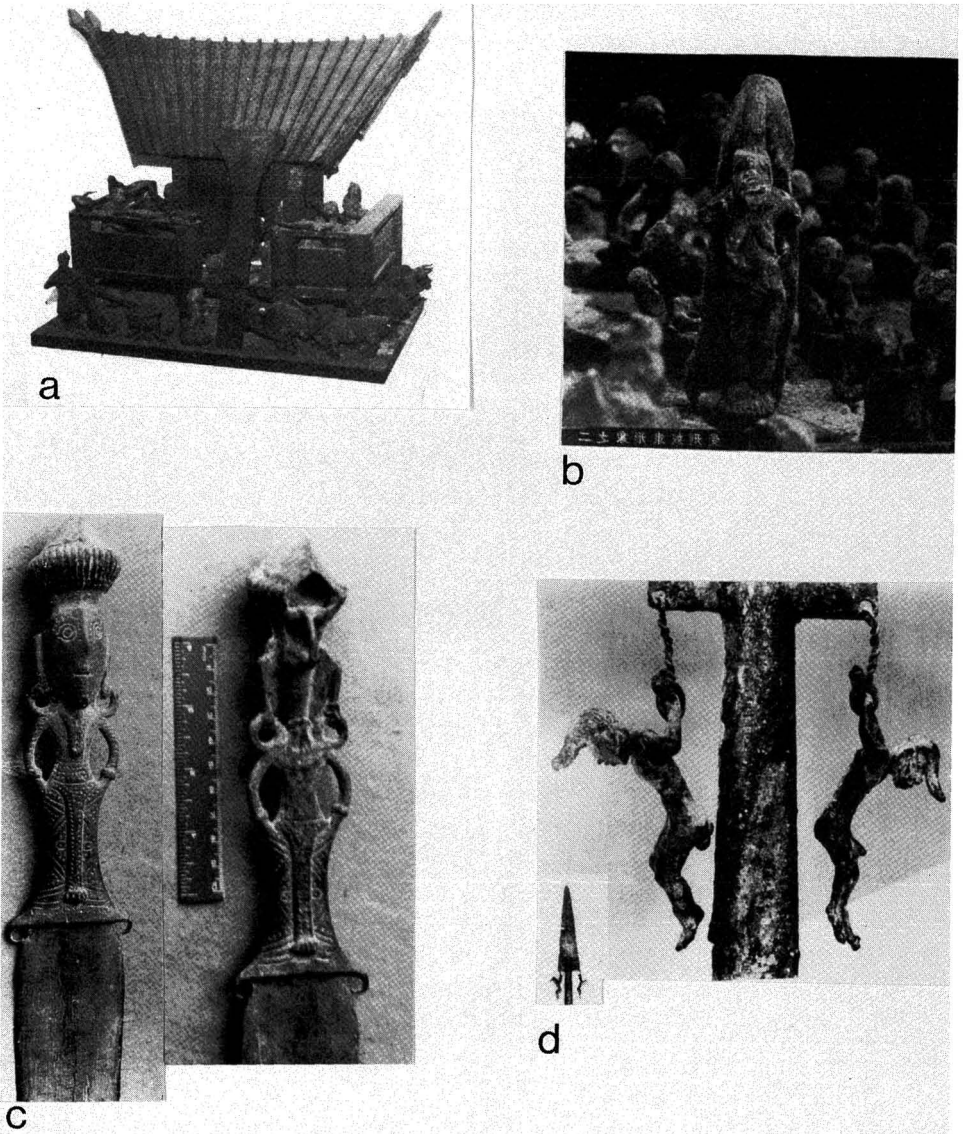
The final blow to both sets of hypotheses came from excavations in Thailand and Viet Nam. Excavations at Non Nok Tha, in northeastern Thailand, produced evidence both for local manufacture of bronze and for an art style on pottery that could logically be ancestral to the art style of the pottery and of the Dongson bronzes, long before the hypothesized time of the Dongson Culture or the Sa-huynh-Kalanay Pottery Tradition (Solheim 1968, 1979:184–194; Bayard 1972). These dates are still controversial, but the dating indicates that bronze manufacture in Thailand was under way before the end of the third millennium B.C. (Pigott 1984, 1985; Natapintu



Pl. I. *a*, Typical tympanum of Dongson drum from Dong Son, in Than Hoa Museum, Viet Nam. *b-d*, bronze artifacts from Shizhai Shan, Yunnan: *b-c*, small drums with attached figures, and *d*, ceremonial pillow(?), all in the Yunnan Provincial Museum, Kunming, People's Republic of China. (Photos by Solheim.)

1988). The art style was in place in northeastern Thailand by the end of the fourth millennium B.C. (White 1982).

Bronze was being manufactured into small artifacts in northern Viet Nam shortly after 2000 B.C. (Ha 1974; Davidson 1975:88-93; Van 1979; Nguyen 1979; Solheim 1980*b*:15) in a cultural sequence that led to the Dongson Culture. It thus became obvious that both the tradition of bronze manufacture and the art style expressed on the Dongson bronze drums and other bronze artifacts had been present in Southeast



Pl. II. Bronze artifacts from Shizhai Shan (*a, b, d*) and Dong Son (*c*): *a*, model of house on piles with activity on verandah and on ground at base of house piles; *b* and *d*, depiction of torture or punishment, a subject never seen on Dongson artifacts; rare Dongson artifacts, however, show copulating couples and other possible fertility symbolism, not found at Shizhai Shan; *c*, front and back of dagger handle, distinct from Shizhai Shan handles, as in Figure 2. (Photos by Solheim.)

Asia long before the Dongson Culture. The origin of the Dongson Culture was right there in northern Viet Nam. The date of this origin depends on the definition of the Dongson Culture, but its ancestry certainly goes back in Viet Nam and neighboring areas into the fourth and fifth millennia B.C., and no doubt much earlier.

A series of sites in Yunnan, South China (Rudolph 1960), define the Tien Cul-

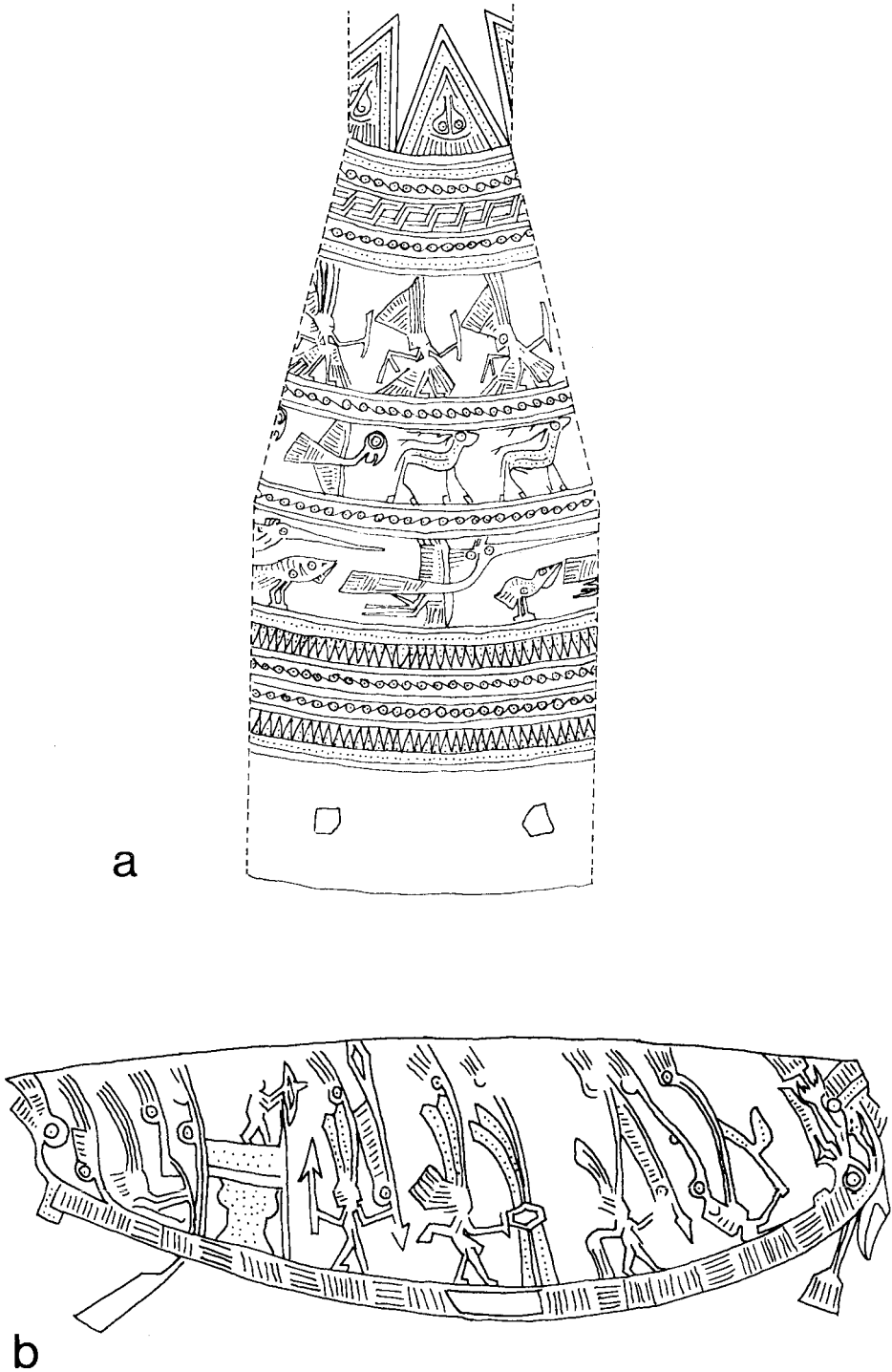


Fig. 1. Typical decoration on a tympanum (*a*) and side of a fully decorated drum (*b*). These examples of decoration are from a drum known as the Ngoc-lu drum, after Karlgren (1942: Pl. 4).

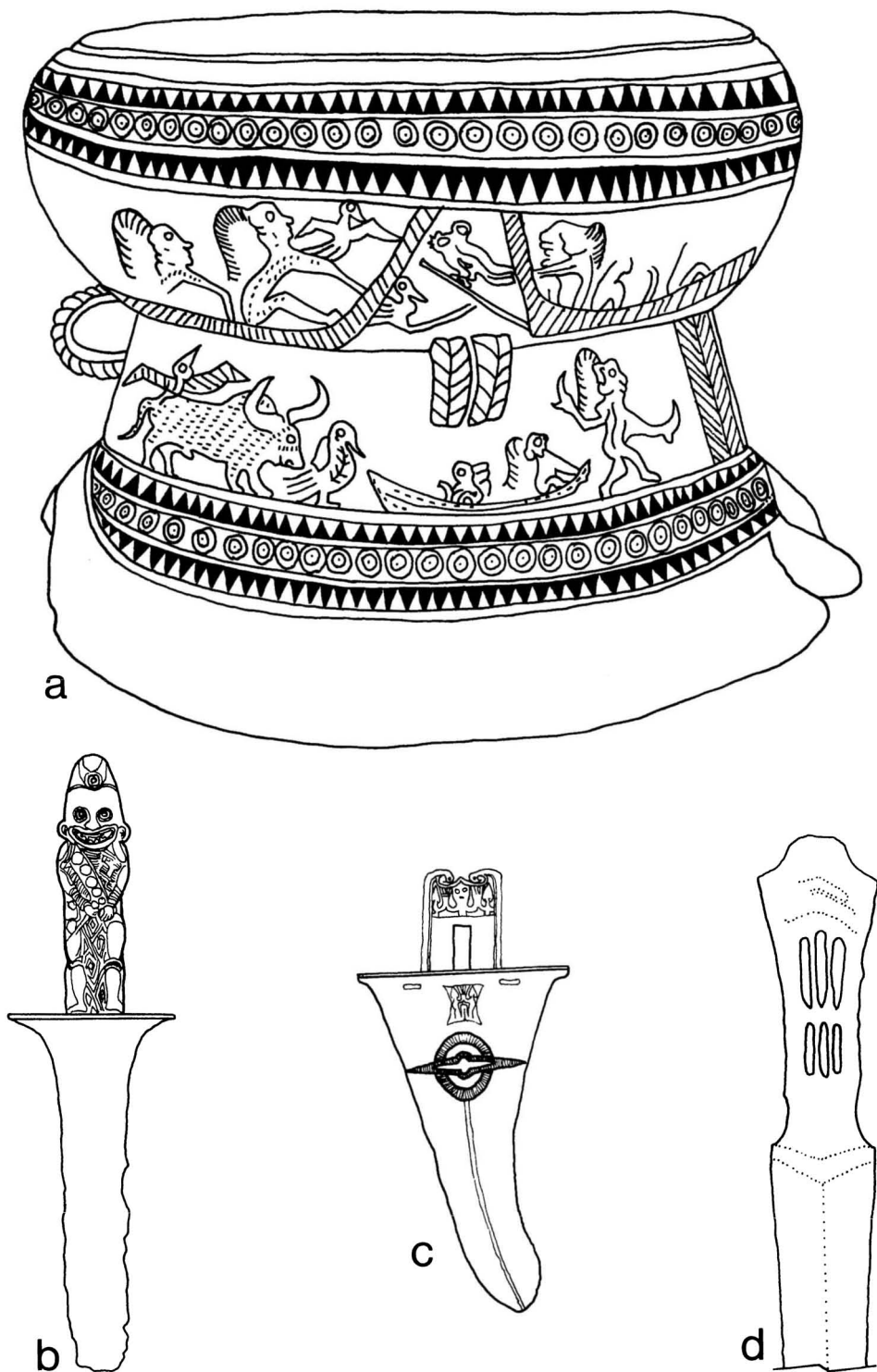


Fig. 2. *a*, Unusual Dongston-style drum with typical geometric patterns bordering bands of Shizhai Shan style decoration on side; drum from Thach Trai Son, Shizhai Shan, Shizhai Shan, adapted from Pham et al. (1987:19). *b-d*, Bronze daggers from Shizhai Shan adapted from Anonymous (1959): *b*, after Fig. 13 (p. 45), *c*, after Fig. 1 (p. 30), and *d*, after 3 of Plate (p. 15). Handle on *d* is hollow with cutouts, similar to a dagger from Dong Son I have seen at the Thanh Hoa Museum.

ture, as it is known to this time. It is obvious that this culture and the Dongson Culture are closely related, and may possibly be variants of one culture. The paper following this one, by John Tessitore, examines the relationship of the two cultures. My paper is meant to be an introduction to Tessitore's, for those who are either not acquainted with the Dongson Culture or not knowledgeable about the recent findings on the Dongson Culture in Viet Nam. As Tessitore's paper has no illustrations of either Tien or Dongson bronzes I include a few to show similarities and differences between the bronzes and cultures of the two (Pls. I-II, Figs. 1-2).

REFERENCES

ANONYMOUS

- 1959 Yün-nan Chin-ning Shih-chai-shan ku mu ch'ün fa-chüeh pao-ka. Peking: Wen Wu Press. (In Chinese.)

BAYARD, DONN T.

- 1972 Early Thai bronze: analysis and new dates. *S* 176:1411-1412.

DAVIDSON, JEREMY H. C. S.

- 1975 Recent archaeological activity in Viet-nam. *JHKAS* 6:80-99.

FOX, ROBERT B.

- 1970 *The Tabon Caves*. National Museum Monograph 1. Manila.

GOLOUBEV, V.

- 1929 L'Age du bronze au Tonkin et dans le Nord-Annam. *BEFEO* 29:1-46.

- 1932 Sur l'origine et la diffusion des tambours métalliques, in *Præhistorica Asiae Orientalis*: 137-150. Hanoi: l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient.

HA, VAN TAN

- 1974 There was an early Vietnamese civilization. *Hoc Tap* 1:48-57.

VAN HEEKEREN, H. ROBERT

- 1958 *The Bronze-Iron Age of Indonesia*. Verhandelingen van het Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde 22. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.

HEGER, FRANZ

- 1902 *Alte Metalltrommeln aus Sudostasien*. Leipzig.

HEINE-GELDERN, H. ROBERT

- 1937 L'art préboudhique de la Chine et de l'Asie Sud-est et son influence en Océanie. *Revue des Arts Asiatiques* 11(4): 177-206.

JANSE, OLOV R. T.

- 1947 *Archaeological Research in Indo-China* I. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Yenching Institute.

- 1951 *Archaeological Research in Indo-China* II. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Yenching Institute.

- 1958 *Archaeological Research in Indo-China* III. Bruges: Institut Belge des Hautes Etudes Chinoises.

KARLGRÉN, BERNARD

- 1942 The date of the early Dong-son Culture. *BMFEA* 14:1-128.

KEMPERS, A. J. BERNET

- 1988 *The Kettledrums of Southeast Asia: A Bronze Age World and its Aftermath*. *MQRSEA* 10.

MALLERET, LOUIS

- 1959 La civilisation de Dong-son d'après les recherches archéologiques de M. Olov Janse. *France-Asie* 160-161:1197-1208.

NATAPINTU, SURAPOL

- 1988 Current research on ancient copper-base metallurgy in Thailand, in *Prehistoric Studies: The Stone and Metal Ages in Thailand*. Papers in Thai Antiquity 1. Bangkok: Thai Antiquity Working Group.

NGUYEN, DUY TY

- 1979 The appearance of ancient metallurgy in Vietnam, in *Recent Discoveries and New Views on Some Archaeological Problems in Vietnam*. Hanoi: Institute of Archaeology, Committee for Social Science of Vietnam.

- PHAM, MINH HUYEN, NGUYEN VAN HUYEN, AND TRINH SINH
 1987 *Trong Dong Son*. Ha Noi: Nha Xuat Ban Khoa Hoc Xa Hoi.
- PIGOTT, VINCENT C.
 1984 The Thailand Archaeometallurgy Project 1984: survey of base-metal resource exploitation in Loei Province, northeastern Thailand. *Southeast Asian Studies Newsletter* 17:1–5.
 1985 Pre-industrial mineral exploitation and metal production in Thailand. *MASCA Journal* 3 (5, Archaeometallurgy Supplements): 170–174.
- RUDOLPH, RICHARD
 1960 China mainland. *AP* 4:41–54.
- SOLHEIM, WILHELM G. II
 1959a (Editor) Sa-huynh pottery relationships in Southeast Asia. *AP* 3(2): 97–188.
 1959b Sa-huynh related pottery in Southeast Asia. *AP* 3(2): 177–188.
 1964 Further relationships of the Sa-huynh-Kalanay Pottery Tradition. *AP* 8(1): 196–210.
 1967 The Sa-huynh-Kalanay Pottery Tradition: past and future research, in *Studies in Philippine Anthropology*: 151–174, ed. Mario D. Zamora. Quezon City, Philippines: Alemar Phoenix.
 1968 Early bronze in northeastern Thailand. *CA* 9(1): 9–62.
 1979 A look at “L’art preboudhique de la Chine et de l’Asie du Sud-Est et son influence en Oceanie” forty years after. *AP* 22(2): 165–205.
 1980a New data on late Southeast Asian prehistory and their interpretations. *Saeculum* 31(3–4): 275–344, 409 (in German).
 1980b Review article: Recent discoveries and new views on some archaeological problems in Vietnam. *AP* 23(1): 9–16.
 n.d. needed research on the origins of the Lapita Culture in eastern Indonesia. Paper for Fifth National Archaeological Seminar, 4–7 July 1989, Yogyakarta, Indonesia.
- VAN, TRONG
 1979 New knowledges [sic] on Dong Son culture from archaeological discoveries these twenty years, in *Recent Discoveries and New Views on some Archaeological Problems in Vietnam*. Hanoi: Institute of Archaeology, Committee for Social Sciences of Vietnam.
- WHITE, JOYCE C.
 1982 *Ban Chiang Discovery of a Lost Bronze Age*. Philadelphia: The University Museum, University of Pennsylvania, and The Smithsonian Institution.