

SA HUYNH REGIONAL AND INTER-REGIONAL INTERACTIONS IN THE THU BON VALLEY, QUANG NAM PROVINCE, CENTRAL VIETNAM

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ABSTRACT

Around 500 BC, the introduction of iron working technology caused radical changes in social structure in both mainland and insular Southeast Asia. The most important phenomenon, which had strong impacts in all aspects of life, was the transformation from small and egalitarian to large and complex societies. This complexity laid the foundations for the emergence and development of early states in the area. The causes and dynamics of these processes were various in nature and included both internal and external elements. Using site and artefact distributions in the Thu Bon Valley, one of the largest and most fertile riverine areas in the whole of central Vietnam, we examine the nature and evolution of regional and inter-regional interaction between Sa Huynh communities and the outside world, especially with the Han Chinese, the Dong Son of northern Vietnam, and contemporary cultures in South and Southeast Asia.

THEORETICAL ISSUES AND APPROACHES

Archaeologists working in Southeast Asia currently consider that iron-working technology was introduced in the area about 500 BC, and iron artifacts were used extensively from the end of the first millennium BC. Complex societies quickly followed the introduction of iron in both mainland and insular Southeast Asia, and first millennium BC cemeteries in Vietnam and Thailand reflect great variation in grave good wealth. Many scholars have deduced that it was Indian and Chinese commerce that stimulated Southeast Asian cultural complexity, but like McIntosh and McIntosh (1988:120) writing on West Africa, I argue that the spread of goods and cultural factors from India and China reflected a grafting of Indian and Chinese commerce on to a pre-existing infrastructure of Southeast Asian communication networks. This implies that pre-iron phases of cultural development in Southeast Asia were characterized by indigenous processes of trade expansion and increasing social stratification. Indeed, recent evidence from the mainland of Southeast Asia demonstrates the development of localized exchange of raw materials and exotic

products during the second millennium BC (Glover 1994:134).

There have been a number of studies on Indo-Roman trade and its role in the development of a Southeast Asian exchange system (see Glover 1996; Bellina 1999, 2003). According to these archaeologists, Indo-Roman trade routes had reached out by the early Christian era to bring together previously rather disparate Southeast Asian exchange systems, linking them into a vast network stretching from western Europe, via the Mediterranean basin, the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea, to India, Southeast Asia and China. The "Great Sea Road" ran from the coastal ports of Southern China along the Vietnamese coast, round Cape Ca Mau into the Gulf of Thailand, thence to the Straits of Malacca or across the Thai-Malay Peninsula using portage routes, and into the Bay of Bengal and to India and the West (Glover 1996: 57).

Recent excavations and casual discoveries in Thailand, Java and especially central Vietnam have produced a surprisingly large number of Indian and Chinese artifacts, the latter primarily Han Dynasty in style. As an archaeologist working in central Vietnam for over 20 years, I have been particularly concerned with this evidence. The suggestion by Momoki (1999: 71) that Champa (i.e. central Vietnam) was a gate to the Chinese world for Malay-Indonesian people, and also a gate to the Indianized world for the Philippines and Vietnam, offers a useful model for late prehistoric and protohistoric central Vietnam (Sakurai 1999:28).

Up to now, at least 40 Sa Huynh burial and habitation sites have been discovered along the Thu Bon River and its tributaries (Fig. 1). The drainage basin was not only ideal for intensive irrigation, but it also supported a rich fish population and offered a network of waterways for inland transport. Until the 19th century, merchandise was transported from the mountains to the coastal markets and ports by boat. There is no direct archaeological evidence for ancient boat construction techniques or shipping technology, but Chinese literary sources refer to Austronesian shipping during the first millennium AD (Manguin 1994:181-192).

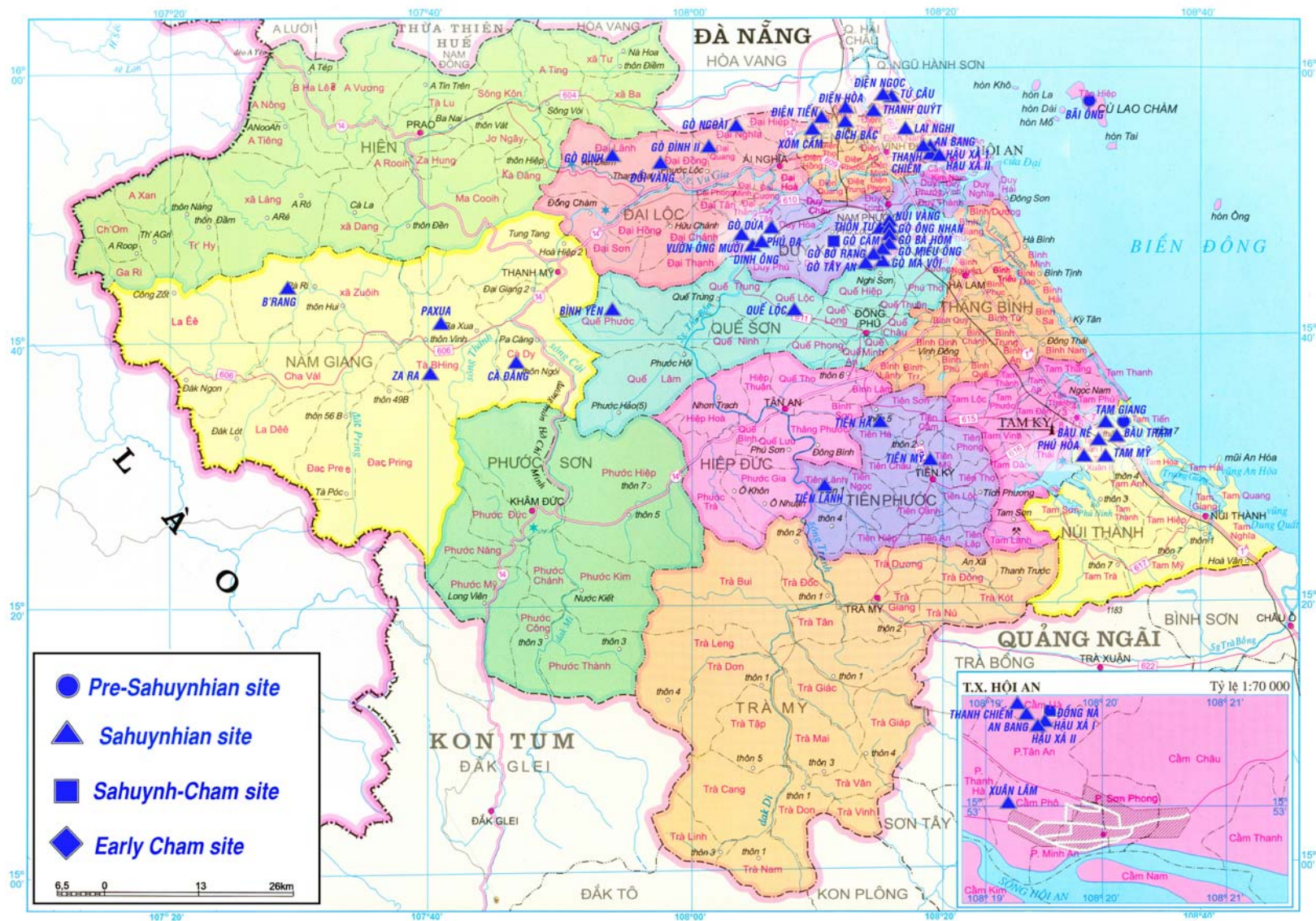


Figure 1. The distribution of proto-historical and early historical sites in Quang Nam province.

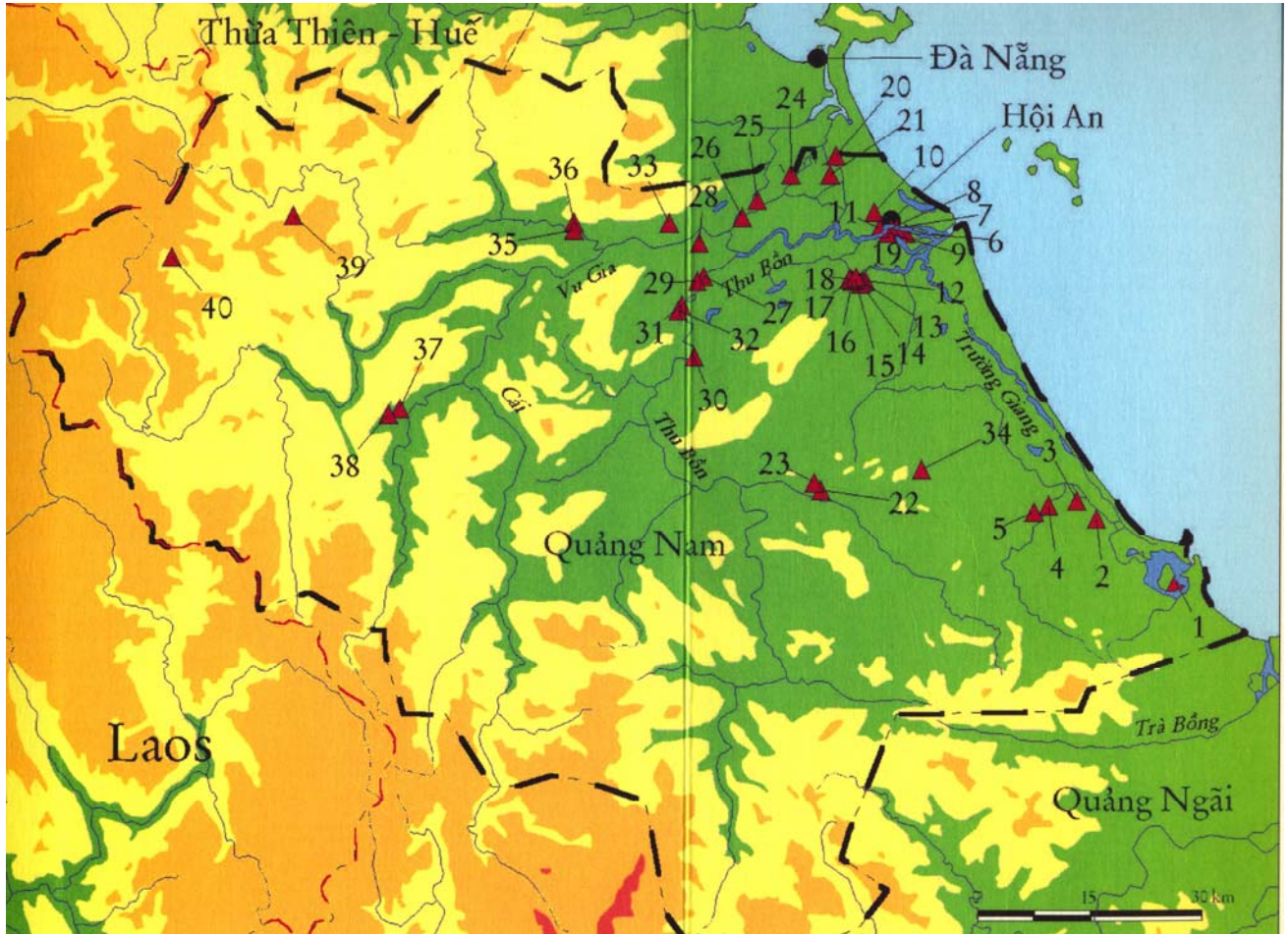


Figure 2. The distribution of Sa Huynh cultural sites in the Thu Bon valley (Reinecke et al. 2002)

THE THU BON VALLEY; NEW ARCHAEOLOGICAL FINDS BEARING ON EXTERNAL TRADE AND POLITICAL/CULTURAL CONTACTS.

There are a great number of Han Chinese coins, mirrors and other imported items from India and West Asia held in private collections in Da Nang and Ho Chi Minh City, all casual finds without good provenance and cultural contexts. But in the last two decades, thanks to systematic research, material is coming increasingly from controlled excavations in burial and habitation sites where the finds can be dated. We can recognize at least 3 clusters of sites (Fig. 2) in the Thu Bon valley.

The Hoi An cluster consists of the jar burial sites of Xuan Lam, Hau Xa I and II, Thanh Chiem, An Bang and Lai Nghi. All are located in a sand dune about 5 km long, close to small streams that run from north to south. From 1989 until 2004, Vietnamese archaeologists excavated a total area of over 300m² in these sites (Lam 1998:13-25).

Lai Nghi

Lai Nghi is in Dien Nam village, Dien Ban district, Quang Nam province, at coordinates of 15°53'465"N and 108°17'377"E. Antiquities were found there by villagers and excavations were undertaken by Hanoi National University jointly with the Commission for General and

Comparative Archaeology of the German Institute of Archaeology between 2002 and 2004. The total excavated area was 192 m², in which a total of 63 jar burials and extended burials were recovered. The latter are few, but Burial 31 contained a double inhumation, and inhumation. Burial 37 contained a series of Eastern Han bronze vessels.

Several preliminary reports are available (Lai Nghi Excavation Team 2004; Reinecke et al. 2003; Lam 2005) and three radiocarbon determinations on organic temper (mainly charcoal), each from a different burial, were as follows: Burial 4 (ERL-5795), 2129±61 bp; Burial 20 (ERL-5994), 2133±50 bp; and Burial 29 (ERL-5995), 2086±50 bp. The cemetery of Lai Nghi thus probably belonged to the period from the 3rd century BC to the 1st century AD in calibrated radiocarbon dates, with the youngest artifacts being contemporary with the Eastern Han.

The burial jars from Lai Nghi contained some of the richest Sa Huynh grave goods ever discovered. Some urns even contained gold beads (Fig. 3). A small four-legged bowl found in one burial jar is a type not previously found in the Sa Huynh culture (Fig. 4). Tools and weapons of iron, and beads of gold, glass, carnelian and agate were found, along with four gold earrings. These are the first

gold earrings ever discovered in a Sa Huynh site (Reinecke et al. 2003:30). Of more than 10,000 beads found in the three seasons at Lai Nghi, more than 1000 were of hard, semi-precious stones such as agate, carnelian, rock crystal and nephrite. Many beads are glass, the smallest of brown glass and measuring just one millimeter in diameter. Among them is a white collar bead similar to those from Tha Chana, Thailand (Glover 1996: figure above, pp. 71).



Figure 3. Gold earrings and beads found at Lai Nghi (Lai Nghi Excavation Team 2002, 2003, 2004. Photo: Andreas Reinecke.



Figure 4. Four legged bowl found at Lai Nghi (Reinecke et al 2003).



Figure 5. Carnelian, gold and glass beads found in one jar burial, Lai Nghi (Reinecke et al 2003).

The high quality agate and carnelian beads found at Lai Nghi have many forms, including cubic, octahedral, rhombic, button-shaped, barrel-shaped, tetragonal and hexagonal prisms, spherical and cylindrical. In addition, small unmodified rock crystals and small cylinders of jade also have been unearthed. With regards to contacts with the west, the most interesting are the gold plate glass beads, alkali-etched beads, a tiger pendant, a bird pendant, and glass collar beads.

Bronze was used for four categories of grave goods at Lai Nghi: containers, mirrors, coins, and ornaments such as small bells and bracelets. The bronze artifacts present strong evidence for contact with China.

One characteristic of Lai Nghi cemetery is the inequality in the distribution of grave goods. We can see clearly at least three or four levels of wealth. For example, in 2003, 10 burials were uncovered in pit II and over 4500 beads and ornaments were recovered. Some burial jars contained only 1-5 beads, while others had from 100-200 to 400-500 beads and ornaments (Fig. 5). One burial jar had over 3000. The rich burial jars with many beads also contained iron and bronze artefacts, especially graves 19, 25, 26, 28 and 37.

Hau Xa II

This assemblage consists of Sa Huynh pottery, glass and stone ornaments and iron tools. The burial jars have geometric stamped pottery in Han style, and there are also nephrite earrings and comma-shaped glass ornaments (Fig. 6).



Figure 6. Ornaments from Hau Xa II.

The Mau Hoa cluster

This cluster consists of two sub-groups. The first includes Go (sand mound or sand bar) Tay An, Go Bo Rang, Go Ma Voi, Go Mieu Ong and Go Cam/Thon Tu. The second includes Go Ba Hom, Go Ong Nhan, and Nui Vang.

Among these sites, Go Ma Voi, Go Mieu Ong and Go Cam/Thon Tu have been excavated several times (Reinecke et al. 2002; Lam 2005).

Go Ma Voi (Mound of Lime Graves)

Go Ma Voi (108°15'33"E; 15°48'34"N; Duy Trung village, Duy Xuyen district, Quang Nam province) was discovered in 1998. The site is situated about 13 km southwest of Hoi An, 16 km east of the My Son sanctuary, near Tra Kieu (ancient Simhapura), and about 100 meters south of the Ba Ren river, a branch of the Thu Bon. The region consists of sand dunes separated by narrow lowlands. Excavations have been carried out on the two dune sites of Go Ma Voi and Go Mieu Ong, revealing about 50 jar burials with 250 pottery vessels.



Figure 7. Bronze artefacts from Go Ma Voi (Reinecke et al. 2002.)

Go Ma Voi site has many bronze implements (Fig. 7), many similar to Dong Son bronze artefacts. According to one radiocarbon date and bronze typologies, the cemetery existed from the 5th to the 1st century BC.

The habitation site of Thon Tu

This site is located close to the Go Mieu Ong and Go Ma Voi cemeteries and the total area excavated in 2005 was 36 m² (Lam 2005). There is evidence for local bronze casting (Fig. 8), but all bronze items found in the nearby cemeteries appear to have been imported (Reinecke et al. 2000).



Figure 8. Cupreous slag and artifacts from Thon Tu..

The Duy Tan-Duy Thu cluster and the site of Go Dua

This cluster is the least studied of the three and includes burial sites scattered in Duy Tan and Duy Thu villages, among them the interesting jar burials of the 1st century BC from Go Dua (mound of the coconut palm), a site on a small hill in Thu Bon hamlet, Duy Tan district (15°48'03"N and 108°05'36"N). From an excavation of 16 m², 6 jar burials were found. Five were double jar burials comprising a smaller Sa Huynh style burial jar put inside a larger one (Fig. 9). Such double jar burials have

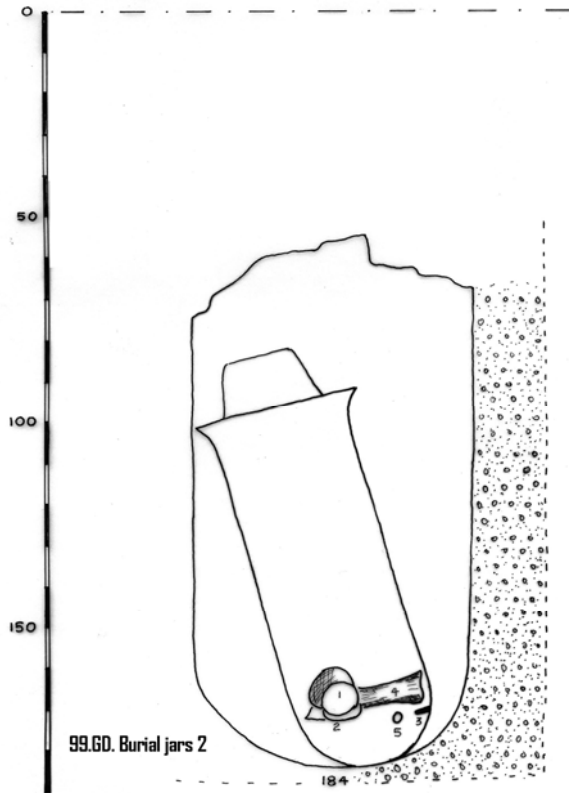


Figure 9. The double jar burial at Go Dua.

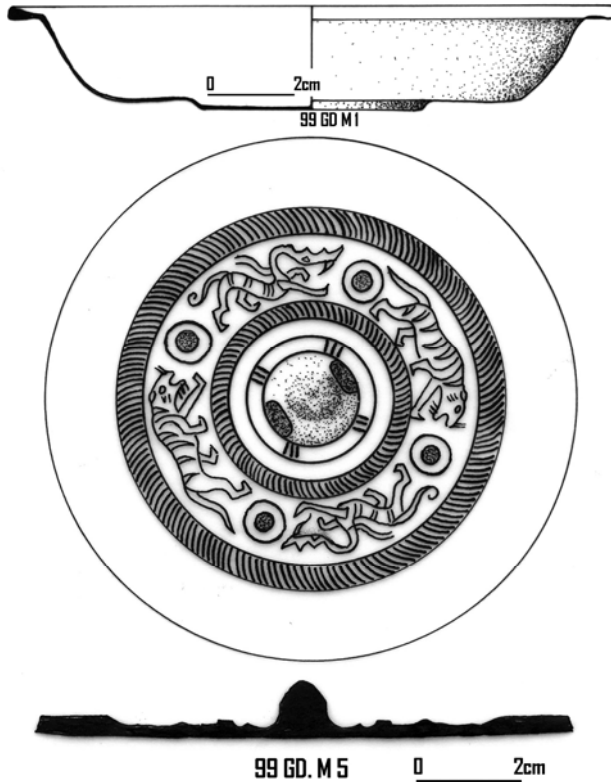


Figure 10. A late Western Han bronze plate and mirror found at Go Dua

been detected only otherwise at Hau Xa II. Go Dua also has Chinese Han Dynasty bronze mirrors and bronze vessels (Fig. 10).

IMPORTED ARTIFACTS IN THE SITES DISCUSSED

Regional and inter-regional trade networks played a fundamental role not only in the process of internal cultural and political development in central Vietnam, but also in the adoption of external cultural influences. The exogenous items can be divided theoretically into three groups; actual imports, items made locally using imported technology, and locally made items that simply imitate foreign goods.

Metal items

The bronze vessels found in these cemeteries present strong evidence for contact with China (Western and Eastern Han Dynasties). A full classification of the Lai Nghi bronze vessels has not been made, but it is clear that they include typical Chinese forms and decoration and are remarkably different from those at Ban Don Ta Phet (western Thailand; Glover 1996: 75-79). No knob-based bowls of the type common in Ban Don Ta Phet have been found in any Sa Huynh culture sites in Thu Bon valley. Several bronze mirrors of Western Han provenance have been found at An Bang, Lai Nghi, Go Dua and Binh Yen. In fact, there are more Han bronze mirrors from Quang Nam than from any other region south of the Dong Son culture, and together with the numerous bronze vessels they indicate intensive contact with northern Vietnam during a late phase of the Sa Huynh culture. A number of bronze coins (*wu shu* and *wang mang* types), bells and other ornaments have also been found unevenly distributed in these sites, mostly from Lai Nghi. A large number of iron knives with loop handles, presumably local imitations of Western Han knives, occur in most Sa Huynh cemeteries.

Stone beads and other ornaments

The high proportion of ornaments found in Southeast Asia made with the most skilled Indian technologies, but in local styles, suggests (following ethno-historical analogies) that Indian products were made to order. Well-established exchange relationships between Southeast Asia and India probably date back to the first half of the first millennium BC (Bellina 2003:290-1).

Grave 29 at Lai Nghi contained an alkaline etched bead (Fig. 11) of an early type (Glover and Bellina 2003: Figure 8.1), together with 4 bronze and 6 iron artefacts and over 300 other beads made from glass, agate, carnelian and nephrite. This jar produced the C14 date of 2086±50 bp (Erl-5995) mentioned above. Two carnelian animal-shaped beads were also discovered in Lai Nghi, one a tiger and the other a water bird. Interestingly, etched beads imported from India have been discovered in abundance in Thailand, but are rare in Vietnam. Apart from the Lai Nghi etched beads, several come from the Giong Ca Vo jar burial site near Ho Chi Minh City, and two unusual etched beads and a turtle-shaped carnelian



Figure 11. An alkaline etched bead from Lai Nghi (Lai Nghi Excavation Team 2002, 2003, 2004. Photo: Andreas Reinecke).

pendant come from Oc Eo culture sites in Long An province, South Vietnam.

The sites of Ban Don Ta Phet, Tha Chana, Khuan Lukpad and Khao Sam Kaeo (Thailand) have yielded carnelian lions, and similar feline pendants come from Myanmar (Glover and Bellina 2003: Fig. 8:20), especially from the Samon Valley - the tiger bead from Lai Nghi is remarkably similar to a carnelian tiger pendant from Binnaka (Glover and Bellina 2003: Fig. 8:20 below). Carnelian felines and bird beads in Southeast Asia are closely related to images of Buddha as Sakyasimha (Lion of the Sakya Clan), and it is highly probable that the lion bead from Ban Don Ta Phet was an early Buddhist icon. However, Hudson (2005:4) also notes a close morphological relationship between the Myanmar carnelian tigers and the bronze Qin Dynasty tigers that served as symbols of military office.

Glass beads and ornaments:

Most glass beads would have been made locally, given the occurrence of glass-making raw materials and semi-finished items in some sites (Francis 2004:2). Several glass beads from Go Ma Voi site have been analysed by X-ray fluorescence, and shown to consist of lead-free glass with a high percentage of sodium (Reinecke et al. 2003:221). Among them, two types are particularly interesting: gold plate glass beads and striped beads. Both types were found in Lai Nghi. It is often believed that the striped beads were made at one of the Indo-Pacific bead making sites (Francis 2004:3), but according to Kotera Chizuko (Graduate School of Humanities and Sociology,

University of Tokyo) this sort of bead originated in West Asia (pers. comm. 2006).

Several gold plate glass beads were found in Lai Nghi cemetery. This is the first time that we have met this sort of bead in Sa Huynh culture sites. Perhaps they were also imported from West Asia. Gold beads and earrings were also probably imported, and the gold earrings from Lai Nghi closely resemble those from Giong Lon in Ba Ria-Vung Tau province in Southern Vietnam. It is possible that they all came from one center.

CONCLUSIONS

The artefacts found in the Thu Bon valley lead us to the conclusion that contacts with the north (i.e. Dong Son and Han China) were stronger in this region of central Vietnam than with India, especially in the early stages from the 5th to the 2nd century BC. To my knowledge, the contacts with India were mainly in trade and religion; those with China were mainly in trade and political aspects; and those with Dong Son/northern Vietnam were mainly in trade but also involved movement of people by sea towards the south. This movement is shown by the distribution of jar burial sites which contain many Dong Son bronze artefacts and extended inhumation burials (these being typical of Dong Son) along the coasts of Quang Nam and Quang Ngai provinces. We should also not ignore trade and exchange with other Southeast Asian regions such as Thailand and Myanmar.

In terms of chronology, from the 4th and 5th centuries BC to the 2nd century A.D the contacts with northern Vietnam and Han China were strongest. From the 2nd to the 5th century AD both China and India played equal roles, then from the 5th century onwards the relationship with India became dominant.

In the Thu Bon valley, each site cluster (Hoi An, Mau Hoa and Duy Tan/Duy Thu) consisted of one or two central places with smaller sites around. It is also clear that the rich graves in Lai Nghi, Go Ma Voi and Go Dua reflect the presence of an elite with economic, cultural, political and religious relations with India and China. It is a fundamental archaeological assumption that a correlation exists between the level of social complexity of a people and the way they treat their dead (Binford 1971:6-29). Ethnographic studies show that the correlation between subsistence strategy, social organization, and mortuary practice is strong: bands and tribes differ comparatively little in mortuary practices, while sedentary agriculturalists vary their practices according to a wide range of age, sex and status distinctions (O'Shea 1984). In all the cemeteries mentioned above we see differences in the quantity and quality of grave goods from very poor to very rich. The presence of juveniles buried with rich grave goods has been given considerable importance in defining the cultural complexity of ancient societies, because such burials are considered indications of ascribed status: it is assumed that young individuals could not have earned these goods on their own. We can see the same situation in Sa Huynh cemeteries.

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