

# JEWELRY FROM LATE PREHISTORIC SITES RECENTLY EXCAVATED IN SOUTH VIET NAM

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper focuses on the rich collection of jewelry from some recent excavations along the Dong Nai and Vam Co rivers in southern Viet Nam. The sites include settlements and jar burial sites such as Go Cao Su, Go Hang, Go Dung, Long Buu, Giong Phet and Giong Ca Vo, all of which have yielded jewelry of agate, carnelian, garnet, rock crystal, nephrite, bronze, iron and gold, as well as terracotta. The sites are dated from about 500 BC to AD 100 by C-14 charcoal dating and typological analysis. A continuous cultural sequence exists within these collections, running from pre-Oc Eo cultures into the Oc Eo phase.*

In the past decade, Vietnamese archaeology has made great achievements. Many research studies have been carried out especially in the south of Viet Nam, where large-scale excavations have been at the following sites: Giong Phet, Giong Ca Vo and Long Buu (Ho Chi Minh City), Go Cao Su (Long An Province) and Go Cay Tung (An Giang Province). Other sites such as Go Hang, Go Dung (Long An Province) were also examined. Most of these sites are located by rivers; the Vam Co and Dong Nai rivers, and along the Soai Riep coast of southeast Viet Nam. Collections from excavations show that this area had a distinctive cultural identity in the later half of the first millennium BC.

## THE SITES AND MATERIALS

Almost all the sites presented below belong to the late Metal Age. Some sites such as Long Buu and Go Cao Su are located on an ancient alluvial terrace. Others such as Go Hang, Go Dung and Go O Chua are in the low-lying rice fields of the Thap Muoi area of Long An Province, situated near an ancient seashore. Giong Phet and Giong Ca Vo are also on an ancient coastline.

Giong Phet and Giong Ca Vo were found and excavated in 1991-94. These are jar burial sites located in low-lying land near the coast between the mouths of the Sai Gon and Dong Nai Rivers, two of the most important transportation routes in the south. They are about 60 km east of Ho Chi Minh City, inside Ganh Rai Bay and opposite to Vung Tau beach. The locations of Giong Phet and Giong Ca Vo are thus very important for cultural interaction between Viet Nam and the Southeast Asian islands.

A 45 m<sup>2</sup> excavation pit at Giong Phet, and a 200 m<sup>2</sup> pit at Giong Ca Vo were excavated in 1993-1994 under the auspices of the Museums of History in Ha Noi and Ho Chi Minh City and the Vietnamese Institute of Archaeology in Hanoi. At these sites over 400 jar burials were found and three samples have been radiocarbon dated, as shown in Table 1.

The accumulated deposits in these sites are nearly 2 m thick. The sites comprise a continuous cultural stratum from about 500 BC to the first century AD. The cultural deposits contained many potsherds and food remains, including fish bones, shells and animal bones, together with many ornaments of shell, pottery and stone. Similar objects were found both inside and outside the burial jars (Dang Van

Table 1. Radiometric dates from southeastern Viet Nam

Site	Method	Age BP (uncal.)	Material	Depth
Giong Ca Vo	C 14	2480±50	Charcoal	1.5m
Giong Ca Vo	C 14	2100±50	Shell	1.6m
Giong Phet	TL	2420±484	Pottery	
Go Cao Su	C 14	2650±70	Charcoal	0.5m
Go Hang	C 14	1970±50	Wood	
Rach Rung	C 14	2780±40	Wood	
Rach Rung	C 14	2800±45	Wood	
Go O Chua	C 14	2420±70	Charcoal	

Thang and Vu Quoc Hien 1995, 1997; Vu Quoc Hien *et al.* 1995; Nguyen Kim Dung and Dang Van Thang 1994, Nguyen Kim Dung *et al.* 1995).

Long Buu (Thu Duc district, Ho Chi Minh City), a settlement site, was excavated in 1994 by the Museums of History in Ho Chi Minh City and Ha Noi. The cultural layer is more than one metre deep, containing much pottery, iron tools, bronze bracelets, fired clay ear pendants and beads; an assemblage very similar to those from Giong Ca Vo and Giong Phet (Nguyen Thi Hau *et al.* 1997:67-94).

Go Cao Su (Duc Hoa District, Ho Chi Minh City) was also excavated in 1994 by the Institute of Archaeology in Ha Noi co-operating with Long An Museum. The site, in a small sand dune overlying a lateritic hill, has a cultural layer 1.8 m deep. The rich collection of pottery shows that this, too, was a settlement site. A radiocarbon date (Table 1) from charcoal indicates that the site belongs to the late prehistoric Iron Age of Viet Nam. In this site, besides pottery, much iron slag and many iron tools were found together with bronze axe moulds, pottery ear pendants and stone beads. The pottery and other finds show a very close relationship with Go Cao, Su Giong Ca Vo, Giong Phet and Long Buu.

Rach Rung, Go Dung, Go O Chua and Go Hang (Vinh Hung and Moc Hoa Districts, Long An Province) were discovered and surveyed by the Long An Museum. All are located in the low-lying rice fields of Thap Muoi. The cultural materials, including many items of jewelry, are similar to those in the above sites.

## THE JEWELRY FROM THE SITES

In this paper, firstly we present the information on the jewelry from Giong Ca Vo and Giong Phet, and then make a comparative study of the ornaments from the sites which were excavated recently in the lower basin of the Vam Co and Dong Nai rivers (Figure 1). It should be appreciated that Giong Phet and Giong Ca Vo are not only jar burial sites, but are also ancient settlements (Dang Van Thang and Vu Quoc Hien 1997). Jewelry from these sites was not only found in burial jars but also in the settlement layers. Nearly 3000 beads (80% of the total jewelry items found) were unearthed at the two sites, made of carnelian, jade, garnet, agate, rock crystal, tektite, glass, shell, gold and baked clay (Figure 2; Tables 2 and 3). There were 465 glass bracelets, 289 of jade and shell, and 27 bronze bracelets found in the jar burials, plus a few from the cultural layers (Figure 3).

The bronze bracelets are similar to examples found at Doc Chua, as well as at Ban Chiang and Ban Na Di in Thailand (Choo 1987:63-4). Their cross-sections vary and include D-, O-, V-, and T-shapes. A gold finger ring and gold beads were also found. Requiring special emphasis are the bicephalous ear pendants with two animal heads (Figure 4:1-5) and the ear pendants with three protruding conical lugs (Figure 4:7). Both of these are distinctive ornaments long regarded as typical Sa Huynh types (Ha Van Tan and Trinh Duong 1977; Loofts-Wissowa 1980-81; Reinecke 1996; Solheim 1984). The number of these ornaments in these sites was surprisingly large in comparison with those found in Sa

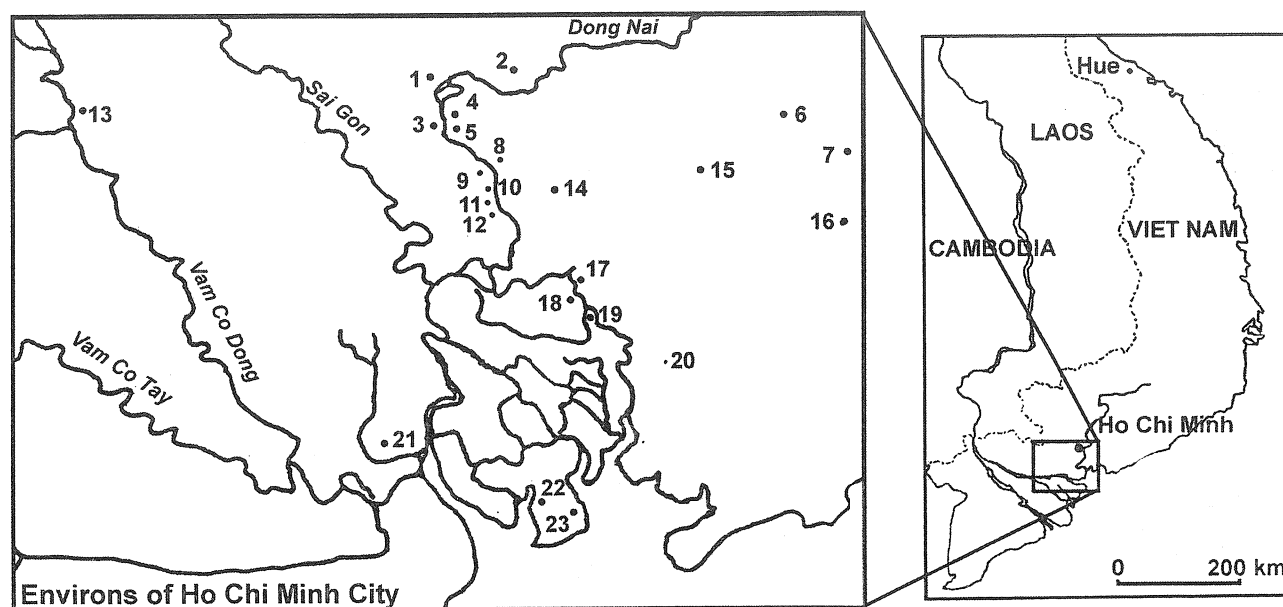


Figure 1. Location of the main sites mentioned in the text. 1. Doc Chua; 2. My Loc; 3. Cu Lao Rua; 4. Ben Ca; 5. Lo Gach; 6. Cau Sat; 7. Suoi Chon; 8. Binh Da; 9. Ngai Thang; 10. Hoi Son; 11. Ben Do; 12. Long Buu; 13. Phuoc Tan; 14. Dau Giay; 15. Phu Hoa; 16. Phuoc My; 17. Phuoc Long; 18. Cai Van; 19. Bau Can; 20. Rach Nui; 21. Giong Phet; 22. Giong Am; 23. Giong Ca Vo.

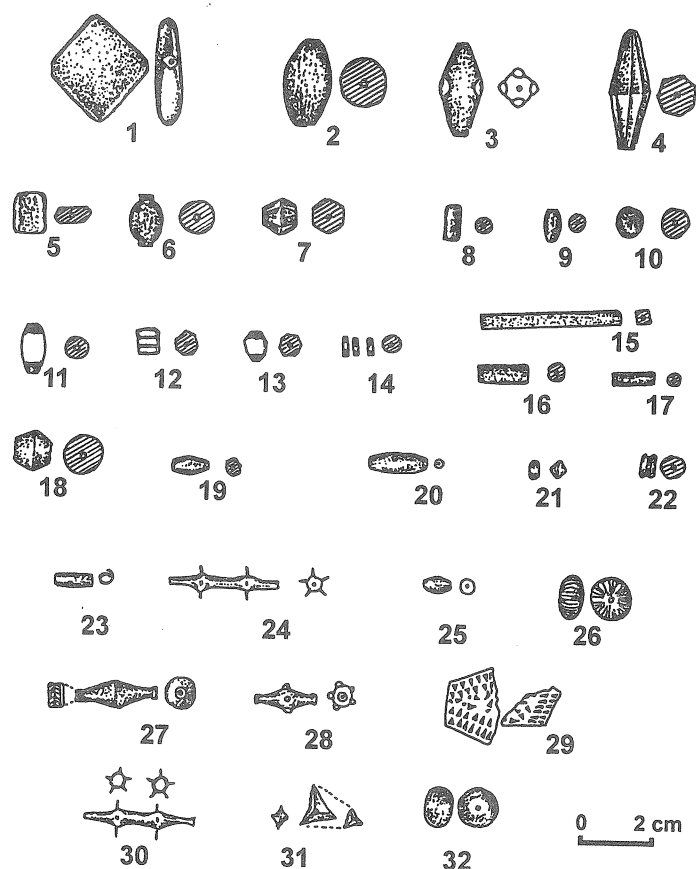


Figure 2. Beads from Giong Phet and Giong Ca Vo arranged by material and type: 1-4. Carnelian; 5-7. Crystal; 8-10. Garnet; 11-14. Banded Agate; 15-17. Semi-precious stone; 18-19. Glass; 20-22. Shell; 23-32.

Huynh sites further to the north. Of the 27 bicephalous pendants, 19 are made of jade and eight of glass. The seven ear pendants with protruding lugs are of carnelian and very fine terracotta. Table 4 gives details of materials used for ear ornament manufacture at Giong Phet and Giong Ca Vo.

The people in Giong Phet and Giong Ca Vo sites worked not only glass (see Salisbury and Glover 1997 for analyses of some of the glass), but also jade for making these special ornaments. One unique jade two-headed pendant and one blank for another example from Giong Ca Vo, together with the carnelian ear pendant with protruding lugs mentioned above, are strong evidence for the manufacture of ornaments in these sites.

Glass and terracotta ear ornaments were also found in the settlement cultural layers. Nearly 300 terracotta ear ornaments could be divided into four types based on their cross-sections. They weigh between 15 and 25 g and are made of very fine clay without sand temper. Some are very hard and polished before firing. In other settlement sites,

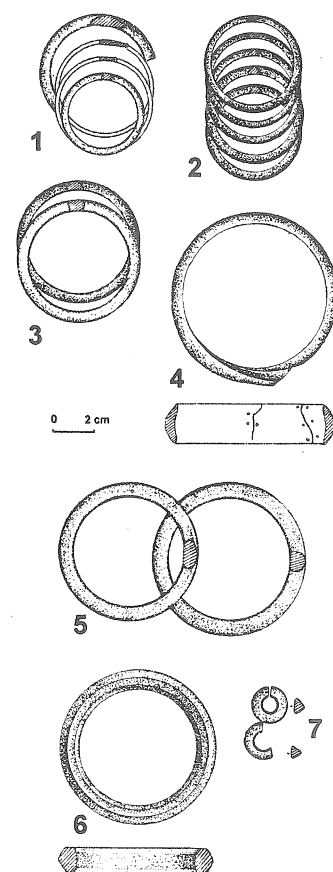


Figure 3: Bracelets from Giong Ca Vo: 1. Carnelian; 4. Shell; 6. Nephrite; the rest of glass.

such as Long Buu, Go Cao Su, Rach Rung, Go Dung and Go Hang, pottery and jewelry like that from Giong Ca Vo was also unearthed. In both the Long Buu and Giong Ca Vo sites, clay ear pendants including a unique form (Figure 4, no. 10) were found together with iron bracelets (Nguyen Thi Hau *et al.* 1997).

In the upper layer of Go Cao Su three beads made of carnelian were collected, and at Go Hang and Go Dung quite a variety of carnelian, gold and glass beads were found. In Go Hang, 300 carnelian, 64 banded pale agate, 272 black and white banded agate and 41 rock crystal beads were excavated. Recently, 14 carnelian, glass and agate beads were also unearthed in Go O Chua (Vuong Thu Hong and Nguyen Duc Dieng 1997). The numerous beads of agate and carnelian, together with iron artefacts and the pottery, date all these sites close to the end of the first millennium BC.

However, the upper levels of Go Hang and Go Dung were continuously occupied after this time, linking the pre-Oc Eo and Oc Eo cultures. Furthermore, some large (4-5 cm

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Table 2: Beads from Giong Phet and Giong Ca Vo, 1993-4 excavations

	Semi-precious stone		Glass	Shell	Gold	Baked clay	Total
	Carnelian	Other					
Giong Phet 1993	35	4	12	4	5		60
Giong Ca Vo 1993	118	136	80	68	12		414
Giong Ca Vo 1994	680	472	652	566	65	7	2442
Total	833	612	744	638	82	7	2916

Table 3: Beads from the 1994 excavation at Giong Ca Vo

Site	Thick tabular diamond	Flat tabular diamond	Corner-less cube	Elliptical	Hexagonal Prism	Spherical	Oblate	Annular	Unusual forms	Total
Carnelian	240	106	2	103	44	182		106	3	786
Nephrite	5				129	2				136
Garnet				10	26	10	5			51
Agate			3	32	19	1				55
Rock crystal	3	5	15	7	12	8	2	70		122
Tektite						2				2
Glass	3	50	12	46	172	168	169	32		652
Shell				20	58	21	250	217		566
Gold			3		22	29			11	65
Terracotta				3		4				7
Total	251	161	35	221	482	427	426	425	14	2442

Table 4: Materials used for ear pendant manufacture from Giong Phet and Giong Ca Vo

	Precious Stone		Glass	Shell	Gold	Metal		Waste		Total
	Carnelian	Jade				Bronze	Iron	Stone	Shell	
Giong Phet	1	2	5			2 (1 bell)				10
Giong Ca Vo (test pit)	1	8	126	8	1	2 bells		1		147
Giong Ca Vo (excavation)	3	20	168	106		23 (3 bells)	3	1	4	328
Total	5	30	299	114	1	27	3	2	4	485

long) etched agate and banded carnelian beads found at Go Hang, Go Dung and Go Gon (Long An Province) indicate trading contacts with India.

#### THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SEMIPRECIOUS STONE AND GLASS ORNAMENTS

As mentioned above, the amount and quality of the jewelry found at Giong Phet and Giong Ca Vo dominates the artefact

assemblages. No other localities have produced such quantities of both carnelian and jade ornaments as these sites. Carnelian beads come in all kinds, including the flat lozenge and spherical shapes which are most numerous. All the carnelian beads are well polished and have small drill holes 3-5 mm in diameter. Some beads are elliptical (Figure 2, no. 2) and there are also collar-beads (Figure 2, no. 6) like those from Arikamedu in South India (Francis 1986). Eight

carnelian beads were etched with white lines. There was one carnelian bracelet and one carnelian ear ornament with three projections, like the typical Sa Huynh ones more commonly made of jade.

Together with carnelian, other precious stone beads of etched agate, violet-red garnet, pale violet-coloured amethyst, and some almost colourless and as transparent as glass, are trade beads whose origin was most probably India (Francis 1991:3-8). These were found in great numbers, over 1300 beads in total. In Burial No. 7 in excavation pit 3 at Giong Ca Vo, for example, there were 62 carnelian beads; 26 beads of garnet, agate and rock crystal; 5 gold beads; a few of shell and many of glass.

Glass beads are very abundant at all sites. They are all monochrome with many different types, sizes and colours. There are plenty of opaque glass beads which appear to have been made from drawn glass tubes by the *lada* technique. Many of these glass beads most likely originated in India (Francis 1991; Glover 1990a). However, many beads were also discovered which were probably not from India. For instance, some cylindrical jade beads have two parallel cuts at each end to facilitate the positioning of the drill holes. Beads from India do not appear to possess this feature, which also occurs on jade beads from Sa Huynh and Dong Son sites, as well as on some of the spherical carnelian beads from Ban Don Ta Phet in western Thailand (Glover pers. comm.).

We can be sure of the local manufacture of some of these semi-precious stone ornaments; for example the two-headed animal pendants and the ear pendants with three projections, because the nephrite-jade raw materials were commonly used in ancient sites in Viet Nam (Nguyen Kim Dung 1998) and are virtually unknown in India or regions to the west. Additionally, some very distinctive products were made from this material, such as the uniquely shaped bicephalous pendant found at Giong Ca Vo (Figure 4:1) (Dang Van Thang and Vu Quoc Hien 1997; Nguyen Kim Dung *et al.* 1995).

Glass was also manufactured at these sites. Small yellow and dark orange flat beads, once considered locally made in Oc Eo (Le Xuan Diem *et al.* 1995), were also found in Giong Phet and Giong Ca Vo in great quantities. Cylindrical glass beads, light green in colour and translucent, are also not typical Indian glass products even though they were seemingly made by the drawing process. In addition, eight of the two-headed animal ear pendants were made of glass, some turquoise blue in colour, and these, together with 289 green, black, brown and violet bracelets prove the local origin of these ornaments. Recent compositional analyses (Salisbury and Glover 1997) suggest that some of the glass beads, and at least one of the bicephalous animal pendants, were made from a type of low-sodium, high-potash glass not

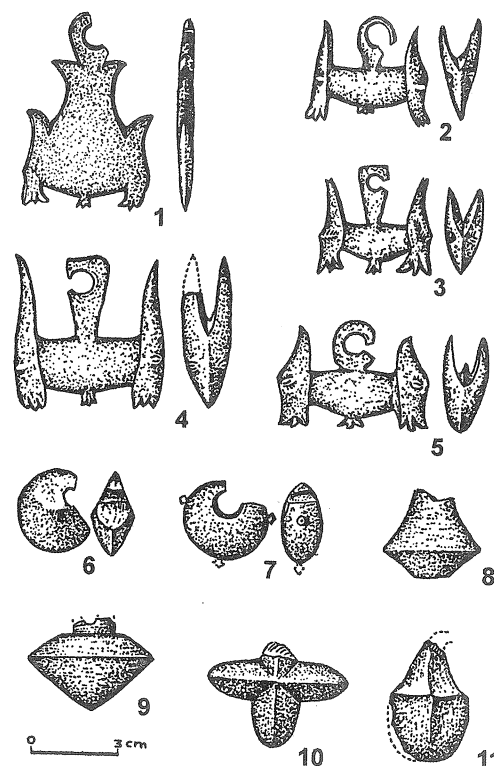


Figure 4: Bi-cephalous ear pendants. 1-4. Jade and nephrite; 5. glass; and other ear ornaments of clay from Giong Phet and Giong Ca Va.

common in India (although it is found in quantity amongst roughly contemporary glass beads and ornaments from Thailand). Some white, fine sand found in a hole at the bottom of one of the excavation pits (Dang Van Thang *et al.* 1998) also supports the conclusion that glass was made locally in southern Viet Nam.

If those signs are enough to prove that a glass-making tradition once existed in this area, then it clearly predates the Oc Eo culture. Francis (1991:34-8) suggested that glassmakers came to southern Viet Nam from Arikamedu in India in the 2nd century AD. But the radiocarbon dates from Giong Ca Vo and Giong Phet (Table 1) shows that glass was being made there at an earlier date.

#### OTHER TYPES OF ORNAMENTS

Outstanding among other locally-made ornaments are many types of shell products, such as ear pendants made from *Tridacna* and *Trochus* shell, species still used today for making beads and bracelets sold in the Can Gio beach markets. Waste and unfinished objects of shell were common in burial and settlement contexts, as were terracotta ear pendants. Terracotta ear pendants with lozenge, prismatic

and other shapes were also found in jar burial sites in caves on Tabon Point, Palawan Island in the Philippines (Fox 1970:Figure 43).

In Somrong Sen (Cambodia), a few examples of the three-pointed ear pendants were found, similar to those described above and from Sa Huynh (Quang Ngai Province) (Loofs-Wissowa 1980-81:57). Others have turned up, but without good excavated contexts, in various parts of Thailand. But nowhere can we find such a great and plentiful number of these artefacts as at Giong Ca Vo. Important evidence for local manufacture includes post-firing waste pieces and some objects not yet fired. Moreover, finished terracotta ear pendants were found not only in the jar burials but also in the cultural layers at all depths to the base of the site.

## DISCUSSION

The ornaments in the Can Gio jar burial sites demonstrate not only an extensive exchange network and cultural contacts with India, but also contacts with Thailand since very similar bronze bracelets and bronze bells occur at Ban Chiang and Ban Don Ta Phet. At the last site a typical Sa Huynh two-headed nephrite animal pendant was excavated (Glover 1990b). At Nong Nor (Thailand), beads and T-section shell bracelets (Chang 1996) similar to those from Giong Ca Vo have been excavated, although in earlier (Neolithic) contexts.

The close similarity in detail between so many Vietnamese and Indian beads suggests a pattern of cultural exchange or trade rather than "cultural convergence". There has long been strong evidence to show that the influence of Indian culture crossed into Southeast Asia by sea and spread inland along the rivers. The jewelry from Giong Ca Vo and Giong Phet indicates that such contacts occurred earlier than previously recognised, and that they were far-reaching. The evidence from these sites also suggests cultural exchanges with the emerging Oc Eo Culture - the main component of Funan Civilization. At the same time, much of the evidence demonstrates a strong indigenous cultural development, with local elements in all assemblages. We refer to these southern Iron Age sites as "pre-Oc Eo" (Ha Van Tan 1986, 1996) and regard them as the foundation from which developed the Oc Eo Culture of the 1st millennium AD.

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