

CON CHAN TIEN: THE BEGINNINGS OF THE PRE-DONG SON PERIOD IN THE MA AND CHU RIVER BASINS

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses some very distinctive prehistoric pottery excavated from the archaeological site of Con Chan Tien, which gives us new insights into pre-Dong Son (Phung Nguyen) cultures in Vietnam.

INTRODUCTION

Prehistoric pottery has been excavated from many archaeological sites at the confluence of the Ma and Chu rivers in northern Vietnam. However, the 1960-61 excavations of the Dong Son site of Thieu Duong produced several pieces of pottery with very distinctive engraved curvilinear motifs (Fig. 1). The site is located in

the village of the same name, Dong Son district, Thanh Hoa Province. The excavation covered an area of 450 m². Little attention was afforded the pottery at the time of excavation because of the limited number of pieces in the assemblage. Similar pottery with engraved wave motifs was also found during the 1975-76 excavations of several pre-Dongson sites (Dong Khoi, Bai Man, Dong Tien, Quy Chu and Con Cau) in the same region by archaeologists from the Institute of Archaeology (Hanoi). More recently, however, excavations in this area at the site of Con Chan Tien have produced sufficient examples of this form of pottery decoration to give us important new insights into the development of both pottery and pre-Dongson cultures in this important part of Vietnam, prior to the Dong Son period.

CON CHAN TIEN

Con Chan Tien is located in Thieu Van Village, Thieu Yen District, Thanh Hoa Province. The site was discovered in May 1980 and excavated over two seasons in 1981 and 1991. The first excavation in 1981 was undertaken by Trinh Can, Vu Quoc Hien and Quang Van Cay (Trinh 1982; Quang 1981), and covered an area of 130 m². The second excavation conducted at the site in 1991 (Pham 1992) revealed a single cultural layer, 55 cm in depth.

The majority of the artefacts from Con Chan Tien were manufactured from either stone or pottery. The stone artefacts were manufactured from local basalt and soft green jade. Amongst the wide range of stone tools in the assemblage were 90 complete stone adzes, many broken adzes (Figs 2, 3), and tens of thousands of lithic flakes. In terms of the development of manufacturing techniques, the adzes from Con Chan Tien appear to be more advanced than those from Bai Man and Dong Khoi.

Amongst the wide range of earthenware artefacts found at the site were zoomorphic figurines (Fig. 4), spindle whorls and possible ear ornaments (Fig. 5). Tens of thousands of pottery sherds were also excavated. The pottery comprises 3 main types:

1. Fine, decorated black pottery;
2. Coarse, sandy red-slipped pottery;
3. Spongy light brown pottery (fewer sherds in number).

The design elements on the pottery were mostly curvilinear zoned incision, with various forms of stamped

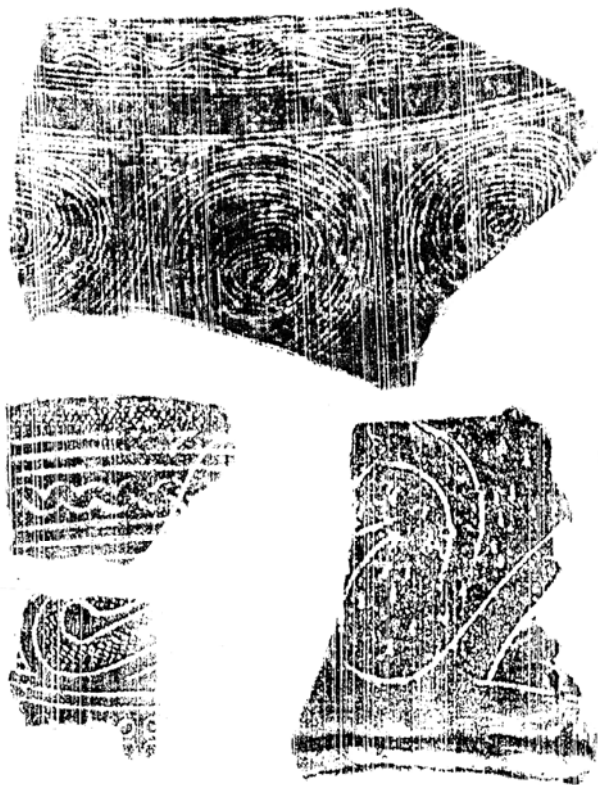


Figure 1. Incised and punctate pottery from Thieu Duong.

filling between the incised lines (Figs 6.7). Some small concentric circle motifs were also noted. The curvilinear decoration is very similar to that recovered at Dong Khoi and Bai Man.

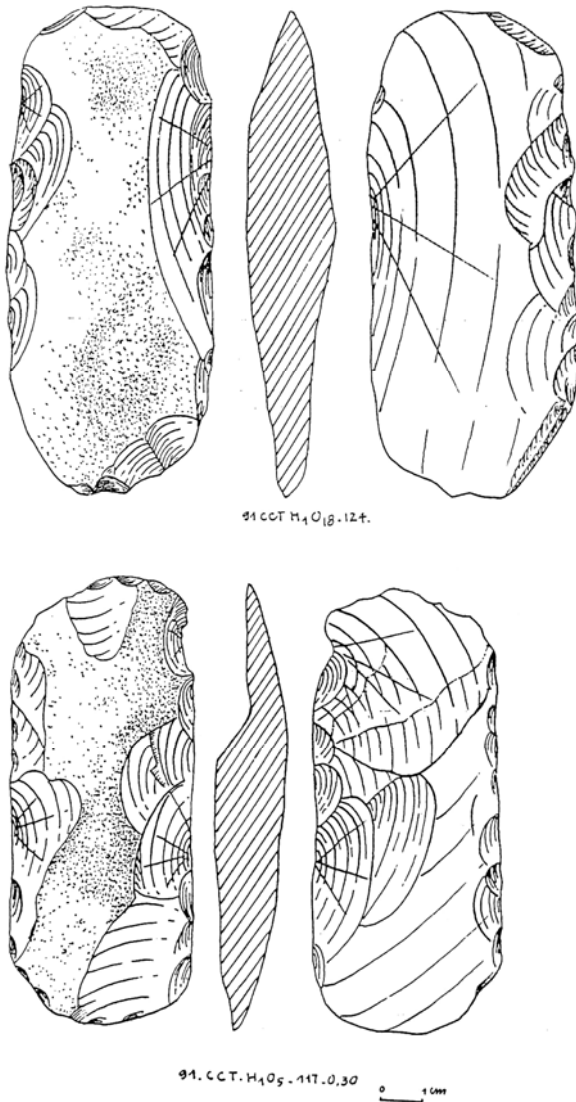


Figure 2. Unfinished stone adzes from Con Chan Tien.

CONCLUSIONS

Both excavations at Con Chan Tien produced pottery that is very similar to that found in the Phung Nguyen sites. Parallels were noted in vessel forms, small zoomorphic figurines, as well as the motifs used to decorate pottery. However, the pottery from Con Chan Tien represents a different stage of development from Phung Nguyen. At Con Chan Tien, there are fewer motifs in the repertoire,

and the motifs are larger and more crudely applied. These marked differences suggest that Con Chan Tien represents an earlier stage of development than the Phung Nguyen culture proper, and that it may have been the starting point of the pre-Dong Son cultural sequence at the confluence of the Ma and Chu rivers.

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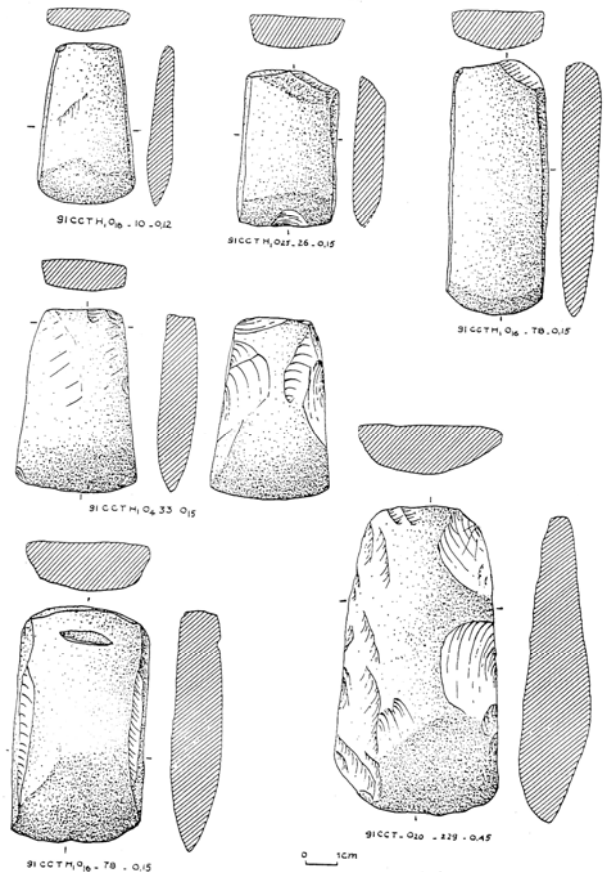


Figure 3. Stone adzes from Con Chan Tien.

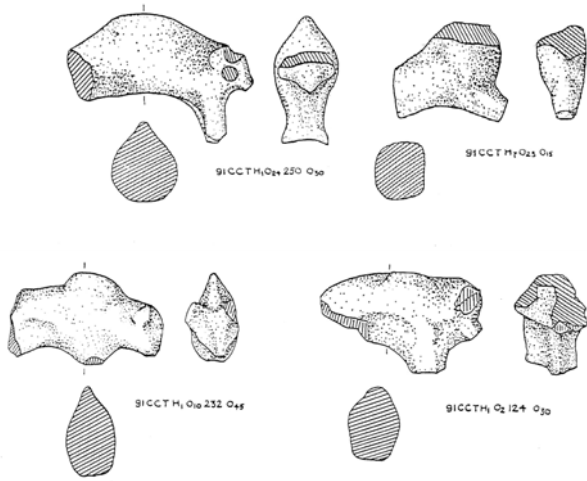


Figure 4. Earthenware animal figurines from Con Chan Tien (scale as Fig. 3).

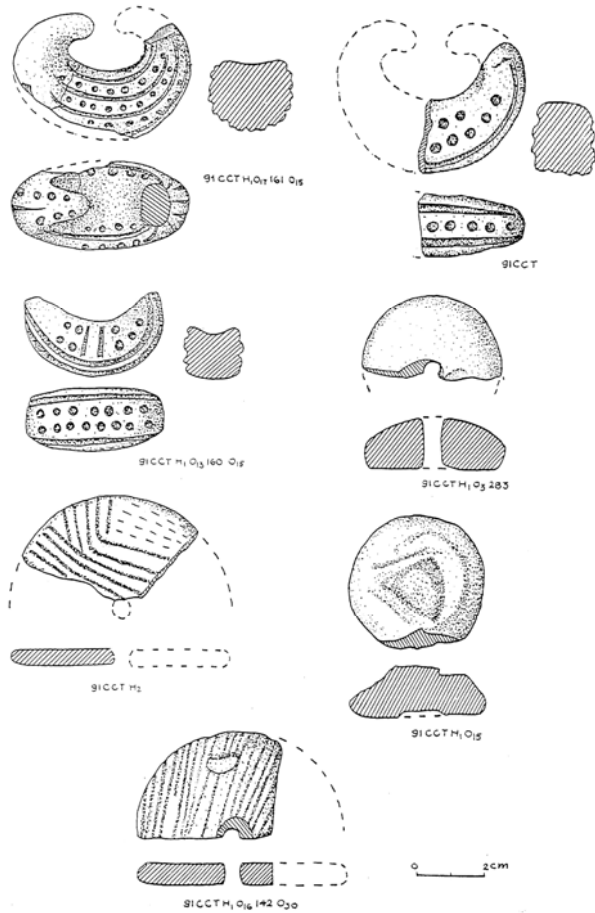


Figure 5. Earthenware ear ornaments and spindle whorls from Con Chan Tien.

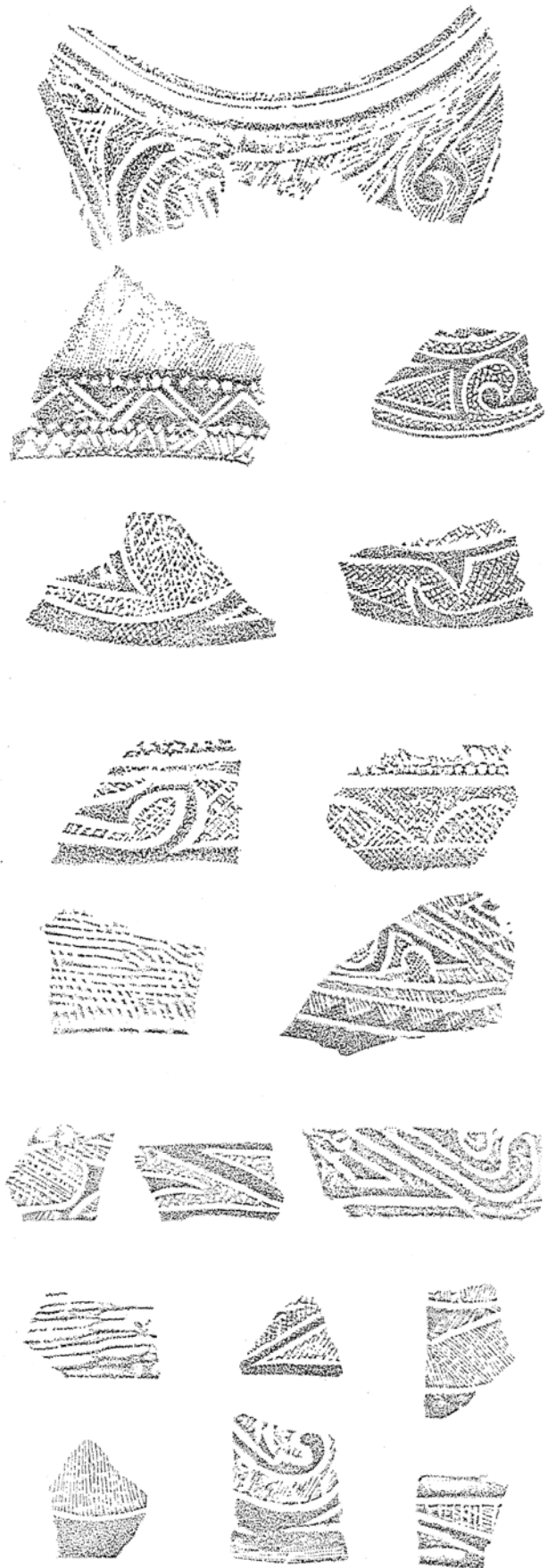


Figure 6 (opposite). Decorated sherds from Con Chan Tien.