

# RECENT DISCOVERY AND EXCAVATION OF A SA HUYNH CULTURE SITE ON LY SON ISLAND (CENTRAL VIETNAM)

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper deals with some interim results from an archaeological excavation carried out at the Xom Oc site on Ly Son Island, Quang Ngai Province, Central Vietnam. The site has an undisturbed stratigraphy, 1.1 to 1.5 metres in depth, formed of sand, soil and seashells. The objects found in Xom Oc, especially the pottery, indicate that it belongs to the Sa Huynh culture. However, there are hundreds of tools made of Tridacna and Turbo shell, suggesting that Xom Oc shared characteristics with Xom Con, an earlier culture distributed along the coast of Central Vietnam. As well as the evidence of settlement, a grave of two adults with rich burial gifts and the burial of an infant in a jar were also discovered. A date of 3000-2000 BP is proposed for the general dating of Xom Oc, from the early to the late phase of the Sa Huynh culture.*

## INTRODUCTION

Ly Son Island (Cu Lao Re) is located in the northeast of Quang Ngai Province (Central Viet Nam), 29 kilometres offshore, from 15°21'00" to 15°27'15" north and from 109°3'30" to 109°10'30" east. The area of the island is nearly 11 km<sup>2</sup> and its present population is about 18,000 people.

The Xom Oc site is located near an ancient stream at the foot of the Hon Soi hill in the northwest of the island. It was discovered in 1996 by a cadre from the Quang Ngai Museum. In January 1997, the site was investigated by the Institute of Archaeology. The first excavation was carried out in April 1997 under a co-operative program of excavation between the Institute of Archaeology and the Quang Ngai Museum (Pham Thi Ninh 1997a-d).

## EXCAVATION

The Xom Oc site was buried in a sand dune one thousand square metres in area. From north to south it slopes from the top to the foot of the sand dune. The excavation covered 60 m<sup>2</sup> (5m x 12m) and was slanted at an angle of 65°

from the southwest to the northeast. The excavation was restricted to six small trenches.

The cultural deposit at the Xom Oc site varies from 110 to 150 cm thick and it lies over a layer of white sand. The cultural deposit is composed of three layers and is mainly a grey-brown sandy clay mixed with shells of gastropods and bivalves. In general, the cultural deposit has distinct, unmixed upper, middle and lower layers, except where some parts are disturbed owing to the phenomenon of burials interred directly into the habitation site. The sterile base is a layer of white sand.

## REMAINS

In the components forming the cultural deposit of the Xom Oc site, the ancient inhabitants left abundant food remains such as mollusc shells, animal bones and fish bones. The mollusc shells were present from the upper to the lower levels of the cultural deposit, especially in the upper layer between 60 and 100 cm depth. A 20 cm thick lens at a depth of 60 to 80 cm contained 463 fish vertebrae and 101 fish jaws, with nearly two million shells of gastropods and bivalves. These mollusc shells include species of *Tridacna* and *Turbo*. A literature review of the scientific names of the different kinds of molluscs and fishes, and their usual habitats, has been undertaken.

Between the depths of 50 and 160 cm, nine clusters of concentrated potsherds and eight mounded piles were discovered. These clusters and piles are often related to firing areas and human burials. We have found vestiges of seven graves dug directly into these areas. However, only two graves have a clearly identifiable cutting. The first one is a jar burial, specifically a high-footed bowl with a lid, discovered at the depth of 100 cm. This is the secondary burial of the bones of a child. The bones of this small child were arranged very carefully along with several beads made of shells.

The second burial was found at the depth of 130-160 cm under a mound of 20 to 25 rocks. This is a double burial with the bones of two adults in a rectangular grave

oriented 30° to the west of the north-south axis. The grave was covered by the shells of large gastropods and bivalves. Before laying the dead, the ancient inhabitants at Xom Oc scattered a thin layer of yellow sand on the bottom, and covered it with broken potsherds. The dead were then laid on this fragmented pottery layer with the head directed toward the north. One of the skeletons is smaller than the other. The braincase is broken but the face and jaws are quite intact. The second skeleton has flexed leg bones, while the torso points in the same direction as the first one. The head was positioned on the left arm of the other burial. From our initial study, the bones might belong to a couple (male and female). This would be the first instance of this kind of burial associated with the Sa Huynh culture.

The double burial contained many funeral goods. At the head and feet of the flexed skeleton were large pots, and its folded legs were covered by a large, high-footed bowl. Carinated vessels and small pots were placed along the right side of the two corpses. The ceramics here are examples of wares very popular in Sa Huynh cultural sites (Ha Van Tan 1982; Vu Cong Quy 1991). They were decorated by red and graphite black bands in combination with skilfully incised motifs (Figure 3). Large gastropod shells with beautiful pink grains were placed on the chest of the flexed skeleton. At its left elbow, there was a bronze arrowhead in the same style as the bronze arrowheads from Binh Chau, Central Vietnam (Ngo Si Hong 1987).

The archaeological evidence obtained reveals the close relationship between the ancient inhabitants at Xom Oc and their counterparts at Binh Chau.

#### ARTIFACTS

A total of eight stone hoes and two adzes was found in the excavated pit. These tools were made of metamorphic rock and represent the unshouldered type of adze, elliptical in cross-section. They were discovered at the depth of 80-100 cm. They are similar to the hoes found in the Long Thanh site (cf. Chu Van Tan and Dao Linh Con 1978) which belongs to an early stage of the Sa Huynh culture, dated to around 3000 BP (Figure 1). Meanwhile, five other stone tools including a pestle, hammerstone, anvil, mortar and grinding stone were also found in the cultural deposit. We also found round stone beads at the depth of 80 cm.

The outstanding feature of the Xom Oc tool collection is that many were made of mammal bone, fish bone and mollusc shell. We have found 224 projectile points made of bone from large mammals and fish, and 90 chisels and scrapers made of mollusc shell (*Tridacna* and *Turbo*). These were concentrated at the depth of 60-80 cm (Figure 2). There were also many ornaments made of shell, such as earrings, bracelets, beads, and so on. The shell chisels and scrapers are very similar to those of the Metal Age

Xom Con culture, along the coastal stretch of the southern end of Central Vietnam.

As well as the bronze arrowhead fragment in the double burial, some iron tool fragments were discovered in the upper layer in association with the pottery concentrations and stone mounds.

Four glass artifacts belonging to the late phase were found during the excavation, notably a triple-tanged earring (*ling-ling-o*) made of blue glass.

In the large excavation trench 60 square metres in area, we found ten intact earthenware vessels and 33,000 potsherds. The intact vessels are carinated pots, carinated jars, high-footed bowls and other bowls (Figure 3). They have the characteristics of the Sa Huynh culture including incisions and designs with a combination of red- and graphite-painted bands. The Sa Huynh potsherds were predominantly found in the early cultural phase at the depth of 80 to 150cm. Han ceramics with small, square impressions were discovered from the depth of 70 cm upwards, and early Champa ceramics were found at the same levels. The early Champa pottery here has a very hard matrix and is more refined than the Sa Huynh pottery. However, some wavy designs on the Champa pottery are the same as their Sa Huynh counterparts. This evidence shows that there is great difficulty in distinguishing where the early Champa pottery begins and where the late Sa Huynh pottery ends (cf. Ngo Si Hong 1987).

#### CONCLUSIONS

The cultural deposit at the Xom Oc site on Ly Son Island is 110 cm to 150 cm thick, and was laid down continuously without interruption. That evidence shows that the site was occupied over a long period. However, there are two phases of development. The early phase is characterized by Long Thanh-style stone hoes, together with chisels and scrapers made of shell (*Tridacna* and *Turbo*). Round-bottomed pottery with cord-marked designs and incised decoration, combined with red- and graphite-painted bands, is similar to Long Thanh pottery. The dating of the early stage would therefore be similar to the Long Thanh site, representing an early stage of the Sa Huynh culture, which is dated to 2875±60 BP (BLn 2094) (Ngo Si Hong 1985).

The later stage is characterized by red- and graphite-painted pottery with carinated forms similar to the pottery style of the Binh Chau site, also assigned to the Sa Huynh culture. It included metal artifacts such as bronze arrowheads and iron knives, as well as impressed Han pottery. However, tools made of *Tridacna* and *Turbo* still persisted. The dating of this stage may lie between 2500 and 2000 BP.

Based on the archaeological evidence, we may conclude that the subsistence of the ancient Xom Oc inhabitants chiefly depended on collecting marine molluscs and fishing. The habitat of the ancient Xom Oc inhabitants

was not exactly the same as the environment of the inland sites which display a Sa Huynh cultural expression, even though the stone, bronze and pottery artifacts at Xom Oc have the characteristics of the Sa Huynh culture. It is readily deduced that the environment and lifestyle of the Xom Oc inhabitants were closely connected to a marine ecosystem, so this site may be considered a maritime variant of the Sa Huynh culture.

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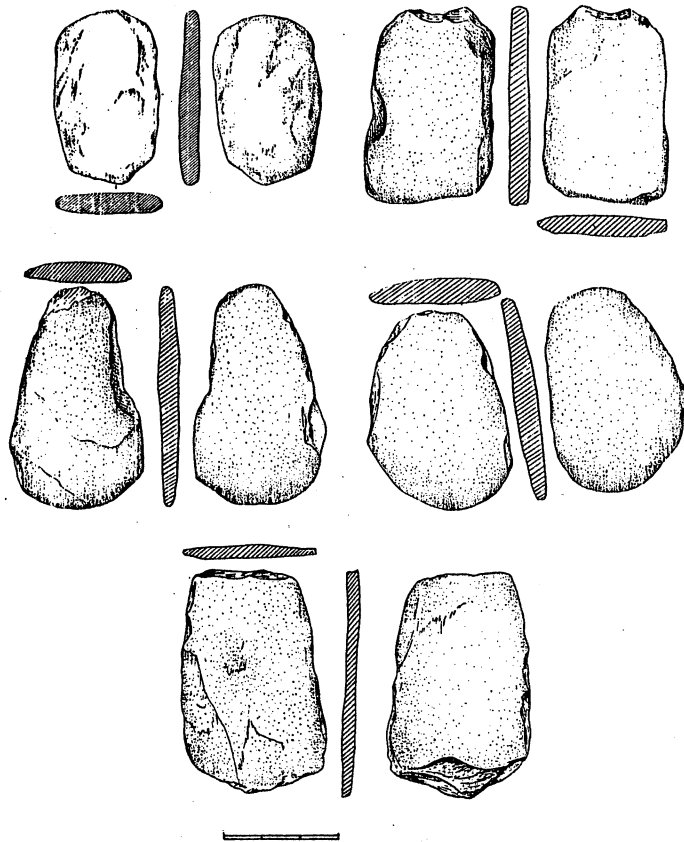


Figure 1. Stone hoes from the Xom Oc site. Scale is 6 cm long.

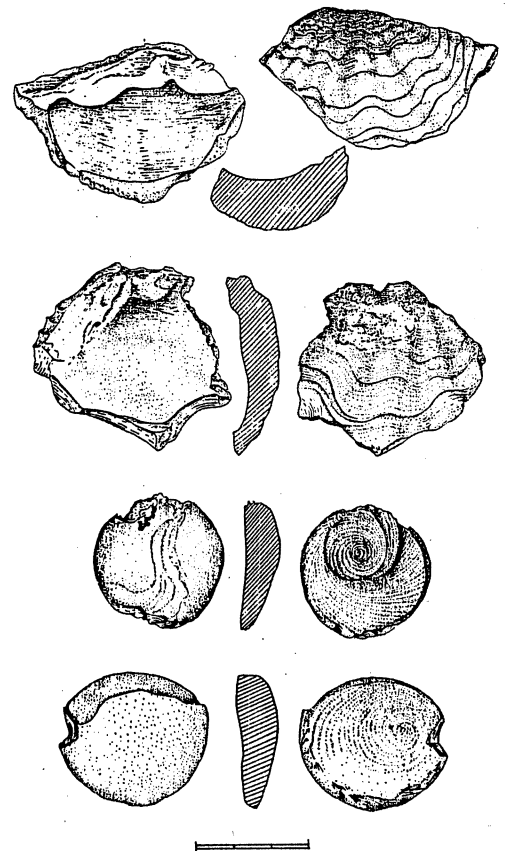


Figure 2. Shell tools (*Tridacna* and *Turbo*) from the Xom Oc site. Scale is 6 cm long.

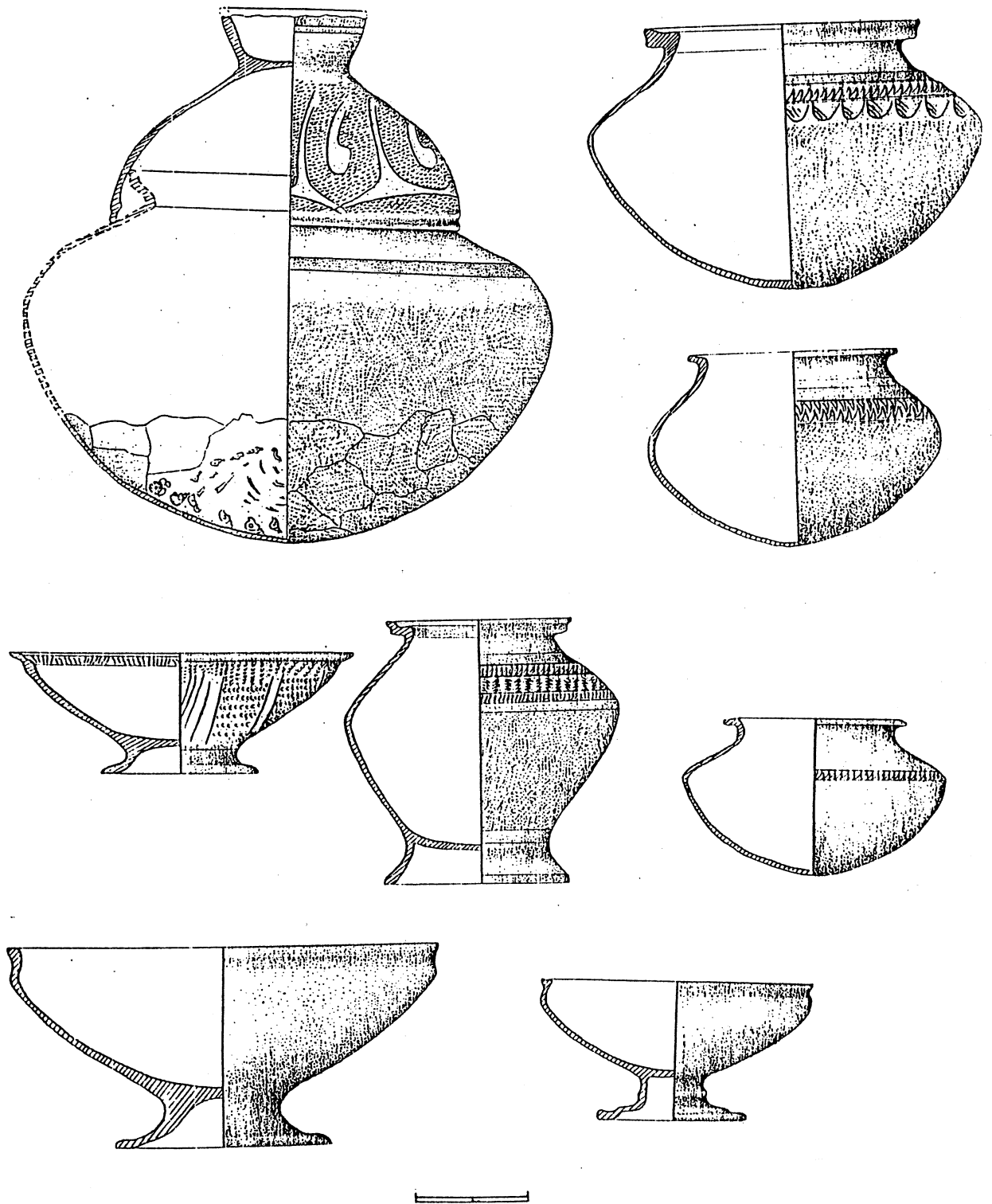


Figure 3. Pottery from the double burial at Xom Oc. Scale is 8 cm long.