

HEGER I DRUMS, BRONZE HALBERDS AND RANKED SOCIETIES IN THE MEKONG BASIN

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the role of Heger I drums and bronze halberds in burials of elites in the Mekong basin during the last millennium BC. The archaeological evidence clearly establishes that these items of material culture were status markers and prestige goods buried with groups in control of early exchange networks on the Southeast Asian mainland. While bronze drums might appear to be randomly distributed along the Mekong basin, this research shows that they are strategically located at critical points on river systems where water transport is interrupted.

INTRODUCTION

On the Khorat Plateau, the last millennium BC was a period of marked social change and the emergence of chiefdoms. The same period of prehistory in this and other parts of the Southeast Asian mainland is marked by the appearance of Heger I type drums and bronze halberds which are generally recognized as the regalia of early chiefs, symbols of economic power and social status. This paper discusses the distribution of Heger I type drums at various locations along the Mekong river valley in Laos, Thailand and Vietnam and explains the rationale behind their distribution.

DISTRIBUTION OF HEGER TYPE I DRUMS

Altogether, ten bronze drums have been found in the Mekong Basin. Figure 1 shows their distribution at nine archaeological sites in the Mekong River Valley and its tributaries. Four bronze drums were uncovered in Laos. These include the Laos drum (Goloubew 1929) from Pakse, the Sane drum from Sane islet (Sørensen 1992; Nitta 1995) and two unnamed drums from Savannakhet (Parmentier 1932). Five additional drums were found in the Mekong basin and its tributaries and on the Khorat Plateau. These include the Don Tan Drum (Nitta 1994) from Don Tan islet, the Ban Chi Thwang drum from the site of the same name (Na Nakhonphanom 1989), the Ban Na Pho drum (Damrikul and Worasaard 1980), the Pakthongchai drum (Nitta 1994) and the Kamcha I drum (Nitta 2000b).

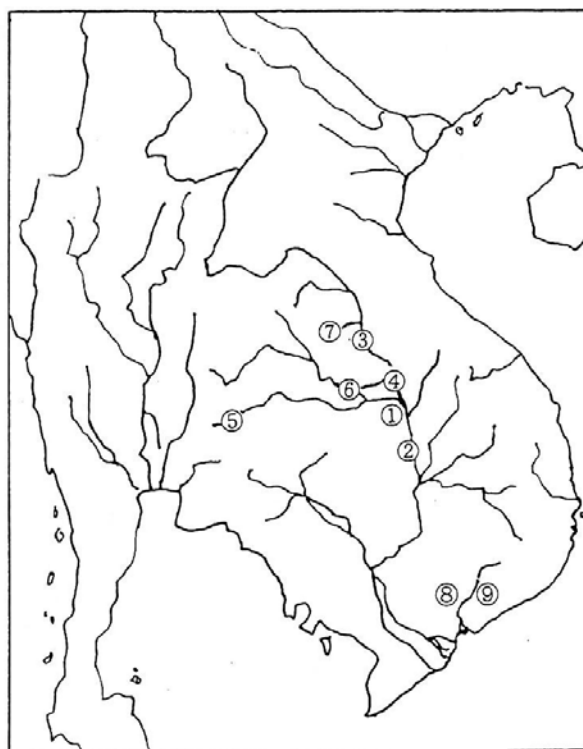


Figure 1. Locations discussed in the text.

All of these drums are classified as Heger I type drums. The Laos drum and the Sane drum from Champassac belong to the earliest sub-type of Heger I drums. Based on the analysis of the stylised motifs (birdmen, parallelograms and facing triangles) on its tympanum, the Don Tan drum is classified in the middle sub-type of Heger I drums. The Ban Chi Thwang and Ban Na Pho Tai drums are classified as later Heger I type drums.

A closer examination of the geographic features of the sites where the bronzes were located reveals an interesting pattern. Without exception, all of the nine places along the Mekong Valley shown in Figure 1 are located at strategic points along the Mekong where geographic features (rapids, waterfalls, river mouths) interrupt river transport. The Laos drum was originally located near Pakse, a large settlement close to the Mekong River.

Little data on this important find are available apart from the fact that it was found in a rice field along the road from Pakse to Ubon Ratchathani (Goloubew 1929). The location of the drum is significant. Pakse is linked to southern Vietnam by the Mekong. The Mekong is navigable from Khone to Pakse but river transport is interrupted by the Kemmarang rapids which extend upstream to Savannkhet, where two bronze drums were also found (Parmentier 1932).

The Sane drum was found by a fisherman on the small island of Sane, which lies in the middle of the Mekong, south of Pakse near Khone. The drum was buried in a deep layer of sand, one metre thick. The tympanum of the Sane drum was missing when found. During my fieldwork on Sane Island, my informants confirmed that the drum had originally functioned as a grave good.

The Don Tan drum came from a similar context at the site of Don Tan on a small islet in the Mekong near the Laotian border. The drum was found amongst cultural materials in a burial layer two metres below the surface. The site of Don Tan is located near the town of Mukhdahan, a port where river and land transport meet, thereby linking the Khorat Plateau to northern Vietnam. Both Savannakhet and Mukhdahan are port towns at the crossroads of land and river transportation systems. Both are linked to Quang Tri, an important port during the Han dynasty (206 BC- AD 220), and the Khorat Plateau. The bronze drum from Don Tan was found in association with other bronze grave goods, beads and pottery rollers, now housed in the Palace Museum in Bangkok. These grave goods are similar to grave goods from the late phase at Ban Chiang.

The Ban Na Pho Tai drum was recovered from the site of Ban Na Pho Tai (Damrikul and Worasaard 1980). The site is located at the junction of the Mekong and the Lam Nam Phai rivers, not far from the Mun River junction.

The Ban Chi Thwang drum was collected at Ban Chi Thwang which is strategically located at the junction of the Mun and Chi rivers, the most important tributaries of the Mekong on the Khorat Plateau. The Chi flows from the northwest to the southeast and joins the Mun River at Chi Thwang, west of Ubon Ratchathani.

Sørensen (1979) found the six drums from Ongbah Cave, near boat coffins which contained the remains of high-ranking people. There can be little doubt that the drums functioned as grave goods. The cave at Ongbah is located in the upper reaches of the Khwae Yai River in Kanchanaburi Province, west Thailand.

The drums from Khao Kwak Cave in Ratburi Province in south Thailand were associated with fragments of a thin-walled bronze bowl and glass beads that resemble those found at Ban Don Ta Phet in Kanchanaburi Province. At Ban Chiang, the drum was found with painted pottery attached to the inside of the tympanum. Both the drum and the painted pottery had been deliberately placed in the burials as grave goods.

Several fragments of Heger I type bronzes have also been recovered from locations on the Malay Peninsula. Two bronze drums were found at Kampong Sungai Lang,

in the state of Selangor. The site has a radiocarbon date of c. 500 BC. The drums were found beneath a clay mould, resting on a wooden plank. The drums also functioned as grave goods (Peacock 1965). An incomplete drum consisting of part of a tympanum was also recovered from Batu Pasir Garam, on the River Tembeling in Pahang, after the great flood of 1926. The broken tympanum which was decorated with stylised birds is similar to that from Selangor. This fragment is housed in the Raffles Museum (Tweedie 1970: Fig.19).

THE EMERGENCE OF RANKED SOCIETIES IN SOUTHERN VIETNAM.

In Southern Vietnam, evidence for social changes consistent with the emergence of ranked societies first appears at archaeological sites in the Dong Nai basin. In this region, small tributaries between the hills and low mountains flow into the Dong Nai River which, in turn, flows into the Mekong. There is firm evidence for early civilization at the two sites of Hang Gon and Long Giao (Le et al. 1991), both dated to the second century AD. Excavations (Parmentier 1929) carried out at Hang Gon in 1927 produced a cist tomb made from large granite slabs. At the four corners of the tomb, stone pillars had originally been erected. The floor of the tomb measured between 440 cm in length and 196 cm in width and 178 cm in height. The inside measurements were 400 cm in length, 150 cm in width and 137 in height. There can be little doubt that the tomb contained the remains of a high-ranking individual such as a chief.

Recent excavations near the site of Hang Gon have also unearthed pieces of broken cist tombs that suggest that the field was a cemetery for chiefs and their families who ruled in the Xuan Loc area. The tombs also contained bronze halberds. Pottery and fragments of bronze buried near the cist tomb indicate that the burials are dated to the first century BC. All of this suggests that in the first century BC, a ranked society existed in the Xuan Loc area, which was organized by a chief who possessed bronze weapons of Chinese origin. The cist tomb is an unequivocal symbol of chiefly status.

In southern Vietnam, there are a number of other sites with evidence for a presence of chiefs buried with bronze halberds. Some of these halberds are distinguished by wings on each side, which are used to fix the weapon to a wooden handle. They are a Vietnamese type, strongly influenced by Han dynasty halberds found at sites in Sichuan and Yunnan, which were introduced into northern Vietnam and copied by Dong Son groups. The same type of halberd has also been found at sites in both northern and northeastern Thailand. The bronze halberd from Hang Gon belongs to the same period as the Han dynasty halberds. The halberd and the cist tomb at Hang Gon are both important symbols of a dead chief.

A horde comprised of more than 16 bronze halberds (including broken pieces) was also found at the site of Long Giao which is located southeast of Hang Gon. The halberds have been analysed by Pham Duc Manh (1985). In 1997, I investigated the halberds from Long Giao that

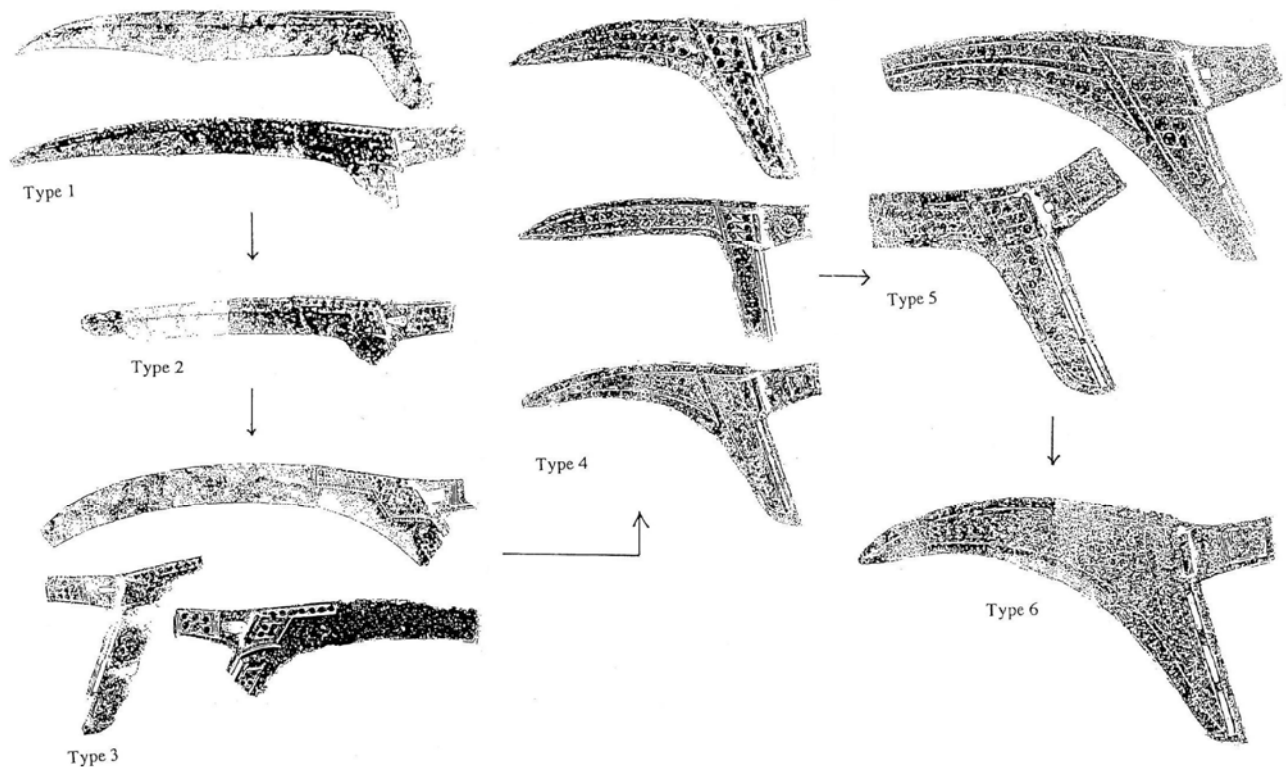


Figure 2. Classification of bronze halberds, as discussed in the text.

were housed in the Dong Nai Museum and classified them into 6 types (Figure 2). Type 1 was distinguished by a sharp cutting edge, a thick blade with ridges on each side of the blade. It is decorated on three parts: the handle, base and edge. Type 1 halberds are genuine weapons designed to kill. At the other extreme, type 6 halberds are distinguished by a thin blade, an unground edge, with no ridges on the sides of the blades. The blade itself is flat and decorated with the spiral motif. The halberd lacks the hole through which type 1 halberds were originally attached to wooden handles. Obviously, type 6 halberds never functioned as real weapons. As with the above-mentioned bronze drums, these halberds are ceremonial items, symbols of status (Nitta 2000a).

All of the halberds in the assemblage from Long Giao have characteristics which reveal that they were produced in Vietnam. It is also significant that the design elements (spiral, tangent, denticulate and sun motifs) used to decorate these halberds also occur on Heger type I drums. A miniature bronze halberd was also found during excavations at Doc Chua. The site is located on the northern bank of the Be River. Like the halberds from Long Giao, the Doc Chua halberd was clearly ceremonial.

Ranked societies existed in southern Vietnam from the 1st century BC to the first century AD. If each generation of chiefs possessed each of the 6 different types of halberd, then we can conclude that a line of chiefs continued in the region from several decades to a century.

The tradition in which bronze halberds were respected suddenly disappeared in the second century AD, and all of

the halberds made at different times and handed down from generation to generation were buried in the ground at once. Two explanations for this are worth considering. Perhaps the chiefs replaced the bronze halberds with other prestige goods. Or, alternatively, groups in the Xuan Loc area were conquered by other groups with different cultural traditions.

CONCLUSIONS

It is generally recognised that the river systems of Southeast Asia were the primary trade routes during the prehistoric period. This research clearly shows a correlation between the location of elite burials containing Heger I type drums and halberds and strategic points on the major river systems interrupted by rapids, waterfalls or river mouths. This correlation also indicates that the Bronze Age elites buried with these status goods controlled the exchange networks between indigenous groups and those who were introducing exotic commodities and ideas into the region.

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