

A REPORT ON RECENT EXCAVATIONS ON LY SON ISLAND (CENTRAL VIETNAM)

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ABSTRACT

The Sa Huynh culture is significant in Vietnamese prehistory primarily as a precursor to the Champa civilization, which is generally associated with the introduction of Hindu cosmology and architectural structures into Central Vietnam. While investigations of many archaeological sites belonging to the Sa Huynh period were undertaken by French scholars during the colonial period in Indochina, recent Vietnamese excavations of Sa Huynh sites have expanded our knowledge of this late prehistoric culture considerably. This paper provides the results of a comparative study of two Sa Huynh sites on Ly Son Island.

INTRODUCTION

The Sa Huynh culture was first identified last century by French scholars during the colonial period in Indochina (Vinet 1909; Parmentier 1924; Colani 1935; Malleret 1959; Saurin 1966, 1968, 1973; Fontaine 1972; Janse 1959). Sa Huynh sites along the coastal dunes of central and southern Vietnam have expanded our knowledge of this late prehistoric culture. Settlement sites which have produced characteristic features of the Sa Huynh culture include Long Thanh (Chu & Dao 1978), Binh Chau (Ngo 1980), Bau Tram (Vu et al. 1993), Xom Oc, Suoi Chinh (Pham 1999a, 2000a, 2000b) and Bai Ong (Tran et al. 1999). The Sa Huynh sites that are the focus of this research are located on the small island of Ly Son in the South China Sea.

LY SON ISLAND (FORMERLY CALLED CU LAO RE)

The small island of Ly Son (Fig. 1) is located about 29 km offshore from the coast of Quang Ngai province in Central Vietnam. Two archaeological sites have been identified on Ly Son Island - Xom Oc and Suoi Chinh (Fig. 1). The first, Xom Oc, was excavated between 1996-7 (Pham 1999) and the results were presented at the IPPA Conference in Melaka (Pham 2000a). This paper gives the results of the excavations of the Suoi Chinh site and compares the findings with those from Xom Oc. The research provides new insights into the Sa Huynh culture

and the developments that took place on the island prior to the better known Champa period.

THE XOM OC SITE

The site of Xom Oc was originally discovered beneath a sand dune on the southeastern side of Ly Son Island in 1996. It lies near an ancient stream at the foot of Hon Soi Hill, and was excavated between 1996 and 1997. The excavations covered a total area of 60m² (5 x 12 m). The results are only briefly summarised here as they have been published previously (Pham 1999, 2000a, b).

Two radiocarbon dates on charcoal were obtained for the site from the ANU Radiocarbon Laboratory. The first, from a depth of 109 cm, gave an uncalibrated date of 1910±60 BP (ANU 10879). The second, from 80 cm, is 1910±60 BP (ANU- 10878). The Xom Oc cultural deposit was mainly of grey-brown sandy clay mixed with shells (gastropods and bivalves). Three distinct layers were identified, except where burials had caused disturbance. Two cultural phases were identified. The base of the site was culturally sterile white sand.

The main feature of the Xom Oc site was its small jar burials containing stone hoes, iron knives and shell beads. The smallest burial jar recovered from the site contained the remains of a small child, found with small shell beads arranged very carefully inside the jar. The jar burials that characterize Sa Huynh sites were not the only types of burials found at Xom Oc. One rectangular grave contained the remains of two individuals, believed to be male and female, with funerary goods including some characteristic Sa Huynh pottery (Fig. 2).

The decorated pottery found at Xom Oc was incised with curvilinear motif; some was painted red and black. The pottery from the earliest phase had rounded bases, cord-marks and incised curvilinear bands, painted with red and black designs. One high-necked vase from the earliest phase was very skilfully incised. Based on strong parallels between the Xom Oc pottery and that from Long Thanh, dated to 2875±60 BP (Bln2094), this phase I pottery from Xom Oc is attributed to the pre-Sa Huynh culture.

The second phase at Xom Oc was distinguished by carinated pottery vessels that were found along with incised and painted red and black pottery. The pottery in this phase was very similar to that from Binh Chau. In addition, Han dynasty pottery with stamped checked

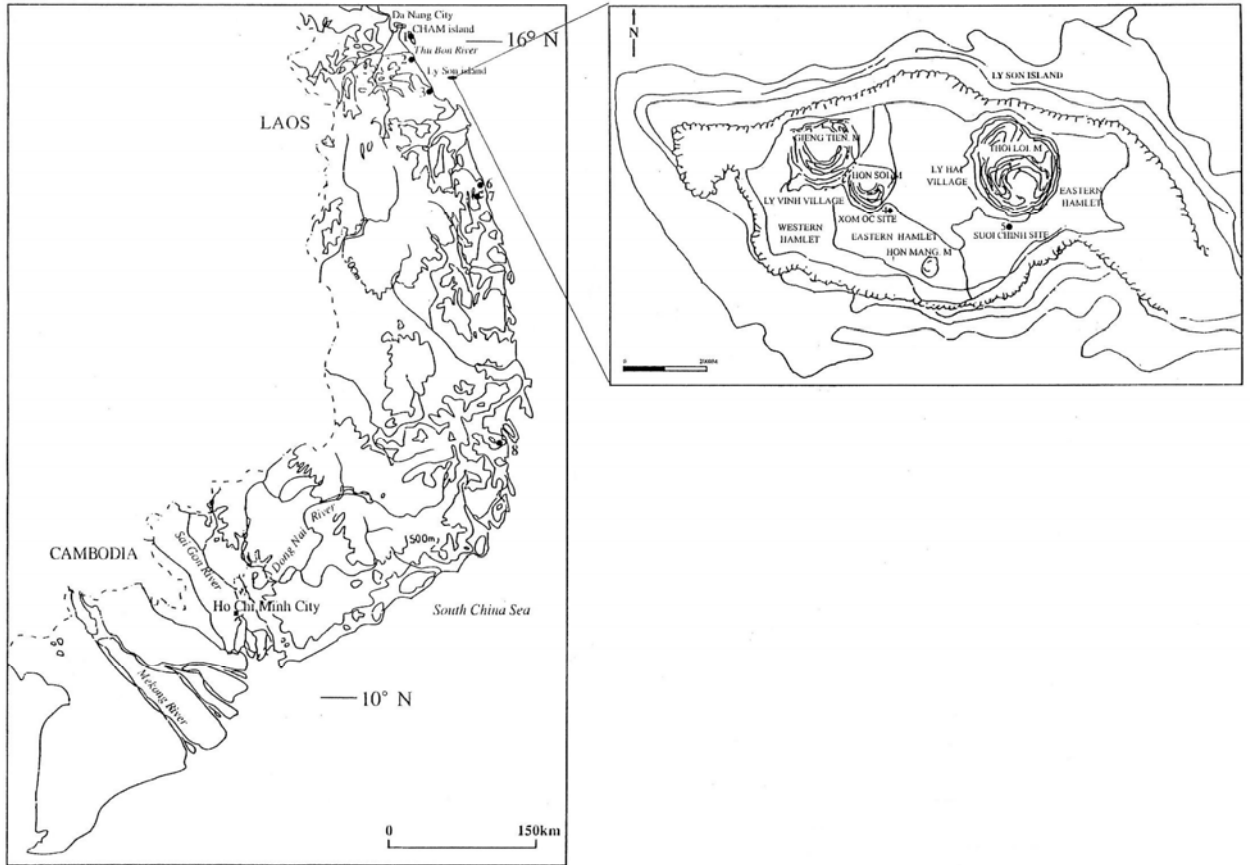


Figure 1. Ly Son Island in the context of central and southern Vietnam. 1. Bai Ong; 2. Bau Tram; 3. Binh Chau; 4. Xom Oc; 5. Suoi Chinh; 6. Long Thanh; 7. Tang Long; 8. Xom Con.

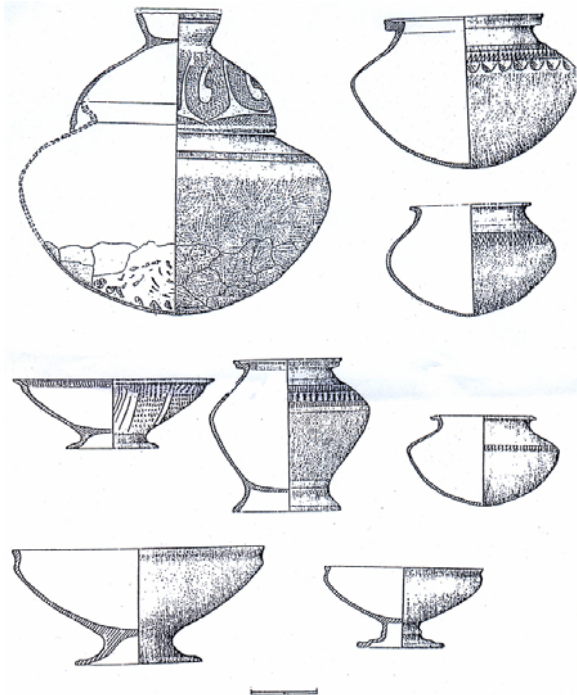


Figure 2. Sa Huynh style pottery from a double burial at Xom Oc. Scale = 8 cm.

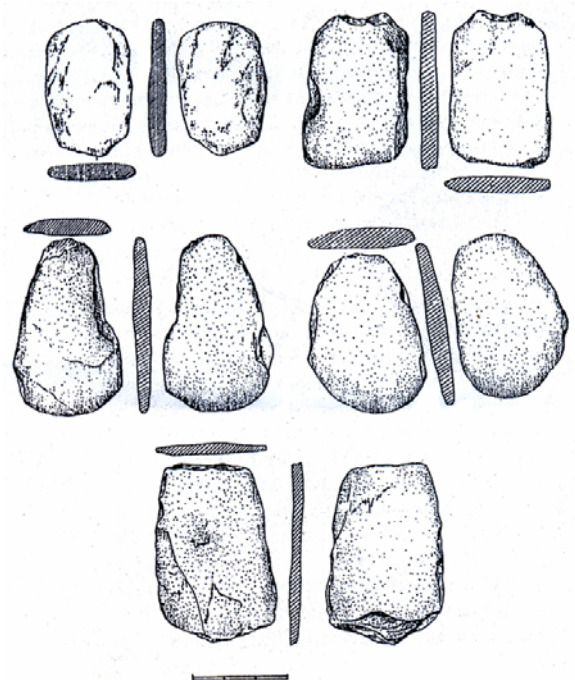


Figure 3. Stone hoes from Xom Oc. Scale = 6 cm.

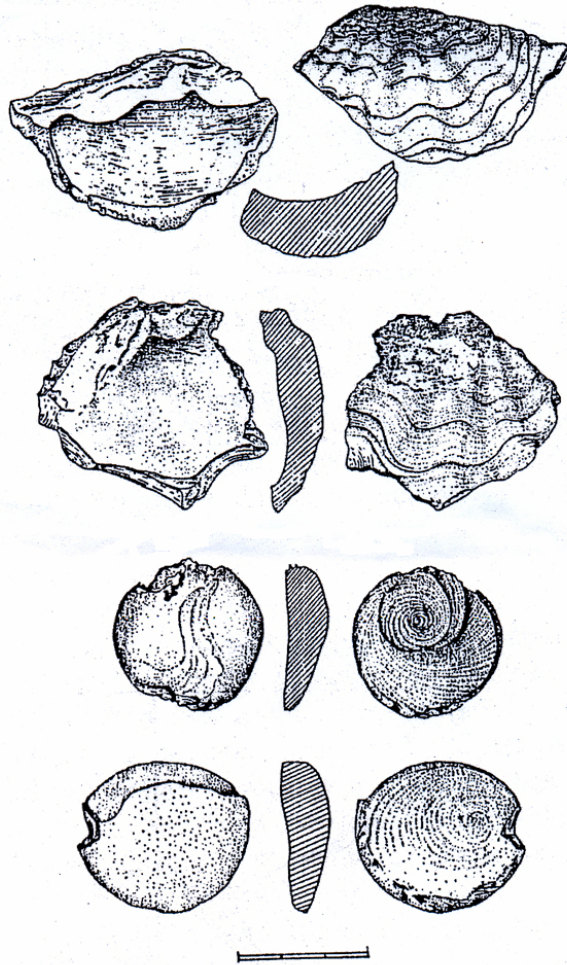


Figure 4. *Tridacna* and *Turbo* tools from Xom Oc. Scale = 6 cm.

designs and early Champa pottery were found in the later phase.

Altogether, eight stone hoes and two stone axes were found during the excavations. These tools were manufactured from metamorphic rocks (Fig. 3). The hoes are the unshouldered type, elliptical in cross-section. The stone hoes and axes are similar to those recovered from the pre-Sa Huynh phase at Long Thanh (Chu & Dao 1978). A bronze arrowhead was found at the left elbow of one female burial at Xom Oc. This arrowhead compares favourably with a bronze arrowhead from Binh Chau, a Sa Huynh site in central Vietnam (Ngo 1980).

Another highlight of Xom Oc was its shell tools, made from *Tridacna* sp. and *Turbo* sp. (Fig. 4). These shell tools compare favourably with shell tools from the Metal Age site of Xom Con, which is located on the southern coast of central Vietnam. Excavations at both Xom Oc and Xom Con also produced glass artefacts and earrings with triple protuberances (*lingling-o*) made from blue glass.

THE SUOI CHINH SITE

The site of Suoi Chinh is located near a small stream at the foot of Mount Thoi Loi, on the southeastern side of Ly

So Island, about 3 km from Xom Oc. It was discovered in 1999 by archaeologists from the Vietnamese Institute of Archaeology (Pham 2000b) and excavated in 2000 by a team of archaeologists from the Institute and the Quang Ngai Museum.

The cultural deposits at Suoi Chinh ranged from 100 to 130 cm thick in total and comprised seven stratigraphic layers. The sterile layer beneath the site was comprised of white sand. Two distinct cultural phases belonging to the early and late Sa Huynh culture were identified. The basal unit was 65 to 85 cm thick and contained five layers of mostly grey-brown sandy clay mixed with gastropods and bivalves. The upper unit was 25-35 cm thick and consisted of two distinct layers of mainly red-brown sandy clay, also mixed with shells. Both layers were fairly distinct, although some mixing was observed around some of the double jar burials.

The cultural materials found at the site were similar in many ways to the materials described from Xom Oc. Similarities were noted in the jar burials, stone tools and glass artefacts, as well as the shell and iron tools. A small bronze bell was also found at Suoi Chinh.

Six double jar burials were excavated, in the basal layers. These are shown in Fig. 5. These were secondary burials; one contained the remains of a small child with funerary goods carefully laid out inside the jar. The funerary goods included shell tools and ornaments (*Tridacna* and *Turbo*) (Fig. 6) and glass beads, three knobbed stone earrings, iron knives and a small pot.

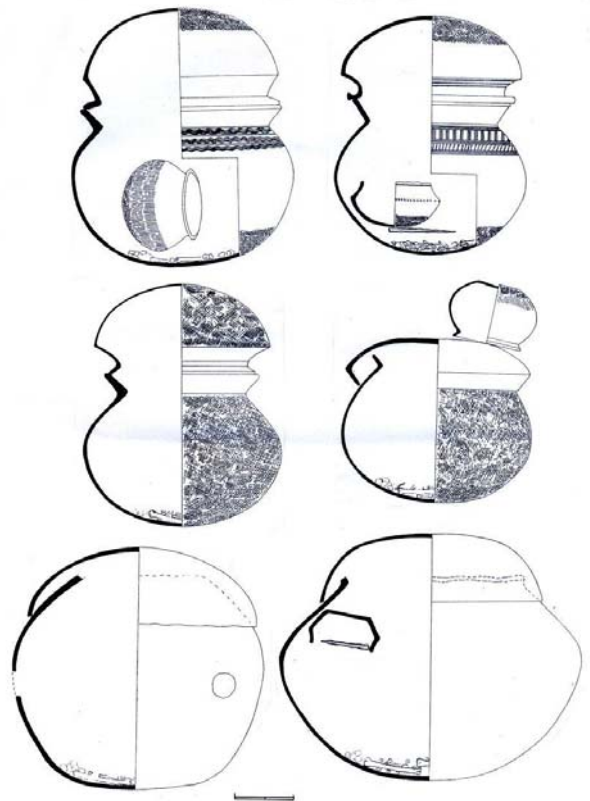


Figure 5. Lidded jar burials from Suoi Chinh, Scale = 10 cm.

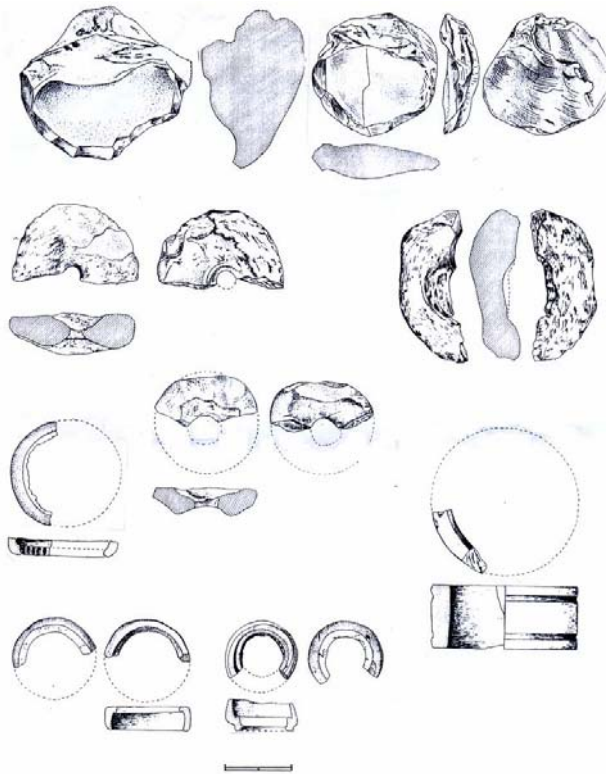


Figure 6. *Tridacna* and *Turbo* tools and ornaments from Suoi Chinh. Scale = 4 cm.

Pottery was also a notable feature of the Suoi Chinh site. Table 1 shows the different types of pottery recovered during the excavations. The jars from Suoi Chinh are carinated, and decorated with wave-like motifs. Some of the jars are very similar to those found in the late Sa Huynh phase at the site of Phu Khuong. Others are similar to the double burial jars with red and black painted motifs from Binh Chau and Xom Oc. While Han style pottery, distinguished by stamped motifs, occurs in all layers, the greatest number of sherds of this type occur in the earliest layers. The Han pottery is gradually replaced by early Champa pottery in the later phase.

CONCLUSIONS

The research into the cultural deposits and artefacts from Xom Oc and Suoi Chinh indicates that the two sites represent different phases of the Sa Huynh culture. Xom Oc shows correlations with other Sa Huynh sites. The earliest phase is characterized by stone hoes and chisels, *Tridacna* and *Turbo* shell scrapers, round-bottomed pottery vessels, high-necked vases with skilfully executed incised designs, and incised pottery with curvilinear motifs painted in red and black. These are also the distinguishing features of the pottery from the Long Thanh site, including shell incised red and black painted pottery. In addition, the earliest phase at Xom Oc relates to the Binh Chau site, which has produced evidence for two continuous prehistoric cultures: pre-Sa Huynh and the later Iron Age culture, Sa Huynh proper.

The early phase of Suoi Chinh belongs to the Sa Huynh culture, the same as the late phase at Xom Oc. Based on radiocarbon dates, the Sa Huynh period overall is estimated to date from about the 5th century BC to the 1st century AD. It is significant that the six double jar burials found at Suoi Chinh belong to the early phase. While some of the Suoi Chinh jars are similar to pottery from Phu Khuong, others are similar to pottery from Binh Chau and Xom Oc. There is sufficient evidence from the pottery to indicate that the later phase of Suoi Chinh developed directly out of the earlier phase.

This comparative study shows the development of later prehistoric cultures on Ly Son Island and increases our understanding of the origin and successive stages of development of the Sa Huynh culture in Vietnam.

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Table 1. The distribution of pottery at Suoi Chinh.

Types		SA HUYNH			EARLY CHAMPA			HAN STYLE POTTERY			Total (layer)
Level		grey-yellow	light red	grey-black	pale red	grey	grey-yellow	pale red	grey-yellow	grey	
I (upper)	1	670 30.15%	90 4.05%				55 2.47%	1262 56.79%	118 5.31%	27 1.22%	2222 100%
II (lower)	2	572 34.17%	32		9 0.54%		52 3.11%	687 41.04%	322 19.24%		1674 100%
	1	215 19.76%	5 0.46%	632 58.09%	3 0.27%		44 0.04%	158 14.52%	11 1.01%	20 1.84%	1088 100%
	2	976 69.52%	282 20.08%		30 2.14%	37 2.64%		32 2.28%	24 1.71%	23 1.64%	1404 100%
	3	618 33.21%	790 42.45%	292 15.69%	39 2.09%		42 2.26%	60 3.22%	20 1.07%		1861 100%
	4	711 43.17%	420 25.5%	233 14.15%	117 7.1%		31 1.88%	79 4.79%	52 3.16%	4 0.24%	1647 100%
	5	667 54.72%	175 14.36%	98 8.04%	41 3.36%		40 3.28%	171 14.03%	26 2.13%	1 0.08%	1219 100%
TOTAL		4429	1794	1255	239	37	264	2449	573	75	11115
		39.85%	16.14%	11.29%	2.15%	0.33%	2.37%	22.03%	5.15%	0.67%	100%