

LATE NEOLITHIC/EARLY METAL AGE SITES IN THE CENTRAL HIGHLANDS (TAY NGUYEN) OF VIETNAM

Tran Qui Thinh

Institute of Archaeology, 61 Phan Chu Trinh, Hanoi, Vietnam.

ABSTRACT

To date, Vietnamese archaeologists have identified 60 archaeological sites in the Central Highlands of Vietnam, an area known as Tay Nguyen. These prehistoric sites date from the Late Neolithic through to the Early Metal Period. This paper describes some of the cultural materials recovered during recent excavations of several Tay Nguyen sites, and the insights they provide into the interaction that took place in this strategic part of Vietnam in the prehistoric period.

THE TAY NGUYEN PLATEAU

Tay Nguyen is a large plateau, in the central part of southern Vietnam, that covers an area of 65,000 sq. km, equivalent to the provinces of Kon Tum, Gia Lai, Dac Lac and Lam Dong. The plateau is characterized by valleys and plains with mountain ranges surrounding them. To the north, the plains are bordered by Quang Nam Province; to the south by eastern Nam Bo; to the west by Laos and Cambodia; and to the east by the coastal plains of Quang Nam, Quang Ngai, Binh Dinh, Phu Yen, Khanh Hoa and Ninh Hoa. The distance from east to west across the plateau is 150 km, and from north to south more than 450 km.

To date, more than 60 archaeological sites have been identified on the Tay Nguyen Plateau (Figure 1). Research began in the 19th century when two French priests (Fr. Piercy and Fr. Guerlach) discovered some stone axes and adzes while proselytizing in the area. The French linguist, La Font, also recovered a few artefacts in Plei Ku Province (now Gia Lai Province) when researching and editing his French-Bahar and French-Jarai Dictionaries. Condominas (1952) also found 11 stone artefacts in Ndut Lieng Krak (now Dac Lac Province) which he classified as stone musical instruments (lithophones). These were taken to France for study and display. Although archaeological research was curtailed during the Vietnam-American War, a number of prehistoric sites were discovered and surveyed in this period. Five of these were investigated by archaeologists from the Vietnam Institute of Archaeology between 1973 and 1974. Since 1975, many more archaeological sites

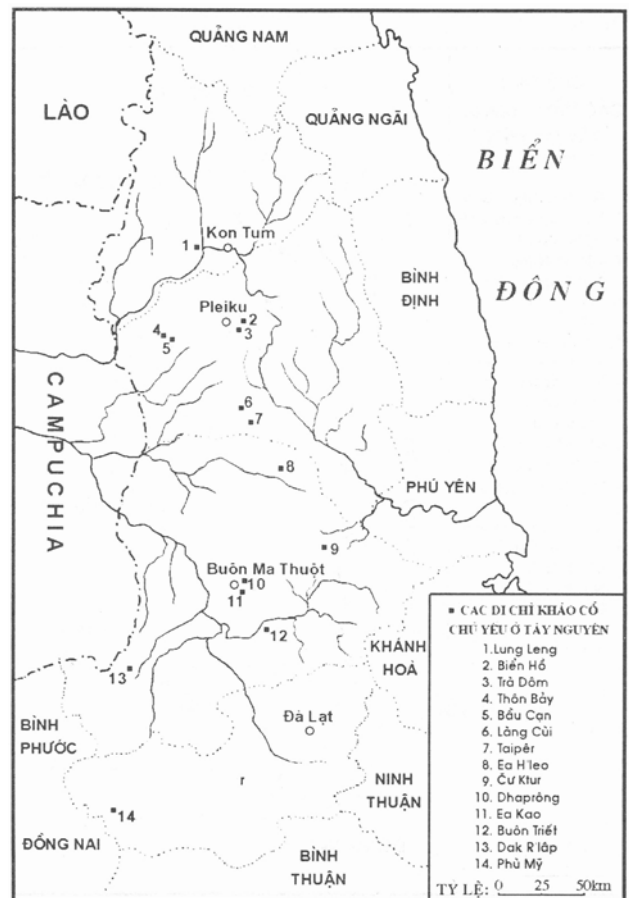


Figure 1. Archaeological sites on the Tay Nguyen plateau

have been identified in the region. These achievements were closely connected with the survey of the hydro-electric lake area of Yaly conducted by the Vietnam Institute of Archaeology and Gia Lai and Kon Tum provincial museums. The state project, Tay Nguyen Archaeology, has been undertaken by the Vietnam Institute of Archaeology.

For previous research in the Tay Nguyen region, see Ha 1985; Le et al. 1991; Tran 1999; Vu et al. 1993, 1995; Vu 1994).

LATE NEOLITHIC – EARLY METAL AGE SITES

Altogether, 60 archaeological sites belonging to the Late Neolithic have been discovered on the Tay Nguyen Plain (Table 1).

Table 1. Numbers and location of sites on the Tay Nguyen Plain.

Geographical zone	Number of sites
Lowlands of Kontum	7
Lowlands of An Khe	2
Highlands of Plei Ku	27
Highlands of Ban Me Thuot	7
Yasup Plain	1
Highlands of Dac Nong	11
Lowlands of Krong Pach-Lac	5

Only five of the archaeological sites identified have been excavated thus far. These are Lung Leng, in the lowlands of Kontum, Bien Ho and Tra Dom in the highlands of Plei Ku, Buon Triet in the lowlands of Krong Pach-Lac, and Doi Nghia Trang in the highlands of Dac Nong. The majority (45 sites) of these Neolithic/Metal Age sites are located in the highlands. The remainder (15 sites) are located in the lowland or plains regions.

Of the 60 sites from the Late Neolithic/ Early Metal Age, five are burial sites, 52 are habitation sites and the remaining three are stone manufacturing workshops. This indicates that most of the prehistoric sites of Tay Nguyen were settlements. Excavations and test-diggings of these settlement sites have produced thin cultural layers with very few traces of ash and no clear traces of habitation. Settlement is only indicated by the darker cultural layer, which contains stone tools and pottery. Stone flakes have also been found in many places, often with one polished side flaked off during the process of retouching polished axes/adzes. All sites contained grinding stones.

So far, archaeologists investigating Neolithic/ Early Metal Age sites in Tay Nguyen have identified two major cultural areas. One is confined to the north; the second confined to the south.

NORTHERN TAY NGUYEN

Northern Tay Nguyen covers the provinces of Gia Lai and Kon Tum. The research shows that the inhabitants of northern Tay Nguyen used a wide range of rocks to manufacture their stone tools during the Neolithic and metal periods. The rocks used by these groups included phtanite, silica, opal, basalt and sandstone, with different types of artefacts manufactured from different materials. For example, every buffalo-tooth shaped adze (slightly shouldered, with rectangular to plano-convex cross-section – see Figure 2) was manufactured from phtanite, and none were manufactured from opal or basalt. Conversely, basalt was primarily used to manufacture untanged axes with quadrangular cross-sections. Most of the shouldered adzes were made from phtanite, with a few of opal but none of basalt. The many stone hoes are of two main types: buffalo-tooth shaped (of phtanite) and

sharply shouldered (Figure 3). The former have evenly curved backs and sloping shoulders. Ground and centrally perforated round pebbles also make an appearance, along with grinding stones made from opal.

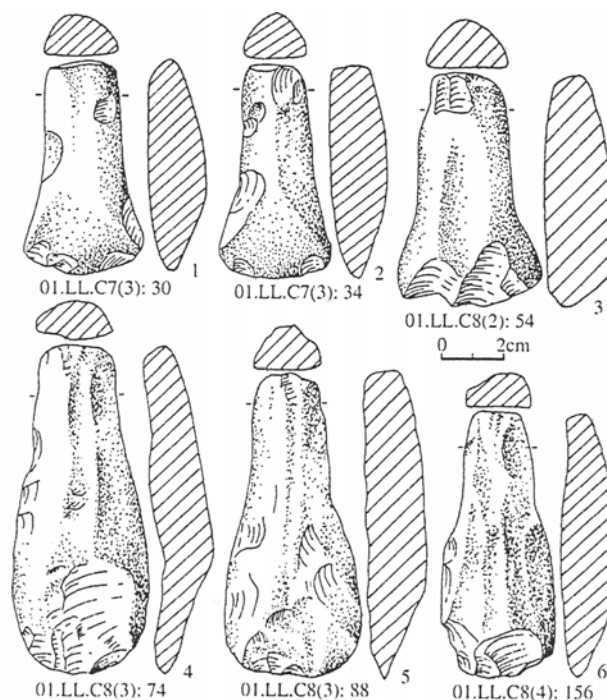


Figure 2. Buffalo-tooth shaped adzes from Lung Leng, Kontum Province

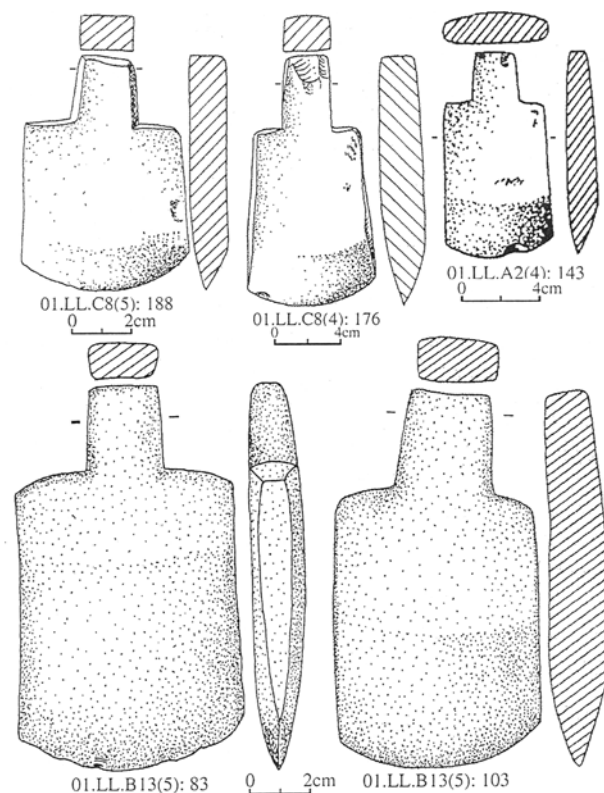


Figure 3. Shouldered adzes/hoes from Lung Leng, Kontum Province

Most of the pottery from northern Tay Nguyen is coarse red, with sand and plant fibre temper. Red pottery makes up 74.06% of the pottery from Bien Ho, 42.39% from Tra Rom, and 50% from Lung Leng. A smaller percentage is coarse grey pottery: 12.68% of the pottery from Bien Ho, 15.18% from Tra Rom and 20% from Lung Leng. While black pottery has been found, it is rare. Some of the pottery is decorated with fine cord-marks; some is comb-incised. Other sherds are decorated with parallel incised bands infilled with short lines and rows of small dots, square or lozenge shaped holes, and small stamped circles and semi-circles arranged in horizontal or vertical lines.

Archaeologists have identified two main types of burial in northern Tay Nguyen: large jar burials, and smaller jars buried mouth-to-mouth. The large jars have plant fibre tempers. A number of artefacts were found inside these burial jars, including buffalo-tooth shaped adzes and nephrite beads. Plain offerring vessels were also present in some jars.

Based on the excavations, surveys, test diggings and analyses, archaeologists have identified a single Late Neolithic/early Metal Age culture in northern Tay Nguyen, which is termed the Bien Ho culture. It takes its name from the site of Bien Ho, located in the Plei Ku Highlands. The Bien Ho culture is radiocarbon dated from 21 dated samples to between 2000 and 3500 BP in the site of Lung Leng.

SOUTHERN TAY NGUYEN

The southern Tay Nguyen extends across the provinces of Dac Lac and Lam Dong. As with northern Tay Nguyen, the southern sites span the Late Neolithic through to the early Metal Age. The archaeological sites in the southern region are located near waterways, either large lakes, rivers or streams. All of these rivers, Ia H'Leo, Ia Sup, Krong No and Krong Ana, flow into Cambodia.

The cultural layers of the archaeological sites in southern Tay Nguyen are also thin, comprised of red basaltic soil, stone tools and pottery. The stone tools in these assemblages are made from the same types of rocks found in the north, but there are some regional differences. In the south, the most commonly used materials for tool manufacturing were basalt and quartzite. Opal and phtanite are rarely seen and nephrite is completely absent. Whereas shouldered axes and adzes outnumber untanged axes and adzes in the north, the reverse is true for the south. In Dac Lac, the lenticular cross-sectioned type is well represented. These also occur in Lam Dong. Buffalo-tooth shaped adzes and axes are rare in the south.

The pottery manufacturing techniques do not differ between the north and the south, but the pottery from southern Tay Nguyen sites is generally less decorated. The principal decorative features are coarse cord-marking, fine cord-marking, combing and dentate stamping, and the use of rows of small dots. There is a notable absence of appliqué and perforation, and very few engraved circles or geometric motifs.

All of the excavations, surveys and analyses have led to the conclusion that a second prehistoric culture, known as Buon Triet or Ho Lac, existed in southern Tay Nguyen. The culture is named after the site of Buon Triet, which lies near Lac Lake. Sites belonging to the Buon Triet culture have been identified on the Dac Nong Plateau at Ia Sup and Krok Pach, in the Lac lowlands, and in the highlands of Buon Me Thuot

DISCUSSION

Investigations have revealed that there were two stages in the Late Neolithic/early Metal Age period in both the northern and southern parts of Tay Nguyen. The early Neolithic is characterized by sites with small quadrangular-sectioned axes/adzes, sometimes slightly shouldered, and coarse cord-marked pottery. Occasionally, appliqué and dot designs are found. There is an absence of large hoes and bronze casting moulds. While small mouth-to-mouth burials jars have been unearthed, large burial jars do not occur in the early stage, which is dated c.3500 – 4000 BP.

The late period is characterized by some of the same elements of the early stage, along with large shouldered adzes. Some sites have produced large jar burials and bronze casting moulds. This stage is dated between c.3000 and 3500 BP.

There are firm correlations between the archaeological sites belonging to the Late Neolithic/Early Metal Period in the northern and southern areas of Tay Nguyen. There are also firm correlations between these archaeological sites and sites in other regions, such as coastal Trung Bo and eastern Nam Bo. The sites from the earliest period are clearly related to Bau Tro sites in Quang Binh Province. In contrast, the sites from the late period are related to sites in eastern Nam Bo, such as Can Sat, Ben Do, Doc Chua, Cai Van and Cai Lang.

Our research has shown the cultural diversity of the prehistoric groups who occupied the Tay Nguyen plateau in the prehistoric period. The research has also shown relationships between these groups and others in the coastal parts of Trung Bo, eastern Nam Bo, as well as Laos and Cambodia. The research also suggests that the Late Neolithic/Early Metal Period inhabitants of the Tay Nguyen plateau played an important role in the formation of the Sa Huynh culture and the development of the Early Iron Age in Trung Bo.

REFERENCES

- Condominas, G. 1952. Le lithophone préhistorique de Ndut Lieng Krak. *Bulletin de l'Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient* 45: 359-92.
- Ha Van Tan 1985. Some problems of Cambodian prehistory. *Khao Co Hoc* 3:9-3 (in Vietnamese).
- Le Xuan Diem, Pham Son, Bui Chi Hoang 1991. *Dong Nai Archaeology*. Ho Chi Min City, Dong Nai Publishing House (in Vietnamese).
- Tran Quy Tinh 1999. Late Neolithic-Early Metal Age in Tay Nguyen: Characteristics of Relics and Artefacts. *Khao Co Hoc* 3:25-38.

Vu Cong Bang et al. 1993. Xom Con culture in Khanh Hoa prehistory. Vietnam Museum and Cultural Bureau of Khanh Hoa (in Vietnamese).

Vu Cong Quy 1994. *Sites of Pre- and Protohistory in Laos. In Study of Laos History-Culture. Vol.II.* Hanoi, Social Sciences Publishing House (in Vietnamese).

Vu Ngoc Binh, Nguyen Khac Su, Dao Huy Quyen, Bui Van Liem 1995. *Gia Lai Prehistory.* Plei Ku: Publishing House of Gia Lai Bureau of Culture and Information (in Vietnamese).