

THE PHU CHANH SITE: CULTURAL EVOLUTION AND INTERACTION IN THE LATER PREHISTORY OF SOUTHERN VIETNAM

Bui Chi Hoang

Center for Archaeological Studies, Southern Institute of Social Sciences, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

Email: buichihoang@yahoo.com

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports discoveries made at the waterlogged site complex of Phu Chanh, along the Cai River, a tributary of the Dong Nai river system in Tan Uyen District, Binh Duong Province, about 40 km northeast of Ho Chi Minh City (Fig. 1). The discoveries include wooden burial jars, weaving equipment and combs, four Heger I bronze drums and a Han Dynasty bronze mirror. The use of wooden burial jars, in one case with a Heger I drum serving as a cover, has not been reported before from southern Vietnam.

The Phu Chanh archaeological site lies in a marshland area located along the Cai River that was formerly inundated all year round, although now provided with drainage ditches to allow market gardening. The discovery zone is a strip of land nearly 3 km long and 50 meters wide, running parallel to the river through Phu Chanh and Vinh Tan Communes (Tan Uyen District, Binh Duong Province) in a northeast to southwest direction (Fig. 2).

Many of the finds in this archaeological zone have been made by farmers, who often find the stubs of old house piles just below their fields. In 1995, a farmer found a Heger I drum and the base of a wooden burial jar. In 1998, another farmer found a Heger I drum and the base of a wooden jar which contained wooden weaving equipment, pottery and a Han Dynasty bronze mirror. In 1999, a third bronze drum was found. Because of these findings, a research project was designed by the Binh Duong Provincial Department of Culture and Information and the Institute of Social Sciences in Ho Chi Minh City (now the Southern Institute of Social Sciences - SISS). The research team included Bui Chi Hoang, Dao Linh Con, Nguyen Van Long, Bui Xuan Long (from SISS) and Le Van Dan and Van Thi Thuy Trang (from Binh Duong Provincial Museum). The excavations at the locality known as Phu Bung in November 2000 (Fig. 2) and a survey in 2001 yielded the data described here.

Settlement traces

Wooden stakes from former stilt houses occur 30 to 50 cm below the surface throughout a large area 3 km long,



Figure 1. Location of the Phu Chanh site, Tai Uyen District, Binh Duong Province

from Bung Sinh and Phu Bung hamlets to the Tho Uc Bridge. The habitation layer itself is black and humic, with dense plant remains including fruits and nuts, branches, cut timbers, and some sherds of cord-marked cooking pots (some with soot on their surfaces) and undecorated dishes on pedestals. The sherds are mostly dark in colour, and several complete vessels were found in the presumed burial assemblages. The house stilts often occur in lines, some small at 5 to 10 cm diameter, others 15 to 20 cm in diameter. Many were pointed before being driven into the ground, like the stilts found at Oc Eo. An excavation next to Tho Uc Bridge in 2001 revealed horizontal timbers and many long leaves amongst the stilts, perhaps the remains of a roof.

The two largest excavated areas at Phu Bung covered 6 x 8 and 8 x 8 metres, and smaller test pits were dug at 5 x 2 m or smaller. Finds were spread out and not easy to locate, but in the excavations we found a total of 7 circular pits presumed to have been graves, even though no bones survived in the acid soil. These were numbered from 1 to 7, and the locations of five of them are shown in Fig. 2. Each pit was carved out slightly wider at the base than at the top, similar in profile to the carinated wooden jars discussed below.

Pit 1 was 60 cm in diameter, cut into ivory-coloured sandy clay and filled with dark-blue viscous mud. It



Figure 2. The locations of Pits 1-5 at Phu Chanh, with the course of the Cai River marked by a line of trees to the northwest.

contained a wooden burial jar 29.6 cm in diameter and 37 cm high with a pottery lid tied down with rattan. Two coconut shell bowls were buried next to the jar.

Pit 2 was about 1 m in diameter, sealed with a layer of peeled *Areca* fruits 3 to 3.5 cm in diameter at 50 cm depth and a leaf lining around its upper part. The base of the pit was lined with leaves and coarse woven fabric (Fig. 3), above which was a wooden jar that contained three cooking pots and three bowls (one pedestalled), all apparently broken before burial. This pit also contained two wooden weaving tools (Figs 4 and 5), both placed horizontally at about 1.1 m depth.

Pit 3 was lined with greyish white kaolin clay, 95 cm in diameter and 1.9 m deep (Fig. 6). It contained a bow-shaped wooden artifact, pieces of a gourd, and potsherds. At the bottom of the pit was a layer of plant remains and wood.



Figure 4. A breast beam to which the backstrap is attached in a backstrap loom, as found in Pit 2.



Figure 3. Coarse woven fabric from Pit 2.



Figure 5. A wooden sword-like implement from Pit 2, perhaps used as a beater for weaving



Figure 6. Pit 3, with its white kaolin clay lining.

Pit 4 lay 3 m northeast of Pit 2, and was also kaolin-lined, 1.2 m in diameter and 2 m deep. A pedestalled bowl was buried in the top of the pit. This pit had no leaf lining, but a few *Areca* nuts were scattered at 40 cm depth. At a depth of 1.6 m, 17 unique and remarkable notched and pointed wooden carved wands were found together in the centre of the pit, above two wooden combs at 1.7 m (Figs 7, 8). Beneath these lay another breast beam from a backstrap loom, four pottery vessels and a coconut shell spoon. The base of Pit 4, at 2 m, was lined with coarse fabric over a layer of grass and leaves.



Figure 7. Eight of the notched and pointed wooden wands recovered from Pit 4.



Figure 8. A wooden comb 4.8 cm wide found in Pit 4.

Pit 5 was 1.15 m in diameter. Four pedestalled vessels were found at 1.2 m depth, with an oval cup made from a large nut termed *ngâu* or *phâu* in Vietnamese. The cup is carved with a bird's-head in relief, with a beak and two eyes. Like the others, Pit 5 is shaped in profile like one of the wooden jars. At the bottom lay the base of a bamboo basket (Fig. 9).



Figure 9. Bamboo matting or basketry in Pit 5.

Pit 6 was separate from the others at about 50 m from Tho Uc stream, a tributary of the Cai River. It was 90 cm in diameter and 1.7 m deep. This pit contained a remarkable combination of a Heger I drum (the second drum described below) positioned over a larger lugged wooden jar 50 cm in diameter and 43.5 cm high (Fig. 10).

Pit 7 (coded 00PC.2001.TS) was discovered by farmers and lies 500 m east of Tho Uc bridge. The pit is 1.5 m deep and 80 cm in diameter, and contained a small wooden jar 42 cm high and 37 cm in mouth diameter.

Bronze

To date, the Phu Chanh locality has yielded 4 Heger I bronze drums. All are similar, with central stars, a zone of flying birds, zones of comb-tooth and circle-and-tangent friezes, and "braided rope" handles.

The first drum, found in 1995, has a tympanum 57.5 cm in diameter, and is 47 cm high and 56.5 cm diameter at the base. It has a central 10-pointed star, each point



Figure 10. Wooden jar and bronze drum combination from Pit 6.

containing a peacock feather design. The tympanum also has a frieze of four birds flying counter-clockwise. Found with this drum was a wooden jar 60 cm in diameter. The second drum, discovered in Pit 6 in 1998, is 40 cm high and 47.2 cm in diameter; the center has a 10-pointed star with peacock feathers, within a zone of 6 flying birds.

The third and fourth drums were found previously by farmers and all four are now on display in the Binh Duong Provincial Museum in the town of Thu Dau Mot. The third drum is the smallest discovered in Binh Duong Province, only 37.5 cm in diameter and 21.5 cm high; the basal diameter is 36 cm (Fig. 11). It has a central 8-pointed star, again with peacock feather designs, within a zone of four birds flying counter clockwise. The fourth drum, 47.2 cm in diameter and 40 cm high, has a 10-pointed star (Fig. 12).

Also from Phu Chanh comes a single Han Dynasty bronze mirror, 10.6 cm in diameter and 0.6 cm thick (Fig. 13). This was found by farmers inside a wooden jar in 1998.

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Based on the excavated data, the presumed burial assemblages at Phu Chanh are in the form of:

- A wooden jar buried in a circular pit, sometimes covered by either a Heger I bronze drum or an upturned pottery vessel serving as a lid (Pits 1, 6 and 7).
- A round pit without a jar or drum, but with a side profile cut like the profile of a wooden jar (Pits 2 to 5).
- A bronze drum buried alone and surrounded by wooden stakes. The third drum, found by farmers in 1998, was apparently of this type.



Figure 11. The third drum from Phu Chanh, scale in cm.



Figure 12. The fourth drum from Phu Chanh., scale in cm.

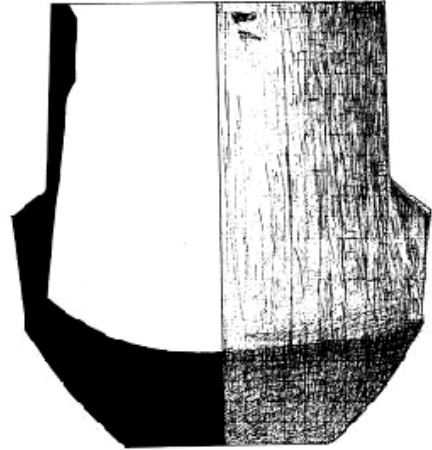


Figure 15. Wooden jar in section, from Pit 1.



Figure 13. The Han mirror from Phu Chanh.



Figure 14. Wooden jar from Pit 1.

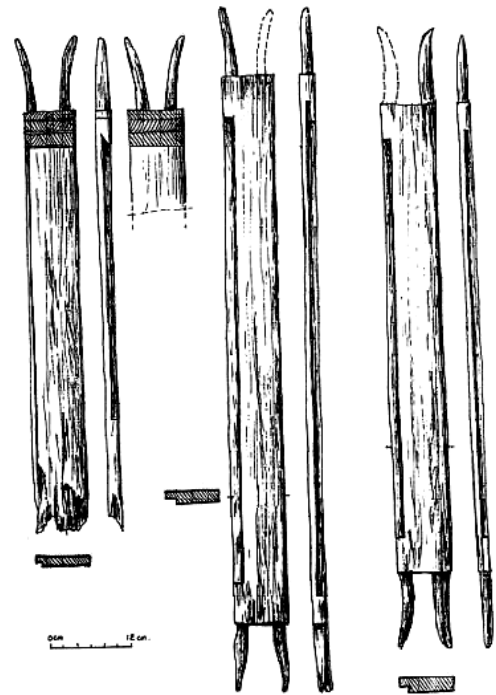


Figure 16. End details and drawings of the three backstrap loom breast beams found at Phu Chanh. Note that the middle one is carved.



Figure 17. The textile beater from Pit 2 (see also Fig. 4).

The wooden artifacts are remarkable and in some cases unique. The three backstrap loom breast beams (identified by Judith Cameron) with two symmetrical pointed “horns” at each end (Fig. 16) were at first thought by us to be examples of “imperial equipage”, symbolising the power of a socially high-ranked person. But after comparison with traditional weaving equipment of the Ma people in Lam Dong Province, the K’tu people in Quang

Nam Province, and the Cham people in Thuan Hai Province, the functions of these items became apparent. Similar-shaped but smaller items have been found in China, in Guangdong, Yunnan (especially Shizhaishan and Lijiashan), and even Hemudu in Zhejiang. It is possible that weaving was a traditional handicraft in the Phu Chanh community. Excavations at the southern Vietnamese sites of Doc Chua have produced 479 spindle whorls, indicating that spinning and the weaving were already practised in this area from 700 BC onwards.

The Heger I drums are clear indicators of trade contact with northern Vietnam. Others have been found in southern Vietnam in Ba Ria-Vung Tau Province, on Phu Quoc Island in Kien Giang Province, and at Loc Tan in Binh Phuoc Province.

The Phu Chanh site dates to about 2000 years ago. Four radiocarbon dates have been run from the site, three on wooden jars and one on another piece of wood: 2100±150, 1850±55, 1910±60 and 1750±70 BP.