

# A TYPOLOGICAL STUDY OF BRONZE DRUMS IN THE HA GIANG MUSEUM

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## INTRODUCTION

Large numbers of bronze drums are housed in Vietnamese museums where they attest to the technical competence and artistic achievements of early Metal Age groups in Vietnam. The greatest number of Southeast Asian bronze drums in Vietnam is housed in the National History Museum in Hanoi (see Pham Huy Thong et al. 1990). In Ha Giang Province, bronze drums are still important items of material culture, kept as family heirlooms by local villagers. Ha Giang Province is one of the northernmost mountain provinces of Vietnam, bordered by Yunnan in the north. The province is marked by considerable ethnic diversity with more than 20 different ethnic groups represented. This paper discusses the distribution of bronze drums in Ha Giang Province and the results of a recent typological study of an assemblage of bronze drums in the Ha Giang Museum.

## THE HA GIANG MUSEUM COLLECTION

The Ha Giang Museum houses 19 bronze drums of different ages. All but one of the drums in the museum is clearly provenienced. As Table 1 shows, they are derived from communes in three different districts of Ha Giang, namely Vinh Tuy, Meo Vac and Dong Van.

Table 1: Derivation of the bronze drums in the Ha Giang Museum.

Numbers	District	Communes
1	Vinh Tuy	-
14	Meo Vac	Meo Vac (12), Xin Cai (1), Niem Son (1)
3	Dong Van	Pho La (1), Sung La (2)

## ANALYSIS

The drums from the Ha Giang Museum were classified in accordance with Heger's typology of bronze drums. Based on morphology, Heger (1902) divided bronze drums into the four principal types (types I, II, III and IV) shown in Fig. 1. The 19 drums in the Ha Giang Museum collection were classified into three main types: Heger types I, II and IV.

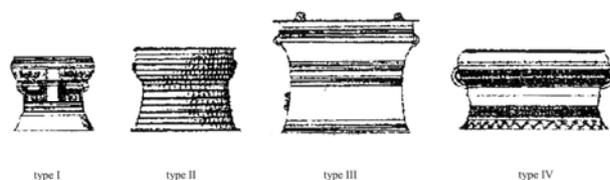


Figure 1. Heger's 1902 typology of bronze drums.

### Heger Type I (HI)

Altogether, 10 of the drums in the collection were classified as HI. HI drums are the oldest known forms in Vietnam and date back to the Dong Son period. These were further subdivided into three main groups.

#### Group HIa

The first group in the assemblage consists of drum BTHG.KL/D10, a large drum measuring 25.5 cm in height with a tympanum measuring 53.5 cm in diameter. This drum is the earliest drum in the museum collection and compares favourably with the Lao Cai VIII drum in the Lao Cai Museum. The patina on the Ha Giang drum is markedly different to the patinas on other drums; it has the characteristic turquoise blue patina of Dong Son drums. The motifs on the tympanum are also quite blurred. There is a notable absence of bands of the flying bird motif that distinguishes most bronze drums of this early type. The surface is decorated with four boat motifs, three bands of concentric circles and the bold saw-tooth motif.

#### Group HIb

The second group consists of drum BTHGKL/D.14, a small drum measuring 30.5 cm in height with a tympanum measuring 30.5-32.5 cm in diameter. This drum is similar to the Dabona drum of Yunnan and might possibly have come from there. Alternatively, the drum might have been a locally cast copy of Dabona drums. The drum was badly cast and appears to be faulty. Certainly, the drum could not have functioned as a musical instrument. Its morphology is distinctive. It has a mushroom shape with a long body, flared base, wasp waist and short upper section. The decoration on the surface of the bronze is very simple. The centre of the

tympanum is decorated with a sun motif with 8 rays. The body of the drum is decorated with 8 relief lines arranged symmetrically on the surface. Two of the lines are casting lines. Between the body and the base there is a circle of corded patterns.

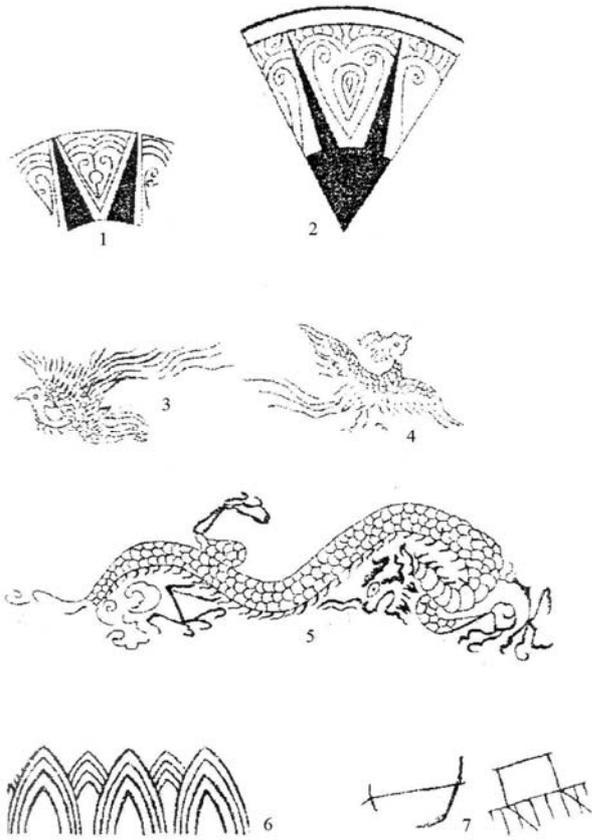


Figure 2. Some design elements on the bronze drums from Ha Giang (see text).

### Group H1c

This group is comprised of 8 drums, BTHGKL/D.02, BTHGKL/D.04, BTHGKL/D.06, BTHGKL/D.07, BTHGKL/D.011, BTHGKL/D.012, BTHGKL/D.16, BTHGKL/D.17. All of the drums in this group are late and intermediate between H1 and H1V drums. The drums in this category are also distinguished by their colour; they all have dark blue or black patinas. All drums feature a sun motif inside a circle in the centre of the tympanum. Two of the drums (BTHGKL/D.16, BTHGKL/D.17) have the conventional sun motif but are further decorated with the lotus buds and leaves (Fig. 1-2) that distinguish H1I drums. The tympanums are also decorated with a motif resembling a fish bone. On drum BTHGKL/D.16, the motif appears on the base.

The decoration of BTHGKL/D.17 is particularly striking. The tympanum of this drum features a band of motifs that do not appear on other drums. Instead of the stylised figures and flag motif that characterizes others, these drums feature dragons and phoenix motifs. These motifs are clearly derived from other items of material

culture, such as ceramics and textiles. These distinctive motifs also appear on historical temples and village houses in the province. The style of the phoenix motif on the drum (Fig. 2-3,4) closely resembles the style of the phoenix motif on stone plates in the Thien Phuc temple in Hai Phong, dated to 1562. The head of the dragon (Fig. 2-5) on the drum closely resembles the head of the dragon at the base of the stone Buddha in the Ma So temple in Hai Duong which is dated to 1573. The same stylistic convention is visible on a stone plate in Yen Dong temple in Quang Ninh, dated to 1590. Based on these correlations, we are of the opinion that the bronzes in this group can be dated to the 16th century.

### Heger type II (H1I)

Only one drum (BTHG.KL/D.18) in the assemblage has the morphology of H1I drums. It measures 37 cm in height with the tympanum measuring 55 cm in diameter. However, while this drum has features of an H1I drum, it is not a typical specimen and differs from H1I drums from Hoa Binh, Phu Tho, Thanh Hoa and Nghe An in several ways. The pairs of handles are positioned in the middle of the upper body instead of on the upper section, as with other H1I examples. As well as being decorated with the familiar lotus motif, the H1I drum from the museum is decorated with agricultural motifs: a plough and harrow (Fig. 2-6,7). These motifs are unusual.

Because of the general preference amongst Ha Giang villagers for H1 and H1V forms, this atypical H1I drum is seen as an example of local development, albeit influenced by drums from other regions.

### Heger type IV (H1V)

A total of eight drums were classified as H1V types. These were further subdivided into four groups.

#### Group H1Va

This group is comprised of five drums, BTHG.KL/D01, BTHG.KL/D03, BTHG.KL/D05, BTHG.KL/D08, BTHG.KL/D013. They measure between 25 and 28 cm in height with the tympana measuring between 47-48 cm in diameter. They weigh from 12 to 16 kg. These drums are of normal size, lightweight, with 4 casting lines. The tympana overhang. Both the upper and lower ends are flared with the middle narrowed. For this reason, it is difficult to distinguish between the top and bottom of these drums. The handles are positioned on the widest section of the upper part of these bronzes, above the flanges. The decoration on the tympana is divided into major and minor bands. Some drums are decorated with male figures with the flag motif and concentric circles.

#### Group H1Vb

Only one drum in the assemblage (BTHG.KL/D09) was placed in this category. It is smaller in size and weight than other bronzes. The upper section is slightly flared and the middle part of the body is narrowed. The tympanum measures 31 cm in diameter and overlaps the

body. The decorative bands on the tympanum are evenly distributed.

#### Group HIVc

The single drum (BTHG.KL/D15) placed in this category is lighter in weight (21 kg) and larger in size than drums in the HIVb group. The drum measures 27.8 cm in height with the tympanum measuring 59.5 cm in diameter. Two casting lines are visible. The top of the upper section is slightly flared with the body narrowing at the base. The drums in this class are decorated with the coin motif and squares.

#### Group HIVd

The single drum (BTHG.KL/D15) placed in this category is very large and lightweight. The tympanum measures 59 cm in diameter and overhangs the body. It has 2 casting lines. The middle section is slightly narrower than the base. The decorative motifs used are similar to those in group HIVc. They are also distributed equally over the surface of the drum.

#### CONCLUSIONS

The research shows that bronze drums have a much longer history in Ha Giang province than previously considered. Prior to the analysis, we thought that only late

bronze drums were held in Ha Giang. The identification of the oldest known type (BTHG.KL/D10) pushes the history of Ha Giang bronzes back to the protohistoric period in Vietnam. The study also revealed that a greater diversity of Heger types co-existed in the province than originally thought. The density of bronze drums in Meo Vac District also indicates that villagers in this district have been using bronze drums for a long time. The Heger IIc drums in the Ha Giang Museum, which preserve the Dong Son tradition, are seen as intermediate between Heger I and Heger II types. It is now believed that the later types were preferred in Ha Giang and that local groups created Heger II types to meet their own needs. The Ha Giang drums indicate that the inhabitants of this province had cultural preferences for drums with dark blue patinas, a sun motif on the tympanum, and small holes in the body to adjust the melody.

#### REFERENCES

- Heger, F. 1902. *Alte Metalltrommeln aus sudost Asien*. Leipzig: Hiersemann.
- Pham Huy Thong, Pham Minh Huyen and Lai Van Toi (eds.) 1990. *Dong Son drums in Vietnam*. Hanoi: Vietnam Social Science Publishing House.