

Dong Son Drums

(C35 p.35)

The Dong Son period is characterized as a period lasting from 2000BCE to 200CE, being the formation period of the Vietnamese nation under a royal dynasty. It also represents the end of the Bronze Age for the Iron Age. As well as the archeological material from the Dong Son period was very rich, its related culture is said to have had a great influence on its neighbor regions through important connections with the Tibeto-Burman, Thai and Mon-Khmer cultures. Such expansion can be explained thanks to the skillfulness of the Dong Son people, as they were great agriculturists, fisherman or bold sailors. Living in large huts closed to the sea or rivers, their boats traversed all the China Sea.

Archeological discoveries in Thailand in the 1970's showed that bronze casting began in Southeast Asia before being borrowed by the Chinese. Such discoveries confirmed that the origin bronze drums of the Dong Son period can be closely related in basic structural features and decorative design to the pottery of the Phung Ngyuen culture (5000BCE ~ 4000BCE), as well as being reported in South and Southwest China, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos and Indonesia. Up to 140 drums were also located throughout all Viet Nam. In fact, if most of the drums were made in Viet Nam or South China, they were traded in Java and Bali islands.

The purpose of these drums (religious ceremonies, wars...) is still uncertain. Nevertheless, they were appreciated for their very high artistic level compared to the others civilizations of that time. These drums depict the Dong Son society in their daily chores or spiritual life with images of object, humans and animals. There is always a star on their center, encircled by concentric panels of scenes with humans and animals or geometric motifs. It can be understand from these pictures the rituals of the Dong Son people and their constant fighting for survival against peoples from the North.



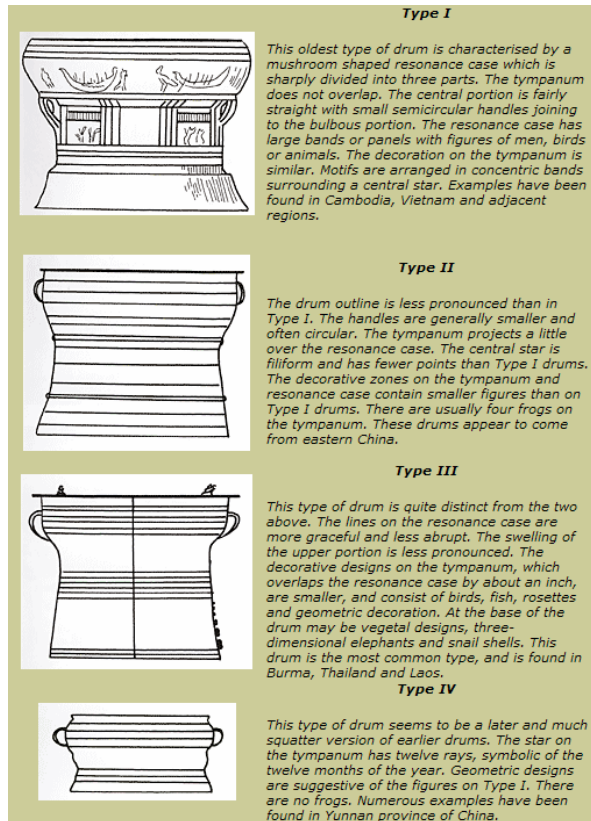
A close-up of the centre of the tympanum dominated by an eight-point star with butterfly motifs between the rays.



Birds, deer, buffaloes and hornbills were depicted.

Dr. Franz Hager, an Austrian ethnographer, gave his name in 1902 to a classification of Southeast Asian drums (*Alte Metalltrommeln aus Südost-Asien*). The classification categorized the bronze drums by their shape, dimension, weight, decorative design, chemical composition, and casting techniques in four types (I to IV, see below). Thanks to new discoveries in 1975, Vietnamese archaeologists proposed a new classification in five

categories (A to E, see below). In these classifications, due to their characteristics, the Dong Son drums should be classified in groups I and B.

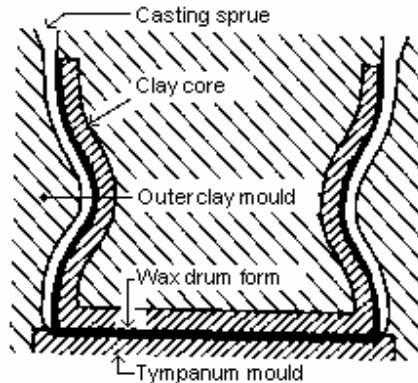


Franz Hager's classification

Vietnamese archeologists' classification

Date	Grp	Examples	Size & Shape	Design	Discovery
6BCE to 3BCE	A	Ngoc Lu, Hoang Ha, Co Loa, Song Da, Mieu Mon	Face: 60-70cm dia. Height: 40-50cm; large & proportional; shouder and body of equal dimensions	vivid, rich & composed	mostly in Viet Nam; drums with sloping body were usually found in the highland while those having vertical straight body were mostly found in the plain
5BCE to 1BCE	B	Duy Tien, Yen Tap, Phu Duy, Dong Son	Face: 56-65cm dia. Height: 47-53cm; slender & tall body	simpler and marked different geometric motifs from Group A	mostly in Viet Nam
4BCE to 1CE	C	Hieu Chung, Dong Hieu, Thanh Van	Face: 34-116cm dia. Height: 24-92cm	sophisticated & stylized as Group A; 4 frog sculptures near the rim of the face	mostly in Viet Nam
4BCE to 1CE	D	Dao Xa, Tung Lam	Face: 26-52cm dia. Height: 24-38cm heavy body; broad shouder, steep slope & shorter base	ew, simple & crude; Flaws resulted from poor casting techniques	few in Viet Nam & mostly in Southern China
1CE to 4CE	E	Cao Bang	Face: 35-88cm dia. Height: 21-62cm undefined & dispropotional shouder, body & base	simple & meager; influenced from other cultural forms; some only 1/3 of face	mostly in Southern China

Casting bronze drums of Dong Son is said to be a very complex process requiring advanced techniques and huge artistic skills. The lost-wax casting technique was used, and smelting 1 to 7 tons of copper was necessary for building one "Co Loa" drum. Separate circular and rectangular clay moulds for different part of the drum were prepared and impress with a patterned old or incised with a stylus. At the end, the procedure gives the impression of a wax drum over a clay core.



Investment of the wax in a layer of very fine clay followed before the assemblage was covered in a coarse clay coat. It was then necessary to melt out the wax, and preheat the clay old.

How ever difficult their production was, drums of the Dong Son period were a key element of the culture of the becoming Viet Nam, just before the Common Era. Even if the purpose of these drums is still unclear, requiring a high level of technique and a great sense of art, it allowed the Dong Son people to have a great influence on cultures in Southeast Asia at this period. Thanks to their precise depictions, archeologists were also able to understand their daily lives and rituals.

References:

- [1] [viettouch.com: Viet Nam History/Pre-Historic](http://www.viettouch.com/pre-hist/) - <http://www.viettouch.com/pre-hist/>
- [2] *L'Asie EXotique*: Frog Drums and their importance in Karen Culture, Sylvia Fraser-Lu - http://www.lasieexotique.com/mag_frogdrums.html

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