



REFLECTIONS OF DONG SON DRUMS IN NÁPRSTEK MUSEUM

Petra Müllerová*

ABSTRACT: The Dong Son culture developed at the Red River Valley of northern Vietnam (approx. 6 BC to 2 AD). This highly mature civilization influenced the whole Southeast Asia region. The majority of bronze items were decorated with refined motives, realistic and stylized. The most famous artefacts produced during the existence of Dong Son culture were bronze drums of various sizes, weight, and quality. The role of the drums is still unclear: used for religious ceremonies, e.g. to hail the rain, used as part of funerary, or other ceremonial rites, or to rally men for war, etc. The drums demonstrate the advanced techniques and the great skill in the lost-wax casting.

In the Czech Republic could be found two Dong Son drums, which apparently were imported into Bohemia at the end of 19th century. The first drum has four frogs on its face. This item (inventory No 06132, old No 1377) is located at Opočno castle in Eastern Bohemia in the original Colloredo-Mansfeld House Collection. The second drum unfortunately has several flaws. This drum (inventory No Vu 517) is in the possession of the National Gallery in Prague.

KEY WORDS: Dong Son Drums – Dong Son culture – rubbing – Opočno Castle – Franz Heger – bronze culture – Vietnam.

The Dong Son culture developed at the Red River Valley of northern Vietnam approximately in the middle of the first millennium BC and lasted until the second century AD. This highly mature civilization influenced the whole Southeast Asia region, mainland as well as the islands. The Dong Son people were capable of producing various kinds of implements like ploughs, shears, axes, scythes, scrapers, chisels for woodworking, needles, fishhooks, domestic utensils like vessels, pots, basins, jars, weapons like arrowheads, spears, sabres, knives, halberds, musical instruments like drums, art items like bracelets, statuettes, etc. The majority of bronze items were decorated with refined motives, during the first period realistic themes (human figures, deer, birds, etc.) were used, later on stylized motifs prevailed.¹

The most famous artefacts produced during the existence of Dong Son culture were bronze drums of various sizes, weight, and quality. These were decorated with a large range

* Contact: Petra Müllerová, mullerova.petra@volny.cz

¹ See catalogue of bronzes, pp. 66–95, in BAPTISTE Pierre et al. 2008.

of patterns. A lot of these drums were later discovered on Java and Bali islands, which proves that trade contacts existed between the Dong Son mainland culture and Southeast Asia islands cultures of that time. It is still not clear whether the bronze drums were made for religious ceremonies, e.g. to hail the rain, used as part of funerary (in some drums were human ashes and bones were found), or other ceremonial rites, or to rally men for war, or for another secular role. The Dong Son bronze drums demonstrate the advanced techniques and the great skill in the lost-wax casting of large objects. Two theories dealing with the origin of bronze casting are widespread among twentieth century scholars: the old one is based on the assumption that bronze casting in eastern Asia originated in northern China. The theory, however, has been disputed by archaeological discoveries in north-eastern Thailand in the 1970s. In this theory is asserted that, "Bronze casting began in Southeast Asia and was later used by the Chinese, not vice versa as the Chinese scholars have always claimed".² This interpretation is supported by the work of modern Vietnamese archaeologists. They have found that the earliest bronze drums of Dong Son are closely related in basic structural features and in decorative design to the pottery of Vietnamese Phung Nguyen culture.³

Numerous discoveries of large, elaborately incised drums in the late 18th century in mainland and the islands of Southeast Asia first drew the attention of Western scholars to the existence in the region of distinctive early bronze-working cultures. Later on, during the 19th century a considerable number of old bronze drums and a large number of incised bronze containers with covers came into the possession of European museums and into the possession of highly educated and rich families, mostly from aristocratic circles, living and working in Europe as well as in Asia. At the close of the century the connoisseur of the art Franz Heger⁴ started to study the bronze drums in-depth. Finally, Heger in 1902 published a collection of 165 large bronze drums completed with detailed descriptions. It also contained a fundamental classification of drums into four types. Heger carried out his classification of the drums on the basis of concrete objects he had seen in museums and private collections in Europe and in Asia.⁵

At the end of the twentieth century Heger's classification of Dong Son drums was improved with a chronological order by Vietnamese scholar Pham Huy Thong:

- A) Group – dated from 6 BC to 3 BC, drums having large and proportional shoulder and body; vivid, rich and composed design. Drums from this group were discovered mostly in Vietnam. Example: Ngoc Lu Drum.
- B) Group – dated from 5 BC to 1 BC, drums with slender and tall body, simpler design and different geometric motifs in comparison with group A, discovered mostly in Vietnam. Example: Dong Son Drum.
- C) Group – dated from 4 BC to 1 AD, sophisticated design and stylized as Group A, four frog sculptures located near the rim of the face, discovered mostly in Vietnam. Example: Hieu Chung Drum.

² See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dong_Son_culture (February 10th , 2009)

³ See http://www.viettouch.com/pre-hist/dongson_class.html (February 10th , 2009). Compare this opinion with facts mentioned in RAWSON Philip, 1993, 14 – 15.

⁴ Franz Heger (1853–1931), ethnographer, curator of the ethnographic collection of the Natural History Museum in Vienna, one of the founders of the Museum of Ethnology in Vienna in 1927. Heger was born in Brandys nad Orlici in Eastern Bohemia and very probably he had close contacts with aristocratic house of Colloredo – Mansfeld in Opočno castle.

⁵ See HEGER, Franz 1902, 1: 8-18.

- D) Group – dated from 4 BC to 1 AD, heavy body, broad shoulder, steep slope and shorter base, simple design. Drums in this group have flaws resulted from a poor casting technique. These drums were discovered mostly in Southern China, only a few in Vietnam. Example: Dao Xa Drum.
- E) Group – dated from 1 AD to 4 AD, drums having undefined and disproportional shoulder, body and base. Simple and modest design on the face. This group was discovered mostly in Southern China. Example: Cao Bang Drum.⁶

In the Náprstek Museum we find two sets of rubbing of Dong Son drums. The first set contains three pieces – the imprint of upper board (face) and two imprints of the drum's body. This set on light blue soft paper presents evidently well-known Ngoc Lu drum from group A according to the latest drums classification. The other set of four pieces, on pink soft paper with simpler face design very likely represents the younger group B of Dong Son drums. Both sets of rubbing of the drums were acquired by Dr Václav Šolc (1919 – 1995), an ethnographer and a specialist in American popular cultures and an expert on organizing museum collections in 1961 in Democratic Republic of Vietnam.⁷

The Ngoc Lu drum is generally regarded as one of the most important of the Dong Son drums and one of the most popular drums from the type I (or group A) classification. The drum was accidentally discovered in 1893 in Ha Nam province, southeast of Hanoi, rather than during a planned expedition. After the World War II, when the Vietnamese reorganized permanent historical exhibitions in the National Museum of History in Hanoi, the Ngoc Lu Drum became a central object of the pre-historic era.

1. The rubbing (inventory No A12 549) of upper board (face) of Dong Son drum, type I (some time called “Tonkin Type”) according to Franz Heger, group A according to the present day Dong Son drums classification. Dimensions: 83 x 83 cm, black Chinese ink on light blue soft paper. The rubbing was drawn up in 1961 in Hanoi. In the centre of the rubbing there is a star with fourteen tips. The space between every two tips is decorated with arrow heads. The cardinal star is surrounded by five even circles of different widths and miscellaneous geometrical patterns. The next circle is quite wide and adorned with human beings wearing feather headdresses. A striking motive is that of a row of figures that appear to be male. Figures are plumed, and led by a man holding a spear that is directed towards the ground. He is followed in the line by five more men, at least two of whom appear to be playing musical instruments. One person appears to be playing a traditional Vietnamese *khen* or bells, while another one holds a wand-like object in his left hand. The people are wearing a type of kilt and headgear with feathers, which includes a figure in the shape of a bird's head. In this circle some sort of a structure that is supported by stilts with either decorated timber walls is displayed, and a house with three people inside it, likely playing percussion instruments. In the second wide row groups of flying birds with short beaks alternate evenly with deer with huge horns. In the third and last wide row there are only flying

⁶ See http://www.viettouch.com/pre-hist/dongson_class.html (February 10th , 2009).

⁷ On the new exhibition project had co-operated Dr. Václav Šolc, further on he helped Vietnamese colleagues with museum objects reorganisation. In 1961 large archaeological excavations of Dong Son Culture in Thanh Hoa province were realized by team of international archaeologist. Dr. Šolc participated on excavations and brought to Prague Náprstek Museum few artefacts, e.g. flint stones, potsherds, etc.

birds with very long beaks, very probably herons, and small birds, maybe hornbills depicted. In the twelve narrow circles situated between the central fourteen tips of the star and the edge of drum's face only geometrical patterns are seen: rectangles, waves, lines, rings, dots.

2. Rubbing (inventory No 46 830) of drum's flank. Dong Son drum, type I according to Franz Heger. Dimensions: height – 27cm, length – 29,5 cm, black Chinese ink on light blue soft paper. Rubbing was drawn up in 1961 in Hanoi. In the rectangle are depicted two persons wearing feather headdresses and very likely having spears and hatches with feathered shafts in their hands. Around the persons are situated vertical and horizontal stripes with geometrical patterns, lines, connected rings, dots and arrow heads.
3. Rubbing (inventory No 46 831) of drum's flank. Dong Son drum, type I according to Franz Heger. Dimension: Height – 18cm, length – 46,5 cm, black Chinese ink on light blue soft paper. Rubbing was drawn up in 1961 in Hanoi. In the rectangle the long boat having five persons on board and a sort of structure, probably sun shelter, is represented. In front of and behind of the boat is standing a long legged bird with a highly stylized long beak pointing to the ground. Around the scene are situated vertical and horizontal stripes with geometrical patterns, lines, connected rings, dots and arrow heads.
4. Rubbing (inventory No 46 834) of upper board (face) of Dong Son drum, type I according to Franz Heger. Very probably group B according to present Dong Son drums classifications. Dimensions: length – 73,5 cm, height – 74,5 cm, black Chinese ink on light pink soft paper. Rubbing drawn up in 1961 in Hanoi is quite heavily damaged and from the imprint quality it is obvious that the original drum was broken, I assume before archaeological excavations had started. There are no humans' beings on this rubbing, the central motif is created by star with fourteen tips, and the space between them is decorated with triangle line points. There are eighteen circles of different length and decorated with completely diverse ornaments between the central star motive and the edge of the drum's face. Very noticeable are the wide line with connected lozenges, and the second wide line with two kinds of birds: flying herons having typical long bills and a few other birds having short bills and standing between flaying herons.
5. Rubbing (inventory No 46 835) of drum's flank. Dong Son drum, type I according to Franz Heger. Dimension: height – 22cm, length – 26 cm, black Chinese ink on pink soft paper. Rubbing was drawn up in 1961 in Hanoi. Horizontal lines of different length are decorated connected lozenges, circles, waves, lines and dots, and probably arrow heads.
6. Rubbing (inventory No 46 836) of drum's flank. Dong Son drum, type I according to Franz Heger. Dimension: height – 22cm, length – 26 cm, black Chinese ink on pink soft paper. Rubbing was drawn up in 1961 in Hanoi. Horizontal lines of different lengths are connected with lozenges, circles, waves, lines and dots, and probably arrow heads. Same pattern as the inv. No 46 835.
7. Rubbing (inventory No A 12 550) of drum's flank. Dong Son drum, type I according to Franz Heger, group A according to the present Dong Son drums classification. Dimension: height – 27cm, length – 168 cm, black Chinese ink on pink soft paper. Rubbing was drawn up in 1961 in Hanoi. It is an imprint of one the most decorative drums flanks: four huge boats full of persons wearing feather headdresses, weapons

decorated with feathers as well, are accompanied by flying birds above the boats and with some kind of reptile between the boats.

It is not widely known, that in the museum collections in the Czech Republic are kept two Dong Son drums, which apparently were imported into Bohemia at the end of 19th century. The first drum belongs to Group C (dated from 4 BC to 1 AD) and has four frogs on its face. This item (inventory No 06132, old No 1377) is located at Opočno castle in Eastern Bohemia in the original Colloredo-Mansfeld House Collection. The second drum belongs to Heger type IV, and according to the Vietnamese researchers into Group D (dated from 4 BC to 1 AD). Unfortunately it has several flaws. This drum (inventory No Vu 517) is in the possession of the National Gallery in Prague.

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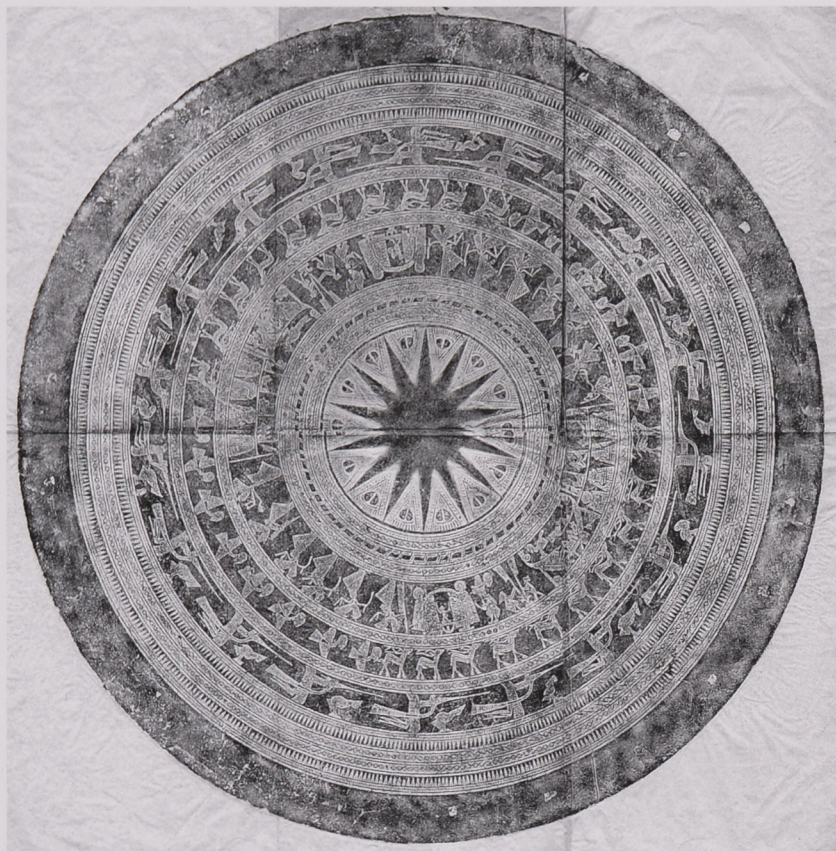


Fig. No 1) Rubbing (inventory No A12 549) of upper board (face) of Dong Son drum, type I (some time called "Tonkin Type") according to Franz Heger, group A according to the present day Dong Son drums classification. Dimensions: 83 x 83 cm, black Chinese ink on light blue soft paper. Rubbing was drawn up in 1961 in Hanoi.

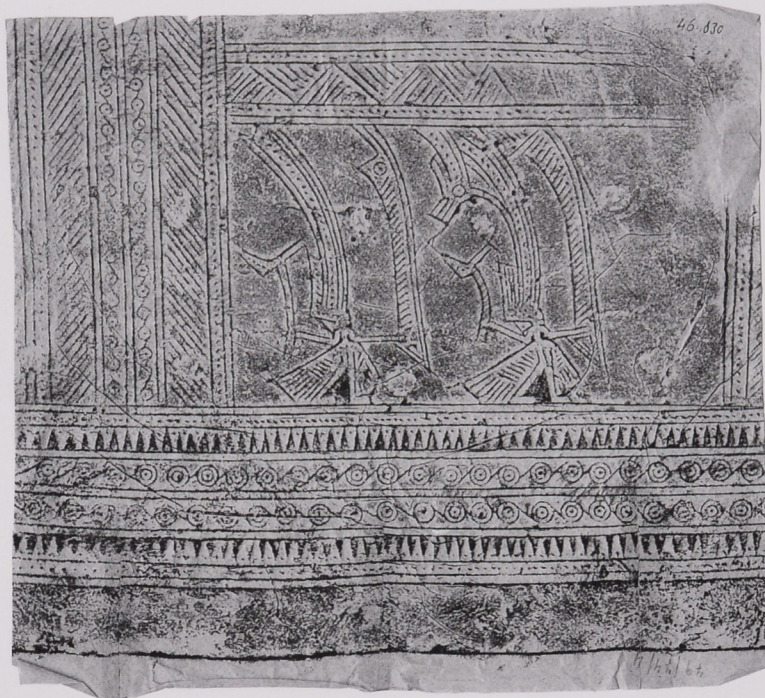


Fig. No 2) Rubbing (inventory No 46 830) of drum's flank. Dong Son drum, type I according to Franz Heger. Dimensions: height - 27cm, length - 29,5 cm, black Chinese ink on light blue soft paper. Rubbing was drawn up in 1961 in Hanoi.

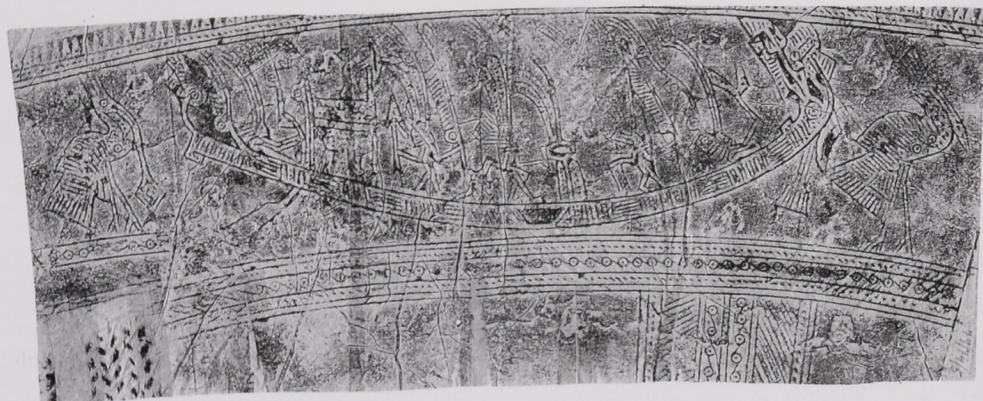


Fig. No 3) Rubbing (inventory No 46 831) of of drum's flank. Dong Son drum, type I according to Franz Heger. Dimensions: height - 18cm, length - 46,5 cm, black Chinese ink on light blue soft paper. Rubbing was drawn up in 1961 in Hanoi.