

Cổ Loa : A Site of Manifold Significance

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Any consideration about the origins of Vietnamese civilization must begin with the northern part of present-day Vietnam, in the area of the Red River delta (RRD). It is considered by many to be the cradle of Vietnamese civilization. Vietnamese traditions and texts describe the florescence of powerful kingdoms in this area during the first millennium BCE¹. These societies purportedly existed well before the arrival of the Imperial Han in the first centuries BCE and CE, which saw the advent of prolonged Sinitic rule over the area (known as the « bắc thuộc » or Sinitic domination period). In the mid-twentieth century, Vietnamese historians revisited these legendary and semi-historical accounts, thereby invoking a long history of Vietnamese cultural tradition and identity that extended well into the pre-Sinitic past. In recent years the material record has been increasingly examined to complement existing textual records. Today, a full grasp of this crucial time period of early « Vietnamese » cultural development necessitates an understanding of the RRD's pre- and proto-history through both textual and archaeological materials.

One of the most important archaeological cultures to be studied in this area is the Đông Sơn Culture (c. 600 BCE to 200 CE). Renowned for sophisticated bronzes, the various communities comprising the Đông Sơn Culture are perceived as part of embryonic Vietnamese civilization. The largest settlement of this pivotal era is the Cổ Loa site, located across the Red River from the core of Vietnam's modern capital of Hanoi, and it is one of the most significant archaeological sites of the country (*ill. 3*).

Cổ Loa may have been the first city and political capital of the region, and is among the largest prehistoric settlements of Southeast Asia². It is mentioned in medieval period Vietnamese annals, traditions, textual sources and legendary accounts, many of which describe its founding as the capital of the Âu Lạc Kingdom by its first ruler, An Dương Vương³. He purportedly took power during the third century BCE, proceeding to construct the massively fortified



Illustration 3. *Satellite Image of Cỏ Loa. Current satellite image of the Cỏ Loa site, with the three rampart enclosures still intact in various states of disrepair. Imagery provided by DigitalGlobe and Archaeo Terra, 2009.*

settlement as his seat of power. According to legend, he was aided by supernatural forces and was in possession of a mystical crossbow. The romanticized tales of An Dương Vương, along with Cổ Loa and the crossbow, conjure up imagery not unlike cases of folklore and literary inventions elsewhere, such as the Arthurian tales of Camelot and Excalibur (*fig. 15*). Cổ Loa has thus become emblematic as a foundational pillar of Vietnamese civilization, and today annual national festivals there commemorate the site and its legendary history. Cổ Loa's monumental system of fortification features still dominates the landscape today, covering some 600 hectares of territory, and its massive scale suggests the presence of significant social complexity at the time of original construction.

Although Vietnamese traditions assert Cổ Loa was founded during the third century BCE, until recently this claim was based on little archaeological substantiation. The timing of the city's emergence and the cultural identity of its founders have been subject to much debate. In contrast with Vietnamese accounts, conflicting depictions come from Sinitic texts written after the area was annexed by the Imperial Han. Chinese chroniclers described the absence of « civilization » among the local « barbarians⁴ ». Relying on Sinitic texts, many scholars over the past century had argued that forms of urbanism and governance were absent in the RRD until after Han arrival, thus generally promoting a Sinicization model of emergent civilization. In more recent years, however, researchers have increasingly recognized the complicated nature of ethnolinguistic origins and interaction between societies of early Vietnamese and Chinese civilizations⁵. Archaeological findings from Cổ Loa and its immediate environs constitute a key component of holistic research that can contribute to these ongoing lines of inquiry, helping to elucidate the underpinnings of Vietnamese identities and civilization. Was civilization the result of: 1) foreign imposition; 2) local, indigenous trajectories of cultural development; or 3) some complex combination of the two?

I have had the privilege of performing field investigations at Cổ Loa with colleagues from the Vietnam Institute of Archaeology and the Thăng Long – Hanoi Heritage Conservation Centre, and our recent findings complement past research completed by my Vietnamese colleagues. We have performed three projects focused on the monumental rampart system since 2007, having just concluded an investigation of the innermost rampart at the time of this writing. Our systematic examination, the first of its kind for understanding the rampart system, has accumulated material data pertinent for construction sequences, chronology, and cultural practices. Overall, the material evidence consists of stratigraphic data, artifact assemblages, and absolute chronological determinations made through radiocarbon and thermoluminescence dating⁶. In terms of artifacts, we recovered Đông Sơn Culture pottery stratified underneath a portion of a rampart, thousands of fragments of ceramic roof tiles (Cổ Loa Culture) within the ramparts, and medieval period artifacts in upper layers. This latter class of materials demonstrates reuses of the ramparts by later societies, with amplification and refurbishment of the walls. To summarize very broadly, the findings suggest that much of the original rampart system was planned

and constructed during the third and second centuries BCE and during what I refer to as the Cổ Loa Polity period (c. 300-100 BCE). This places original construction well before Han annexation and commencement of the Sinitic domination period.

These new data offer different ramifications. First, Cổ Loa is significant as a case to be included within a wider context of archaeological theories regarding the emergence of early cities and sociopolitically complex societies. A long tradition of such studies in the Western world has largely overlooked Southeast Asian pre- and proto-historic cases, and there is virtually no mention of northern Vietnam in such discourses. Understanding the area's social patterns and diachronic changes during the key Iron Age period can offer an important case study for knowledge of incipient civilizations and forms of emergent urbanism. Judging by the amount of construction materials and labor involved, it is very likely that the Cổ Loa Polity held tremendous power and influence over many people and resources. Our ongoing fieldwork thus provides insights for considerations of early examples of political centralization and state formation.

Another implication of the research, as discussed above, pertains to ideas about Vietnamese origins. The RRD has long been widely perceived as the nucleus of a budding Vietnamese civilization, and so Cổ Loa is central to ideas about Vietnamese ethnogenesis. Unfortunately, the material remains recovered to date do not allow us to make direct inferences about ethnic identity and origins, and many related questions remain. For instance, it is difficult to make a direct connection between Cổ Loa material remains and any semi-historically or historically ascribed individual or kingdom, such as the Âu Lạc or the Nam Việt. Perhaps we will have more evidence to do so in the future. Nevertheless, the mounting archaeological evidence does allow us to conclude with confidence that a model of foreign imposition being exclusively responsible for the genesis of local civilization is untenable. Since the three ramparts appear to be roughly contemporaneous in their original construction during the third and second centuries BCE, it is likely that a local, pre-Han, political authority was responsible for the system. That said, the societies of the area were not geographically isolated and did not develop in a cultural vacuum. There is ample archaeological evidence for interaction with communities throughout Southeast Asia and southern parts of modern China from even earlier periods of the Late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age.

Finally, it is clear from the combination of new archaeological data and historical accounts that the settlement and its surrounding landscape have played an ongoing role in ideas about an independent and developing sense of Vietnamese identity. For instance, it is recorded that Ngô Quyền used the site as his capital when the Vietnamese regained independence from the Chinese at the end of the domination period during the tenth century. Excavations have uncovered evidence of continued occupation and refurbishment, into the Trần and Lê Dynasty periods. Accordingly, it appears that the ancient city has been perceived as an ancestral home to incipient Vietnamese cultural identity for

many centuries. The uses of this area as a locus of political power, starting over two thousand years ago, underscores the cultural and historical significance this locality has held and continues to hold. In the past the significance pertained to political power, and over time this has shifted into the domains of cultural heritage, commemoration, and tourism. Embedded within the idea and perception of Cổ Loa are its artifacts, remnant architecture, myths, and attendant ceremonies of remembrance. For all those communities that would inhabit or come into contact with Cổ Loa in subsequent generations since the closing centuries BCE, echoes of the past in the form of materials and stories would continue to reverberate, arguably through to this very day. It is this collection of materials and narratives that form a foundation of cultural power, consisting of not only the material record, but also the extant chronicles describing the Iron Age, the historiographical constructions and ensuing reconstitutions of such narratives, and the changing patterns of cultural practice. Whatever the case, Cổ Loa's built spaces and engineered landscapes still stand today as testament and reminder of past proto- and « Vietnamese » societies. What has been momentous about Cổ Loa throughout Vietnamese history, and why it continues to be significant today for many Vietnamese, is that the site has continued to serve as a center of power, national identity, and cultural imagination, as a potent crucible for what the Vietnamese consider an indigenous civilization.

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RÉSUMÉ

Des millénaires après sa construction originelle, les remparts de terre monumentaux de la citadelle de Cổ Loa, située dans le Nord du Vietnam, restent toujours debout à ce jour, comme un rappel silencieux de sa puissance ancienne. Considérée comme la capitale de la première civilisation vietnamienne, Cổ Loa aurait été fondée au III^e siècle avant J.-C. par le Royaume légendaire d'Âu Lạc. Cependant, les recherches sur la date de fondation de ce siège du pouvoir étaient basées sur des sources contradictoires. Ces dernières années, Nam C. Kim a dirigé un terrain de recherche en collaboration avec des chercheurs de l'Institut d'archéologie du Vietnam, qui a permis de rassembler de nouvelles preuves matérielles dans le but d'améliorer les connaissances sur la cité, l'histoire de son développement ainsi que celle de son peuplement premier. Ces découvertes suggèrent qu'une forme de gouvernement autochtone et avancée a été à l'origine de la construction du système de cet imposant système de rempart durant les derniers siècles avant l'ère commune. Ces découvertes ont des répercussions sur notre compréhension des origines de la civilisation vietnamienne, ainsi que sur les formes précoces d'installations urbaines en Asie du Sud-Est.

ABSTRACT

Millennia after their original construction, the monumental earthen ramparts of the Cổ Loa settlement located in northern Vietnam remain standing today, a silent reminder of an ancient and powerful society. Believed to be a capital city of proto-Vietnamese civilization, Cổ Loa was purportedly founded during the third century BC by the legendary kingdom of Âu Lạc. However, scholarship regarding its establishment as a seat of power has been conventionally based on conflicting sources of textual information. In recent years I directed collaborative field investigations with researchers from the Vietnam Institute of Archaeology, gathering new material evidence in efforts to enhance knowledge of the settlement, its construction history, and its founding society. Our findings suggest that an indigenous, state-level polity was responsible for building Cổ Loa's massive rampart system during the closing centuries BC. Accordingly, these results have broad implications for understanding both the origins of Vietnamese civilization, as well as early patterns of urban formation in mainland Southeast Asia.

TÓM TẮT

Hàng nghìn năm sau khi xây dựng, các lũy đất đồ sộ của thành Cổ Loa, nằm tại miền bắc Việt Nam, vẫn tồn tại cho tới ngày nay, như một cách gợi nhớ thâm lặng về sức mạnh xưa của mình. Được coi là kinh đô của nền văn minh Việt Nam đầu tiên, Cổ Loa được vương quốc huyền thoại Âu Lạc thành lập vào khoảng thế kỷ III trước Công nguyên. Tuy nhiên, việc nghiên cứu ngày thành lập trung tâm quyền lực này dựa trên những nguồn tư liệu trái ngược nhau. Những năm gần đây, Nam C. Kim đã điều hành một lĩnh vực hợp tác nghiên cứu với các nhà nghiên cứu của Viện Khảo cổ học Việt Nam, đã cho phép tập hợp các bằng chứng cụ thể mới với mục đích nâng cao kiến thức về khu thành, lịch sử phát triển của nó cũng như lịch sử tình hình dân cư thời đầu. Những khám phá này đưa ra giả thuyết rằng một chính quyền bản địa và tiến bộ là nguồn gốc công việc xây dựng hệ thống thành lũy quan trọng trong những thế kỷ cuối trước kỷ nguyên ngày nay. Những phát hiện này tác động trở lại tới sự hiểu biết của chúng ta về nguồn gốc nền văn minh Việt Nam, cũng như những cách thức hình thành đô thị đầu tiên tại vùng Đông Nam Á.

Notes

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Figure 15. Statue of Cao Lỗ at Cổ Loa. The statue commemorates the legendary military advisor or holy man that produced the mythical crossbow for An Dương Vương, 2012, photograph by Nam C. Kim.