

STUDY OF MEGALITH IN VIETNAM AND SOUTHEAST ASIA

LÂM THỊ MỸ DUNG (*)

1. Discoveries and studies of megalith sites in Southeast Asia

Megalith (Cự thạch) is the term to call the sites structured by great stones, which might be a single site or a complex. In some European languages, *megalith* is used to call them. It means the sites were built with great stones arranged closely together, without using mortar or any sticky stuff. The word *megalith* originated from the ancient Greek, in which *Megas* means great and *lithos* means stones.

There are some ways to classify megalith - *Cự thạch*. The conventional way just includes three to four types such as Dolmen - *Trác thạch*, Menhir - *Trường thạch* and *Hoàn thạch* (*Cromlech*). According to Heine Geldern (1945:148) megalith - *Cự thạch* includes Menhir (straight stones - *Trường thạch*), Dolmen (Stone tombs - *Trác thạch* or *Bàn thạch*), Stone cists (Stone boxes - tombs), Stone jars, Stone sarcophagus, Stone sculpture, Stone bend, Stone wall, Stone stairs, Stone bathing place, Cairn, Terrace and Stepped Pyramid. In general, there are two groups of megalith meaning, wide and narrow.

Dates: megalith sites have been built almost all over the world since Prehistory. The earliest ones were found in Western

Europe, with the date even up to 7000BP. Some others were from the historical period and contemporary time. Many megalith sites have become historical, whereas many others play certain role today.

Functions: According to the recent studies, the functional diversity of megalith sites directly proportional to their types. However, in general, they can be put in one group or divided into two to five major groups: Memories, Sacred spirit – Religion, Burials, Astronomy, and Competition – Authority.

Due to their diversified functions, the interpretation of this type of site is very varied. The matter interested by researchers is the social structure linked to megalith sites, especially in Pre- and Proto- history. In Southeast Asia, according to researchers, megalith sites were built to function as burial sites or symbols of power and authority of the heads of the communities (the leaders) and closely related to fiefs – the communicative type. The idea of burial type or megalith cultural period in

(*) Associate Professor, Doctor. Museum of Anthropology, University of Social Sciences and Humanity, Hanoi National University.

Southeast Asia or in a larger area in the southern and eastern Asia have been discussed a lot (Byung – mo Kim, the editor, 1982). Megalith is used to call a great stone bar or rock, sometimes with inscriptions, which is used to form a structure functioning as a burial site or a landmark to define the leader's status. One of the earliest interpretation is of Heine – Geldern.R, which is about megalith culture – an early Neolithic period (the second millenium B.C), with the sites found in Nias, Flores, Sumba and northern Luzon. The art styles distinguish them from other megalith types in the Central Borneo. The central Salawesi and Batak in Sumatra – the types seen to be artistic, which originated from the Đông Sơn culture and had a direct effect on Indonesian art later. Bellwood assumes that megalith sites came from the Austronesian region at least from the first millennium BC and lasted until the historical period (Bellwood, 1997, p.153). Megalith is popular to the fish men with the Austronesian language. However, it is rare to find typical sites in Southeast Asian islands.

With the current data, it is impossible to accept the perception of a megalith cultural period existing independently in Southeast Asia. However, it is possible to see that the megalith sites in Southeast Asia, especially in Southeast Asian Islands were built and used a lot in the historical period with diversified types and from one of the two traditions of the past and present. The inhabitants in many areas in Indonesia, Malaysia and even India, still perform rituals at the megalith sites and there are a lot of folkloric stories related to those sites.

2. Megalith in Vietnam

The megalith sites in Vietnam might have belonged to the megalith complex in western Pacific, spreading from Japan to Korean peninsula to all over Southeast Asian.

In Vietnam, megalith sites were found at Hàng Gòn (Đồng Nai), Đông Phở (Quảng Ngãi), Chư Pa (Gia Lai), Hung Yên (Nghệ An), Vũ Xá (Bắc Giang), Lam Kha mountain (Bắc Ninh), Bản Thành (Cao Bằng), Nám Dần (Xín Mần, Hà Giang), and recently Mẫu Sơn mountain and Chóp Chài (Lạng Sơn), Tả Van Giáy (Lào Cai), Sóc Sơn (Hà Nội)... which have not been excavated except Hàng Gòn, Mẫu Sơn and Tả Van Giáy. Of those mentioned sites, Hàng Gòn is the only one site that has sufficient data to date; the others are impossible to define their dates. The megalith sites found in Vietnam are mainly Dolmen.

Generally, the megalith sites in Vietnam have just been studied and what have done are just notations, preliminary description of each site. Many other problems such as their owners, functions, morphological classification need further investment both money and grey matter. The followings are the review of some sites that have been excavated and initially studied.

2.1. Tả Van Giáy megalith site

The site Tả Van Giáy belongs to Tả Van commune, Sapa district, Lào Cai province, near the famous ancient stone field of Sapa. Its latitude 22⁰18'070''north and longitude is 103⁰53'126''east. It is 1078m - 1084m higher than the sea level. This altitude is equivalent to that of Mẫu Sơn megalith site (Lạng Sơn).



Tả Van Giáy site

The excavation results show 07 large stone bars that are non-standard rectangular and similar in size, with one exposed flat face. The other face is impossible to see, but it might be fairly flat. Of these 07 stone bars, 02 have slipped down, 01 (No.4) has broken into two pieces and 01 (No.VII) has slipped further down and lies next to a stone arranged burial. According to the local people, this bar used to lie on the upper position, but it fell down later due to landslide three years ago. The other 05 bars lie closely to each other in paper fan shape on the original rock surface on a fairly sloping cliff; the soil under them and in the excavated trench does not include any artifacts. The ends of the stone bars No. I, II, II and IV are all curved; the bar V has two fairly flat ends. The sizes of those bars as follows:

Stone bar I: (306 x 80 x 25) cm

Stone bar II: (340 x 82 x 36) cm

Stone bar III: (320 x 82 x 36) cm

Stone bar IV: (240 x 95 x 30) cm

Stone bar V: (130 x 55 (60) x 28) cm (the width of both ends).

Stone bar VI: 150 x 40 x 30 cm (slid down).

Stone bar VII: (140 x 80 x 26)cm (measured sizes, except part of it inside the burial). This bar might have the same size as the bar I.



Therefore, the bars I, II, II and VII are similar in size; the bar V and VI are much the same. The bar IV has a length in between the two above groups.

Those stone bars are not *insitu*. They gradually slid downwards. Based on the physiognomy, it is possible to see that if they had belonged to any megalith type, they would hardly stay in the middle of the hill cliff. They might have been from a high hill top that was fairly flat and wide and after many sliding times, they moved to the present position.

During the excavation, the scientists conducted a survey to investigate the area round the site and found a



fragment of a terra-cotta bottom and a potsherd of a brown-inlaid jar (from the Trần period). They were about 20m away from those stones to the southeast, near a running rivulet.

The local people also collected some artifacts in the area. They include a bronze kneeled leg of a small urn, on which is a

design of a human face (or more probably a stylized tiger face. The two handles forming figure of lion-like animal attaching on the mouth of a bronze urn or incense burner. It was in meandering position surrounded by wavy designs and its tail is in form of a Bodhi leaf. It is 0.9m long and 0.5m thick. Both of the mentioned objects are associated to votive and ritual items from late Nguyễn period. However, like the mentioned terra-cotta fragment or potsherd, it is impossible to identify their relationship with megaliths at Tả Van Giáy.

Due to the serious lack of necessary data to come to a scientific conclusion, we assume that the large stone bars at Tả Van Giáy were once used intentionally and associated to a generation of local inhabitants living in that area (reasonably Tày – Thái minorities). Those stones bear megalith ideas and have various functions such as burial and votive area and symbol of power that seems to be the main function. The megalith site at Tả Van Giáy cannot exist alone. It must have a certain relation to the ancient stone fields in Sapa and their counterparts that have just found in the area (possible references are some Asian sites such as complexes of megalith sites at Yoshinogari, Ashiziri Cape (Japan), the field of jars at Xiem Khoang (Laos), Sunda (Indonesia)... and other similar sites located along Vietnamese – Chinese borders. It is possible to say they are complex with natural large-size stones, which were processed by man for various aims. The date of their appearance and existence are impossible to identify exactly with current data. It is probable that the site was set up from the medieval to contemporary time.

2.2. Megalith sites at Mẫu Sơn and Chóp Chài (Lạng Sơn).

At Chóp Chài, there are large stone bars on a fairly-flat hill top. They are very large and nearly rectangular. No processed traces and original structure have been found.



Megalith sites at Chóp Chài

At Mẫu Sơn, apart from the vestiges of a temple built in the late 19th century, there are some stone tombs (dolmen), two of which remain visible structure. Remarkably, at the small tomb found some traces of mortar to attach the cover to the tomb. There are many other large stones lying in clusters around the site. Some of them remain processed traces. Obviously, this site provides materials for building the ancient temple.

Mẫu Sơn site was excavated in 2003. The results of archaeological data (artifacts) are not enough for us to date the remains. Most of the found artifacts here have a very late date (the 19th century). The date given by the excavators is the tenth – twelfth century, which were based on the comparison of the types and materials with other megalith sites in Bắc Giang, Bắc Ninh (the Department of Culture and Information of Lạng Sơn, 2004). It is necessary to notice that the date of the sites in Bắc Giang and Bắc Ninh is completely based on deduction. Therefore,

it is impossible to date the megalith sites in Lạng Sơn.

2.3. *Megalith site at Năm Dền (Xín Mần, Hà Giang)*

Two megalith sites lie in a valley between Tây Tần mountain range and Năm Dền hill range to the south. In this valley, there are many stones with carved marks. Two megalith sites have been found among them.

The first site was built with degenerated schist stone (top stone) that is amorphous, 2.3m – 2.4m long, 1.0m – 1.10m wide and 0.35m – 0.40m thick; both the sides are smooth, without any processed traces. This stone was put on 3 other small stones in a tripod position. It is the human arrangement here that makes it possible to distinguish them from other natural stones (according to Dr. Trình Năng Chung, Institute of Archaeology, Hà Nội). The founder has not referred to their date yet.

The second site lies next to the first one and is similar in structure. However, the size of the top stone is different. According to Dr. Trình Năng Chung, this is a dolmen type and it shares many similarities to the dolmen sites at Hòa An (Cao Bằng) and Nà Hang (Tuyên Quang).

2.3. *Megalith site at Sóc Sơn*

At Sóc Sơn district, the group of archaeological researchers of the 1000-year Thăng Long – Hà Nội project from the University of Social Sciences and Humanity of Hà Nội National University, found two fairly intact dolmen sites. Remarkably, on the surfaces of the stones all have ground traces. There are no archaeological artifacts or vestiges round the site, which can help to define the date. The ground traces suggest a possibility that these sites are associated with votive practices or certain rituals of the local

inhabitants. At Java, there a type of stone site with a hole for grinding rice, which is considered to be associated to the sexual image and practice rituals.

3. Some comments

Having been found all over the world, megalith sites have great megalith significance that expresses human desire – competitive for authority, power, properties or strength...

Megalith site (particularly Dolmen sites) was built to memorize a powerful figure when he died. Therefore, the stone size represents the wealth of the death family and the power when that person had been still alive. The paradox thing is that many people built megalith though, some of them were chosen to be buried in them.

It is possible to use megalith data from Southeast Asia to conduct a comparative study of those sites with large-size stone found a lot in Vietnam recently. According to the issued data, megalith sites in Indonesia belong to three groups: stone tombs, single stones and construction complex. The stone tombs are defined through human bones and accompanied goods; the single stones are associated to a ritual or religious custom and the stone works were built with stone bars associated with megalith ideas. The basic ideas of these stone works are for worshipping the ancestors. At present, large-size stone works are continued to be built at Nias, Toraja and Sumba.

The megalith sites found in Vietnam so far were mainly built in the areas of forest, hills and mounds, which were quite separate from the settlement sites and they were easy to observe from a distance. The ancient inhabitants took advantage of natural stones to arrange purposefully. We have just found some sites with traces

related to processing or transporting materials from other places.

Similar to some Asian countries, the megalith sites in Vietnam do not exist separately but in assemblages with various functions and diversified forms such as dolmen sites, straight to flat stones with carved marks. However, the most popular type is dolmen.

The megalith sites in Vietnam all belong to *the past megalith tradition*, though some sites are still used for votive practices by the local people. However, those sites, in fact, have lost their initial function and the present local people almost know nothing about the original function as well as the dates of those sites with large-size stones. Instead, they introduce their own contents and interpretation. In the other words, we are impossible to find out any appropriate archaeological and ethnological data. However, it does not mean that it is not necessary to collect data and conduct an overall and inter-disciplinary survey when studying megalith sites. A popular present approach is to search for the relationship between these sites and the legends of the local chieftains and the process of formation of the fiefs (Byung-mo Kim – edited in 1982:182-187- plate 5).

The megalith sites in Vietnam were the earliest built (based on the existing data), from the Christian era to possibly contemporary time. The set-up/construction and exploitation of these sites might be closely associated to:

- i) the psychiatry in favour of “monumentality” and the desire for showing this character by the local powerful class;
- ii) the mixture of many religious levels and holy items of the local people and
- iii) the contact, interaction and integration of many cultural layers/sources.

Among all the megalith sites found in Vietnam, Mẫu Sơn is the only one site that has a structure similar to Hàng Gòn site but its size is much smaller and it is impossible to date exactly.

Among the megalith site known in Eastern and Southeast Asia, Hàng Gòn site is the largest and the most standard in building. It is possible to see that megalith sites symbolizing a fief– like community, which lost its role when state with its central government structure of state organized as exotic model appeared. The megalith sites in Vietnam might include two stages of formation and development. The early stage (protohistory) is associated to the formation of fief and the later one (contemporary history) is connected with local feud and the regime of chieftain of the minorities.

REFERENCES

1. Byung-mo Kim (Ed.). *Megalithic Cultures in Asia*. Hanyang University Press. Seoul. 1982.
2. Bellwood Peter. *Prehistory of the Indo-Malaysian Archipelago*. 2nd ed. Honolulu University Press. Honolulu. 1997.
3. Heine Geldern, R.von. “Prehistoric research in the Netherlands Indies” *Science and Scientist in the Netherlands Indies*. New York: Board for Netherlands Indies, Surinam and Curacao. 1945.
4. Lâm Mỹ Dung et al. Report of excavation results at Tả Van Giáy (Lào Cai). Documents of Museum of Anthropology, Hà Nội University of Social Sciences and Humanity.
5. Culture and Information Department of Lạng Sơn Province. Report of Excavation results at Mẫu Sơn (Lạng Sơn). 2004.