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Ancient Crafts in Ho Chi Minh City During the Prehistoric and Early Era

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Abstract
This paper investigates the formation process and technical characteristics of ancient crafts in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) within the context of the new administrative boundaries following the 2025 merger. Using an interdisciplinary approach combining archaeology and history, the study identifies large-scale production centers from the Stone Age to the Metal Age, such as Hang Ong Dai, My Loc, Doc Chua, and Phu Chanh. The findings indicate that ancient crafts in this region early achieved high levels of specialization, shifting significantly from a self-sufficient economy to a commodity and international trade economy. The research affirms that the heritage of ancient crafts is the core foundation for the dynamic identity of the modern HCMC megacity.

Keywords: Traditional crafts, Prehistory - Early History, Ho Chi Minh City

1. Introduction

Ho Chi Minh City, after July 1, 2025, has become a megacity with an area of 6,772.65 km² and a population of over 14 million people after merging with Binh Duong and Ba Ria - Vung Tau provinces. Located in a strategic position connecting inland and international maritime routes, this land possesses a long history of formation linked to the ability to conquer nature and adapt to different cultures. Ancient crafts in Ho Chi Minh City are not only a means of livelihood but also material evidence of the level of technical thinking and social organization of ancient inhabitants of the Dong Nai culture. Studying the system of ancient crafts from the Pre- and Early History layers helps to identify the continuity and inheritance of professional knowledge in the development process of this land.

2. Sources and Research Methods

2.1. Research Sources

The research is primarily based on archaeological data, including archaeological works in Ba Ria - Vung Tau, Binh Duong, and Ho Chi Minh City, which provide quantitative data on molds, ceramic artifacts, and stoneworking workshops. These are material evidence of the industrial foundation of the Pre- and Early History periods, serving as a scientific basis for reconstructing the appearance of ancient crafts in Ho Chi Minh City. Professor Phan Huy Le's report on the formation of the Southern region of Vietnam serves as a theoretical framework for analyzing basalt eruptions and the formation of mineral deposits serving the metallurgical industry.

2.2. Research Methodology

The research was conducted using a combination of interdisciplinary methods. Archaeological and historical methods were applied throughout to reconstruct the development process of ancient crafts in Ho Chi Minh City. Archaeological research played a key role in identifying the rudimentary crafts and the level of specialization of ancient inhabitants through the direct analysis of sites and artifacts. The research focused on large-scale crafting "workshops" in the northern area such as Hang Ong Dai, Hang

Ong Dung, and My Loc. Through the analysis of the accumulated thickness of the chipped fragments and sketches, the research clarified the continuous production process and the division of labor from the initial processing of the raw stone to the final polishing of the product.

Analyzing collections of sandstone and terracotta castings at centers such as Doc Chua, Bung Bac, and Bung Thom aims to fully identify the techniques of mold making, including retaining and breaking molds, and to analyze the alloy composition (copper, tin, and lead) in typical artifacts such as the Doc Chua animal statues or bronze spearheads. Through discoveries of wooden stilt house systems, wooden burial jars, and wooden weaving tools at Phu Chanh, the study analyzes the physical and chemical properties of materials (sandalwood, soft-grained wood) and the sophisticated woodworking and carving techniques of ancient inhabitants. Researching glass, agate, and gold artifacts at Giong Ca Vo and Giong Lon aims to determine the techniques of pipe drawing, embossing, and the inter-regional trade links with India and island Southeast Asia.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. The Land and People of Ho Chi Minh City

3.1.1. Overview of the Land of Ho Chi Minh City

The formation and development of Ho Chi Minh City is not simply a story about administrative boundaries, but also an epic tale of conquering nature, cultural adaptation, and political vision spanning centuries. Implementing Resolution No. 202/2025/QH15 dated June 13, 2025, of the National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam on the rearrangement of provincial-level administrative units: On July 1, 2025, Ho Chi Minh City will officially merge with the two provinces of Binh Duong and Ba Ria - Vung Tau to form a megacity with an area of 6,772.65 km² and a population exceeding 14 million people [1]. Ho Chi Minh City is bordered to the east by Dong Nai and Lam Dong provinces, to the west by Tay Ninh province, to the south by the East Sea [2], and to the north by Dong Nai and Tay Ninh provinces. Located in a strategic position connecting inland economic regions with the international maritime system, Ho Chi Minh City has played and continues to play a pivotal role in the national economy.

Ho Chi Minh City boasts a diverse natural ecosystem, ranging from the low hills in the north to the mangrove forests and coastline in the south. The terrain slopes gradually from northeast to southwest, creating two distinct regions: a highland area characteristic of the Southeast region, with elevations ranging from 10 met to 22 met, and a lowland area typical of the Mekong Delta, with elevations from only 0.5 met to 3 met.

Ho Chi Minh City is located in the lower reaches of the Dong Nai River system, with major tributaries such as the Dong Nai River, Be River, and Vam Co River, along with their branches. In addition, along the coast there are smaller rivers such as the Thi Vai River, Dinh River, Co May River, Du Du River, Dong Tranh River, Ca Gau River, Long Tau River, and Ray River. Ho Chi Minh City has a coastline of 127 km, stretching across 9 communes and 6 wards: An Thoi Dong Commune, Can Gio Commune, Thanh An Commune, Phuoc Tan Ward, Tan Hai Ward, Long Son Commune, Phuoc Thang Ward, Rach Dua Ward, Tam Thang Ward, Vung Tau Ward, Long Hai Commune, Phuoc Hai Commune, Ho Tram Commune, Xuyen Moc Commune, and Binh Chau Commune. Furthermore, Ho Chi Minh City also includes the Con Dao Special Zone, comprising 16 islands of varying sizes, with an area of 76 km^2 (the largest being Con Son Island, with an area of approximately 51.52 km^2). From Binh Chau commune to Vung Tau ward, the coastline is high with many dunes, ridges, and long stretches of sandy beaches. From Long Son commune to An Thoi Dong commune, there are many estuaries, low-lying areas, and swamps. With its advantageous coastal location and dense network of rivers and canals, Ho Chi Minh City has developed a thriving seafood industry in general, and fishing in particular. The Dong Nai River system acts as a backbone connecting prehistoric workshops from the highlands down to the coastal region.

Ho Chi Minh City is located in the sub-equatorial tropical belt (Northern Hemisphere) with an average annual temperature of 27.3°C and two distinct seasons. The rainy season lasts from April to November, and the dry season from November to April of the following year. Due to the strong influence of the trade winds, which are characterized by their dry nature, resulting in a prolonged and intense dry season and a relatively high number of sunshine hours per year, Ho Chi Minh City has an advantage in developing salt production from a very early period.

Ho Chi Minh City is not rich in mineral resources, especially metallic minerals. Although iron and aluminum minerals are scattered and present in low concentrations, the total reserves in the weathered crust are quite high. The main minerals are bauxite ore, clay, and stone, which are readily available resources and have been the foundation for the formation and development of stone carving and pottery making since prehistoric times.

According to historian Phan Huy Le, during the Quaternary period there were many large basalt eruptions in the southern part of the Indochinese peninsula, including in Lower Laos and the Central Highlands, distributed along an axis extending from Ba Ria - Xuan Loc through Binh Phuoc to Kompong Cham (Carbonnel, 1972). Basalt flows developed along the northern slopes of the Mekong Delta and divided the Saigon - Dong Nai river basin [3]. It is possible that volcanic eruptions north and northeast of Ho Chi Minh City during the late Cenozoic and Quaternary magmatic-tectonic activity formed some copper ore deposits in the area. It is highly probable that the ancient inhabitants of Ho Chi Minh City discovered, exploited, and used this readily available resource to manufacture tools, weapons, jewelry, and amulets to serve their daily needs.

Ho Chi Minh City is located in the transitional area between the semi-plain terrain of the Southeast region and the Mekong Delta. Its geomorphology is composed of three ecological sub-regions: The northern and northeastern basaltic red soil plateau sub-region (formerly Binh Duong province), with ancient granite bedrock and abundant forest resources serving

[1] Resolution No. 202/2025/QH15 dated June 13, 2025, of the National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam on the reorganization of provincial-level administrative units.

[2] Resolution No. 202/2025/QH15 dated June 13, 2025, of the National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam on the reorganization of provincial-level administrative units.

[3] Resolution No. 202/2025/QH15 dated June 13, 2025, of the National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam on the reorganization of provincial-level administrative units.

stone quarrying, toolmaking, carpentry, and providing valuable timber for shipbuilding; the ancient alluvial sub-region (gray soil), occupying a large proportion and mainly concentrated in the north of Ho Chi Minh City. This area is densely populated with archaeological sites and was the most stable and favorable environment for the development of pottery and metallurgy due to its abundant clay resources; and the southern and southeastern coastal and mangrove sub-region of Ho Chi Minh City, with the Can Gio estuary and mangrove forest system being the cradle of salt production, fishing, net weaving, and boat building. These potentials and advantages form the foundation for the development of traditional crafts in Ho Chi Minh City.

3.1.2. Overview of the People of Ho Chi Minh City

The land of Ho Chi Minh City was formed tens of millions of years ago. Between 30,000 and 20,000 years ago, prehistoric societies appeared – the Old Stone Age of Vuon Du. Throughout the New Stone Age, many stone tools developed. Ancient inhabitants of Ho Chi Minh City knew how to use axes and hoes with V-shaped or symmetrical V-shaped cross-sections for clearing forests to create fields, planting root crops or rice, and gradually shifting from hunting and gathering to farming and animal husbandry.

Around the 2nd century BC, the ancient inhabitants of Ho Chi Minh City began to advance into the Metal Age, belonging to the Dong Nai culture. The stone carving skills of the ancient inhabitants of Ho Chi Minh City reached a high level, with stone carving workshops in Hang Ong Dai, Hang Ong Dung, Hang Tam Dang in the Be River basin, and Bung Bac and Bung Thom in the coastal swamp area. Metallurgy and bronze casting also began to appear in areas such as Doc Chua, Cu Lao Rua, Bung Bac, and Bung Thom, with casting molds dating back approximately 2,500 years. These molds were mainly double-sided, made of stone, and used to cast weapons such as axes, spears, and ceremonial objects. In addition, pottery making, weaving, and jewelry making also developed quite early in Ho Chi Minh City.

The emergence of stone carving, pottery making, bronze casting, weaving, and jewelry making from the prehistoric period reflects the increasing level of specialization in primitive societies. The dwelling areas of the ancient inhabitants of Ho Chi Minh City were no longer confined to the Dong Nai and Be river basins, but had expanded throughout the entire Southeast region. According to Professor Tran Van Giau: On the land of Saigon – from the Vam Co River to the Dong Nai River – there were several tribes of the Indigenous people living there before the establishment of Funan. During the Funan period from the 1st to the 6th centuries, these tribes were more or less dependent on the Funan rulers, but did not submit to Indian assimilation [4]. From the 6th to the 16th centuries, the land of Ho Chi Minh City nominally belonged to Chenla. However, the dependence was loose, similar to the period of the Funan state before. According to Professor Tran Van Giau's assessment, this land remains the free land of various ethnic groups and is virtually ownerless, a barren wasteland both economically and sovereignly since ancient times.

During his diplomatic mission to Cambodia in 1296, Zhou Daguan recorded several place names and landscapes in the area of Ho Chi Minh City as follows: “From Champa, sailing downstream for about half a month, we reach Chan Bo [in the Ba Ria region, Ba Ria-Vung Tau province], which is the border of that country [Cambodia]”. “From the point of entering Chan Bo onward, it is mostly low forest with dense trees. Long rivers and wide harbors stretch for hundreds of miles, covered with dense ancient trees, overgrown with vines, and filled with the sounds of birds and animals. Only halfway to the harbor do we see vast rice paddies, completely devoid of trees. Looking into the distance, we only see lush rice paddies… surrounded on all sides by high mountains” [5]. In his records, Zhou Daguan mentioned the boat-building techniques of the Cambodian people; the boats were made of wooden planks, without the use of saws, only hammers, chisels, and iron nails, requiring much effort and wood.

The ancient inhabitants of Ho Chi Minh City belonged to the Dong Nai culture, located in an area controlled by Funan and Chenla. However, the influence and dominance of these two empires on this land was almost negligible. This can be considered a large, unexplored gap due to a lack of documentation and inscriptions recording the Dong Nai culture during this period. When Vietnamese people arrived in this new land (Ho Chi Minh City) to reclaim land and establish settlements around the late 16th and early 17th centuries, historian Le Quy Don recorded in Phu Bien Tap Luc: “From the estuaries of Can Gio, Soai Rap, Cua Tieu, and Cua Dai (upwards), there was dense forest stretching for thousands of miles” [6]. Le Quy Don's records of the Ho Chi Minh City area are not numerous, but they share similarities with those of Zhou Daguan, namely the unspoiled nature of the area due to dense forests along the estuaries upstream.

The land surrounding Ho Chi Minh City was formerly a wild, sparsely populated area of dense forests, located in the lower reaches of the Dong Nai, Saigon, and Ray rivers. It was the long-standing home of indigenous communities such as the Xtieng, Ma, Co Ho, and Cho Ro people. Most scientists acknowledge that the ancient inhabitants of Ho Chi Minh City were the ancestors of the Xtieng, Ma, Co Ho, and Cho Ro ethnic groups. From the 17th century onwards, historical progress revealed the presence of Khmer, Cham, Vietnamese, and Chinese communities, along with other northern ethnic minorities such as the Tay, Nung, Thai, Muong, and Mong. Among these, the Vietnamese increasingly dominated in numbers and played a major driving role in the development of the Southern region in general, and Ho Chi Minh City in particular.

According to historical records on the Khmer Empire, the chronicles and missionary accounts in the study of the Cultural Geography of Ho Chi Minh City, published in 1987, record the marriage between the King of Cambodia and the Princess of Annam in 1620 and the establishment of a tax office at Prei Nokor, Kas Krosey (Saigon) in 1623. These events contribute to affirming the strength and influence of the Vietnamese community in Ho Chi Minh City in the first half of the 17th century.

When Vietnamese migrants entered the Mo Xoai (Ba Ria),

[4] Resolution No. 202/2025/QH15 dated June 13, 2025, of the National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam on the reorganization of provincial-level administrative units.

[5] Resolution No. 202/2025/QH15 dated June 13, 2025, of the National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam on the reorganization of provincial-level administrative units.

[6] Resolution No. 202/2025/QH15 dated June 13, 2025, of the National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam on the reorganization of provincial-level administrative units.

Dong Nai, and Saigon areas to cultivate land and establish new villages, some indigenous communities such as the Xtieng, Ma, Co Ho, Cho Ro, and Mnong abandoned their land and moved deeper into the old-growth forests in the North and Northwest – where their people lived. The Mo Xoai area was the first stop, laying a solid foundation for the Vietnamese to spread in various directions, gradually developing the downstream areas of the Dong Nai River system. In this process, a natural division of labor occurred among the communities: the Vietnamese, skilled in wet rice cultivation, often concentrated on cultivating deep fields (grassland) near the basins of large rivers and swamps, while the indigenous communities cultivated on higher ground (mountain fields).

In their journey to new lands, the Vietnamese people not only possessed a strong pioneering spirit but also brought with them techniques for wet rice cultivation, fishing, salt making, weaving, blacksmithing, metallurgy, bronze casting, goldsmithing, papermaking, carpentry, boat building, making rice paper, rice noodles, fish sauce making, rượu (rice wine) making, and sugar making, etc.

According to the Dai Nam Nhat Thong Chi: "In the year of Ky Vi (1679), during the reign of Emperor Thai Tong Hieu Triet, he ordered generals to open up land and build military outposts in the neighboring Tan My area" [7]. By mid-1679, remnants of the anti-Qing, pro-Ming army submitted to the Nguyen lords, were granted titles and given land in Gian Pho to live in. In 1698, Le Thanh Hau Nguyen Huu Canh, under the orders of Lord Nguyen Phuc Chu, undertook a southern expedition. He "made the Nong Nai area into Gia Dinh prefecture, established the Dong Nai region as Phuoc Long district, built the Tran Bien garrison, established the Saigon region as Tan Binh district, and built the Phan Tran garrison; Each administrative unit appointed a governor, a chief administrator, and a clerk to govern" [8]. Nguyen Huu Canh established the first foundation of administrative governance by creating Gia Dinh Prefecture, dividing the territory into two large districts, Phuoc Long and Tan Binh, using the Dong Nai River and the Saigon River as natural boundaries. This was not merely naming a region, but a systematic act of establishing territorial sovereignty, based on an administrative system similar to that in the North and Central regions.

The formation of Ho Chi Minh City's community is closely linked to the history of the Nguyen Dynasty's expansion into the South from the late 17th century. This migration process involved three main waves: The first wave migrated to Saigon-Gia Dinh, a gathering place for intellectuals, merchants, and multi-skilled laborers from all over the country. The second wave migrated to Mo Xoai-Dat Thu, a land of the earliest settlers, forming a population with a tradition of sophisticated handicrafts and a resilient spirit. The third wave migrated to the coastal areas of Ho Chi Minh City, from Binh Chau commune to An Thoi Dong commune and the Con Dao special zone, a place once visited by "heroic" sea-guards and fishermen from the central coast, creating a distinct maritime and island culture.

By the mid-18th century, under Lord Nguyen Phuc Khoat, this region continued to expand through diplomatic policies. Political stability, along with policies to recruit impoverished migrants from the southern part of Bo Chinh, helped the population of Gia Dinh prefecture increase rapidly, transforming the vast, densely forested area into a bustling center with river ports, markets, and strategic fortifications.

Throughout the Nguyen Dynasty, the French colonial period, the Republic of Vietnam era, and up to the present day, Ho Chi Minh City has not only been a melting pot of people from all over the country but also an attractive destination for foreigners from all five continents. The characteristics of its population and migration patterns have shaped the personality of its people, characterized by dynamism, perceptiveness, diligence, creativity, generosity, kindness, compassion, mutual support, resilience, and fortitude. Throughout the formation of Ho Chi Minh City, new residents, armed with knowledge and practical skills acquired in their homelands, simultaneously reclaimed barren land and developed their trades to meet essential needs, contributing to socio-economic, cultural, and national defense and security in the area. Currently, Ho Chi Minh City has become a megacity of the whole country and in the Southeast Asian region, with 168 commune-level units, including 113 wards, 54 communes and 01 special administrative-economic zone, Con Dao Island.

3.2. Ancient Prehistoric and Early Historical Crafts

The land of Ho Chi Minh City was formed tens of millions of years ago. Between 30,000 and 20,000 years ago, a prehistoric society – the Old Stone Age of Vuon Du – appeared. Throughout the New Stone Age, many stone tools developed. According to researcher Bui Chi Hoang: "Axes and hoes with V-shaped or symmetrical V-shaped cross-sections were used for clearing forests to create fields for cultivation, planting root crops, or growing rice" [9]. This shows that the ancient inhabitants of Ho Chi Minh City gradually shifted from hunting and gathering to farming and animal husbandry (domesticating livestock and poultry).

Scientists agree that the Ho Chi Minh City area was home to many stone carving workshops in the southern region. Approximately 4,000-2,000 years ago, stone carving workshops such as Hang Ong Dung (Phu Giao commune), Hang Ong Dai, Hang Tam Dang (Bac Tan Uyen commune), My Loc (Tan Uyen ward), Bung Bac (Tam Long ward), Bung Thom (Dat Do commune), along with pottery making, metallurgy, bronze casting, carpentry, weaving, and jewelry making, were discovered at sites like Doc Chua (Tan Uyen ward), Cu Lao Rua (Tan Khanh ward), Phu Chanh (Binh Duong ward), Giong Ca Vo, Giong Ca Trang (Can Gio commune), Giong Lon (Long Son commune).. This shows that the social life of the ancient inhabitants of Ho Chi Minh City was not simply about livelihood activities but had progressed to a high level of specialization, organized production processes, and the initial formation of a rudimentary commodity economy.

Throughout the period from the late Neolithic to the early Iron Age, the lower Đồng Nai River basin witnessed a dramatic shift from natural resource exploitation to highly

[7] Resolution No. 202/2025/QH15 dated June 13, 2025, of the National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam on the reorganization of provincial-level administrative units.

[8] Resolution No. 202/2025/QH15 dated June 13, 2025, of the National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam on the reorganization of provincial-level administrative units.

[9] Resolution No. 202/2025/QH15 dated June 13, 2025, of the National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam on the reorganization of provincial-level administrative units.

specialized, technologically advanced industries. These activities not only served domestic needs but also laid the foundation for early international trade relations, paving the way for the emergence of the Óc Eo culture and other ancient states on the Indochinese peninsula.

3.2.1. Stone Carving

Stone carving is one of the oldest crafts, dating back to the Paleolithic era and reaching its peak in the late Neolithic and early Bronze Ages. In Ho Chi Minh City and surrounding areas such as Dong Nai, traces of this craft are recorded through thousands of artifacts dating from 600,000 to 700,000 years ago. The lower reaches of the Dong Nai and Be rivers witnessed a boom in stone carving with the largest workshops in Southern Vietnam.

The transition from chipping to grinding, sawing, and drilling techniques marked a giant leap forward in stone craftsmanship. At the Hang Ong Dai and Hang Ong Dung sites in the north, archaeologists discovered a large-scale stone crafting "workshop" with a dense accumulation of tool outlines. The cultural layer here is not a gradual accumulation but rather a "point" accumulation of production waste. Over an area of more than 10,000 m2 at the Hang Ong Dai site, a layer of accumulated chipped fragments, approximately 0.3m - 0.4m thick, was found in a chaotic state, allowing archaeologists to precisely determine the seating position of the craftsmen and the flight path of the chipped fragments. The dense accumulation of chipped fragments and outlines indicates a highly specialized level of production organization beyond self-sufficiency, and also proves that this was not only a residence but also a specialized production workshop.

Based on the results of field surveys, the system of relics is clearly delineated according to each stage in the stone tool making process. First, Hang Tam Dang is identified as the initial processing site of the raw stone (step 1 chipping process) characterized by scattered flakes accumulating on the surface; the main products here are rough sketches chipped from the raw stone (step 1). Next, the shaping of the rough sketches (step 2 chipping) is concentrated at Hang Ong Dai and Hang Ong Dung. At Hang Ong Dai, the thickness of accumulated flakes ranges from 0.3m to 0.4m, creating products such as hoes, axes, large quadrilateral chisels, and sickles. Meanwhile, Hang Ong Dung has a greater thickness of accumulated flakes (reaching 0.6m) and specializes in small quadrilateral tools. Finally, My Loc plays the role of the center for product completion with a thick cultural layer; This is a collection of tools that have been polished and fully finished, with a very high density of artifacts (949 specimens in an area of 400m²).

The table above shows a continuous and planned production process across different locations. Raw stone was quarried and pre-processed at Hang Tam Dang (where the original stone blocks are located), then transported to Hang Ong Dai or Hang Ong Dung for preliminary shaping, and finally to settlement sites such as My Loc for finishing. The separation between the raw production and finishing sites demonstrates professionalism and a division of labor in stone toolmaking. Furthermore, mass production exceeding self-sufficiency needs suggests the exchange of goods within the region and neighboring areas.

The ancient inhabitants of Ho Chi Minh City demonstrated a profound knowledge of the properties of different types of stone. They selected hard stones such as dasite and andesite for crafting tools, while slate was used for jewelry and fine sandstone and sandstone for grinding stones. Techniques such as direct chipping, anvil chipping, and fine chipping were skillfully applied to create the thinness and sharpness of the blade edges. Notably, wire sawing was commonly used to create the shoulders of axes, resulting in a product with a high degree of balance and aesthetics that would be difficult to achieve with conventional chipping techniques.

Archaeologists have discovered 949 grinding stones of various types used for sharpening tools before use at the My Loc site, within an excavated area of only about 400 square meters. This shows that My Loc played the role of a final "finishing station" in the stone tool production process, where tools were thoroughly sharpened before being used for slash-and-burn agriculture or traded to more distant areas such as the Vam Co River basin or coastal regions.

While the northern area of Ho Chi Minh City is notable for the production of labor tools, the southeastern area of Ho Chi Minh City is marked by the exquisite craftsmanship of stone jewelry making, culminating in the Bung Bac workshop. This is a testament to the shift from a self-sufficient economy to a market economy, where jewelry products were mass-produced with astonishing technical precision.

Through two archaeological excavations at the Bung Bac site in 1984 and 1994, archaeologists discovered many artifacts (waste products of the core drilling technique) related to the process of crafting green slate bracelets, from disc-shaped sketches to broken bracelet fragments. According to archaeological researchers, the total number of artifacts in the bracelet crafting process, such as initial sketches, disc-shaped sketches, partially drilled sketches, bracelet cores, and broken bracelet fragments, is approximately 801 artifacts (45 specimens in 1986 and 756 specimens in 1994), along with quite a number of grinding tables and core grinding tables, proving a “closed-loop technology” process in bracelet crafting [10]. The process of crafting jewelry and the core drilling technique can be divided into several main stages including: creating the sketch, core drilling, and polishing [11]. The mass production of stone bracelets at Bung Bac, with its closed-loop process, shows that this craft had reached a professional level. Similar to stone tools, stone jewelry products also became important commodities, connecting communities in the area and surrounding regions. The presence of D-shaped bracelets at the Cu Lao Rua or My Loc archaeological sites may be products from these coastal workshops.

In 2024, excavations in Kim Long commune, Chau Duc district (now part of Kim Long commune) uncovered settlements and burial sites dating back 2,500-2,000 years; in Cu Bi commune, Chau Duc district (now part of Chau Duc commune), they uncovered settlements and stone tools dating back 3,500-3,000 years; and in Quang Thanh commune, Chau Duc district (now part of Binh Gia commune), they uncovered pottery and wooden artifacts, contributing to filling the gaps in the prehistoric history of this region.

[10] Resolution No. 202/2025/QH15 dated June 13, 2025, of the National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam on the reorganization of provincial-level administrative units.

[11] Resolution No. 202/2025/QH15 dated June 13, 2025, of the National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam on the reorganization of provincial-level administrative units.

3.2.2. Pottery making

Pottery was an indispensable part of the prehistoric handicraft structure, reflecting the aesthetic level and living habits of each cultural sub-region. Archaeological excavations at the Cu Lao Rua, Doc Chua, and My Loc sites show that pottery making flourished. Ancient inhabitants knew how to use clay mixed with fine sand and plant residue to create the clay body. In particular, Cu Lao Rua pottery is famous for its technique of applying bright red or reddish-brown color to the smoothed shoulder, creating an aesthetic contrast with the body of the pottery, which is decorated with brushed or engraved wave patterns.

Meanwhile, pottery at the Bung Bac and Bung Thom sites is surprising with its painted pottery. Straight lines, S-shaped lines, or concentric circles are painted directly with dark brown on the base of the high-footed bowl. This is an exogenous cultural element, reflecting a connection with the painted pottery centers of Ban Chiang (Thailand). Furthermore, the type of bowl with a high pedestal accounts for a very large proportion of the coastal pottery collection, indicating that they played an important role in the sacrificial or burial rituals of the swamp inhabitants.

Another prominent feature is the use of pottery as coffins. Archaeologists have discovered hundreds of pottery vessels with wide, flared mouths and bulging bodies in Con Dao. Notably, many of these everyday pottery vessels had their mouths chipped or partially destroyed by the inhabitants to facilitate their use as coffins for the deceased, creating a unique burial custom that spread throughout the coastal region from Sa Huynh to Can Gio.

Most of the pottery materials at the sites of Cu Lao Rua, Doc Chua, My Loc, Bung Bac, Bung Thom… "all used local materials, with analyses by Diep Dinh Hoa (1976), Pham Duc Manh (1996) and Ho Khac Buu (1998) showing that the main material was clay with added additives to the pottery body such as plant residue or minerals of basalt and granite origin" [12]. The raw materials for pottery at the Doc Chua and My Loc sites mainly come from the Dat Cuoc area (Bac Tan Uyen commune), which has large reserves of high-quality clay, distributed near areas inhabited by both past and present communities.

3.23. Metallurgy and Bronze Casting

The transition from the Stone Age to the Metal Age marked a great turning point in human history, changing both the level of technology and the social structure. In this process, the Southeast region of Vietnam emerged as a "cradle" of a brilliant prehistoric culture, with the metallurgy and bronze casting industry developing strongly and possessing a distinct identity. In particular, Ho Chi Minh City was not only a residential area but also a center of large-scale metal production and workshops. This was a crucial link in the network of cultural exchange in Southeast Asia from the 2nd to the 1st millennium BC.

The development of copper smelting in Ho Chi Minh City is linked to favorable geographical factors. These include the geological diversity, with a combination of red soil plateaus and ancient alluvial plains creating ideal alluvial terraces for prehistoric people to settle and develop copper smelting. The Dong Nai River system, with its main tributaries such as the Be River, Saigon River, and Vam Co River, is a vital waterway connecting the northern highlands with the Can Gio and Xoai Rap estuaries in the south. Ancient inhabitants of Ho Chi Minh City thoroughly exploited existing resources such as clay for smelting pots and sandstone for casting molds. While Ho Chi Minh City does not have a strong advantage in copper resources, it is likely that late Cenozoic volcanic eruptions in the north and northeast of Ho Chi Minh City formed some copper ore deposits, which were used by ancient inhabitants as raw materials for copper smelting. Furthermore, thanks to the system of vital waterways, the ancient inhabitants of Ho Chi Minh City interacted and exchanged goods with other ancient communities in the region, including copper materials.

From the late 19th century, French researchers began to pay attention to scattered discoveries in the East, notably the collections of Mougeot, Holbé, and Barthère. However, these activities were mainly about collecting artifacts randomly rather than systematic excavations. During the period 1945-1975, with the contributions of E. Saurin and H. Fontaine, important sites such as Dốc Chùa began to be publicized. After 1975, Vietnamese archaeology officially took over and implemented large-scale research programs. The establishment of the Center for Archaeological Research in Ho Chi Minh City, along with support from experts from Hanoi, led to a series of excavations at Dốc Chùa (1976-2018), Bưng Bạc (1986-2002), and Giồng Cá Vồ (1993-2022). These efforts have outlined the characteristics of the Dong Nai Culture – an independent cultural entity that developed continuously from the late Neolithic to the Metal Age, closely related but not identical to the Dong Son culture in the North and the Sa Huynh culture in the Central region. This contributes to affirming its important geopolitical position as a gateway trading port for Ho Chi Minh City from prehistoric times.

The Doc Chua site dates back 2,500 to 3,000 years ago. Through four official excavation phases (1976-2009) and the H2 excavation in 2018, scientists have collected thousands of valuable artifacts. A highlight at Doc Chua is the collection of 76 sandstone casting molds in the initial phases and an additional 3 molds in 2009. The H2 excavation in 2018 further unearthed bronze spearheads and 803 tools of various types, confirming Doc Chua as a bustling center for mold making and bronze casting. With a total of 85 fragments of various types of casting molds, both intact and broken, discovered in the stratigraphic layers of the excavation pits, it shows that the ancient inhabitants of Doc Chua not only cast common production tools such as axes but also sophisticated weapons such as spears, barbed javelins, bronze halberds, and even artistic objects such as rattles, bells, and animal statues… Among them, the "Doc Chua Animal Statues" are considered the pinnacle of bronze casting technique, artistry, and aesthetic thinking of the ancient inhabitants of Doc Chua.

[12] Resolution No. 202/2025/QH15 dated June 13, 2025, of the National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam on the reorganization of provincial-level administrative units.

Fig 1: The animal statues at Doc Chua were recognized as national treasures in 2013. [13]

Excavations (1986-2002) at the Bung Bac site revealed it to be a multi-functional "workshop" covering over 1,100 square meters. Archaeologists discovered a total of 65 casting molds at the Bung Thom site, 38 casting mold fragments at Bung Bac, and hundreds of fragments of cooking pots and pouring ladles. Particularly noteworthy are the multi-part molds (four-part molds) that allowed for the simultaneous casting of multiple items such as symmetrical axes and barbed spears. Although the number of bronze artifacts found is not large due to the strong weathering of the saline soil, the collection of casting molds here is extremely unique. The inhabitants used a continuous mold system that allowed the simultaneous casting of two or three different artifacts on the same pair of molds (for example, simultaneously casting an axe blade and two barbed spears). According to archaeologists, the discovery of a collection of casting molds with traces of use in Bung Bac and Bung Thom, belonging to the ancient community of Ba Ria - Vung Tau, truly proves the existence of a highly developed and sophisticated copper smelting industry, comparable to other contemporary copper metalworking centers in Southeast Asia, especially the metalworking center of Northeast Thailand [14]. The bronze casting techniques at Bung Bac and Bung Thom demanded absolute precision in designing the pouring spouts and channels to ensure the molten metal flowed evenly into the artifact cavities without clogging or creating air bubbles. The presence of oval-throated axe molds with raised patterns at Bung Bac bears a striking resemblance to those at Non Nok Tha (Thailand) or Samrong Sen (Cambodia), evidence of a vast network of technical exchange within mainland Southeast Asia.

Numerous fragments of axe molds, broken cooking pots, and copper slag were discovered at the Ben Do and Long Buu sites (Long Binh ward). Earthenware molds alongside copper smelting blades at Go Cat (Rach Dua ward) indicate that ancient inhabitants had mastered the technique of breaking molds – a major advancement in the casting of complex artifacts. Furthermore, the excavation of the Giong Ca Vo site (2021-2022) revealed a “treasure trove of burial jars” with 185 burial jars and 13 earthen tombs, along with hundreds of valuable burial goods including metal artifacts, double-headed animal earrings, three-pronged glass earrings, and 66 gold beads. Particularly noteworthy is the discovery of pouring ladles, cooking pots, and breaking molds, confirming this as a local center for jewelry and tool making, integrating traditional Dong Nai techniques with Indian technology.

Archaeological research from the prehistoric period reveals that the ancient inhabitants of Ho Chi Minh City mastered the techniques of creating both mold-holding and mold-breaking techniques. Mold-holding (sandstone molds) were primarily used for mass-producing standard tools such as axes and chisels. Fine sandstone was cut into mold plates, the mold faces were polished smooth, and finely carved negatives were created. Meanwhile, mold-breaking (terracotta molds) were used for items with complex patterns, such as the Dốc Chùa animal statues. This technique required mixing kaolin clay with rice husk ash and plant fibers to increase heat resistance, then breaking the mold to obtain the finished product.

The brass alloy found here is stable with a three-component system: Copper (Cu) - Tin (Sn) - Lead (Pb). Copper accounts for approximately 70-90%. Tin accounts for approximately 10-15% to provide hardness and lower the melting point to 1,000-1,200°C. Lead is a characteristic auxiliary component (1-5% for tools, 15-30% for jewelry), helping to increase fluidity so that the molten copper can fill the intricate details of the sandstone molds. The cooking pots and pouring ladles were made of heat-resistant coarse pottery, and ancient inhabitants used bellows (wooden bellows or earthen bellows) to achieve high melting temperatures. The molten copper was poured into molds, allowed to cool, and finally processed (sharpened, embellished with patterns).

The rise of copper smelting spurred specialization in production and social stratification. Centers for the production of tools, implements, and weapons, such as Dốc Chùa, Bưng Bạc, and Bưng Thơm, served not only local needs but also regional trade networks. Despite the scarcity of copper ore, the ancient inhabitants of Ho Chi Minh City developed a long-distance exchange network for raw materials. Studies show a close technical relationship between Northeast Thailand, Cambodia, and Southeast Vietnam via the Mekong River system. Copper casting produced symbols of power and ceremonial objects,

[13] Resolution No. 202/2025/QH15 dated June 13, 2025, of the National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam on the reorganization of provincial-level administrative units.

[14] Resolution No. 202/2025/QH15 dated June 13, 2025, of the National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam on the reorganization of provincial-level administrative units.

reflecting a clearly stratified social structure (leaders - craftsmen - farmers).

Ho Chi Minh City was one of the most highly developed metallurgical centers in Vietnam's early Bronze and Iron Age. Despite the limitations of local mineral resources, the ancient inhabitants of the Đồng Nai River basin built a self-sufficient copper casting industry, mastering both stone and clay mold techniques. The diverse system of archaeological sites, from the hilly areas of Doc Chua and the Hang Ong Dai stone quarry to the mangrove areas of Giong Ca Vo and Bung Bac, demonstrates the extraordinary creativity in the construction of civilization. Artifacts such as the animal statues of Doc Chua and the bronze drums of Phu Chanh are evidence of a highly organized prehistoric society, rich in identity and always open to interaction with the region.

3.2.4. Weaving

Weaving is one of the clearest examples of stable settlement and the development of personal aesthetic needs. Traces of weaving are recorded by archaeological discoveries, specifically: At the Doc Chua site, archaeologists found 478 ceramic spindle whorls, a huge number compared to other sites of the same period in the North (Dong Son culture); at the Phu Chanh site, archaeologists discovered a collection of weaving designs made of wood [15], which was recognized as a National Treasure in 2020.

The discovery of a piece of red cloth buried in a wooden burial jar at the Phu Chanh site is the most direct evidence of the products of weaving. The coarse, woven fabric, dyed with herbal colors, shows that prehistoric inhabitants knew how to combine weaving techniques with dyeing techniques to enrich their material lives. This shows that the craft of spinning and weaving in Doc Chua and Phu Chanh was not just a family activity but had progressed to a very large-scale community production. The spindles were shaped like truncated cones, wheels, or flat shuttles, used to create the desired tension in hemp or cotton yarn when stretched.

Fig 2: The Phu Chanh wooden weaving kit was recognized as a national treasure in 2020. [16]

The ceramic spindle whorls discovered at the Doc Chua site (Tan Uyen ward) and Cu Lao Rua site (Tan Khanh ward), dating back 3000 years, and especially the wooden artifacts discovered at the Phu Chanh site (Binh Duong ward), such as weaving spools, weaving knives, winding rods, weaving blades, shuttles, etc., dating back over 2000 years, have many similarities with the weaving tools of the Ma and K'Ho ethnic groups in the southern Central Highlands. The “knee-folding sitting weaving” technique proves the formation and development of weaving from prehistoric times. Furthermore, the weavers of Doc Chua, Cu Lao Rua, and Phu Chanh in prehistoric times had close ties to, or were ancestors of, the Ma and K'Ho ethnic groups today.

3.2.5. Woodworking

The ancient inhabitants of Ho Chi Minh City often resided near the river basins of the Dong Nai River system. Their lives were closely intertwined with both forests and rivers, and from a very early age they knew how to use wood to build houses and tools. In prehistoric times, carpentry in the Southeast region of Vietnam was not simply about making tools, but also involved the art of constructing houses and building boats, helping people conquer swamps and estuaries. At the Bưng Bạc, Bưng Thơm, and Phú Chánh archaeological sites, researchers have discovered traces of a dense system of wooden stilt houses. Ancient inhabitants demonstrated superior architectural thinking in calculating the load-bearing capacity of their houses on the weak soil. The supporting piles, 10-20cm in diameter, were sharpened at the ends and driven deep into the muddy ground in regular straight lines, forming a sturdy stilt house frame. The floorboards were flattened and fitted together or connected by horizontal beams and wooden mortises. At Bưng Bạc, archaeologists found 18 seamlessly joined floorboards, demonstrating a very high level of woodworking skill and further evidence of a stable life in the flooded wetland area.

The need for transportation between coastal islands and along rivers spurred the development of boatbuilding. The use of sharp bronze axes allowed inhabitants to fell large, ancient trees and hollow them out to create dugout canoes. The Phu Chanh site also shows a unique application of this technique: wooden jars, 60-80cm high, hollowed out from solid tree trunks to serve as coffins—a unique burial practice found only in Phu Chanh at that time. Furthermore, an ancient wooden weaving kit was discovered in Phu Chanh. The kit includes 23 artifacts crafted from wood (mainly reddish-brown wood and soft-grained gray wood). Based on function and morphological characteristics, the artifacts are classified into five main groups:

- The group of weaving knives consists of 2 artifacts, with lengths ranging from 70cm to 87.5cm. The knives resemble swords in shape. The blade is long and wide, with a flattened rhombus cross-section. One end of the knife is beveled to a point; the other end is flat, with 3

[15] Resolution No. 202/2025/QH15 dated June 13, 2025, of the National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam on the reorganization of provincial-level administrative units.

[16] Resolution No. 202/2025/QH15 dated June 13, 2025, of the National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam on the reorganization of provincial-level administrative units.

evenly spaced protrusions. The part of the blade near the handle has 6 isosceles triangle-shaped holes punched through it. The arrangement of these holes creates a symmetrical graphic design, mimicking the appearance of a human face.

- The group of weaving spools consists of 2 artifacts, with a stable length ranging from 89cm to 90.5cm. The spools are narrow and long rectangular bars. Both ends of the spool are shaped like curved horns. Notably, the horn tips at both ends rotate in opposite directions, serving the mechanism of the loom.
- The group of stepped bars consists of 16 artifacts, with lengths varying from 17.7cm to 37.5cm. The notched bar is similar in shape to a comb, but varies in size and number of notches depending on the specimen. The notched bars have one perfectly flat surface and the opposite side has sharp, pointed notches. The entire group is exquisitely carved from reddish-brown wood, the carvings demonstrating a high level of craftsmanship.
- The pointed rod has one artifact, approximately 22.8 cm in length. The pointed rod is beveled on both sides, forming a sharp point at both ends, and has a semicircular cross-section.
- The group of combs consists of two artifacts; this is the smallest group in the set, with lengths ranging from 3.5 cm to 4.5 cm, comprising two specimens: One comb is made from soft-grained gray wood, with a rounded, curved tip; the other comb is made from soft-grained reddish-brown wood, with an overall semicircular shape.

In 2018, the "Phu Chanh Wooden Jar with Bronze Drum Lid" was recognized as a national treasure by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism. The jar dates back to approximately the 2nd-1st century BC (based on C14 analysis: 2,100 ± 40 years) and is made from Dalbergia tonkinensis (Dalbergia tonkinensis/Dalbergia tonkinensis). It was crafted from a section of an ancient Dalbergia tonkinensis tree trunk with a diameter of over 100cm. The choice of horizontal wood grain for carving demonstrates a deep understanding of the wood's physicochemical properties, allowing the artifact to survive for over 2,000 years. The jar's body features beautiful concentric circular patterns. The mouth is perfectly round, beveled to create a radial plane that perfectly fits the lid (bronze drum). The jar's shape is slanted and gradually widens towards the base, requiring extremely high control of force and precision in craftsmanship. The wooden jar is 61cm high, with a diameter of 68cm at the base and a thickness of approximately 7cm at the bottom. It is a heavy and sturdy piece of wood, reflecting a significant investment of effort.

Fig 3: The wooden burial jar with a bronze drum lid was recognized as a national treasure in 2018. [17]

The wooden jar tomb with a bronze drum lid is a “novel” burial style, discovered for the first time in the history of Vietnamese and world archaeology, combining the wooden jars of the Sa Huynh culture and the bronze drums of the Dong Son culture. The use of a bronze drum as a lid for a "coffin" made of precious wood suggests that the tomb's owner was a person of status, power, and wealth within the community. The wooden jar tomb with a bronze drum lid demonstrates the cultural exchange between regions and the prosperity of Ho Chi Minh City during the prehistoric and early historical periods. The most noteworthy aspect is the "transformation of materials." Normally, burial jars are made of ceramic, but in Phu Chanh, the inhabitants replaced them with precious wood, carved with a high level of artistry. The Phu Chanh wood weaving tools demonstrate a high degree of consistency in materials and craftsmanship. The diversity of artifact types (from weaving knives and looms to notched bars) indicates a complete system of tools, proving the development of ancient hand-weaving techniques among the inhabitants of Phu Chanh. This also contributes to confirming the strong development of carpentry among the ancient inhabitants of Ho Chi Minh City from prehistoric times.

3.2.6. Crafting Glass, Gemstone, and Gold Jewelry

Around the 5th century BC to the beginning of the Common Era, the coastal areas of Can Gio and Long Son became bustling ancient trading ports, receiving and localizing advanced jewelry-making techniques from India and the Southeast Asian island region. The Giong Ca Vo and Giong Phet sites have yielded thousands of monochrome and multicolored glass beads [18]. Most of these beads were crafted using the drawing technique, a mass production

[17] Photographs of artifacts at the Binh Duong Provincial Museum.

[18] According to statistics in the book "Archaeology of Ba Ria - Vung Tau from Prehistory to Early History": Archaeologists have discovered 1,637 specimens of glass beads at the Giong Lon site and 1,040 specimens of glass beads at the Giong Ca Vo site (page 275).

method from a hollow glass tube pulled out while molten, characteristic of South Indian glass factories such as Arikamedu. The presence of on-site glass earring molds indicates a vibrant inter-regional cultural and commercial exchange network among the ancient inhabitants.

At the Giồng Lớn site, the presence of rare artifacts made of pure gold, such as gold masks and spiral-grooved earrings, demonstrates a high level of goldsmithing craftsmanship and reflects close trade relations with the Java region (Indonesia) and South India. Meanwhile, the Giồng Cá Vồ site stands out with its jewelry made of precious stones and glass, notably earrings with animal heads and agate beads; these artifacts confirm a strong interaction with the Sa Huỳnh culture and influences from India. Particularly, at the Phú Chánh site, the presence of Đông Sơn bronze drums and bronze mirrors made from brass establishes a direct link to the Đông Sơn cultural center in the North and the Western Han Dynasty (China). Overall, the diversity of materials (from precious metals and gemstones to brass) and the distinctive artifacts found at these sites not only reflect sophisticated craftsmanship but also illustrate a multifaceted maritime trade system, connecting indigenous communities with major civilizations in the region and the world.

The pinnacle of luxury and power is exemplified by the collection of gold artifacts at the Giồng Lớn site. Three gold-embossed masks depicting human faces (large eyes, thick eyebrows, broad noses) were found in the richest earthen tombs. Along with gold spiral earrings, gold-plated beads, and nephrite jade tubular rings (originating from Taiwan), these artifacts demonstrate the formation of a merchant aristocracy – those directly involved in and coordinating the coastal trade network.

The traditional crafts of prehistoric Ho Chi Minh City are a vibrant tapestry, reflecting the extraordinary creativity and mastery of nature by the ancient inhabitants. From their rudimentary stone tools, they progressed to mastering pottery techniques, the art of stone xylophone music, and sophisticated bronze casting and iron smelting. These crafts not only provided necessities but also formed the economic and technical foundation for the development of pre-state social organizations, laying the groundwork for the vibrant and dynamic cultural identity of Ho Chi Minh City in subsequent centuries. Studying these ancient crafts helps us better understand the origins and the persistent labor of our ancestors in building a major cultural center as it is today.

4. Conclusion

The ancient crafts of the Pre- and Early History periods in Ho Chi Minh City are not only cultural heritage reflecting the material and spiritual life of ancient inhabitants, but also vividly reflect the primitive production methods of the Southeast region. The system of large-scale stone carving workshops in Hang Ong Dai, My Loc, or the metallurgical center at Doc Chua demonstrates the high level of specialization of the ancient inhabitants. Furthermore, the rudimentary techniques of pottery making, weaving, and carpentry formed the foundation for the exchange and assimilation of indigenous culture with Vietnamese, Chinese, and Western cultures from after the 16th century; new crafts quickly blended and flourished on this existing foundation.

From their earliest stages, the crafts here clearly demonstrated a commodity-based nature. Traditional crafts did not exist in isolation but were closely linked to the cultural ecosystem of Dong Nai. Wooden burial jars with bronze drum lids or the Phu Chanh wooden weaving kit are vivid examples of the technical thinking and political power of the inhabitants of this region during the Pre- and Early History periods.

In short, the ancient crafts in Ho Chi Minh City reflect both their long-standing origins and the continuity and inheritance of their craftsmanship; they also demonstrate the convergence and openness of professional knowledge and the development of a commodity economy. Fully identifying the historical value and technical characteristics of these crafts not only helps preserve ancient heritage but also forms the foundation for developing cultural industries and experiential tourism in the current trend of modernization and digital transformation.

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