

Lecture: “Barbarians” and Bronzes: The Origins of Civilization in Ancient Vietnam

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Guest Lecturer

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Room HSS302

College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences Building

University of Guam - Mangilao

Lecture summary:

Two thousand years ago, China’s Han Empire stretched its imperial grasp beyond the mountains far to the south of the Central Plains, reaching into the domains of “barbarians”. Along its southernmost periphery lay the Red River Valley (RRV) of present-day Vietnam. In their chronicles, the Han claimed that they “civilized” the RRV’s “barbarians”. In contrast, many Vietnamese believe this time and location represents the birthplace of an indigenous, Vietnamese civilization that predates Han arrival. This view has been traditionally based on colorful tales and legends. One of the most enduring accounts tells of the Au Lac Kingdom and its capital city, known as Co Loa. Thus, at the heart of ongoing, intense, and sometimes nationalistic debates are two contrasting views. One sees “civilization” as a byproduct of Han arrival, while the other sees it as the outcome of local, indigenous cultural traditions. This lecture presents new and ongoing archaeological research that addresses these themes and questions. Specifically, it highlights recent investigations at the Co Loa site, considered to be the first capital of ancient Vietnam.



IMAGE: Temple of An Duong Vuong in Co Loa commune, Dong Anh district, Hanoi Photo courtesy of VuThiAnh, CC0, via Wikimedia Commons



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