Thúc Phán, Cao Tông, and the Transfer of Military Technology in Third Century BC Việt Nam

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One of the most intriguing problems in early Vietnamese history is the ruins of a citadel at Cổ Loa across the Red River and some 20 km from Hà Nội. This is a puzzle that comes in two parts: the physical remains and the story attached to them in early Chinese records. The story is of a man who conquered the Vietnamese Hùng King and the kingdom of Văn Lang, founded his own kingdom, built a citadel, acquired a magic crossbow with which to defend it, and lost them all—crossbow, citadel, and kingdom—because of overconfidence and treachery. As for the physical remains, the citadel has the first rammed earth defensive walls in Việt Nam, and an examination of its archaeology can give clues to the probable source of this new technology.

Commonly attributed to Thúc Phán, King An Dương of Âu Lạc (traditional dates: 257-208 BC), the remains of the citadel are situated about 8 km from where the Hoàng River flows into the Red River, near the district town of Đông Anh (see Map 1). The site appears to have been carefully chosen to correspond to the requirements of a “male city” as recommended by the late fourth-century BC

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1 I am grateful to the Office of Faculty Development and the History Department of Towson University for funding for research for this article, and to Sharon Mollock, the invaluable head of Towson’s Interlibrary Loan Department, for speedy and cheerful service. I am also grateful to C. Michele Thompson and two anonymous readers for generous and bracing advice.

Chinese military theorist, Sun Bin: “If a city lies amidst small marshes, lacks high mountains and notable valleys but has moderate-sized mounds about its Four Quarters, it is a ‘male city’ and cannot be attacked. [...] If within the city there are moderate-sized mounds, it is a male city and cannot be attacked.”

The mounds provide high ground from which the defenders can fire down upon attackers and force them to fire upward, an advantage for the defenders. The interior mounds also provide hidden sites for ballista artillery that the enemy will not be able to target and positions from which a strong defense can be mounted even if the attackers have broken through the first line of defense.

A total of 18 mounds exists within and without the citadel: a string of large mounds just outside the moat surrounding the outer wall from east to west, and a line of smaller mounds to the northwest and north. Smaller mounds appear between the outer and central walls and inside the inner wall (see Map 2, no. 2 and Gò Đồng Băn to the NW). It seems likely that some or all of these mounds were artificially constructed, since they are described as “sand hills,” and the sand must have been dredged from the rivers.

The fortress is composed of three rammed earth walls. The unusual outer and central walls are built in irregular curves, with a circumference of nearly eight km and 6.5 km respectively. The square inner wall is a little more than 1.65 km around the perimeter. The ruins of the outer wall rise three to four meters, with the wall near the Flagpole Mound to the south, where the central wall joined it, rising to eight meters. The walls must have been taller before the ravages of time

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3 Sun Pin, *Military Methods*, trans. Ralph D. Sawyer (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995), 75-77, 214, 217. A female city was one with terrain that allowed it to be attacked, 214.
and weather reduced them. The central wall is from six to twelve meters high, taller than the outer wall, which would, like the hills, make safe positioning for artillery as well as making an attack even more difficult should the enemy penetrate the outer wall. The original main gate must have been where these two walls come together in the southeast. The flagpole made signaling to all parts of the citadel possible by hoisting flags or baskets of smoking brush in the daytime and burning brush at night (Flagpole Mound, Map 2, 41, is probably near 35 and 36; number 41 does not seem to exist on the map).

MAP 2

The inner wall, said to be Chinese, enclosed the palace and temple areas. These structures may have been part of the original construction pre-dating the Han wall. The two outer walls were 25 meters thick at the base tapering to 12 meters at the top. They were reinforced at the base with large boulders and above with terra cotta tiles, a necessity because of the high water table in the area, which was a drawback to building the citadel on marshy terrain.

Each wall had its moat; that of the outer wall “averages from 10 to 30 meters wide, with some places wider.” This moat would have been able to accommodate a class of warship called the “King’s Wide Ships.” The widest portions of the outer moat are to the south, where the citadel’s waterways link with the Hoàng River, allowing the King’s Wide Ships to provide a mobile naval defense to the vulnerable area of the city to the south where an attacker might try an assault from the river.

The system of moats around the two outer walls has certain unique features. Where the outer and central moats come together to the east, the jointure of waters flows inside the outer and central walls and then divides into five channels, like the fingers on a hand. The system provided a secure interior anchorage for the Âu Lạc fleet and for commercial vessels, while also providing quick and easy entrance and exit. The channels penetrating the two walls must have been controlled by large water gates. There is no point in fortifying a city and then leaving gaps in the walls.

Chinese cities of the period and later commonly had canals or rivers controlled by water gates flowing inside their walls. The best known water gate

5 Phạm Minh Huyễn, Institute of Vietnamese Archaeology, personal communication, April, 2001.
from Warring States times is the one excavated at Ying, the former capital of the State of Chu. That gate is 10 m wide, about the width of the water gates at Cô Loa. The water gate at Ying penetrates the outer wall and allows ships access to the rivers inside the city. Ying had natural rivers crossing the city; Cô Loa did not. Its outer two moats linked to a set of artificially constructed anchorages which provided access to the docking area inside the second wall, while a branch of the middle moat appears to provide fast water access to both the middle and outer moats in the dangerous northeast quadrant.8 The link with the outer moat, near the present highway, would have been controlled by a water gate, too. Sorties by fast small ships docked in the inner anchorages could, therefore, respond to trouble anywhere on the perimeter and could reinforce or resupply the outside hills under fire if necessary.

As for the other citadel gates, the inner wall has a single one to the south at the west corner, a narrow Han style gate with an extension on the east side, probably paralleled by another of the same length to the west, producing a narrow passage through the gate, and making it easier to defend (see Map 2). The central wall had five gates: south, southeast, east (a water gate), north, and northwest. The number of gates in the central wall provided maximum flexibility of troop deployment for defense of the outer wall in time of trouble. Each gate, except the main gate to the southeast where the outer and central walls meet, had a temple (miếu), possibly to propitiate the local gods of soil and water for having disturbed them. There may have been a large temple at the main gate, long since destroyed. The outer wall may have had four gates: to the south, southeast, east (a water gate), and another water gate to the northeast. The south gate of the outer wall had two temples, as befitted a propitious location. The water gates also once had temples.9 Gates and guard towers would have been constructed of wood. Guardwalks along the top of the walls would have been paved with tiles or bricks.

The southeast orientation of the main gate and the ceremonial center of the citadel appear to follow the yin-yang theory of cosmological space which was current in late Warring States China. According to the theory, parts of which date to Shang times, the sun moves from yang to yin, southeast to northeast, in its yearly path. The southeast was considered the most propitious direction, because that is the position of the sun at the summer solstice and thus the maximum yang

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8 Needham and Yates, *Military Technology*, 294, 296, 303 (Ying), 304-305 (diagrams of the water gate). Unlike Cô Loa, all of these cities are determinedly square. During the Warring States period, some Chinese capitals evolved into two separate walled cities, one for the palace, temples, and government and the other for workshops, shops, and residences for the common people. In these “double cities,” each part was square, no matter how they were linked.

9 Trần Quốc Vượng, “Cô Loa,” 114.
(summer, fire, male) position. The northeast direction was the most dangerous direction, because it is the position of the sun at the winter solstice, the maximum yin (winter, water, female) position. The location of the main gate and the palace quarter in the southeast gave them maximum cosmological protection against untoward events. The gates have south-north and a southeast-northwest axes. The dangerous northeast direction appears to have no land gate, unless it was destroyed by the road construction, but the presence of an extension of the middle moat, which runs through the outer wall and presumably had a watergate, suggests that there was never a land entrance there. That perilous site, however, could be reached immediately by naval vessels to reinforce and resupply the infantry positioned there.

If we ignore the Han wall, the citadel town is divided into two parts by the central wall. This is also Chinese city planning usage from the Spring and Autumn to the Warring States periods; the free form of Cổ Loa’s outer and central walls is not. It may have been dictated by the terrain, but terrain never stopped city designers in China from building determinedly square cities. The Chinese universe had been square since Shang times. In fact, the form and location of the inner wall is the best argument for its having been built later than the other two walls. It is forthrightly square, but it is not located in the center of the city as proper Han palace precincts were. Its location off to the southeast is an indication that that was the position of the palace precinct before Han times; although it does not appear that Chinese citadels of the Warring States period had any special location for the palace precinct, a newly built Han city would have the ceremonial center squarely in the center of the plan. The unusual off-center location of the Han wall’s only gate may have been dictated by the location of King An Dương’s temple. Han rule over Việt Nam was fraught with enough problems without the obvious impiety of destroying the temple of a local hero who had probably been deified by the time the wall was built. The other gods might not have liked it either.

Archaeological investigation at Cổ Loa has uncovered artefacts dating from Phụng Nguyên times to the Đông Sơn period (2000 BC - 45 AD), which proves that the site was continuously occupied before the citadel was built. The earliest bronze crossbow bolts ever found in Việt Nam have been excavated at Cổ Loa, near bronze arrowheads of the Đông Sơn type.

11 Major, “Northeast.”
12 See Wu Hung, Monumentality, 103, 104; Needham and Yates, Military Technology, 294, 296, 303-305. The position of a concentration of rammed earth platforms located in these cities ranges from north to southwest. This concentration of platforms would indicate an area of important buildings.
What was the source of this new construction and military technology? The rammed earth wall construction must come from China, where it was in use around 3000 BC.\textsuperscript{14} Did the \textit{yin-yang} cosmology, which appears to be new, come from China, too? Only a few “Chinese” artefacts with dates earlier than the Qin/Han period have been excavated in Việt Nam. One, a Warring States sword, was excavated by Pajot from Tomb 1 at Đồng Sơn, Thanh Hoá Province, in the 1920s (see Figure 1). It strongly resembles a sword in the Freer collection, down to the monster mask decoration. The Freer sword is said to have been collected in Anhui Province and may be a Chu piece (see Figure 1, R).\textsuperscript{15} Besides importing the sword, the Vietnamese also imported its name; given the Vietnamese transliteration of Chinese, they are the same word: Chinese \textit{jian}, Vietnamese \textit{kiếm}.

\textbf{Figure 1.} Left: Sword from Đồng Sơn; Right: Freer sword.

The arrowheads excavated in 1959 at Cầu Vục near the outer moat at Cổ Loa are standard late Warring States crossbow bolts (see Figure 2). The arrowheads in Figure 2, top, are Đồng Sơn (a-e) and Warring States Chinese (f-h, the Cổ Loa


type is f). Compare f-h with the Chinese arrowheads, particularly the first four at the top left (see Figure 2, bottom).\footnote{Bezacier, \textit{Le Viêt-nam}, 126-128, dates, 127-128; Cheng Dong and Zhong Shao-yi, \textit{Ancient Chinese Weapons—A Collection of Pictures} (Beijing: The Chinese People's Liberation Army Publishing House, 1990), 9.}

\textbf{Figure 2.} Top: Vietnamese arrowheads. The Cổ Loa type is f; \textbf{Bottom:} Chinese Warring States arrowheads.

In 1960, Dương Minh compared the bronze arrowheads found at Cổ Loa in 1959 with Đông Sơn arrowheads as well as with those from the Chinese Central Plains in Warring States times and the Han dynasty, and with those from Korea. He concluded that the percentages of copper and lead in Đông Sơn bronze
arrowheads are different from those percentages in Warring States and Han dynasty China and that the arrowheads found at Cô Loa in 1959 were more like the Chinese examples than the Đồng Sơn arrowheads previous to the Cô Loa period.  

Besides influences from the Central Plains and possibly Chu, there were other influences on north Việt Nam before the construction of Cô Loa. A rich boat burial in Tomb 2 at Việt Khê, near Hải Phòng (see Map 1), provides not only a link to Chu but perhaps to Yue as well. The site contained five tombs; only Tomb 2 had any artefacts. Tombs 1 and 2 are of similar size; the other three are smaller. Tomb 2 is oriented east-west, while the others were placed just slightly to northeast-southwest (see Figure 3). Were Tombs 1, 3, 4, and 5 constructed at a time different from Tomb 2, were the dead less important people, or did the occupants follow the owner of Tomb 2 in death? What is the significance of the fact that Tombs 1 and 2 are of similar size but are oriented differently? It is not possible at present to say.

Figure 3. Việt Khê site plan. Cốc is a small hill. See the north [bắc] arrow, top right.

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17 Dương Minh, “Thư nhận định về những mũi tên đồng phát hiện Cô Loa” (Observations on the Bronze Arrowheads from Co Loa), Nghiên cứu lịch sử (Research on History) 14 (May 1960), 41-49.

Tomb 2 contained no human remains, but it had over 100 objects, including bronze vessels, weapons, chisels, remnants of lacquered leather, and a wooden oar. The weapons and some of the vessels are attributed to the Đông Sơn culture by the excavators. A medium-sized bronze drum, a pair of thap (sometimes called buckets), a pair of thô (also called buckets), and two dippers bear traditional Đông Sơn decor: boats with feathered warriors, cervids, circle and tangent bands, birds, and bands of triangles. A number of the bronze artefacts are attributed to Chu in Warring States times: a sword, a ring-handled knife, a spearhead, two bells, a cooking pot, and a bronze tray, along with some pieces of lacquered leather which are probably parts of a shield. The authors of the site report give these artefacts dates of between the fifth and the third centuries BC.

In a recent article, Bùi Văn Liêm ranks VK2 as the earliest boat burial yet excavated in Việt Nam and reports carbon-14 dates of 530 BC, 465 BC, and 370 BC. These dates are consistent with the dates given by the authors of the site report, as far as they go, but some of the artefacts, including the drum, some of the weapons, the chisels, the thap, and the thô, date to the third century BC. The tomb must, therefore, date to the third century.

An analysis of the artefacts attributed to Chu suggests that some of them may have come from the State of Yue or from Yue people elsewhere. The superb double-edged sword might be from sixth century BC Chu as the site report suggests, but in light of the boat coffin in VK2, it might also have come from Yue, where a number of cliff-cave boat burials oriented east to the rising sun have been found in southern Zejiang. Because the states of Wu and Yue made the best swords in late Spring and Autumn times, it is interesting to compare the VK2 sword with the sword of King Fuchai of Wu (r. 496-472 BC) and the sword of King Guoqian of Yue (r. 496-465 BC) (see Figure 4 below).

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20. VK site report, 10-13, 54-55.
21. VK site report, 47-50, 55.
23. Bùi Văn Liêm, 90.
Figure 4. Left to Right: the VK2 sword, the sword of the King of Wu, the sword of the King of Yue.

With its plain guard, the VK2 sword looks more like the Wu sword, although its shape is more like the Yue weapon, but the Yue sword has a monster mask guard and the remains of the silk which was wrapped around the hilt for a better grip. When King Guoqian of Yue conquered Wu in 473 BC, King Fuchai killed himself. Yue doubtless inherited Wu sword smiths along with the Wu territories.

Figure 5. Top: cooking pot; Bottom: Yue ding.

The VK2 sword, which must be fifth century BC rather than sixth, could have been a Yue noble’s prize of war, or it could have been made a bit later in a hybrid style by a Wu craftsman. Wherever it was made, by the third century BC, it was an heirloom.

Vessels in the style of Yue include the bronze ding and probably the cooking pot (âm) (see Figure 5, above). Both show signs of considerable use before being buried and have the flavor of a military camp rather than the home of a man rich enough for his family to bury a great deal of expensive bronze with him.

Figure 6. **Left:** VK2 binh; **Right:** vessel from the tomb of the Second King of Nan Yue.
The ding is in the Yue type 1 style, absolutely plain and functional. The other pot seems to go with the ding; it is plain and functional too. VK2 does contain a more elegant cooking pot (bình), one that is similar to a bronze recovered from the tomb of the Second King of Nan Yue in Guangzhou.28 The decor of the VK2 piece is more aesthetically pleasing, with better proportions, better positioning of the bands of decoration, more functional handles, and a lid more suited to its body, although the lid of the Nan Yue piece may not be original; it does not fit with the design or the neck of the pot.

Other military items appear in the tomb. The six spear heads labeled “Dông Sơn” may not all be indigenous; some of them are so generic that they could be from Warring States China. The barbed spear head may be unique (see Figure 7); there are arrowheads like it in Chinese military history from Shang times on, but

28 Mai Yinghao, “On the Various Cultural Factors of Burial Articles Unearthed from the Tomb of the Second King of Southern Yue,” in Chau Hing-wah, ed., Collected Essays on the Culture of the Ancient Yue People in South China (Hong Kong: The Urban Council, 1993), 124-139. There are a number of Dông Sơn items in the king’s grave goods.
there is no record of a barbed spear head. The barb made the spear more difficult to remove and pulling it out enlarged the wound.

**Figure 7.** VK2 barbed spear.  **Figure 8.** VK2 spear butts.

The spear butts, placed on the bottom of the spear shaft for its protection when the spear was grounded, are the first and, so far as I know, the only such items excavated in Việt Nam. They are flat-bottomed, the mark of an infantryman (see Figure 8). Both Wu and Yue had primarily infantry armies, because the southern Yangzi area was not suitable for the deployment of chariots. The tomb contains a collection of 31 axes, too many for the owner to use. Possibly they were a symbol of his power.

Pieces of lacquered leather with a pattern of concentric circles and triangles are the final exotic deposits in VK2. They are probably the remains of a shield. The reconstruction in the site report should probably be shaped more like the Warring States shield below (see Fig. 9). While the form of the Warring States shield was generally rectangular, it was modified by curves and ended in a

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30 VK2 site report, 46.
31 Sun Tzu, *Art of War*, 89.
32 VK 2 site report, 42–46, 15.
rectangular tab at the top. The curves were to provide free movement for the sword or dagger axe arm, and the tab at the top was to protect the throat from slashing attacks. Somewhat surprisingly, there are no dagger axes or arrowheads in the grave goods. Apparently the owner carried a spear.

**Figure 9. Left:** VK2 shield reconstruction; **Right:** Warring States shield.\(^{33}\)

Since VK2, whose date must be in the third century BC, has the earliest boat coffin yet excavated in Viêt Nam, its owner may have introduced the custom from southern Zhejiang in Yue.\(^{34}\) Judging by the many weapons among his grave goods, he was probably a military man. Since he owned a Đông Sơn drum, he was probably a vassal of the Hùng king who ruled at the time, but the sword suggests that he may have been from the State of Yue, which fell to Chu in 334 BC.\(^{35}\) While the theory that the Yue migrated in large numbers to Viêt Nam after

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\(^{33}\) VK2 site report, 59; Yang Hong, *Weapons in Ancient China*, 120.

\(^{34}\) Falkenhausen, “Waning,” 527.

\(^{35}\) Blakeley, “Geography,” 17.
the fall of Yue is no longer widely held, it is possible that some of the nobles did
migrate with their retainers. If the owner of VK2 and his followers conquered a
portion of coastal Việt Nam, the Hùng king might have recognized his rule there
under Hùng overlordship. It would not have been impossible for such a man to
have lived into the third century BC, particularly since his drum dates to the third
century. The Vietnamese boat burials are concentrated in the district between
Việt Khê and Hà Nội along the Đồng and Red Rivers, which suggests the
penetration of people with what were originally alien burial customs.

While the evidence of Chu influence is strong in VK2, the fact that the owner
possessed a fifth-century BC sword and was buried in a boat coffin would seem
to point to his being a noble from Yue. If that is so, then a military man brought
new technology to Việt Nam half a century before Thực Phán; however, it seems
that he made no attempt to overthrow the ruling dynasty. He probably did not
have the power to do so, but he did have the power to conquer a secure foothold
on the coast. He worked within the prevailing system; he did not, however, build
a citadel, although his residence may have been protected by a wooden palisade.

To sum up, from the few pre-Han artefacts that have been excavated in Việt
Nam, the State of Chu seems to have been the primary outside influence on Việt
Nam in the third century BC, not surprising since they controlled the southern
trade to the rest of China. They, or men trading with them, transmitted both
Chu products and those of the other Warring States. Chu also served as the
interpreter of Chinese culture to Việt Nam and to the whole of south China. The
Yue influence is more difficult to pin down, but Tomb 2 at Việt Khê, the Đồng
Sơn items in the Tomb of the Second King of Nan Yue, and the easy
communication between Việt Nam and the area south of the passes in Han times
suggests a previous connection, commercial if not tribal. It is also worth noting
that, on the evidence of Tomb 2 at Việt Khê, outsiders were beginning to cast
covetous eyes on the fertile Red River valley.

Phạm Văn Kính sums up the importance of Cổ Loa citadel thus: “[It] was
the first important political center that was built, the first area with a large
population, the first city on such a large scale based on a foreign ruling class and
their army; the [local] population was of little importance, but Cổ Loa was the
biggest urban area yet.” He concludes that the fortress, excluding the inner
enclosure, was pre-Han and that it was built in King An Dương’s time (beginning

36 Keith Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press,

37 Bùi Văn Liêm, 90.

38 Hà Văn Tấn, *Văn hóa Đồng Sơn ở Việt Nam* (The Dong Son Culture in Vietnam)
(Hà Nội: Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1994), unpaginated map.

Cook and Major, eds., *Defining Chu*, 113-117.
in 257 BC), and that the construction method (rammed earth) was “not unlike” the citadels built from Warring States to Han times in China.

The orientation of the fortress is the first clear evidence of yin-yang cosmology in Việt Nam, although many of the Đông Sơn drums appear to have symbols marking the cardinal points. Of 144 categorized drums, nearly half—40 with four birds and 35 with four frogs—have such symbols. This tidy observation is rather spoiled by 10 drums with six birds, three with eight, and those with various numbers of birds. When we reach the drums with cartouches, which are Han designs, even this correlation breaks down. Whether this signals a knowledge of Chinese cosmology or was a part of an independent Đông Sơn cosmology, or was the result of new political leaders using the drums for their own purposes is impossible to say. The location of Cổ Loa indicates the movement of the political center of the country to the plains of the Red River. The Hùng kings’ capital at Mê Linh was on the mountain terraces. In Việt Nam, the movement of dwelling sites went from caves and rock shelters to terraces to the river plain, which signified the transition from a hunting and gathering society to an agricultural society and, finally, to the cultivation of wet rice.

Altogether, Cổ Loa has a number of unique features, and it represents a sharp break with the past. Taken with Tomb 2 at Việt Khê, it indicates growing foreign interest in the rich lands of northern Việt Nam, an interest that would culminate in the conquest of Âu Lạc by Nan Yue and later by the expanding Han dynasty to the north (111 BC). It is time, therefore, to have a look at the supposed founder of the kingdom of Âu Lạc and the builders of the citadel.

Because there are no surviving Vietnamese records from the period of the founding of Cổ Loa, the story comes from Chinese works, and it appears that the Chinese were willing to believe anything of the “barbarians” except their having a culture worthy of respect. The Chinese narrative that serves to explain the existence of the fortress at Cổ Loa is oblique, metaphorical, and symbolic. It has all the passion and authenticity of a historical novel—magic, supernatural beings, doomed lovers, treachery, the loss of a kingdom, a bad last emperor, a foolish

41 Pham Huy Thông et al., Đông Sơn Drums in Việt Nam (Hà Nội: The Việt Nam Social Science Publishing House, 1990) publishes all the drums known up to 1980. Vietnamese archaeologists have discovered continuing production of Đông Sơn drums in Eastern Han times (the supposed end of the Đông Sơn period) and later: Phạm Minh Huyễn, personal communication, December 9, 2001. Dr. Huyễn was a member of the editorial board of the 1990 book. It would be useful to map and date the various drums to see if a chronology of decor development can be constructed and correlated with location.
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king, a trouble-making woman, all the edifying lessons a Confucian historian could want.

The tale appears in the three Vietnamese annals, the An-nam chí lược (Annals of An-nam; c. 1340), the Việt sử lược (The Historical Annals of the Viêt; between 1377 and 1388), and the Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư (The Complete Historical Records of Đại Việt; 1479). The first two are fairly laconic; the longest and most detailed version comes from the third, which is said to have been augmented by received Vietnamese oral tradition.43

In 258 BC, the Red River valley was ruled by a religious leader, King Hùng XVIII. The first Hùng king had been a local man who used the “arts of illusion” to make himself king. He named the country Văn Lang, and his descendants ruled for eighteen generations.44 In 258 BC, Thúc Phán, the son of the King of Shu, invaded Văn Lang. The Hùng king said to him, “Don’t you know that I have magic powers? Aren’t you afraid?” Apparently Thúc Phán was not impressed, for despite the bravery of the Văn Lang generals, his army won every battle. Relying on his magic powers, the Hùng king “would not go into military training, caring only to eat, drink, and have a good time.” When the enemy drew near to the palace, the king was still drunk. Spitting blood, a traditional sign of impending death in Viêt Nam, he jumped into a well. The Văn Lang troops “turned their lances and surrendered to King Thúc.”45

Thúc Phán proclaimed himself King An Dương, changed the name of the country to Âu Lạc, and began constructing a fortified capital.46 Thus a politico-religious leader fell to a politico-military chieftain.

The need for massive walls around his city demonstrates that King An Dương’s rule rested on military force, for a man who needs to build such walls has enemies. “Demons” on a nearby mountain, led by a thousand year old White Chicken, interfered with the construction by making every day’s work collapse. The son of King Hùng XVIII was on the mountain leading the “demons,” who are identified as Lạc lords, the sub-chiefs who had ruled Văn Lang in conjunction with the Hùng kings. A Golden Tortoise came from the river to help King An Dương kill the White Chicken; before returning to its watery home, it gave King An Dương one of its claws to be used in building a crossbow trigger, telling him that with such a bow, he would be invincible. The king gave the claw to his advisor Cao Tông, himself a man of magic, who then constructed the bow, which was given the sonorous ceremonial name of “Saintly Crossbow of the Supernaturally Luminous Golden Claw.”47

43 Taylor, Birth, 358.
44 VSL, 14. The Bad Last Emperor died suitably, by his own hand.
45 TT, I, 35.
46 TT, I, 34-35.
With the fall of the Qin dynasty in China, their commissioner in Pan Yu (Guangzhou), Zhao Tuo 趙佗 took advantage of the civil war raging to the north and closed the passes against attack, for Zhao Tuo had ambitions. In 210 BC he attacked King An Dương’s citadel but was repulsed when the king used his magic crossbow. Then Zhao Tuo conceived a crafty plan. He sent his son, Trong Thủy (Chinese: Shi Jia) to the court at Cổ Loa to arrange diplomatic relations or possibly to serve King An Dương, as the sons of neighboring kings were wont to do. Thủy was handsome and charming, and he won the heart of King An Dương’s daughter, Princess My Châu, who was persuaded to let him see the magic crossbow. He secretly disabled its trigger and returned to report to his father, who then attacked the fortress. Like the Hùng king before him, King An Dương relied on his magic and made no preparations. After all, he had defeated Zhao Tuo in 210 BC using his magic bow. It was another matter, however, in 208 BC. When the time came to use the crossbow, its magic had fled, it would not fire, and King An Dương was defeated. It was the end of the house of Thục. In 203 BC, Zhao Tuo proclaimed himself King of Nan Yue (VN: Nam Việt).

The story is a sublime mixture of possible fact and probable fantasy. Zhao Tuo certainly existed, and he proclaimed himself King of Nan Yue. The citadel certainly existed; however, Golden Tortoises and magic crossbows strain the credulity of the modern reader, although the Chinese, whose dynasties were thought to descend from gods and cultural heroes, had no problem with them, particularly if they explained how a barbarian could defeat a man like Zhao Tuo, who possessed a modern Chinese army. But what does the story really mean? Were King An Dương and Cao Tông real men or shadow creatures invented to go with a Golden Tortoise?

The identity, dates, and even the historicity of Thục Phán are difficult to determine. While current Vietnamese scholars, such as Phạm Văn Kính, regard Thục Phán as a real historical person and defend the traditional dates of 257-208 BC for his reign, western scholars have long disputed both. Because he believed that the Qin conquest of the south included actual occupation of northern Việt Nam, Leonard Aurousseau was obliged to move Thục Phán to 210 BC, the year of Qin Shihuangdi’s death—so late a date that he would hardly have time to build the fortress. Henri Maspero criticized the Aurousseau theory and argued that Qin troops did not occupy territory in north Việt Nam.

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48 VSL, 14-15.
49 Lê Thành Khôi, Histoire de Viêt Nam, des origines à 1858 (Paris: Sudestasie, 1992), 393. Poor My Châu is the first in a long line of women blamed for disasters of one kind or another by Confucianized Vietnamese historians.
50 Phạm Văn Kính, 128-134.
O’Harrow concluded that the Thúc Phán story was “problematic.”53 Keith Taylor treated Thúc Phán as a real person but believed that Cô Loa was more likely to have fallen after 179 BC.54

The most convincing argument for Thúc Phán’s historical existence is his human genealogy. According to the annals, he was the son of the King of Shu.55 Had the dynasty lasted longer, perhaps he would have acquired divine ancestors or have been said to be descended from a Chinese culture hero, but, without that typical reverent manipulation of his ancestry, he stands before us simply as a human being.

Who was Thúc Phán? All of the Vietnamese annals give the same elementary information about him: he was the son of the King of Shu (part of modern Sichuan), he defeated King Hùng XVIII, made himself king, and named his kingdom Âu Lạc.56 Two texts add that he arrived there at the head of 30,000 people: An-nam chí lược has it a 30,000 man army, and the Han period Guangzhou ji has him fleeing from Qin-dominated Shu with 30,000 people.57

The An-nam chí lược may be based on the Guangzhou ji or on other material held in China and not readily accessible to Vietnamese historians, because this information is not in the other two histories. While Lê Tác, the author of the An-nam chí lược, was Vietnamese, he submitted to the Mongols during the first Việt-Mongol war and fought for them against his compatriots. He subsequently lived in exile in Hanyang in Hubei province, a town where many other Vietnamese exiles lived. He was a fine scholar and acquired a number of high-ranking Chinese friends who wrote introductions for his book, including the Academician Baiyun Chahan, a member of the Grand and the Privy Councils who ranked I-b in the nine civil service rankings.58 His work shows close acquaintance with Chinese historical documents, and it is probable that he had access to the files of the Yuan Dynasty History Bureau. According to Keith Taylor, the Guangzhou ji has the earliest mention of the Văn Lang Lạc fields, which were irrigated using tidal reflux, so that version of the Thúc Phán story may represent some record in Guangdong that has not been preserved elsewhere.59 While 30,000 is one of those “myriad” numbers not to be taken

53 “From Co-loa to the Trung Sisters’ Revolt: Viet-nam as the Chinese Found It,” Asian Perspectives 22 (1979), 148.
54 Taylor, Birth, 125-126, particularly note 113.
55 ACL 39; VSL, 14-15; TT, I, 35.
56 ACL 39; VSL, 14-15; TT, I, 35.
57 ACL, 39; Steven F. Sage, Ancient Sichuan and the Unification of China (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 151 and 265 note 105.
59 Taylor, Birth, 350.
literally, it seems that Thực Phấn arrived from somewhere with a substantial number of troops or people.

Early Vietnamese historians seem to have had no problem with Thực Phấn’s Chinese origins. All that changed in the fifteenth century. In 1407, the Ming conquered Việt Nam and occupied it for a generation. They intended to sinify the country and retain it as a part of their empire. After a long and desperate struggle, the Vietnamese freed themselves from the occupiers. The struggle was a defining point in Vietnamese history, and after that integrating national event, it was no longer suitable for the first historically documented Vietnamese king to have come from what was by then China. At the same time, during the occupation years, Vietnamese intellectuals had become more familiar with Chinese historical texts.\(^6^0\)

The later annals continued to record the essential information about Thực Phấn in the same way, but textual commentators began to point out that Shu no longer had a king in 257 BC, since it had been conquered by Qin in 316. The search for a Vietnamese Thực Phấn had begun. Adopting an oral tradition of the Tây people, Vietnamese commentators transformed Thực Phấn from a man of Shu to a Lạc lord from Cao Bằng, by insisting that Thực, which means “Shu” in Vietnamese, was not a place name but a family name. If Thực is a family name in Việt Nam, it is not a common one, although it occasionally appears as a personal name.\(^6^1\) Subsequent historical treatments of the story have assumed his native origin.\(^6^2\) The only question remaining was where in Cao Bằng he was born.

It may be that, if Thực Phấn was from Cao Bằng, he had some relationship with the Đồng Sơn culture of the Hùng kings, but it is unlikely that he was a Lạc lord. There are only scattered Đồng Sơn finds in Cao Bằng, which suggests that the area was not within the immediate Đồng Sơn world.\(^6^3\)

A more likely connection between Cao Bằng and Đồng Sơn was trade, because Cao Bằng had and has deposits of high grade tin ore necessary for the production of bronze, for which the Đồng Sơn metal industry provided a ready market.\(^6^4\) While the terrain from Cao Bằng to the Red River is difficult, there is a water route, which is necessary for the transport of heavy goods, even if they are valuable. The Hùng kings may have called such trade tribute in the Chinese way and may thus have regarded Thực Phấn as a dependent chief, but the lack of Đồng Sơn artefacts in Cao Bằng suggests that the link was not close. How Đồng


\(^{63}\) Hà Văn Tán, *Đồng Sơn*, unpaginated map.

Son foundries paid for the tin if not with bronze and pottery is a matter for further research. Another likely market for Cao Bằng tin was Guangxi, which can also be reached by water. Did Cao Bằng serve as a conduit for Đông Sơn bronze wares to the Guilin area?

If Thúc Phán was from Cao Bằng, as the Vietnamese claim, there is no reason he could not have been both a tribal chieftain and a man of Shu, or the descendant of one. On the other hand, an ancestor could have come directly from Shu to Dian (in Yunnan) or Việt Nam after the Qin conquest of Shu. To understand this requires a detour into the history of Shu.

Before the Qin conquest of Shu, there were strong links between Shu and the kingdom of Chu. According to one legend, the founder of Shu’s Kaiming dynasty was a man of Chu who floated upstream on the Yangzi River, introduced flood control measures to the region, and was made king in gratitude.65

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65 Sage, Ancient Sichuan, 45.
This would make the King of Shu a kind of “younger brother” to the King of Chu, with all the attendant ritual observances that go with such a family relationship. In addition, the position of Chu traders as middlemen between the Central Plain and the south led to their expansion up the Yangzi River to Ba-Shu, so Chu economic and cultural influence became strong there. Heather Peters notes marriage alliances between Ba and Chu in this period. There is no reason that similar alliances could not have been made between Shu and Chu. But even without them, there is a strong possibility that the king of Shu could have sent sons to Chu to serve his “elder brother,” the king. The Qin conquest of the area was partly to stifle this Chu influence in Shu. After the Qin conquest, the Kaiming rulers were enfeoffed as marquises of Shu until 287 BC, at the end of the third Shu rebellion. On putting down that rebellion, Qin replaced the local rulers with a full Qin government, and they probably seriously discouraged further contacts with Chu.

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With the Qin conquest of Ba-Shu, Chu began to worry about the over mighty stance of Qin and attempted a series of alliances with neighboring states against Qin, a move that ultimately failed because of Qin diplomacy and the fact that the other states were no more enthusiastic about being dominated by Chu than by Qin. Shortly after the death of the last Kaiming Marquis of Shu, therefore, Chu decided to try to regain its influence and put pressure on Qin by a flanking attack on Shu from the south. In 281 BC, a Chu army led by Zhuang Qiao invaded Guizhou, eventually going as far as Lake Dian in Yunnan. Qin’s riposte was to take Guizhou behind the Chu army and cut its line of communications and retreat. Concluding that he was not going to be able to return to Chu, Zhuang Qiao used his army to make himself King of Dian.68

The son of any one of the three marquises of Shu might have gone to Chu in the normal way or might have fled there as Qin rule over Shu tightened. In either case, he would be a reasonable choice to accompany the Chu army, both as a man who could inspire loyalty among the people of Shu and as one who knew the terrain. After the army was cut off, he was ideally situated to split off with some troops and make himself master of Cao Bằng, especially if, as one source has it, the Chu advance was to the southwest from Changsha in Hunan along the Zuo River, a route that leads directly to Cao Bằng.69 The route to Việt Nam was well known to Chu traders who had been in the area, possibly even in Việt Nam, for some time.70

A second alternative is that Thực Phán, or more likely his father, arrived in the area with his 30,000 people/army fleeing Shu in 287 after the fall of the last Kaiming marquis. After the arrival of the Chu army in Dian in 281, he might have decided to set up for himself in Cao Bằng. Indeed, Đào Duy Anh has speculated that Thực Phán’s clan had already settled northeast Việt Nam from Cao Bằng south to the Red River.71

A third option might be that the Thực clan settled in Dian, left with the arrival of the Chu army, and migrated to the northern Red River valley. The head of the Thực clan might then have pledged fealty to the Hùng king and become a Lạc lord. A member of the clan might then have overthrown the ruling dynasty and founded one of his own.

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68 Sage, Ancient Sichuan, 144; Sima Qian, Records of the Grand Historian, trans. Burton Watson, 3 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961) II, 253-254. Sima Qian places the move during the reign of King Wei of Chu (r. 339-328 BC) and thus before the Qin conquest of Shu. I follow Sage’s dating here.
69 Sage, Ancient Sichuan, 143.
As for King An Dương’s assistant Cao Tông, his origins are even more obscure. According to the annals, he built the magic crossbow. He is described variously as an immortal, an advisor, and a general. If one translates the name Cao Tông, one finds it means “a noble who transmits or communicates,” which suggests Cao Tông’s role in communicating the military technology necessary for conquering Văn Lang and building Cổ Loa. His background is not discussed. If the Thục clan came directly from Shu or left the Chu army in 281 BC to settle in Dian or Cao Bằng, it is unlikely that they would have forgotten the Chinese art of war, but weapons manufacture and citadel construction are different from commanding troops in the field. Those are the tasks of a specialist—in the modern world, of a series of specialists. Cao Tông’s brief biography suggests that he was a military specialist, a man capable of supervising strategy, tactics, weapons manufacture, citadel construction, and possibly even the yin-yang orientation of the citadel, although that might have required a civilian yin-yang specialist, because military specialists were primarily interested in divining the proper time for military movements.72

Military advisors in early China moved from country to country selling their skills even as civil advisors did.73 During the final convulsions of Warring States China, a free-floating mass of gentlemen-militarists and experienced soldiers must have been in flight in all directions from the victorious Qin armies, with only their knowledge and their weapons to provide them with a livelihood.74 The only individual associated with military technique in the records concerning Cổ Loa is Cao Tông. His three identities—immortal, advisor, and general—need not be mutually exclusive. In a pre-literate society, knowledge beyond everyday information about farming would have been regarded as occult, and no knowledge was more occult than the art of war.75 Manuals of strategy and tactics appeared in China possibly as early as the fifth century BC and continued to be produced well into Tang times. They were closely held by the authors and their


73 Sage, Ancient Sichuan, 84-85.


75 C. Michele Thompson argues that the Yue in Việt Nam had a script before the arrival of Han that has now been lost. See Thompson, “Scripts, Signs, and Swords: the Việt Peoples and the Origins of Nôm,” Sino-Platonic Papers 101 (March 2000), 27. If such a script existed, it would have been the property of priests or members of the elite. There is no possibility that the ordinary people were literate.
families because they represented the livelihood of the family. Sometimes the lore was said to have been given to a suitable person by an immortal, which suggests the divine transmission of knowledge. Thần, the word used in the Vietnamese annals to describe the crossbow, is usually translated into English as “magic,” but it can also mean “divine.” Cao Tông could, therefore, be an immortal in the sense of possessing occult knowledge while at the same time he was an advisor and a general. Or he could be an immortal in the sense that Joseph Needham understands him, as a mechanic or proto-scientist involved in esoteric experimentation.

It is possible, then, that Cao Tông was a military specialist, fleeing south, possibly with veteran troops, but certainly with a knowledge of Chinese military arts gained by experience. He could have become an advisor to Thực Phán before the latter invaded Văn Lang. If that be so, then he could have used his knowledge and his veterans to organize, arm, and train a new army for Thực Phán in the military usages of Warring States China. Lê Thành Khôi has described that army as “professional,” although this rests upon the discovery of the cache of crossbow bolts at Cầu Vục, about 300 meters from the south wall of Cô Loa (see Map 2).

The bolts need not have belonged to the king’s army, of course; their location outside the walls suggests the haste of an attacking force. Any local force that left the area without most of its ammunition would be sent back to get it in a hurry.

Cao Tông’s knowledge, and possibly his crack troops, might have produced the conditions that enabled Thực Phán to attack Văn Lang. The Cô Loa walls might have been built with a migrant’s memory of Qin walls in Shu, although the construction would have required military engineers, but designing the moats and water gates is a different matter.

In fifteenth century historiography, when Thực Phán was transformed into a Lạc lord, Cao Tông was also domesticated. In his history of Vietnamese generals, Đỗ Đức Hùng transforms him to a Vietnamese general from the district of Quế Vô in Băc Ninh province. He also suffered a name change: from Cao Tông (noble who communicates) to Cao Lỗ (hole, pit, grave, orifice; to lose in

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76 Ralph Sawyer (trans.), The Seven Military Classics of Ancient China (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993), 36-37, 111, 130, 191-192, 232, 281, 311. These classics were collected and given canonical status in Song times (xii).

77 Needham and Yates, Military Technology, 190-191.

78 Lê Thành Khôi, Histoire de Viêt Nam, 68. See also Nguyễn Khắc Viện, Vietnam, 17.

79 Phạm Minh Huyền believes there had been a storage depot where the bolts were found. Personal communication, April 2001. A storage depot outside the walls seems unlikely. The shafted and fletched arrowheads should have been in an armory in the garrison area, no. 20 on Map 2.
business; to be coarse or uncouth). The change does not seem complimentary. Was it based on the fact that he was “Chinese?”

Wherever Thúc Phán and Cao Tông originated, even if they never existed as individuals at all, we are left with one incontrovertible fact: Cổ Loa exists, and somebody built it. It was a formidable defensive position, probably the equal of a Warring States provincial town, if not a capital, and there are certain deductions which can be made about the site which may shed some light on this misty, semi-historical period in Vietnamese history. I will assume the existence of two such men and will continue to call them Thúc Phán and Cao Tông for convenience.

CHRONOLOGY

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The possession of an army trained in Chinese military practice would explain how Thúc Phán was able to undertake his sudden and violent descent upon Văn Lang, whose army was probably composed of feudal levies and armed with the kind of weapons shown on the Đông Sơn drums: simple bows, lances, bronze axes, long wicker body shields, blow pipes, and possibly slingshots.81 Nguyên

80 Đỗ Đức Hùng, Danh Tiếng Việt Nam (Famous Vietnamese Generals), 2 vols. (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Thanh Niên, 1999), I, 15. For what it is worth, the võ in his supposed home district means military, martial, as opposed to văn—civil (official) or literary man.

81 Louis Bezacier, in Le Việt-nam, gives an excellent discussion of the drums found up to his death in 1966 (see 180-225). The illustrations are particularly useful.
Phúc Long remarks on pottery balls for hunting with blowpipes that have been found on the northern coast and rivers, citing the study by the Russian archaeologist, Borikovsky. Such clay balls from the earlier Bronze Age Đông Dươ and Gò Mun cultures are displayed in the National History Museum in Hà Nội, and there is no reason why they should not have been used in the succeeding Đông Sơn period. With diameters of from 1.5 to 2 cm, however, these balls are unlikely ammunition for blowpipes, which project light darts. It is hard to imagine the size of blowpipe that would take a clay ball with a 2 cm diameter and equally hard to imagine who could blow such a heavy object from it. Stone and clay balls for slings were used in China from the Neolithic period, and they seem a simple device to invent.

Excavated Vietnamese weapons of the period are predominately lances, axes, daggers, and arrowheads. All of this points to an infantry army, probably of peasants fighting under their local lords. Lance butts excavated from Tomb 2 at Việt Khê are rounded at the end, another sign of infantry warfare; if they had been meant to be used against cavalry, they would have been pointed, because the lances need to be firmly grounded to withstand a cavalry charge. Lance butts occur only in VK2, however, and probably do not represent Vietnamese weaponry of the third century BC.

The Văn Lang army would have been no match for an army trained in Chinese infantry tactics, held together by a harsh regime of punishments and perhaps having nowhere else to go. They would have maneuvered in tight, well-drilled units; their weapons would have included swords and bronze or iron pole weapons more complex than the lances of Văn Lang and capable of both cutting and thrusting. Special units of archers using bronze-triggered crossbows would have “out-gunned” Văn Lang archers even if they did have crossbows, because the range of the heavier bows, c. 500 yards, would have allowed Thục Phán’s archers to stand off and fire, avoiding the supposed poisoned arrows of Văn Lang. The invading forces might also have had ballista artillery, heavy field crossbows, and fire weapons, since the Văn Lang capital at Mê Linh probably had a wooden palisade.

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83 K. C. Chang, Archaeology, 114, 122.
84 Hà Văn Tấn, 449-465. Swords and dagger-axes have been found, but not in large numbers, which suggests that they were elite status symbols rather than weapons that saw much use in combat.
85 The British Museum has on display several Warring States lance butts, all pointed at the end for bracing into the ground.
86 For the range of the standard bronze-triggered crossbow, see Needham and Yates, Military Technology, 122. For the Văn Lang bows and poisoned arrows, see Louis Bezacier, Essais sur l’art annamite (Hanoi: IDEO, 1944), 88.
87 For a discussion of field artillery and fire weapons, see Needham and Yates, Military Technology, 5, 11, 185, 189, 277.
Because of the water gates later built at Cổ Loa, we know that Thúc Phán’s army was supported by naval forces; war vessels of the period were neither expensive nor difficult to build and would have provided transport, supply, and speed of deployment for Thúc Phán’s army. Naval engagements, or at least control of the Red River, would have been necessary to prevent Văn Lang forces from cutting Thúc Phán’s lines of communication. Thúc Phán’s “Wide Vessels” were presumably larger than the naval vessels of Văn Lang.\(^\text{88}\) The possible inclusion of cavalry or chariots is harder to assess. To the north, the Dian army had cavalry, but the Vietnamese have never been horse people, the native horse being not much larger than a good sized dog, and no horse equipment has been excavated in Việt Nam, although some bronze horse bits were collected at Lào Cai on the Yunnan border.\(^\text{89}\) They are probably Dian. It is curious that the use of cavalry did not spread south of the Dian border. The terrain, the horse supply problem, and the ease of deployment by water probably explain it. There is not much evidence that chariots were ever used by the Chinese in the far south; they were not really suitable for deploying in a land of mountains and rivers or in paddy lands, and they were going out of the materiel inventory in the north at this time anyway, to be replaced with the much cheaper and more mobile troops of cavalry.\(^\text{90}\)

A clash between two such different armies could have only one outcome: defeat for Văn Lang. Some of the Lạc lords would have submitted and kept their fiefs, and others would have fled to the mountains to carry out the guerrilla campaign suggested by the Lê dynasty chronicle.\(^\text{91}\) This guerrilla operation would have had to be defeated before the citadel at Cổ Loa could be built.

Many problems plagued the construction. It was surely the most massive public work yet attempted in the valley of the Red River, and it required large amounts of labor and other resources. Communal works had been constructed in the area before; after all, the ditches, dikes, and paddy balks which allowed the farmers to take advantage of tidal reflux for irrigation predated Thúc Phán’s campaign.\(^\text{92}\) Indeed, it was the area’s suitability for growing wet rice that made it so rich and prosperous and well worth conquering. These works must have been local affairs, however, with the neighborhood lord calling out his people to work in the agricultural off-season. Besides, irrigation and flood-control were projects that the peasants could see would benefit them.

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88 In 312 BC, the King of Qin claimed he could build ships able to “carry 50 men as well as their rations for three months.” Sage, Ancient Sichuan, 122.
89 Phạm Minh Huyên, personal communication, November 1996.
90 Noel Barnard and Soto Tomatsu, Metallurgical Remains of Ancient China (Tokyo: Nichiosha, 1975), 111, 410. The map on page 111 shows the recovery of a few chariot parts in the Guangzhou area in Western Han. Was this a ceremonial unit attached to the governor’s palace?
91 Taylor, Birth, 21.
92 ACL, 39; Taylor, Birth, 10-12.
Cổ Loa fortress was another matter. It was so vast that it must have required labor duty far beyond what could have been provided by slaves or war prisoners, and its benefit to the community would be the continuance of the military rule of an invader. It does not seem possible that the project could have been completed without corvée labor. The Văn Lang people probably owed their lords something like corvée and probably paid taxes, even if they were disguised as gifts. But nothing on the scale of Cổ Loa had ever been attempted before. Thực Phán and Cao Tông were not just building a fortress, they were building a city, from the size of it, the largest one Việt Nam had ever seen, and the huge labor requirements must have disrupted the agricultural round and brought thousands from their villages to the works at Cổ Loa. The project required careful management, although the work was nothing the people had not done before, digging, hauling and carrying. The rammed earth technique is not difficult to learn, but digging ditches for moats and making walls with the resulting spoil was still hard work on a scale even rice farmers were not accustomed to. Cao Tông and his military engineers had to train as well as supervise their peasant work force. There were also other requirements: a palace, temples, office buildings, military barracks, not to speak of shops and homes for artisans, merchants and servants.

The corvée might have had to be imposed by military force, and there must have been a harsh regime of military discipline at the site; military force would certainly have been needed to keep the laborers at work and to prevent trouble. All of this required a great deal of organization, one of an army’s great skills. Did the cost of all this construction result in higher taxes for the people as well as heavy labor duty? If it did, conflict must have been constant in the early years of Âu Lạc. The battle was won in the end, for the citadel was built, although from the conclusion of his story it appears that Thực Phán and his rule remained foreign to the end.

What the “magic crossbow” represents is a more difficult part of the puzzle. It was built by Cao Tông to defend the fortress, and it deterred Zhao Tuo from conquering Âu Lạc. When the crossbow was destroyed, Zhao Tuo successfully defeated King An Dương and absorbed Âu Lạc. Joseph Needham regarded the weapon as some kind of improved crossbow, but Zhao Tuo had a Chinese-style army and a Chinese weapons inventory. He would not have been put off simply by an improved crossbow. There is something more behind the story. Two of the sources report that Cao Tông was treated badly by King An Dương and left Âu Lạc after telling the king, “He who is able to hold this crossbow rules the realm; he who is not able to hold this crossbow will perish.” In another passage, Cao

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93 Taylor, Birth, 49.
94 ACL, 39; VSL, 15; TT, 139
96 Taylor, Birth, 25.
Tông said that he “was denounced by the Lạc lords and had to flee.”97 It was not until Cao Tông left Âu Lạc that Zhao Tuo was able to send his son to find and destroy the magic crossbow. As confident in his magic as the last Hùng king had been, King An Dương lost his kingdom when the crossbow would not fire.98

What lies behind this part of the tale? I suggest that the crossbow be understood as symbolizing King An Dương’s New Model Army. The strategic and tactical skills of Cao Tông, including his grasp of yin-yang divination, constituted its “magic.” So long as Cao Tông was in charge of things, the Âu Lạc army was a match for that of Zhao Tuo; indeed, the two armies must have been quite similar. To attain victory, Zhao Tuo would have had to besiege the citadel, an expensive and time consuming project that held little promise of success. Even with all the siege engines of the late Warring States at his disposal, a lengthy siege, especially if it extended into the monsoon season, was a venture Zhao Tuo would want to avoid if at all possible.

When Cao Tông left, he took the brains of the Âu Lạc army with him, and King An Dương lost a penetrating intelligence from his circle of advisors. With Cao Tông gone, Zhao Tuo was able to win by guile what he had failed to take by force. He sent his son to Cổ Loa as the kind of “living spy” recommended by Sun Tzu, one who lives to report back.99 It is a depressing fact of military history that more fortresses have fallen to treason from within than have ever been taken by storm, and archaeologists have found no evidence at Cổ Loa of the kind of destruction suffered by a city taken by the sword. I suggest that, whatever his relationship with Mỹ Châu was, Thủy’s real task was to coordinate with the Lạc lords who drove Cao Tông from Cổ Loa to arrange for their betrayal of the citadel to Zhao Tuo. No court exists without intrigues, and there must have been men who wanted to reclaim their old power. They would see themselves as defending traditional values and ridding themselves of the man they still regarded, after fifty years, as an interloper. Perhaps the Prince’s act of disabling the crossbow lock represents the subversion of key officials after Cao Tông’s departure.

What happened to the Âu Lạc army? There must have been a battle inside the citadel, even if Zhao Tuo’s forces did not have to storm the ramparts. Loyal troops would have accompanied King An Dương in his flight, while others covered their exit. If Warring States Chinese practice is any guide, the remainder would have “turned their lances and surrendered” and been made prisoners of war, with the best of them after a time, perhaps, assimilated into Zhao Tuo’s army. The victor would have enfeoffed someone trustworthy at Cổ Loa and left some troops with him, enough to support his vassal but not enough to pose any

97 TT, I, 40. The story of Cao Tông’s fall would resonate with Vietnamese officials, who were familiar with the fate of ministers destroyed by court intrigues both in China and Việt Nam.
98 ACL, 39; VSL, 15; TT, I, 24-25.
problem for the future. The Lạc lords who submitted would have been confirmed in their holdings so long as they paid their tribute and did not rebel. According to the records, Zhao Tuo did not rule Âu Lạc directly after he conquered it. He merely sent two “legates” to the area, probably to collect tribute and control trade. After the fall of the house of Thục, the Lạc lords ruled in the land again.100

A slim piece of evidence about what happened in Âu Lạc after the defeat of King An Dương occurs later in the Chinese sources. When the army of Han Wudi arrived at the Âu Lạc frontier, one local lord, the King of Tây Vu, decided to resist and to try to establish his own kingdom in the area. He was beheaded by the “General of the Left of Âu Lạc,” who was rewarded by the Han with a marquisate.101 The general bore a distinctly Chinese rank, which suggests Chinese terminology, and thus Chinese technology, in the Âu Lạc army. Of course, it is possible that the term was imposed upon the text later.

From the strategy and tactics used by the Lạc lords in the rebellion of the two Trưng ladies in 40 AD, we gather that the military arts in Việt Nam had by then reverted to the old feudal usage. During King An Dương’s time, he would have wanted the Lạc lords at court where he could keep an eye on them, but it is doubtful that the king would have trusted them in his army. Their hostility to Cao Tông must have rested in part on his superior military ability, his control of the army, and possibly even of the calendar. It seems unlikely that a Nan Yue deputy or the Chinese occupiers would have tried to enlighten subsequent generations. Cao Tông’s military knowledge would not have been handed down to subsequent Lạc lords; that would have been a prescription for rebellion. It is also possible that the Lạc lords simply preferred to return to the way things were done the golden years of their greatest glory, before the advent of Thục Phần. When the Trưng ladies revolted, the Lạc lords supported them in what Keith Taylor calls a “restoration movement, an effort to bring back a simpler state of affairs more congenial to traditional values.”102 In his campaign against the ladies two and a half centuries after the fall of the house of Thục, the Han general Ma Yuan defeated a generation without even a folk memory of how to use Cao Tông’s superior military methods. The history of his era had become a fable about a magic crossbow.

If my hypothesis about the men who built Cổ Loa is sound, they introduced new military technology and construction techniques copied from Warring States China. If the man called Cao Tông was a military strategist, he had knowledge of Chinese civil and military organization as well as a supremely flexible mind, for the design of the two outer walls at Cổ Loa is utterly unorthodox. With the

100 Taylor, Birth, 26.
102 Taylor, Birth, 38.
esoteric knowledge represented by the Chinese military classics in the hands of a
genral and strategist, the conquest of Văn Lang, the construction of the fortress
at Cổ Loa, and the fifty-year military rule of King An Dương can be explained
without resorting to magic.

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