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# ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE OC EO CULTURE (SOUTHERN VIETNAM)

## EXPLORATION, RESEARCH, AND ACHIEVEMENTS

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### ABSTRACT

The term 'Oc Eo culture' originates from the archaeological site of Oc Eo, situated in the Oc Eo - Ba The complex, located in An Giang Province, Vietnam. In early 1944, Oc Eo became the initial excavation site for Louis Malleret, a French scholar. This site unveils the remnants of an ancient civilization that once existed in the Mekong Delta region during the early Common Era, also referred to as Funan in ancient Chinese texts.

Over the course of more than 140 years, commencing with the initial explorations by foreign scholars in the late 19th century, followed by the unceasing research endeavors of Vietnamese scientists, the Oc Eo culture has been acknowledged for its prominent values. The issues concerning cultural spatial alongside the fundamental characteristics of sites and artifacts, the process of formation and development of this ancient culture as the archaeological culture of the Funan State, and its role within the ancient East-West trade network, have also been elucidated.

### KEYWORDS

Oc Eo, Vietnam, Funan, Mekong Delta

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## THE EXPLORATION AND RESEARCH PROCESS

### Initial Records of the Oc Eo Culture in Southern Vietnam

The earliest information about the archaeological sites and artifacts related to protohistoric period in southern Vietnam is in the book *The Annals of*

*Gia Dinh Citadel* [Gia Định Thành Thông Chí - 嘉定城通志] compiled by Trinh Hoai Duc [Trịnh Hoài Đức], a famous historian during the Nguyen Dynasty (1802-1945). The book provides specific descriptions of the discoveries at An Tong Pagoda [chùa Ân Tông], now known as Cay Mai Pagoda [chùa Cây Mai], in Ho Chi Minh City:

“In the 15th year of Gia Long’s reign, in the year Binh Ty [*Bính Tý*, 1816], a Buddhist monk

renovated the pagoda and unearthed many old bricks and tiles, as well as two square gold leaves, each measuring more than 3 cm in size, weighing 3 taels [钱] [approximately 10 grams]. On the surface, there were carvings of an ancient Buddha riding an elephant, which could possibly be the object used by the monk Hu [Hò] to guard the temple?" (Trinh 2004: 41)

### Exploration and Research by French Scholars (Late 19th Century to 1975)

From the late 19th century, the history of ancient civilizations in Southeast Asia attracted the attention of many Western scholars. Among them, southern Vietnam, with its vast lowland area in the Mekong Delta, became one of the focal points of this exploration.

The first significant discovery occurred around 1878-1879 when a number of ancient inscriptions in ancient Sanskrit were found at the Prasat Pream Loven site, now called the Go Thap [Gò Tháp] archaeological complex in Dong Thap [Đồng Tháp] Province. Among them, the best-preserved inscription, labeled K5, was dated to the 5th century CE and is the earliest known inscription in the Mekong Delta region. It mentioned a prince of Funan named Gunavarman, who governed the "conquered lands in the mud." This discovery, later published and evaluated by George Coedès, suggested that the site might have been an important religious center (Coedès 1931: 1-23). During the same period, the first artifacts were discovered in the Oc Eo - Ba The region [Óc Eo - Ba Thê], An Giang Province by Armand Corre and reported in the journal *Excursions et Reconnaissances* (Corre 1879). It mentioned two inscriptions in ancient Sanskrit carved on stone slabs found in association with the remains of an ancient structure at the Prasat Brah Dhat site, now the Linh Son Pagoda [chùa Linh Sơn], part of the

Oc Eo - Ba The archaeological complex.

In the last two decades of the 19th century, many traces of an ancient civilization, including sculptures, religious artifacts, and architectural ruins, were collected and recorded in the provinces of An Giang (Núi Sam [Núi Sam] and Bay Nui [Bây Núi] regions), Tra Vinh [Trà Vinh], and Bien Hoa [Biên Hòa] (Aymonier 1891: 7, 84-85; *Chronique De L'année 1940*: 477-484; Dupont 1934: 64). Subsequently, Lunet De Lajonquière conducted several surveys (from 1899 to 1909) to map the architectural monuments in southern Vietnam and Cambodia. He identified several sites such as Chot Mat temple [tháp Chót Mạt] (Tay Ninh [Tây Ninh] Province), Ba The (An Giang Province), and Tra Long temple [tháp Trà Long] (Bac Lieu [Bạc Liêu] Province). He also documented several Hindu and Buddhist statues, including the Uma Goddess, Vishnu God, Buddha statues, and a Maitreya statue (*Chronique 1909b*: 819-820; Malleret 1963: 39-40).

The first important book documenting an ancient kingdom that once existed in the southern region of Vietnam is *Le Fou-nan* by Sinologist Paul Pelliot, published in 1903. Pelliot meticulously collected almost all the ancient documents mentioning the history of the Funan kingdom recorded in the ancient Chinese annals and chronicles<sup>1)</sup>. Through his work, Pelliot made important conclusions about (1) the location and existence of Funan, (2) the interactions between Funan, China, and India, and (3) the Funanese kings from the beginning of the Common Era until its annexation by the Chenla kingdom in the mid-7th century CE (Pelliot 1903).

Notably, in the early 20th century, Henri Parmentier conducted investigations and surveys, documenting numerous traces of ancient architectural structures in provinces such as Tay Ninh (Go Chua Co Lam [Gò Chùa Cổ Lâm], Ben Dinh [Bến Đình], and other sites in the Cau An Ha [Cầu An Hạ] area), Bac Lieu (Tra Long Temple), Tien Giang [Tiền

Giang] (remains at Thien Pagoda [chùa Thiên] and Linh Phong Pagoda [chùa Linh Phong]), Long An (Bau Thap [Bàu Tháp], Bau Dai [Bàu Dài], Bu Loi [Bù Lôi], and the group of ancient architectural structures in Binh Ta [Bình Tả]). In addition, the efforts to discover and study the relics of ancient cultures in the southern region also included con-

tributions from J. Bouchot, J. Y. Claeys, R. Dalet, and others (Chronique 1909a: 618-620; Chronique 1922: 376; Chronique 1924: 643; Chronique De L'année 1939: 335; Cœdès 1931: 1-12; Dalet 1936: 38; Finot 1914: 1-8; Malleret 1937: 120; Malleret 1969: 232-235; Parmentier 1909: 739-756).

From 1936, Louis Malleret conducted extensive



**Fig. 1.** The geographical divisions in southern Vietnam (based on the map from snazzymaps.com and Bui et al. 2018: 848).

surveys and research on ancient architectural monuments and related artifacts scattered throughout the entire Southern region, including both the Eastern and Western regions<sup>2)</sup> (Fig. 1) (Malleret 1969: 20-145). A significant milestone in the study of this ancient culture occurred from February to April 1944 when Malleret and his colleagues conducted excavations at 12 archaeological sites in the Oc Eo plain<sup>3)</sup> (Malleret 1951: 75-88). He proposed the name “Oc Eo” to refer to the material civilization closely associated with the kingdom of Funan, as mentioned in historical records and inscriptions. The results of Malleret’s surveys, excavations, and research were published in the four-volume series *L’archéologie du Delta du Mékong* [Khảo cổ học Đồng bằng sông Cửu Long], published between 1959 and 1963.

Many other sites with traces of ancient architectural structures were surveyed in the 1940s and subsequently published by L. Malleret, such as the Vatt Pan Dham and Knun Tuol sites in Kien Giang [Kiên Giang] Province; the Thma Tamrwt, Dwl Cety Dwl, Vatt Jhi Ka En, and Brah Cety sites in An Giang Province; and the Ba Tuc Pagoda in Tra Vinh [Trà Vinh] Province, which contained artifacts related to religion and daily life, such as Buddha statues, eight-armed and five-headed Hindu deity statues in the Angkor style, yoni, and stone sugarcane crushers. Additionally, he documented over 30 other archaeological sites in the southwestern part of the Mekong Delta (Malleret 1969: 19-261).

Therefore, in the first half of the 20th century, approximately 300 archaeological sites, including over 50 architectural monuments and a large number of artifacts related to the archaeological culture of Oc Eo, were discovered by French researchers in the Southern region of Vietnam. These findings were published in journals such as *Bulletin de la Commission archéologique de L’Indochine* (BCAI), *Bulletin de la Société des Études Indochi-*

*noises* (BSEI), *Bulletin de l’École Française d’Extrême-Orient* (BEFEO), and *Cahiers de l’École Française d’Extrême-Orient* (Bui et al. 2018: 26-27).

After Malleret’s research, there were almost no archaeological surveys conducted in the Southern region related to the Oc Eo culture until 1975, due to the military situation in Vietnam.

### **Inheritance and Continuation of Research by Vietnamese Archaeologists (from 1975 to the Present)**

After the reunification of the country, along with the post-war restoration process, archaeological work in southern Vietnam was reinitiated with the pioneering of archaeologists from the Archaeological Department of the Institute of Social Sciences in Ho Chi Minh City<sup>4)</sup>. The objective was to appraise and systematize the previously discovered and researched sites by the French, while also providing direction for future research endeavors.

#### ***The Period of Assessment and Re-study on the Oc Eo Cultural Sites (1975-1995)***

The research during this period was closely associated with the most significant discoveries in three key areas: Kien Giang, An Giang, and Dong Thap.

In Kien Giang Province, the Nen Chua [Nền Chùa] site was surveyed and excavated from 1981 to 1983. This was an important archaeological site with large stone and brick structures, along with 19 “cremation graves” [ngôi mộ hỏa táng] (Vo 1984a: 199-206). The Canh Den [Cạnh Đền] site was also a notable archaeological site, surveyed from 1981 and further researched in 1986. The study revealed that Canh Den site included residential areas, religious architecture, and tombs, with diverse materials such as brick, stone, wood, and sculptures. Additionally, grinding tools, mortars, as well as

human and animal remains were found (Vo 1986, 1990). By 1990, the Ke Mot [Kè Môt] site was discovered and excavated, consisting of a brick “architecture-cremation grave” [kiến trúc - mộ hỏa táng] containing 40 artifacts, including religious objects (Dao 1990: 247-250).

In An Giang, the second excavation on the Oc Eo plain, after nearly 40 years since Malleret’s excavation, took place in 1983 at 10 sites including Go Cay Trom [Gò Cây Trôm], Go Cay Coc [Gò Cây Cóc], Go Ong Con [Gò Ông Côn], Go Cu Lao Voi [Gò Cù Lao Voi], Go Da [Gò Đá] no. 1, Go Da no. 7, Go Da no. 8 and Go Da no. 10 (Le 1983). During this time, a survey was also conducted to re-evaluate the conditions at Malleret’s “Oc Eo ancient city”. The site had undergone changes compared to the description by Malleret, influenced by nature and human activities, revealing numerous traces of ancient cultural remains on the surface of the fields.

In 1984, the eastern slope of Ba The Mountain was surveyed and investigated. Along with recording traces of architectural ruins on a large scale at the Linh Son Pagoda area, which had been dug for bricks used in paving roads and numerous pieces of processed and decorated granite and basalt stones, the establishment of topographic maps of the Linh Son Pagoda site (scale 1:500) and the Oc Eo plain (scale 1:1,000) was carried out by the Geodesy Department of Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology (Bui et al. 2018: 30). Also in 1984, the Da Noi [Đá Nôi] site was discovered and excavated a year later (Fig. 2). The results revealed seven “architecture-worship grave” [kiến trúc - mộ thờ] structures with a central square cylinder shape built with bricks. The collection included 331 gold-leaf artifacts with religious themes, as well as metal jewelry and gemstones. The Da Noi artifact collection was considered to be largest and most significant collection in terms of quantity, types, and cultural content within the Oc Eo culture in the

southern region of Vietnam (Dao 1985).

Dong Thap Province is an area that contains many important archaeological sites, among which the Go Thap archaeological complex, formerly known as Prasat Pram Loven, is a typical example. In 1983, this site was investigated and evaluated, and one year later, the first excavation took place. The research findings unveiled that Go Thap is a significant archaeological site comprising three categories of monuments: architectural monuments showcasing the hallmark features of Hindu temple architecture, burial sites, and ancient settlements. Notable sites include Ba Chua Xu [Bà Chúa Xứ], Go Minh Su [Gò Minh Sư], and Go Thap Muoi [Gò Tháp Mười] (Dao 1984: 238-240; Nguyen 1984: 260-262; Vo 1984b: 280-283). It is worth noting that during the excavation at Go Thap Muoi site in 1998, archaeologists discovered two Vishnu statues and several other sacred artifacts (Vo and Dao 1998: 732-734).

In addition, during the two decades of the 1980s and 1990s, a series of archaeological sites related to the Oc Eo culture were discovered across the vast Mekong Delta region. These include residential sites such as Nhon Thanh [Nhơn Thành] (1990-1991, Can Tho [Cần Thơ] City) (Nguyen and Nguyen 1990: 250-253); religious architectural ruins in Vinh Hung [Vĩnh Hưng] (1990, Bac Lieu



**Fig. 2.** Da Noi site, excavated in 1985 (© Center for Archaeology, Southern Institute of Social Sciences).

Province); the sites of Luu Cu [Luu Cù], Luu Cu II, and Luu Cu IIa (1985-1987, Tra Vinh Province) (Dao 1986); Go Thanh [Gò Thành] site (1987-1989, Tien Giang Province) (Dao 1989); Go Roc Chanh [Gò Rộc Chanh], Go De [Gò Đé], Go Dung [Gò Dung], and Go Hang [Gò Hàng] sites (1986, Long An Province); Binh Ta archaeological complex (including Go Xoai [Gò Xoài], Go Don [Gò Đôn], Go Nam Tuoc [Gò Năm Tước] sites) and Go Sao [Gò Sao], Bau Dai [Bàu Dài], Go Tram Quy [Gò Trâm Quy] sites (1987, Long An Province); Cay Gao [Cây Gáo], Dong Bo [Đồng Bơ] site (1985-1987, Dong Nai [Đồng Nai] Province) (Nguyen, V. L. 1997: 52); Go Chieu Lieu [Gò Chiêu Liêu], Go Ong Tung [Gò Ông Tùng], Bau Sen [Bàu Sen], and Da Lak [Đạ Lăk] sites (1995, Dong Nai Province) (Nguyen and Luu 1994, 1995, 1996).

During the two decades after the Vietnam War, the process of surveying and documenting the previously recognized sites in the southern region of Vietnam was carried out, alongside the discovery, research, and excavation of numerous new archaeological sites. These efforts have significantly contributed to the understanding of the prehistoric period in the southern region as a whole. Over 90 sites belonging to the Oc Eo culture have been surveyed, and 20 architectural sites of this ancient

culture have been excavated (Bui et al. 2018: 36-37). The religious and funerary architectural monuments have received focused research attention, which has helped to clarify the characteristics, formation process, and development, as well as the indigenous and exogenous cultural elements of this rich and diverse culture. Additionally, other important religious and settlement centers of the Oc Eo culture have been identified, including the Oc Eo - Ba The (An Giang Province), Go Thap (Dong Thap Province), the Go Don - Binh Ta (Long An Province), and the Nhon Thanh (Can Tho City)<sup>5</sup>.

#### ***Implementation of Research and Collaborative Research with Domestic and International Scientific Organizations (1997-2012)***

Research on the Oc Eo culture and Funan kingdom in Vietnam took a significant step forward through collaborative research between archaeologists from the Southern Institute of Social Sciences (SISS, Vietnam) and École Française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO) from 1998 to 2002, under the project named "Archaeology of the Mekong Delta". The program aimed to synthesize existing research materials and relevant maps on the Oc Eo culture and Funan kingdom in Vietnam and France. It involved a comprehensive inventory of approxi-



**Fig. 3.** Linh Son Nam site, excavated in 1999  
(© Center for Archaeology,  
Southern Institute of Social Sciences).



**Fig. 4.** Go Oc Eo site, excavated in 2002  
(© Center for Archaeology,  
Southern Institute of Social Sciences).

mately 300 archaeological sites associated with this ancient culture in the Mekong Delta region, with geographical references. Additionally, several sites identified as important at the foot of Ba The mountainous area and the plain of Oc Eo were excavated using advanced scientific archaeological methods to effectively control and gather information (Figs. 3 and 4). The goal was to establish a reliable chronological framework for the “Oc Eo culture” and the “Funan kingdom” in general, and provide the basis for dating a large number of discovered artifacts.

The period from 2002 to 2005 marked the participation of Japanese archaeologists in collaborative research with the Center for Archaeology, Southern Institute of Social Sciences, Vietnam. The focus was on studying and exploring the characteristics of the community’s daily life and the scientific value of representative settlement sites within the Oc Eo culture at Oc Eo - Ba The, Go Thap, and Nhon Thanh site.

The research topic “Buddhist and Hindu Art in the Mekong Delta before the 10th Century”, conducted by Le Thi Lien [Lê Thị Liên] in 2002, focused on analyzing the artistic features and sculptural styles of the worship figurines, ritual objects, and religious architectures within the Oc Eo culture of the Mekong Delta. By combining various sources of material, the study aimed to gain a better understanding of the Oc Eo cultural period and the multidimensional cultural relationships within the region and internationally.

The research project “Systematization of Archaeological Materials in Southern Vietnam from 1975 to 2005”, led by Bui Chi Hoang [Bùi Chí Hoàng] and the Center for Archaeology (2005-2010), synthesized and organized archaeological materials from the Prehistoric and Protohistoric periods in the Southern region from the reunification of the country until 2010. The research results were pub-

lished in two volumes: *Prehistoric Archaeology of Southern Vietnam* (Bui et al. 2017) and *Protohistoric Archaeology of Southern Vietnam* (Bui et al. 2018).

The research project “Pre-Oc Eo Sites in the Southwestern Region” by Dang Van Thang [Đặng Văn Thắng] (2008-2009) aimed to investigate and construct a system of materials on pre-Oc Eo sites in the Southwestern Vietnam, in order to clarify the development process from prehistoric period to the Oc Eo culture. It particularly examined pre-Oc Eo sites such as Go O Chua [Gò Ô Chùa], Go Cay Tung [Gò Cây Tung], and Go Tu Tram [Gò Tư Trăm].

The research topic “Archaeological Sites of the Oc Eo and Post-Oc Eo Periods in An Giang” by Pham Duc Manh [Phạm Đức Mạnh] (2008-2009) focused on studying the Oc Eo culture in An Giang Province. By gathering and systematizing materials, especially from representative sites such as Go Cay Tung and Go Tu Tram, the research contributed to shedding light on fundamental aspects of the Oc Eo culture in An Giang and the Southwestern region of Vietnam.

The research project “Southern Vietnam from Its Origins to the 7th Century”, conducted by Vu Minh Giang [Vũ Minh Giang], was part of the State-level social sciences project “The Formation and Development Process of the South Vietnam” led by the Ministry of Sciences and Technology (2008-2011). The objective was not only to study the historical process of the Southern region from prehistoric period to the 7th century but also to clarify the characteristics of the Oc Eo culture and the Funan kingdom within the flow of Vietnamese history and culture. The research adopted an approach that considered both indigenous and exogenous factors, as well as changes in the region’s political and social space.

The research topic “Cultural Value of Oc Eo in

the Southwestern Region (Based on Existing Documents)”, conducted by Dao Linh Con [Đào Linh Côn] (2009-2010), focused on studying important archaeological sites such as Oc Eo - Ba The, Nen Chua, Go Thap, Da Noi, and Nhon Thanh. The objective was to identify the cultural and historical value of Oc Eo within the context of the South Vietnam’s history and the early Common Era in Southeast Asia.

The research project “Conservation and Development Planning Guidelines for Oc Eo - Ba The Archaeological Site (Oc Eo Town, Thoai Son District, An Giang Province)”, was chaired by Bui Chi Hoang (2011-2012), aimed to determine the value, scale, and nature of the archaeological sites within the Oc Eo - Ba The area. This involved synthesizing and systematizing existing materials and conducting new surveys and excavations to establish the fundamental characteristics of the core (central) and buffer (peripheral) zones of the archaeological site. The objective was to provide guidance for the conservation and promotion of the site’s value. The most important goal was to complete a comprehensive scientific dossier that would contribute to the classification of the Oc Eo complex as a Special National Heritage.

During this period, several scientific conferences were organized on the topic of Oc Eo culture, with the most important being the specialized conference on “Oc Eo Culture and the Kingdom of Funan” held in 2004 to commemorate 60 years of research (1944-2004). This conference marked the initial summary of the achievements in the study of Oc Eo - Funan civilization by the entire scientific community in Vietnam up to that point. Another significant conference was the “Oc Eo Culture: Awareness and Solutions for Conservation and Value Enhancement of Heritage” held in 2009. The conference focused on evaluating the research accomplishments in Oc Eo culture to date, particularly in representative ar-

chaeological sites located in provinces such as An Giang, Dong Thap, Tien Giang, Long An, and Kien Giang. It assessed the interdisciplinary and inter-regional research collaboration on Oc Eo culture during the preceding years and provided directions for future research activities. Furthermore, the conference evaluated the management efforts, current conservation status, and value enhancement of Oc Eo heritage. It aimed to propose solutions for effective management, planning, conservation, and value enhancement of exemplary Oc Eo sites, while integrating them with local tourism development and interregional relationships.

### ***Large-scale Research on the Oc Eo - Ba The and Nen Chua Archaeological Complexes (2017-2020)***

A large-scale research project on Oc Eo culture was initiated in 2012 by archaeologists from the Southern Institute of Social Sciences. In 2015, the Prime Minister assigned the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences to lead the State-level scientific project titled “Research on the Archaeological Complex of Oc Eo - Ba The and Nen Chua (Oc Eo Culture in the Southern of Vietnam)”. Two years later, the project was officially deployed in the field. This project represented the largest archaeological endeavor to date on Oc Eo culture<sup>6)</sup>. The main objective of the project was to excavate and study two significant archaeological complexes, namely Oc Eo - Ba The and Nen Chua, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the formation and development of the ancient urban center of Oc Eo and its role in the region and the world during the early Common Era. The project also aimed to provide a scientific foundation for planning, conserving, and enhancing the cultural heritage value of the Oc Eo - Ba The archaeological complex, with the ultimate goal of proposing its recognition as a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage.





**Fig. 5.** Wet sieving method to collect the micro-materials.



**Fig. 6.** Flotation method to collect the micro-materials.



**Fig. 7.** Animal bones, fish bones, and plant seeds obtained from wet sieving samples.



**Fig. 8.** Square brick well at Go Giong Cat site, excavated 2019.

The project not only employed specialized archaeological methods but also marked the first time interdisciplinary and scientific-technical approaches were applied in the study of Oc Eo culture (Figs. 5-7). As a result, numerous important relics were discovered, including temple architectures wells, and water reservoirs, along with residential sites, and craft production sites (Figs. 8 and 9). Notably, a significant number of valuable artifacts were unearthed, helping to answer questions regarding the living environment, the ancient city of Oc Eo, cultural exchange, and the life of the Oc Eo community during that period. These new findings once again affirmed that Oc Eo - Ba The



**Fig. 9.** Circular brick well at Go Giong Cat site, excavated 2019-2020.

and Nen Chua constitutes a complex ancient urban center and a major economic and cultural hub with a coastal orientation, serving as a gateway for external cultural interactions. They played a crucial role in the formation and development of Funan, a nation built upon indigenous traditions and with extensive trade relationships along international maritime routes<sup>7)</sup>.

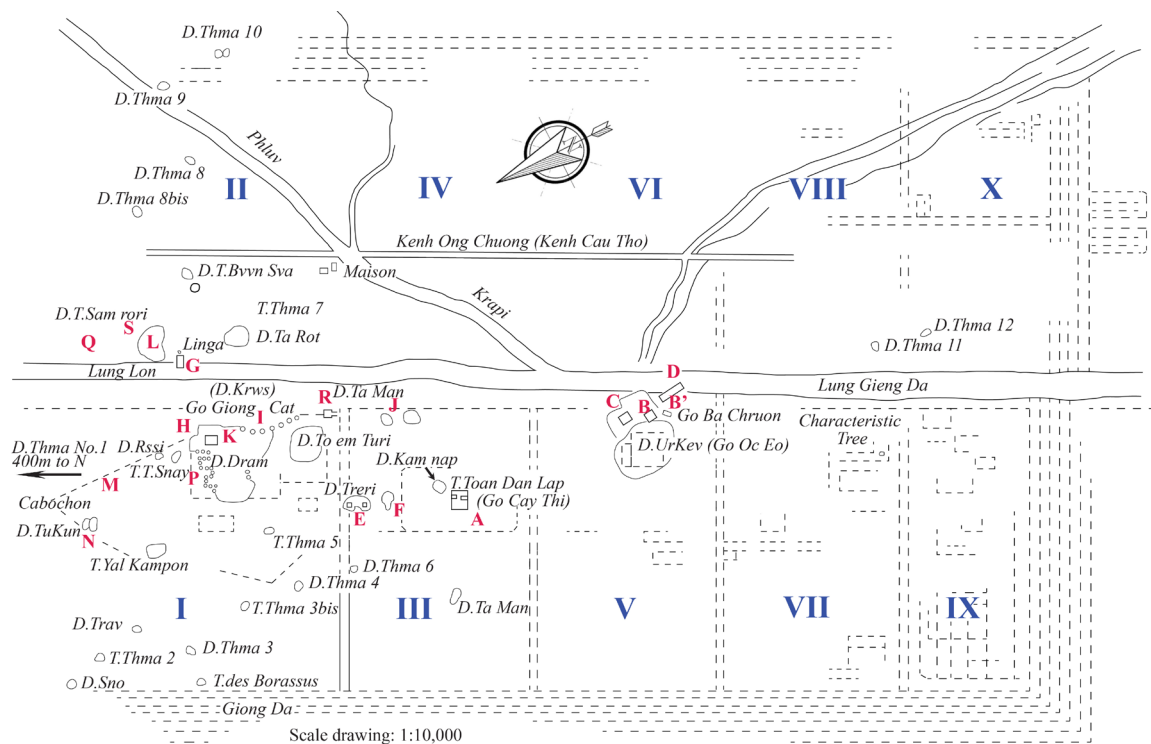
## ACHIEVEMENTS IN OC EO CULTURAL RESEARCH

### Basic Overview of Oc Eo Culture and the “Ancient Port-city” of Oc Eo

French scholars and officers were among the pioneers in the research on the ancient Oc Eo culture. Since the late 19th century, they made significant

contributions through documentation and surveys of related archaeological sites and artifacts. Notably, Malleret played a prominent role not only as the first person to excavate Oc Eo archaeological site and identify this ancient culture but also through important studies that contributed to the fundamental understanding of Oc Eo culture and the kingdom of Funan. These studies were presented in the four-volume series *L'archéologie du Delta du Mékong* published between 1959 and 1963. Malleret was also the first to apply scientific and laboratory techniques to the research of historical archaeology in Southeast Asia (Manguin 2009: 106).

Through a combination of surveys and aerial photography, Malleret discovered a rectangular-shaped fortified structure encompassing an area of approximately 450 hectares, measuring 3,000 meters in length and 1,500 meters in width. Inside



Position of the topographical features of the Oc Eo site. The letter design the point excavated in 1944. The dotted line corresponds to the lines apparent from aerial observation.

Fig. 10. Oc Eo ancient port-city (after Malleret 1959: Pl. XV).

the structure, there were traces of roads, waterways, and geometrically arranged residential buildings (Fig. 10). Passing through the ancient city was a canal known as Lung Lon [Lung Lớn], which was over 100 kilometers long, flowing in a north-east-southwest direction and connecting the Angkor Borei archaeological site to the north and the Ta Keo (Nen Chua) site to the south, close to the ancient coastal area (Fig. 11). Malleret also identified Oc Eo as a central hub with close connections to neighboring regions such as the Long Xuyen Quadrangle [Tứ giác Long Xuyên] Depression and the U Minh Thuong [U Minh Thượng] region (Malleret 1959: 273-297).

In addition, Malleret systematically documented around 300 archaeological sites throughout southern Vietnam. Along with this, he collected, categorized, described, and sometimes analyzed

hundreds of Oc Eo-Funan artifacts, including jewelry made of gold, silver, and gemstones, stone and bronze statues of deities and Buddhas, components of architectural structures made of bricks and tiles, as well as various pottery, stone, and wooden household objects (Manguin and Vallerin 1997: 408). These discoveries provided essential insights into the Funan, an entity vaguely mentioned in ancient manuscripts and inscriptions<sup>8</sup>). Malleret believed that Oc Eo was a material manifestation of the maritime sector of the Indianized Funan polity, functioning as a significant port-city with the Ta Keo (Nen Chua) archaeological site as its gateway port. It was a diverse industrial center, a culturally rich city following the tradition of Sanskrit, and possibly the capital known as Naravanagara [or Nafu-na] of the Funan kingdom (Malleret 1962: 307, 408-425, 452-454).

### Identification of the Characteristics of Oc Eo Monuments and Artifacts

#### Monuments

Foreign scholars, mainly of French, discovered the Oc Eo culture and, in this context, identified the primary distribution area of this cultural phenomenon in the Long Xuyen Quadrangle and U Minh Thuong (Transbassac area<sup>9</sup>). From 1975 to the present, Vietnamese archaeologists have continued to study and identify over 100 monuments, expanding the spatial distribution of the Oc Eo culture to include almost all provinces in the Mekong Delta region. These sites are located in diverse natural landscapes and ecological environments, ranging from the lowland area of Long Xuyen Quadrangle and Dong Thap Muoi, coastal sand mounds and dunes, transitional zones between ancient alluvium in southeast Vietnam and recent alluvium in southwest Vietnam along the flow of the Vam Co river [sông Vàm Cỏ] (Figs. 1 and 12). Some opinions

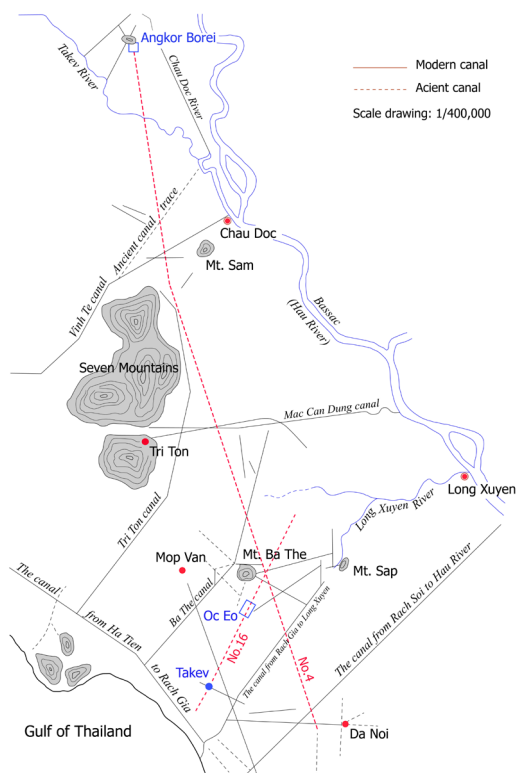
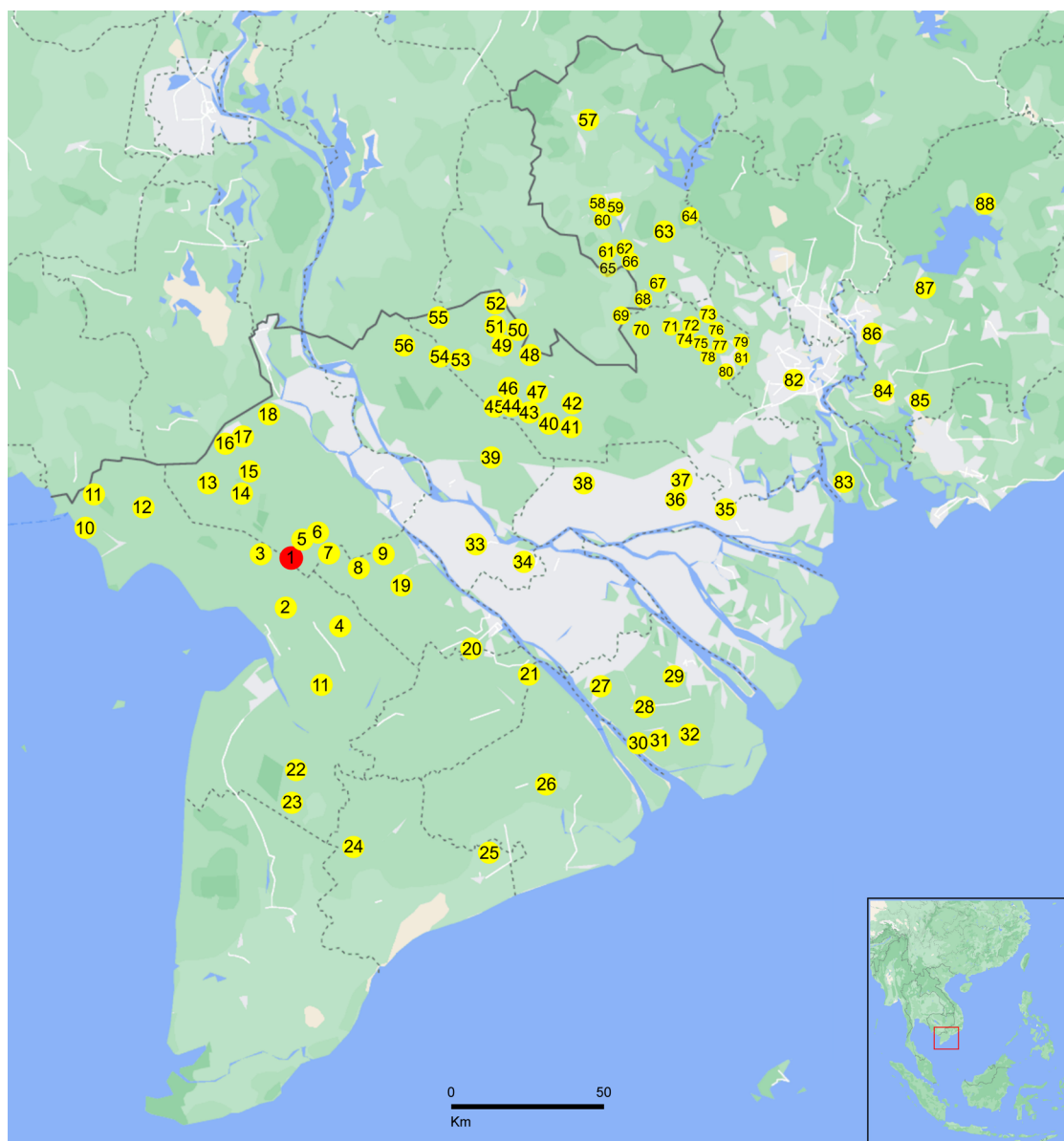


Fig. 11. Ancient canal systems of Oc Eo culture in the Transbassac area (after Malleret 1959: Pl. XII).



- |                      |                     |                    |                      |                     |
|----------------------|---------------------|--------------------|----------------------|---------------------|
| (1) Ốc Eo            | (19) Thạnh Trung    | (37) Gò Trâm Quý   | (55) Bàu Xả Keo      | (73) Gò Cao Su      |
| (2) Nền Chùa         | (20) Nhơn Thành     | (38) Địa Tháp      | (56) Gò Tám Áu       | (74) Gò Sao 1       |
| (3) Mốp Vắn          | (21) Xuân Hòa       | (39) Mỹ Tây 3      | (57) Tháo Chóp Mạt   | (75) Gò Bàu Thành   |
| (4) Đá Nổi           | (22) Kè Một         | (40) Gò Bảy Liếp   | (58) Gò Chùa         | (76) Gò Chàm        |
| (5) Lung Giầy Mé     | (23) Nền Vua        | (41) Gò Mốp Xụ     | (59) Gò Mít Đợi      | (77) Gò Cao Su      |
| (6) Tráp Đá          | (24) Cạnh Đền       | (42) Rạm           | (60) Gò Tháp         | (78) Gò Xoài        |
| (7) Núp Lê           | (25) Vĩnh Hưng      | (43) Gò Dung       | (61) Gò Tháo         | (79) Gò Bàu Tháp    |
| (8) G1               | (26) Mỹ Xuyên       | (44) Gò Chùa       | (62) Gò Miếu Bà      | (80) Bình Tả        |
| (9) Đá Nổi           | (27) Chùa Trà Khảo  | (45) Vĩnh Châu A   | (63) GòTháo          | (81) Gò Sáu Huấn    |
| (10) Xoa Áo          | (28) Bàu Ông Bé     | (46) Gò Hàng       | (64) Ấp 1            | (82) Chùa Phụng Sơn |
| (11) Giồng Cu        | (29) Chùa Lò Gạch   | (47) Gò Đế         | (65) Gò Tháp         | (83) Giồng Am       |
| (12) K9              | (30) Lưu Cừ II      | (48) Cổ Sơn Tự     | (66) Bàu Ông         | (84) Gò Bường       |
| (13) Gò Me - Gò Sành | (31) Gò Trâm Vồ     | (49) Gò Láng       | (67) Bửu Tháp        | (85) Gò Ông Tùng    |
| (14) Gò Tháp An Lợi  | (32) Chùa Chongbat  | (50) Gò Duối       | (68) Tháp Bình Thạnh | (86) Bến Gổ         |
| (15) Phum Quao       | (33) Kênh Ruột Ngựa | (51) Lò Gạch       | (69) Gò Tháp         | (87) Cây Gáo        |
| (16) Gò Cây Sung     | (34) Thành Mới      | (52) Gò Ô Chùa     | (70) Gò Tho Mo       | (88) Đồng Bơ        |
| (17) Gò Cây Tùng     | (35) Gò Thành       | (53) Gò Rộc Chanh  | (71) Gò Bàu Đá       |                     |
| (18) Núi Sam         | (36) Gò Huyện Ủy    | (54) Tráp Gáo Miếu | (72) Gò Sao 2        |                     |

**Fig. 12.** The distribution of Oc Eo cultural monuments in southern Vietnam (based on the map from snazzymaps.com).

even suggest that the influence of the Oc Eo culture is present in the Cat Tien Holy Land [Thánh địa Cát Tiên] in southern central Highlands. However, the Oc Eo culture exhibits a unified appearance with its diversity, demonstrating a highly developed economic and cultural level with a well-organized society.

The development of the Oc Eo culture has been identified through archaeological discoveries, including stages such as pre-Oc Eo, early Oc Eo, typical Oc Eo, and post-Oc Eo. Important settlement centers were established during the early period, around the 1st-3rd centuries CE, followed by the appearance of religious architectural monuments, dated from the 4th to 7th centuries CE and even later, influenced by Indian civilization, including Hindu and Buddhist architecture. Additionally, archaeology has documented the presence of burial sites, workshops for jewelry production, wood-carved Buddha statues, and pottery kiln sites. Moreover, ancient Chinese manuscripts have mentioned that Funan had “walled cities, castles, and houses” (Pelliot 1903: 254).

In his research, Malleret (1959a: 279) stated that “stilt houses are a common form of residence in the Oc Eo culture”. The residential architecture of the Oc Eo inhabitants, represented by stilt house structures, not only reflects their creativity and adaptability but also embodies elements of indigenous cultural traditions dating back to prehistoric times. Throughout the low-lying areas of the Mekong Delta, clear evidence of stilt columns, elaborately decorated wooden structures with high aesthetic value, and a delicate combination of imported cultures can be found, creating unique and distinctive architectural features. “They [*the Funanese*] cut down trees to build houses. The king resides in a multi-story building. They have wooden walls as fortifications. Along the coastal areas, there is a type of large bamboo with long leaves, which they use to thatch

their houses. The people also live in tall houses” (Pelliot 1903: 261). One of the most distinct pieces of evidence was found in a cultural layer of a 150 cm-thick residential site at the Go Thanh archaeological site in Tien Giang Province, where a layer of 30 cm-thick water coconut leaves was discovered at a depth of 170 cm, beneath which were several processed wooden beams. This trace could indicate a collapsed thatched house, with the results of <sup>14</sup>C dating identifying it as from the 4th century CE (Le et al. 1995: 160). Additionally, an authentic depiction of a wooden house with a lightweight roofing material was found on a golden leaf at the Go Thap archaeological complex, providing specific evidence of the architectural style and dwelling patterns of the inhabitants in the southern region in the first half of the 1st century CE.

In 2018, the excavation results at the Go Giong Cat [Gò Giồng Cát] archaeological site uncovered the embankments of brownish-yellow clay soil (Hue 2.5Y 5/6), characterized by a firm and homogeneous structure with a relatively flat surface. Based on the comparison of pottery types and AMS dating analysis, these embankments could have been constructed as early as the 2nd century CE, and continued to be inhabited until the 4th-5th century CE. The study indicated that these earth layers were selectively applied to individual living spaces with uneven thickness, averaging from 30-50 cm, gradually thinning towards the edges. They also served as foundation or reinforcement for the above structures, leaving numerous traces of postholes. Notably, a system consisting of five rows of wooden columns/postholes aligned in an east-west direction was discovered, measuring 7.26 m x 6.3 m, with consistent spacing between columns. The remaining wooden columns exhibit a relatively large diameter, ranging from 18 to 25 cm, with surface tool marks, and the majority of them were crafted with mortise and tenon joints to in-

terlock with wooden beams at the base, providing reinforcement and structural support for the architectural framework (Fig. 13). This was identified as the remaining part of a wooden structure built on the deposited earth, potentially serving as the residence of affluent inhabitants during the 4th-5th century CE (Nguyen, H. B. L. 2020).

In contrast, the architectural structures associated with religious practices in the Oc Eo culture were robustly constructed using materials such as bricks, stones, and a combination of bricks and stones (Fig. 14). They are often dated to a continuation and later date than the habitation sites. These structures encompassed the philosophies and religious models of India from early to late periods, wherein the technique of reinforcing the foundation with a system of wooden piles combined with earth fill on top was a notable feature in the architectural art of the Oc Eo inhabitants. They also utilized lightweight and local materials such as wood and leaves for the superstructures. This construction method demonstrated their high adaptability and control over the topography of the low-lying region. This particular technique had developed through the long-term accumulation of the indigenous resident's history of conquering their deltaic homeland (Bui 2013: 160-162).



**Fig. 13.** The traces of settlement on wooden architecture and clay embankment at Go Giong Cat site, excavated in 2018-2020.

Archaeology has also discovered traces of production activities, metal casting, and jewelry craftsmanship at various Oc Eo cultural sites. While Go Oc Eo, Go Hang, and Go Dung reveal a vast amount of glass bead types along with production evidence, sites such as Oc Eo - Ba The, Nen Chua, Canh Den, and Go Thap have yielded traces of metalworking and jewelry crafting using various materials. Particularly, the Nhon Thanh site, one of the most important settlements of Oc Eo, with the largest and most diverse collection of molds, is considered one of the specialized centers for crafting lead-tin jewelry with a high level of specialization, catering not only to local demands but also allowing for commercial exchange.

### *Artifacts*

Building upon the research foundation laid by Malleret, and nearly 50 years of continued investigation, the distinctive artifacts of the Oc Eo culture have been identified and classified, with pottery being the most significant category. Pottery serves as reliable evidence of material and provides a basis for better identification and evaluation of the remains and artifacts of this ancient culture, especially within ancient settlements. It helps to reflect the social structure and life of the ancient community,



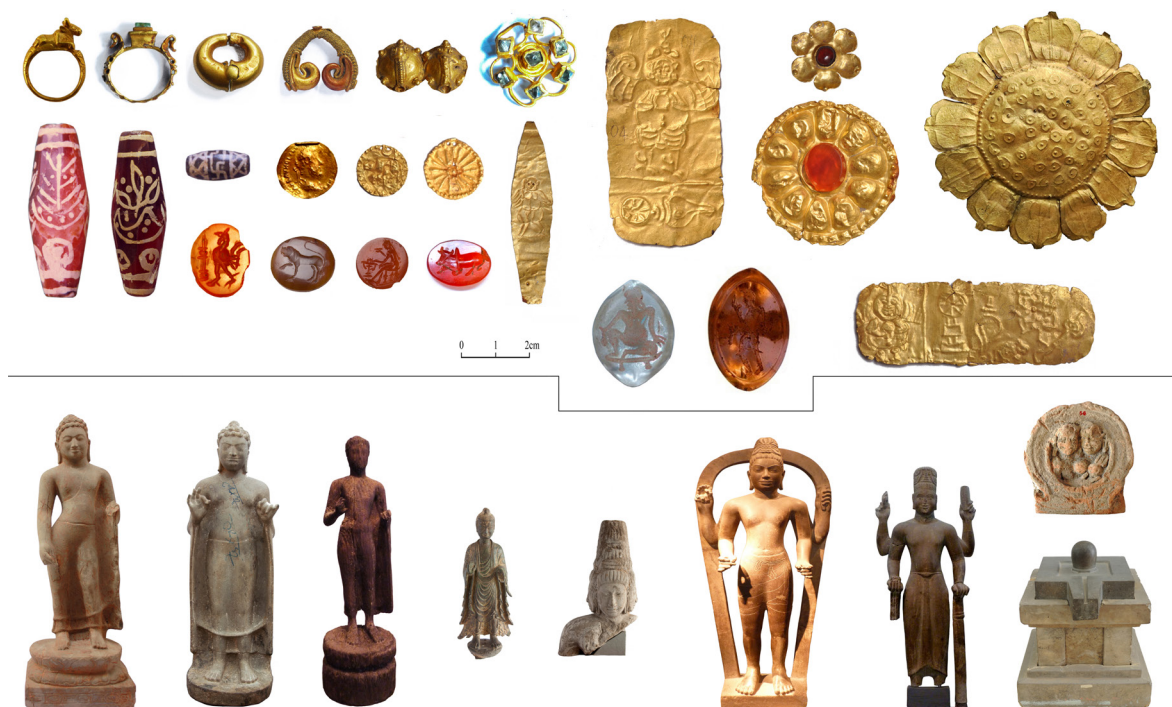
**Fig. 14.** Go Sau Thuan architectural site, excavated in 2017-2019.

an important aspect that has not been fully emphasized.

The pottery collection of the Oc Eo culture exhibits unique characteristics in terms of type, material, and manufacturing techniques. It demonstrates a combination of various indigenous and imported cultural elements, while clearly reflecting the development from early to late stages in the history of Oc Eo culture. High-quality pottery is from carefully processed materials and often used for specialized and primarily religious items, such as jars, cup, *kendi* (spouted jars), *kundika* (ritual sprinklers), bell-shaped lids. These products are typically decorated with simple colored patterns. On the contrary, ordinary pottery is primarily made from coarse clay mixed with sand or plant residues, including everyday household items such as pots, vessels, jars, *carang* (stoves). This group of products is the focal point of decorative art, combining various technical methods to create pottery products that bear the dis-

tinctive characteristics of the Oc Eo culture.

The various types of handicrafts are also notable collections within the Oc Eo culture. Ancient Chinese documents described the life of the people of Funan: “Further, they like to decorate ornaments and to carve. Many of their eating utensils are silver. Tax is paid in gold, silver, pearls, perfumes. They have books and archives and other things. Their written characters are like those of the Hu [*Hò*]” (Pelliot 1903: 254), “The people of Funan cast rings and bracelets in gold and dishes in silver” (Pelliot 1903: 261), “It is a market where East meets West. Thousands of people gather there every day. Rare items and precious goods are abundant” (Pelliot 1903: 263). At the Oc Eo site, archaeologists have discovered a vast quantity and diversity of glass bead strings, along with evidence of production and crafting activities. This indicates that the area was one of the important centers for manufacturing and supplying glass beads in the region. In addition, the



**Fig. 15.** Some typical artifacts in the Oc Eo culture in southern Vietnam  
 (© Center for Archaeology, Southern Institute of Social Sciences, and the author).

collection of jewelry is highly diverse, including gold rings adorned with bull motifs or engraved with Sanskrit characters, earrings made of lead-tin alloy, gold-plated or gold-wrapped, bracelets, amulets, and insignias. Furthermore, a rich collection of molds and tools used to craft these types of jewelry has been found at various sites of Oc Eo culture. All of this demonstrate a high level of integration between traditional metalworking and the importation of diverse and continuously innovative design patterns, resulting in a distinctive style of artisanal craftsmanship within the Oc Eo ancient culture.

Religious artifacts in the Oc Eo culture include sculptures and reliefs depicting Buddhism and Hinduism on various materials such as stone, wood, fired clay, and gold (Fig. 15). They bear the unique artistic characteristics of “Funan Art”, as referred to by Vietnamese archaeologists (Bui et al. 2018; Bui et al. 2022; Le 2006) influenced by various art styles from India through direct or indirect cultural exchange during the cultural diffusion to neighboring regions. These artworks closely adhere to religious patterns and distinct cultural features imported from different regions. At the same time, the process of “localization” has led to the development of superb sculptural artworks found throughout the Mekong Delta region. For example, in Go Thap, Giong Xoai [Giông Xoài], and Phong My [Phong Mỹ], in 4th-6th century CE, unique wooden Buddha sculptures bear deep influences from the Amaravati and Dvaravati art styles. Additionally, stone sculpture reached its peak with the Phnom Da style around the 6th-7th century CE, exemplified by the gigantic Vishnu statue in Ba The (Bui 2013: 162-163). Furthermore, it is worth mentioning intricately engraved gold leaves with religious symbols. These artworks not only demonstrate the development and product diversity of the sculptural art but also attest to the high level of craftsmanship. These products were not only used within the local

community but also likely became one of the main trade commodities in the region’s commercial activities.

## Origin and Development of Oc Eo Culture — Funan Kingdom

Based on excavation findings, stratigraphic analysis, typological comparison of archaeological artifacts, and the application of scientific dating methods, primarily radiocarbon dating, Vietnamese scholars have essentially delineated the general process of development of Oc Eo culture in southern Vietnam, which can be divided into four phases (Bui et al. 2018: 611-613):

- *Pre-Oc Eo phase* (3rd century BCE - 1st century CE): characterized by sites such as Go Cay Tung (phase 2), Go Me - Go Sanh [Gò Me - Gò Sành], K9, Giong Cu [Giông Cu], Xoa Ao [Xoa Áo], Giong Xoai, Go Tu Tram (phase 1).
- *Early Oc Eo phase* (1st-3rd century CE): represented by sites like Mop Van [Móp Vãn], Nop Le [Nóp Lê], Go Cay Thi [Gò Cây Thi] (phase 1), Go Oc Eo [Gò Óc Eo] (phase 1), Go Cay Da [Gò Cây Da], Go Tu Tram (phase 2).
- *Developed Oc Eo phase* (Typical Oc Eo, 4th-7th century CE): characterized by sites such as Da Noi (Kien Giang), Da Noi (An Giang), Nen Chua, Oc Eo - Ba The, Nhon Thanh, Go Thap, Kenh Ruot Ngua [Kênh Ruột Ngựa], and others.
- *Post-Oc Eo phase* (8th-10th century CE): primarily concentrated in the ancient estuarine regions, coastal sand mounds and dunes areas, and highland regions of southern Vietnam, such as, Go Thap An Loi [Gò Tháp An Lợi], Go Cay Tung, Go Minh Su (phase II), Ba Chua Xu, Luu Cu II, Chua Lo Gach



[Chùa Lò Gạch], Go Thanh, Vinh Hung, Ben Dinh, Binh Thanh, Chop Mat, Go Buong, Cay Gao, and others.

Among these, the origin and formation of Oc Eo Culture in the Mekong Delta have been a subject of significant interest for Vietnamese researchers, particularly during the phase of re-examining this ancient culture.

During the conference on “Oc Eo Culture and Ancient Cultures in the Mekong Delta” held in 1983, Ha Van Tan [Hà Văn Tấn] (1984: 225) analyzed the indigenous and exogenous factors and argued that Oc Eo culture represents the continuation of the internal cultural development that had existed in this area since early times, possibly stemming from the Metal Age. Sharing a similar perspective, Le Xuan Diem [Lê Xuân Diệm] (1984: 55) asserted that Oc Eo culture was established in the region of the Mekong Delta, and in reality, it owes a significant part of its formation to the creative efforts of the Dong Nai cultural inhabitants. Pham Duc Manh and Bui Chi Hoang (1984: 127-135), following important discoveries at Iron Age archaeological sites in the Dong Nai river basin, concluded that these findings indicate transitional phases, marking the end of the prehistoric society and the beginning of protohistoric life, characterized by the development of multifaceted cultural relationships and exchanges expanding in various directions, including Central and Northern Vietnam, the Mekong Delta, and other regions of Southeast Asia. Additionally, Vo Si Khai [Võ Sĩ Khải] (1985: 28-29, 31), in summarizing the achievements of the first 10 years of Oc Eo cultural research (1975-1985), identified the presence of an indigenous cultural foundation and imported elements within Oc Eo culture based on new discoveries at Oc Eo, Nen Chua, and Go Thap. Furthermore, these findings were placed in relation to archaeological sites in Can Gio [Cần Giò], Vam Co [Vàm Cỏ], and Dong Nai regions in southern

Vietnam, as well as Sa Huynh [Sa Huỳnh] culture in central Vietnam, and extending further into the Southeast Asian region.

Based on the foundational cultural elements of Oc Eo culture identified in the late Bronze Age - early Iron Age archaeological sites in the south, Ha Van Tan (1996: 9) argued that this cultural foundation resulted from the development of multi-lineage cultures, possibly formed from various pre-Oc Eo cultures that developed independently yet intermingled with each other. These lineages may include the Giong Ca Vo - Giong Phet - Giong Lon [Giồng Cá Vồ - Giồng Phệt - Giồng Lớn], the Go Cao Su - Go O Chua [Gò Cao Su - Gò Ô Chùa], and the Go Cay Tung. The hypothesis of this multi-lineage development is supported and supplemented by some archaeologists' opinions. For example, Nguyen Thi Hau [Nguyễn Thị Hậu] (1997: 132) suggested that the Giong Ca Vo - Giong Phet line advanced towards Oc Eo culture and the Funan kingdom. Tong Trung Tin [Tống Trung Tín] (2008: 211-228) synthesized four developmental paths from pre-Oc Eo to Oc Eo culture, including: (1) Pre-Oc Eo through the Go Cay Tung site, (2) Pre-Oc Eo through the Go Cao Su site, (3) Pre-Oc Eo through the Giong Ca Vo - Giong Phet - Giong Am sites, and (4) Pre-Oc Eo through the Giong Noi [Giồng Nổi] site. Dang Van Thang (2009: 309-314) illustrated three developmental paths: (1) Pre-Oc Eo through the An Son - Go Cao Su - Go O Chua and Giong Noi sites, (2) Pre-Oc Eo through the Go Cay Tung site, and (3) Pre-Oc Eo through the Bao Dong - Giong Ca Vo - Giong Phet [Bao Đổng - Giồng Cá Vồ - Giồng Phệt] and Giong Lon sites. Meanwhile, Vu Quoc Hien [Vũ Quốc Hiền] and Truong Dac Chien [Trương Đắc Chiến] (2010: 57) asserted that from Can Gio [Cần Giò] to Long Son [Long Sơn], from Giong Ca Vo - Giong Phet to Giong Lon, there exists a distinct form, a developmental path from the early Iron Age to Oc Eo culture.

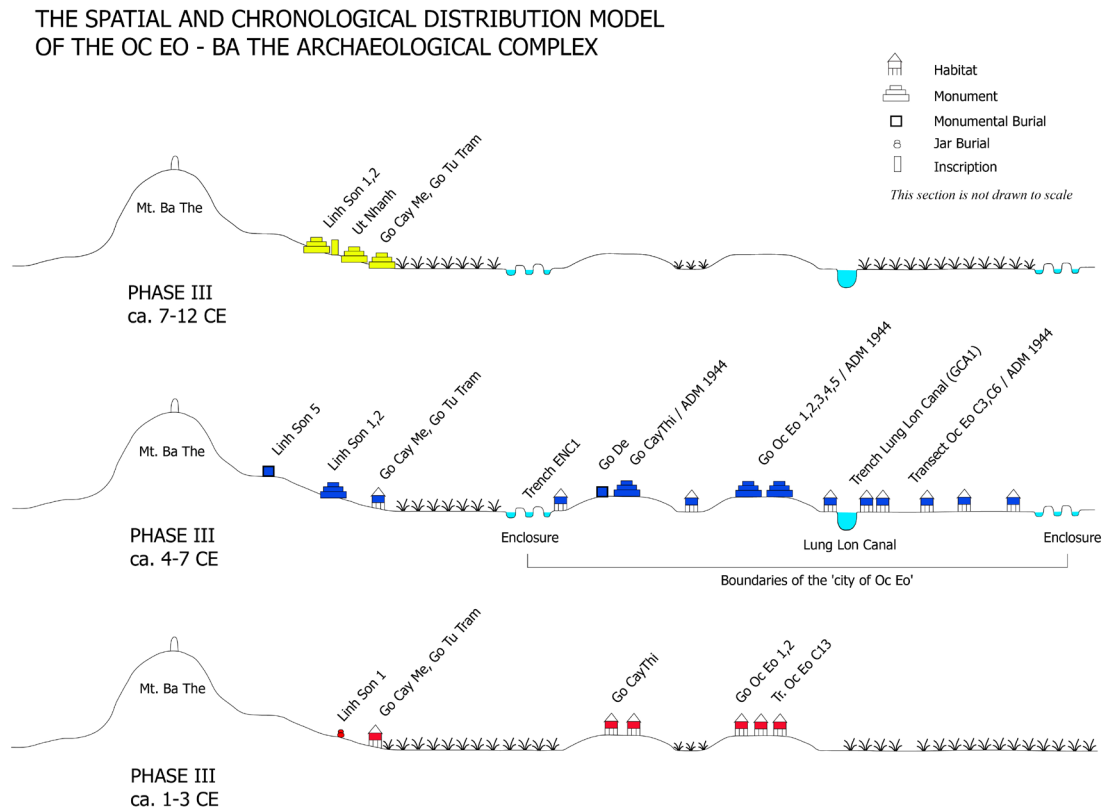
Another approach proposed by archaeologists is to consider Oc Eo culture within the broader context of cultural strata and reflect on the relationship between the prehistoric and protohistoric cultural traditions in the south Vietnam. During the late Bronze Age and early Iron Age periods, the development of metallurgical techniques influenced the economic and cultural structure, contributing to the emergence of Oc Eo culture. Simultaneously, the rapid formation and expansion of the natural landscape in the Mekong Delta region since the late 1st century BCE also had a significant impact on the birth of Oc Eo (Nguyen 2019: 21-22).

Dao Linh Con [Đào Linh Côn] (2002: 109-110) conducted analyses and synthesis of residential sites within the Oc Eo - Ba The archaeological complex, identifying a continuous process of formation and development spanning multiple stages of this area, from pre-Oc Eo to Oc Eo. In this process, the indigenous traditional elements, known as the Dong Nai culture, served as the foundation for the formation of Oc Eo culture, which was further influenced by cultural elements imported during the late Bronze Age and early Iron Age phases in southern Vietnam. Bui Phat Diem [Bùi Phát Diệm] (2002: 119, 145) analyzed the close relationship and shared cultural traditions between the sites of pre-Oc Eo and early Oc Eo stages in the spatial context between the southeastern and southwestern regions, distributed from the Vam Co river basin to the Dong Thap Muoi region. According to Vo Si Khai (2008: 360-362), the pre-Oc Eo period in the southern region corresponded to the Metal Age, serving as a dynamic and driving force for the development and accumulation of culture from the Bronze Age to the early Iron Age and playing a significant role in the formation of Oc Eo culture. The agricultural economy based on wet rice cultivation, the development of maritime trade, and inter-regional commercial exchange played crucial roles

in connecting communities and contributing to the establishment of Oc Eo culture from the beginning of the Common Era. Pham Duc Manh (2008: 106) defines the concept of pre-Oc Eo as encompassing the entire cultural complex that developed from prehistoric to protohistoric times, with processes of emergence, development, interaction, and convergence of cultures, serving as the foundation for the formation of a new social structure and representing the root of Oc Eo culture that emerged in the early Common Era.

Currently, the majority of Vietnamese scholars agree on two continuous developmental stages of Oc Eo culture, including: (1) *the early Oc Eo stage*, approximately 1st-3rd century CE, and (2) *the typical Oc Eo stage*, around the 4th-7th century CE. These periods witnessed the civilization of Oc Eo taking shape and experiencing significant development, laying the groundwork for the emergence and flourishing of the Funan kingdom as one of the most prosperous cultural and civilized centers in Southeast Asia. From the 8th century to approximately the 10th century CE and beyond, Oc Eo culture entered a period of decline in the lowland plains (Fig. 16). During this stage, cultural distribution shifted to higher regions such as coastal mounds and dunes in the southwest, the ancient alluvial plain surrounding the Long Xuyen Quadrangle, the Vam Co and Dong Nai river basins (Bui et al. 2018: 43-44).

The two developmental stages of the archaeological culture of Oc Eo exhibit similarities in the transition of the Funan. Phan Huy Le [Phan Huy Lê] suggests that Funan also had two stages: the Funan kingdom and the Funan empire (Vu and Nguyen 2017: 17). In fact, the geological evolution as well as the archaeological evidence also indicate these differences. Pierre-Yves Maguin (2009: 103-118) divided Funan archaeology into two stages: the initial stage of "Control of flood plains and urban de-



**Fig. 16.** The development phases of Oc Eo - Ba The archaeological complex (after Manguin 2002: Table 3).

velopment” and the later stage of “Indianization”. The period of constructing irrigation systems and limited transportation, along with the emergence of port cities and early trade relations with the pre-3rd century CE world in the Long Xuyen Quadrilateral region, can be understood as the era of the Funan kingdom. The Indianization process from the 4th to 5th century CE marks the beginning of the Funan empire<sup>10</sup>.

The robust development of the port-city contributed to Funan’s increasing prominence. This kingdom became an important hub of culture and commerce, connecting three nascent Southeast Asian kingdoms. The first region extended from Lower Myanmar (Chin-lin) through Funan, where the Mon-Khmer and Pyu civilizations were in their developmental stage. The second region stretched northwards along the Vietnamese coast from Fu-

nan, encompassing the territory of the Champa civilization. Additionally, Funan had relations with a third region, expanding from Funan into the cultural sphere of Java Sea, inhabited by Malay ethnic groups (Hall 1985: 66). The Funan empire dominated the entire Gulf of Thailand region and can be considered as controlling the vital trade route from Indochina to India via the Kra Isthmus.

After a period of flourishing development, the Funan Empire began to decline in the late 6th century CE (Vu and Nguyen 2017: 274). The Xin Tang Shu [新唐書] provides more specific information, stating that during the reign of Zhen Guan of the Tang Dynasty (627-649), “The king of Funan resided in the city of T’o-mou [*Đặc Mục*], but that city was unexpectedly conquered by the kingdom of Chenla, forcing the king of Funan to flee south to the city of Na-fu-na” (Pelliot 1903: 299). The de-

cline of Funan was not solely attributed to political factors, the rise of powerful neighboring nations, and the loss of its role in international trade networks, but also linked to the influence of natural conditions and the ecological environment. The slow rise in sea levels led to the intrusion of salt-water and had a negative impact on the economy of the marshy region, creating favorable conditions for the development of higher, drier areas (Hall 1985: 78-83; Vu and Nguyen 2017: 277-278). In this context, Chenla, originally a vassal state, triumphed over Funan. This explains why, for nearly 10 centuries afterward, the land of southern Vietnam became a desolate region, undeveloped and neglected by the Angkor authorities, although nominally, Angkor had claimed control over this land since the 7th century CE (Vu and Nguyen 2017: 278).

### The Oc Eo Cultural Inhabitants

A key research issue of interest in the study of Oc Eo culture is who left the culture. The initial understanding of the ethnic characteristics and ancient inhabitants of Oc Eo is mentioned in ancient Chinese texts, such as, “the men of Funan are ugly and dark, with curly hair” (Pelliot 1903: 254), “the people of the Whitehead country, located west of Funan [*which is a vassal state of Funan*]. The Whitehead people have white faces and smooth, shiny skin like wax” (Pelliot 1903: 275), and “the people of Funan are very tall” (Pelliot 1903: 280).

Discoveries of human skeletons within the cultural layers of archaeological sites related to Oc Eo are scarce in general. Malleret (1962b: 194-197), while analyzing cranial indices found at Lo Mo, Oc Eo, and Canh Den, concluded that the indigenous people of Oc Eo may be ethnically related to present-day ethnic groups in the Central Highlands, as they were deeply inland and not mixed with other

populations. Le Trung Kha [Lê Trung Khá] (1984: 247; 1986: 232) analyzed the skulls discovered at Canh Den and Go Thap sites and classified them as part of the Indonesian sub-group, which includes present-day people such as the Thượng in the southern Truong Son mountain range, the Kha people in the Boloven Plateau (Laos), the Po Nong and Pêa people in Cambodia, and the Dayak people in Kalimantan. When analyzing the human remains found at the Rach Rung [Rạch Rừng] and An Son [An Sơn] prehistoric sites, Nguyen Quang Quyên [Nguyễn Quang Quyên] (1990: 118) concluded that the bone samples from Moc Hoa [Mộc Hóa] belong to the same type of ancient population, referred to as “Prehistoric people” [người thượng cổ], similar to Melanesians. He also suggested that the skulls from An Son are likely of the same type, indicating that the inhabitants of these areas over 2,000 years ago in the southern region and even the Dong Thap Muoi area were predominantly of the ‘Prehistoric people’ type. However, through the analysis of ancient skulls from Loc Giang [Lộc Giang], Go O Chua, Go Me [Gò Me], Giông Ca Vò, and Nhon Thanh sites, Nguyen Lan Cuong [Nguyễn Lan Cường] (2008: 184-187) argued that they have closer affinities with Mongoloid or Dong Son [Đông Sơn] (Southeast Asian group) populations and are distinct from Australian, Melanesian, or Khmer skulls.

Nguyen Quoc Manh [Nguyễn Quốc Mạnh] (2019: 141-143), through the analysis and comparison of material evidence, revealed the similarities and traditional relationships between the Oc Eo culture and neighboring prehistoric cultures such as those in the southeastern region, central Highlands, coastal areas of central Vietnam, and Southeast Asian archipelagos. Additionally, there is evidence of cultural connections and the development of communities among these cultures through maritime trade activities, especially during the late

Bronze Age and early Iron Age. Situated at the intersection of the east and the west, the Mekong Delta region, with its favorable natural conditions, has created a diverse cultural environment characterized by cultural diversity and connections between mainland and the island Southeast Asia regions.

### Oc Eo in Its Cultural Relations with the Region and the World

Economic trade during the Oc Eo cultural period developed strongly and participated in the East-West trading network from the early centuries of Common Era. This is evidenced by the discovery of Oc Eo cultural coins at numerous archaeological sites in present-day Thailand, Myanmar, and the Malay Peninsula. Additionally, through contact with Indian, Arab, and Roman traders, Oc Eo established trade activities with India and the Mediterranean (Vo 2008). The maritime trade route was established from the river ports along the Ganges, continued along the coast of the Bay of Bengal, passed through Malaysia, crossed the Kra Isthmus, looped through the Gulf of Thailand, and ultimately reached Funan in the Mekong Delta (Hall 1985: 67, 69; Bui et al. 2018: 626).

The city of Oc Eo, along with the Nen Chua

foreport, played the role of an ancient port-city complex of Funan kingdom situated on the East-West trade route, which also clearly demonstrates extensive trading relations through the presence of imported elements, as evidenced by archaeological discoveries. These include Roman gold coins minted during the reign of Emperor Antonius Pius (138-161 CE, Fig. 17: 1) and Marcus Aurelius (161-180 CE, Fig. 17: 2), Roman-style bronze keys (2nd-3rd century CE, Fig. 17: 3), mosaic eye glass beads in Roman style (Fig. 17: 4), Persian bronze lamps, beaded glass necklaces originating from West Asia. In addition, archeology also recorded the presence of leaf-shaped paddle oars in the style of India and the maritime residents of Southeast Asia (Fig. 17: 5, 3rd-4th century CE), bronze mirrors (Fig. 17: 6) and Wuzhu coins (Fig. 17: 7) from the Eastern Han Dynasty (1st-3rd century CE), as well as various artifacts with inscriptions in Chinese, Brahmi/Sankrit, and a wide variety of imported pottery, including Roman pottery (2nd century CE), Chinese pottery (2nd-8th century CE, Fig. 17: 8-10), Indian pottery (1st-6th century CE, Fig. 17: 11), and Islamic pottery (8th century CE, Fig. 17: 12) (Bui et al. 2022: 288-289, 301-305).

The civilization of India can be said to have the most important and powerful influence not only



**Fig. 17.** Some imported artifacts were found at the Oc Eo - Ba The, and Nen Chua archaeological sites (after Bui et al. 2018: 910 [1, 2]; Bui et al. 2022: 125, 161, 237, 291 [4, 6, 9, 10, 13]).

on the Oc Eo culture but also on the contemporary cultures of the Southeast Asian region in general, through processes of trade and cultural dissemination. This influence is evident in the social organization, religious architecture, objects, and technologies. The Hindu and Buddhist architectural elements in Oc Eo adhere to common construction standards derived from Indian architectural models, while still displaying distinct local characteristics. Additionally, high-quality pottery types imported from India, including fine clay material, and polished black pottery, have been found dating back to the earliest phase of Oc Eo culture (the earliest cultural layer of Lung Lon, 1st-3rd century CE). Another type of pottery, adorned with black patterns on a red surface, was discovered in residential sites dating to around the post-3rd century CE (Bui et al. 2022: 295).

The cultural exchange between the residents of Oc Eo and ancient China, as evidenced by recent archaeological discoveries, is believed to have existed from an early period, possibly in the 2nd-3rd century CE. In the Oc Eo plain and Nen Chua ar-

chaeological site, Wuzhu coins and Chinese mirrors from the Eastern Han Dynasty, and Han-style glazed pottery with floral patterns, as well as spouted teapots in the shape of a rooster's head from the Six Dynasties period (4th-6th century CE), have been found. The presence of ancient Chinese culture is also noted in the later period of Oc Eo culture, with the identification of certain ceramic types that, according to Bui Minh Tri's analysis (2020: 43-62), are characteristic products of the Ding kiln, Heng kiln (Hebei), and Dehua kiln (Fujian) during the Northern Song Dynasty (10th-12th century CE).

At several archaeological sites in Thailand, such as Khao Sam Kaeo, Phu Kao Thong, and Khuan Luk Pat, the presence of various types of jewelry made from gemstones such as carnelian and agate, glass, and gold has been documented. These artifacts exhibit a high degree of similarity to those found in the Oc Eo culture, which did not have access to the raw materials required for their production. Researchers suggest that these jewelry items were likely popular imported goods among the residents of Oc Eo during the early Common

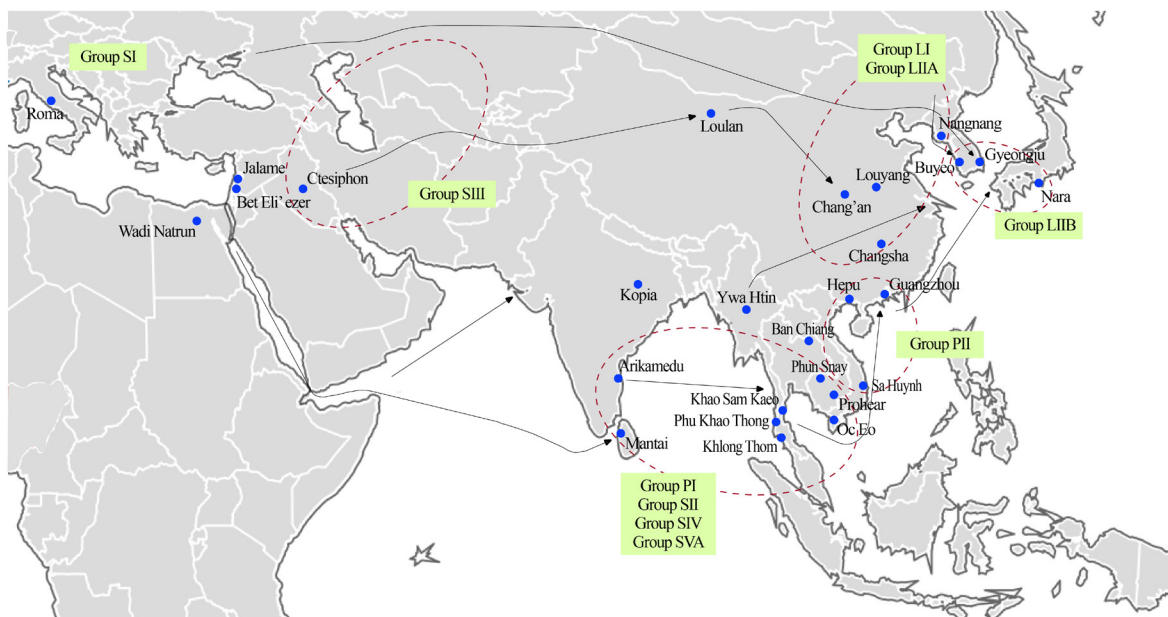


Fig. 18. Provenance and trade routes of glass beads, including Oc Eo (after Oga and Tamura 2013: 36).

Era. Additionally, Go Oc Eo is known as a center for the production of Indo-Pacific glass beads, with the estimated quantity unearthed exceeding the local demand. Analysis using XRF (X-ray Fluorescence) has revealed similarities in the composition of raw materials used in the production of Indo-Pacific glass beads between Oc Eo, archaeological sites in Southeast Asia, and even further into the South Asian region (Fig. 18). Hence, it is possible that these locations shared a common source of glass material (Nguyen et al. 2020; Oga and Tamura 2013).

The relationship between the residents of Oc Eo and the island-dwelling communities of Southeast Asia in the past research remains somewhat faint. However, during excavations at the Oc Eo - Ba The archaeological site between 2017 and 2020, archaeologists discovered three objects of leaf-shaped oar blades in the Lung Lon cultural layer. Through research and comparison, it was observed that these oar blades bear similarities to those used by ancient people in India and island-dwelling communities in Papua New Guinea, a country that belongs to the Commonwealth, and surrounding areas. Additionally, through the application of starch analysis (Torrence and Barton 2006) on pesani, pestles, grinding stones, and mortars, researchers identified the presence of common spices such as ginger, turmeric, and taro. Notably, starch from benzoin was also detected (Nguyen 2020). Benzoin has been known since ancient times as an important and valuable commodity, widely used in the production of perfumes, flavorings, pharmaceuticals, and in religious ceremonies. Benzoin primarily originates from the islands of Sumatra and Java in Indonesia.

## CONCLUSION

The Oc Eo culture, from scattered references

in ancient literature to archaeological discoveries from the late 19th century to the present, has been studied and approached by generations of scholars both domestically and internationally, from various aspects. These include dating, the process of formation, development and decline, spatial distribution, fundamental characteristics of artifacts and sites, the influence and cultural relations with contemporary ancient civilizations in the region and beyond, as well as the connection between the Oc Eo culture and the ancient kingdom of Funan. The results of these researches have significantly contributed to recognizing the historical, cultural, and social value, as well as the role of this ancient culture in the development process of the history of southern Vietnam, particularly in Southeast Asia during the first millennium CE.

However, there are still many scientific issues related to the Oc Eo culture that require further research. Determining the indigenous or origins factors, and pathways of the formation of this culture has not yet reached a consensus among the academic community. Additionally, the methods and pathways through which exogenous influences, especially from Indian civilization, were introduced, adopted, and assimilated by the local population, and their impact on the formation and development of Oc Eo, are still largely based on hypotheses derived from the study of imported artifacts and scant information mentioned in ancient literature and records. The issue of the cultural agents of Oc Eo still requires more evidence through analytical and comparative approaches in anthropology and ancient languages, which can be explored through future archaeological excavations.

In addition, the geographical location and role of Oc Eo also need further examination to determine whether it was an urban settlement, a port-city, an international trading center with commercial activities between local residents and foreign

merchants, or the capital Na-fu-na mentioned in certain periods of the Funan kingdom in some ancient texts and recent studies (Dang et al. 2020), particularly in relation to the Angkor Borei archaeological site (Cambodia). Furthermore, elements related to the urban properties of Oc Eo, such as its scale, urban structure, population, settlement patterns, food supply sources, adaptability to annual flooding phenomena, and its relationship with the religious center of the Ba The mountain region, and other cultural centers of Oc Eo in the Mekong Delta, and the contemporary cultural complexes in the region, also require further research to clarify the role and significance of this particularly important archaeological site.

Previously, Vietnamese archaeologists tended to focus only on the study of religious architectural monuments and related artifacts in Oc Eo culture. In the early 21st century, the study of ancient settlements has begun to receive research interest and has made certain achievements, notably the successful establishment of a basic Oc Eo pottery chronology according to the developmental progression from early to late stages. However, other aspects have not received sufficient attention and research due to various objective reasons, such as the preservation conditions of ancient environments, the process of occupation and habitation, material and spiritual life of the community residents, the social structure of Oc Eo, dietary patterns and nutrition, and the adaptation of Oc Eo residents to different natural conditions, such as the lowland region of southwestern Vietnam or the highland region of southeastern Vietnam.

One issue that has sparked considerable debate in cultural research on Oc Eo and the Funan in southern Vietnam over the past decade is the identification of religious architectural structures or the determination of the ruling deity associated with these discovered temple ruins. Unlike the Cham-

pa civilization in Central Vietnam, where many well-preserved religious structures exist, most of the known religious architectures of the Oc Eo culture is in the form of ruins or partially preserved foundations. There are very few or virtually absent inscriptions providing information about the dating or the kings and nobles who constructed and worshiped a particular deity. Instead, the evidence mainly consists of religious artifacts found *in-situ* or artifacts that have been displaced due to frequent excavation activities conducted in the past. The identification of specific religious functions or the specific ruling deity of an architectural structure, therefore, needs to be approached with caution. It should not be solely based on a statue found or some religious artifacts associated with a Hindu or Buddhist deity that commonly encountered in consecration deposit within the central architecture. Comparative studies and archaeological evidence have revealed that architectural structures in ancient cultures often existed not only for a short period but could undergo continuous renovation, expansion in scale, structural changes, and even modifications in religious functions. Another issue recently raised by some Vietnamese archaeologists is the subjective naming of major settlement points of Oc Eo cultural residents, such as religious centers, cultural centers, capitals, and even the “micro-state” of the Funan kingdom, without defining the corresponding criteria and constituent elements in relation to contemporary ancient cultures within the region and beyond.

The number of archaeological monuments and artifacts unearthed and collected from Oc Eo culture over the past decades is extremely diverse and abundant. Although archaeologists have made significant efforts in studying and analyzing them, the overall research primarily remains at a descriptive and statistical level. This is due to a lack of experts in iconography, comparative research, and the ap-



plication of advanced methods to analyze materials and techniques within a broader context. Initial results have been achieved, but there is still ample fertile ground and potential for researchers to contribute significantly in deciphering their content, meaning, cultural relationships, and elucidating the cultural-artistic interactions with traders from the region and abroad at the ancient Oc Eo cultural sites. Through this, a clearer and comprehensive understanding of Oc Eo culture will be established.

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### NOTES

1) The oldest book in China that records information about the southern region and the kingdom of Funan is the *Diwu Zhi* [地物志] written by Yang Fu during

the Eastern Han Dynasty (25-220). There are also other ancient texts such as *Funan Zhuan* [扶南传], *Wu Shu* [吴书], *Jin Shu* [晋书], *Qi Shu* [齐书], *Liang Shu* [梁书], *Tang Shu* [唐书], and *Song Shi* [宋史], but the information about Funan is often scattered and only briefly mentioned.

- 2) In terms of natural geography, southern Vietnam is commonly divided into two regions. *The southwestern region* [miền Tây Nam Bộ] (also known as the Mekong Delta), characterized by low-lying newly formed alluvial plains. It features flat terrain, intricate networks of branches from the Mekong river, and a dense system of canals, alongside coastal mounds and dunes. *The southeastern region* [miền Đông Nam Bộ] is located in higher areas with more diverse topography, combining mountains, ancient alluvial plains, and coastal wetlands.
- 3) “Oc Eo” is a term used in Vietnamese, phonetically derived from the Khmer language “Ur Kev”, pronounced as “O Kéo” in a common phonetic way among residents of the Mekong Delta. However, it is not an original Khmer word but a Thai word meaning “Jade River” [O = depression/river; Kéo = jade] (Malleret 1962: 427).
- 4) Now the Center for Archaeology, Southern Institute of Social Sciences, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences.
- 5) The achievements of the archaeological research on the Oc Eo culture over 20 years after the reunification of the country were summarized in the publication *Oc Eo Culture: New Discoveries* in 1995 by Le Xuan Diem, Dao Linh Con, and Vo Si Khai.
- 6) The project has the participation of leading Vietnamese archaeologists from the Southern Institute of Social Sciences, the Institute of Archaeology, and the Institute of Imperial Citadel Studies, as well as the collaborative involvement of experts from Japan and Australia. The research outcomes of the project were published in the work titled *Oc Eo Culture: New Archaeological Discoveries at the Oc Eo - Ba The and*

*Nen Chua 2017-2020*, released in 2022, authored by Bui Minh Tri, Nguyen Gia Doi, and Nguyen Khanh Trung Kien.

- 7) Significant results from the project have contributed to the completion of the nomination dossier for the Oc Eo - Ba The archaeological complex as a proposed UNESCO World Cultural Heritage (Phase 1). Currently, the project is in the process of preparing the dossier for the second phase, aiming to propose the recognition of the Oc Eo - Ba The complex as a World Cultural Heritage by UNESCO.
- 8) However, it is necessary to distinguish between two concepts: the Oc Eo culture (archaeological) and the Funan kingdom (national). In terms of time, based on material evidence, the Oc Eo culture has an earlier and longer dating than Funan. Currently, archaeologists unanimously determine the dating of the Oc Eo culture from the 1st to the 9th, 10th century CE. On the other hand, based on historical records and archaeology, history recognizes the existence of the Funan Kingdom and Empire from the 2nd to the early 7th century CE. In terms of geography, the boundaries of Funan do not always coincide with the distribution of the Oc Eo culture (Phan 2011: 179, 213).
- 9) “Transbassac” is a French term used by the French to refer to the southwestern region of Vietnam, where the Mekong River flows through. This term originated from the combination of “trans”, meaning “across” or “beyond”, and “Bassac”, another name for the Hậu River, one of the main branches of the Mekong River in this area.
- 10) The concept of “imperial” used here is relative, derived from records of Pham Man (Fan Shi Man) using large ships to establish vassal relationships with some remote port states. However, there is insufficient evidence to compare it with contemporary empires such as the Roman or Chinese empires (Vu and Nguyen 2017: 179).

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