



ИСТОРИЯ, РЕЛИГИЯ И КУЛЬТУРА

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MEMORY OF OC EO ANCIENT CITY AND FUNAN KINGDOM IN LIGHT OF RECENT ARCHAEOLOGICAL DISCOVERIES

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Abstract. Oc Eo is a well-known archaeological culture in southern Vietnam, associated with the history of the Kingdom of Funan, which is a component of Vietnam's national history. In 2015, the Vietnamese government tasked the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences with coordinating the implementation of the "Research on the archaeological sites of Oc Eo – Ba The, Nen Chua (Oc Eo Culture in Southern Region)" project. This is the most extensive scientific project that has ever been conducted in Vietnam regarding the investigation of Oc Eo culture. Three leading units in the field of archaeology participated in this project: the Institute of Imperial Citadel Studies, the Institute of Archaeology, and the Institute of Social Sciences in the Southern region. The primary objective of the Project is to excavate and study the remains of the Oc Eo culture at the sites in Oc Eo – Ba The (Thoai Son district, An Giang province) and the Nen Chua (Hon Dat district, Kien Giang province) in order to collect data and clarify the history of the formation and development of the Oc Eo culture, as well as to investigate the position, function, and significance of the ancient city of Oc Eo.

After nearly four years of the project, many significant new results and vivid evidence of the formation and brilliant development of the Oc Eo culture from the first century CE to the eighth century CE have been obtained. This article will publish for the first time the results of new research on the ancient city of Ok Eo and the kingdom of Funan, based on the 2017-2020 archaeological excavations and surveys at the Oc Eo - Ba The and Nen Chua sites.

Keywords: Oc Eo archaeological culture, Oc Eo ancient city, kingdom of Funan, Southern Region/Mekong delta, Vietnam

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ДРЕВНИЙ ГОРОД ОКЕО И ГОСУДАРСТВО ФУНАНЬ В СВЕТЕ ПОСЛЕДНИХ АРХЕОЛОГИЧЕСКИХ ОТКРЫТИЙ

Буй Минь Чи²

Аннотация. Окео – известная археологическая культура на юге Вьетнама, связанная с государством Фуанан, которое является частью национальной истории Вьетнама. В 2015 г. правительство Вьетнама поручило Вьетнамской академии общественных наук координировать реализацию проекта «Исследование археологических памятников Окео – Батхе, Нентюа (культура Окео в южном регионе)». Это самый масштабный вьетнамский научный проект по изучению культуры Окео. В нём участвовали три ведущих научных учреждения в области археологии: Институт изучения императорской цитадели, Институт археологии и Институт общественных наук Южного региона. Основная цель проекта заключается в раскопках и изучении культуры Окео на стоянках Окео – Батхе (уезд Тхоайшон, провинция Анзянг) и Нентюа (уезд Хондат, провинция Киензянг) с целью сбора данных и уточнения истории её формирования и развития, а также исследования положения, функции и значения древнего города Окео.

В течение почти четырех лет осуществления проекта было получено много важных новых результатов и ярких свидетельств формирования и блестящего развития культуры Окео в I–VIII вв. н. э. В данной статье впервые опубликованы результаты новых исследований древнего города Окео и государства Фуанань, основанные на археологических раскопках и изысканиях 2017–2020 гг. на стоянках Окео – Батхе и Нентюа.

Ключевые слова: археологическая культура Окео, древний город Окео, государство Фуанань, Южный регион/дельта Меконга, Вьетнам

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Introduction

In the Mekong Delta, Oc Eo culture is found in the provinces of Tien Giang, Hau Giang, Kien Giang, An Giang, Dong Thap, Tra Vinh, Vinh Long, Tay Ninh, Dong Nai, and Soc Trang (southern Vietnam) (Fig.1). French scholars discovered physical traces of this culture at the end of the nineteenth century. Louis Mulleret then conducted the first archaeological excavations at the site of Oc Eo, at the foot of Ba The mountain, in Thoai Son district, An Giang province, in 1944 [Malleret 1959]. This is a significant milestone in the history of discovery, and Malleret has since officially identified the name: Oc Eo culture.

Numerous renowned Oc Eo cultural artifacts have been discovered in An Giang and Kien Giang provinces, which are located in the expansive Oc Eo cultural space in the southern region. These are Oc Eo – Ba The and Nen Chua's sites. The Oc Eo – Ba The site is regarded as the most significant center of Oc Eo culture in the Mekong Delta, as well as the largest and most well-known urban center of the Funan kingdom.

Over the past several decades, excavations at Oc Eo – Ba The have unearthed numerous relics and artifacts that vividly illustrate the formation and evolution of the Oc Eo culture. Specifically, the

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largest historical archaeological excavation ever conducted on the Oc Eo culture was conducted at the Oc Eo – Ba The site (An Giang **province**) and Nen Chua site (Kien Giang province) in 2017-2020, conducted by the Institute of Imperial Citadel Studies, the Institute of Archaeology and the Institute of Social Sciences in the Southern region, many new discoveries were made that helped shed light on the history of the Oc Eo culture, particularly the renowned Oc Eo ancient city, which still conceals many secrets underground.

In the excavation pits, numerous important monuments such as temple, water wells, brick-and-stone lakes, and numerous relics of residence, daily life, and handicraft production have been discovered. Specifically, the excavation has unearthed a vast variety and abundance of artifacts, the majority of which are ceramics and glass jewelry. These significant discoveries have contributed to a more convincing demonstration of the characteristics and properties of the "ancient city of Oc Eo" from more than 2,000 years ago. This city was founded on a network of interconnected canals that provided exceptional agricultural and commercial livelihoods, cultural exchanges, and developed maritime trade, connecting many regions of the globe at the time. In addition, a large-scale complex of religious and cult architecture was discovered, giving quite a vivid picture of the major religious center of the Funan Kingdom and the unique cultural life of the ancient city of Oc Eo.

The history of the formation and development of Oc Eo culture, the ancient city of Oc Eo, and the kingdom of Funan continues to be clarified through relics and artifacts discovered as a result of significant archaeological discoveries made between 2017 and 2020. This article will publish new research results from the Oc Eo Cultural Research Project for the first time, which aims to present the most recent archaeological research and excavation results from 2017 to 2020 at the Oc Eo – Ba The and Nen Chua sites.

The space of Oc Eo ancient city

Oc Eo cultural heritage is increasingly being found in most provinces of the southern Delta 78 years after Mulleret's discovery. From this point on, the historical and cultural values of this illustrious culture and civilization are gradually clarified and thoroughly identified. Through these studies, Vietnamese archaeologists have unmistakably established that the ancient city of Oc Eo and the heart of the kingdom of Funan are located on the coastal plains of modern An Giang and Kien Giang provinces, extending from the Ba The Mountain area and vast fields in the southwest to the Gulf of Thailand, where Oc Eo - Ba The and Nen Chua are places of preservation and reflection of the remaining historical values of this significant urban space.

Oc Eo – Ba The area

The Oc Eo – Ba The relic area consists of two distinct regions, Oc Eo field and Ba The mountain, which cover a combined area of approximately 160 hectares. From 2017 to 2020, the Institute of Archaeology and the Institute of Social Sciences in Southern Region conducted extensive archaeological excavations of this site, covering an area of over 16,000m² at 8 locations: Go Giong Cat, Go Giong Trom, Go Oc Eo, Lung Lon (Oc Eo field); Go Sau Thuan, Go Ut Tranh, Linh Son Pagoda, Linh Son Bac (Ba The Mountain) (Fig. 2).



Fig.1. Map of Oc Eo cultural space in Vietnam's Southern provinces. *Source:* Institute of Imperial Citadel Studies

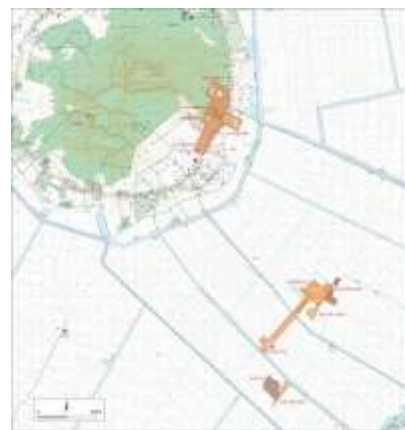


Fig.2. Panoramic photo and map of the Oc Eo – Ba The site.
Photo: Nguyễn Khánh Trung Kiên

Ba The archaeological sites

The results of re-investigations and new excavations at four sites – Linh Son pagoda, Linh Son Bac, Go Sau Thuan, and Go Ut Tranh – in a total excavation area of 10,185 m² revealed a significant religious structure at the foot of Ba The mountain. This structure included a network of temples, gates, walls, ceremony paths, sacred water wells, and other structures to support religious ritual activities, and it was built between the 1st and the 12th centuries. The areas of Linh Son and Go Sau Thuan are regarded as the center of this significant religious complex.

Ba The mountain's eastern slope is home to the Linh Son Pagoda. The pagoda contains a statue of Vishnu, two stone stelae and many valuable Oc Eo artifacts. In the south of this pagoda, archaeologists found the remains of the foundation of the wall and brick lake, the earliest of which dates back to the I-IV centuries, and the latest to the VIII-XII centuries.

In front of Linh Son Pagoda is the relic of Go Sau Thuan. This is a very large-scale architectural construction. A complex of gateway architecture was found here, combined with a ceremonial walkway of solid bricks that stretched more than 200 meters directly into the central temple (presumed to be at the current location of Linh Son Pagoda). This discovery demonstrates that Linh Son was a large and important temple of Ba The religious center (Fig. 3).

About 300 meters south of Linh Son Pagoda is the Go Ut Tranh site. This monument contains a complex of three Hindu temples with a square plan, surrounded by walls, and with a block stone foundation. This is a temple architecture complex representing Hinduism's three supreme gods (the Trinity) including Brahma (the Creator), Vishnu (the Protector) and Shiva (the Destroyer). This architectural work was constructed between the 6th and 7th centuries, at the same time as the previously mentioned Go Sau Thuan gate architecture. This temple area was reconstructed between the 8th and

9th centuries with a system of walls and several corridors made of bricks, which were connected to the main stone structure of the previous period. (Fig. 4).

In addition to these discoveries, other unique artifacts were discovered in Linh Son Bac. One of them is a stone stele engraved with ancient Sanskrit and Khmer letters (Fig. 5), specifically a stone tablet depicting a meditating Buddha. In 2021, the Vietnamese government designated this precious stone a National Treasure (Fig. 6).



Fig. 3. Vestiges of the gate and ceremonial path, Go Sau Thuan site. *Photo:* Nguyễn Khánh Trung Kiên



Fig. 4. Remnants of the Hindu temple in the south of Go Ut Tranh. *Photo:* Đặng Ngọc Kính



Fig. 5. Stone stele engraved with ancient Sanskrit and Khmer letters, first half of the 8th century, Linh Son Bac site. *Source:* Institute of Archaeology



Fig. 6. Stone carved image of the Buddha, Linh Son Bac site. National Treasure, 2021. *Source:* Oc Eo - Ba The Relic Management

Archaeological findings in the sites of Go Ut Tranh, Linh Son, and Go Sau Thuan indicate that Ba The was a major religious center intended to serve the activities of Oc Eo city's settlers in the

6th and 7th centuries. Statues of Hindu and Buddhist gods have been discovered in this region, reflecting the harmonious coexistence of Hinduism and Buddhism.

Oc Eo archaeological sites

Ba The Mountain is surrounded by a vast field of Oc Eo (Fig. 2). On a total area of 5,816 square meters, archaeologists have unearthed four sites: Go Oc Eo, Go Giong Trom, Go Giong Cat, and Lung Lon. Important and valuable discoveries at Go Giong Cat include the remains of temple architecture, traces of dwellings on stilts, and wooden structures with stakes driven in. This discovery suggests the type of dwelling and spatial organization of the ancient city of Oc Eo, in which the house on stilts was the predominant form of housing (Fig.7).

The brick wells, which include the Round Well and the Square Well, are the second most significant discovery at this site. These two wells are the most characteristic Oc Eo wells, dating from the 5th to 7th centuries. The functioning of the wells may have been related to the religious activities of the temples in the ancient city of Oc Eo (Fig. 8–9).



Fig. 7a,b. Vestige of the wooden stakes from an ancient stilt house, Go Giong Cat site, 1st-4th centuries. *Photo:* Nguyễn Hoàng Bách Linh



Fig. 8-9. Round and square wells built with bricks, Go Giong Cat site, 5th-7th centuries. *Photo:* Nguyễn Hoàng Bách Linh

At the Go Giong Cat site, numerous types of significant relics have been discovered, such as a Chinese bronze mirror from the Han Dynasty, 1st-2nd centuries (Fig. 10), and a Nandin bull-embossed gold ring from the 5th century. In 2021, the Vietnamese government designated this ring a National Treasure due to its rarity (Fig. 11).

Lung Lon site is the recent and most significant discovery at Oc Eo. Many sections of this ancient canal were filled in in the 80s of the last century. This ancient canal is located east of the Go

Giong Cat and Go Oc Eo sites, cuts through the center of the "ancient city" of Oc Eo and flows from northeast to southwest to the Nen Chua site (Fig.12, 14).

Numerous important relics and artifacts have been unearthed in 2019 excavations at Lung Lon. It is a relic of houses on stilts, built on rows of wooden columns driven deep into the ground or built by burying the columns. The architectural remains of these stilts can be found in the region surrounding the valley and close to the ruins of the temple (Fig.7, 12). Archaeologists have discovered wooden oars with broad, pointed leaves, similar to those used by ancient Indians or Southeast Asians, in the heart of Lung Lon (Fig.13). Specifically, 218,000 multicolored glass beads and a variety of precious metals, including a collection of hooks, needles, hammers, earrings, badges, rings, rattles, and wuzhu coin, were discovered here. Thanks to these discoveries, it became quite clear that Lung Lon was a vital waterway for the ancient city of Oc Eo (Figs. 16–21) [Nguyen Khanh Trung Kien 2020].



Fig.10. Chinese bronze mirror, Han dynasty, 1st-2nd centuries, Go Giong Cat site. *Source:* Institute of Archaeology



Fig. 11. Nandin gold ring, 5th century, Go Giong Cat site. *Source:* Institute of Archaeology



Fig. 12a, b. Vestiges of the ancient canal of Lung Lon and wooden stakes of stilt house found at the bottom of the canal. *Photo:* Nguyễn Khánh Trung Kiên



Fig. 13. The pointed leaf-shaped oar, Lung Lon site. *Photo:* Nguyễn Hoàng Bách Linh

The remnant of Lung Lon from the Oc Eo period has been studied and its appearance and dimensions clarified. This is a natural canal with a depth between 1.5 and 2.0 meters and a width between 30 and 35 meters. The depth and width of this channel indicate that its use by large vessels was severely limited. In fact, only the oars of small boats were discovered during excavations at this site. The discovery of the aforementioned wooden oars indicates that the main mode of transport on Lung Lon was small boats, which could transport goods from the ancient city of Oc Eo to the trading port where large ships were anchored. From the middle of the 2nd century to the start of the 7th century, this canal was bustling with commerce.

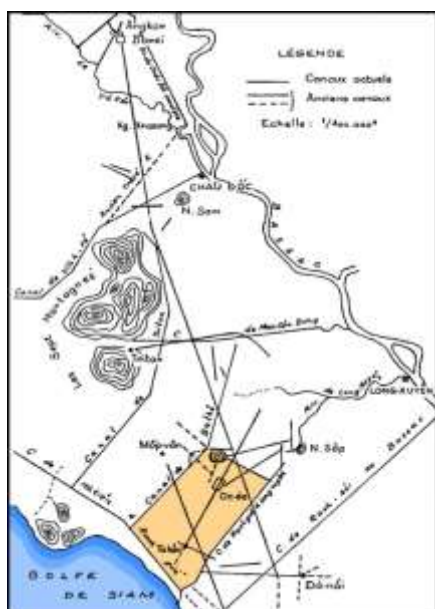


Fig. 14. The urban space of Oc Eo – Ba The and the ancient canal system of the Mekong delta. *Source:* Malleret, L. (1959) Planches. Pl.XII

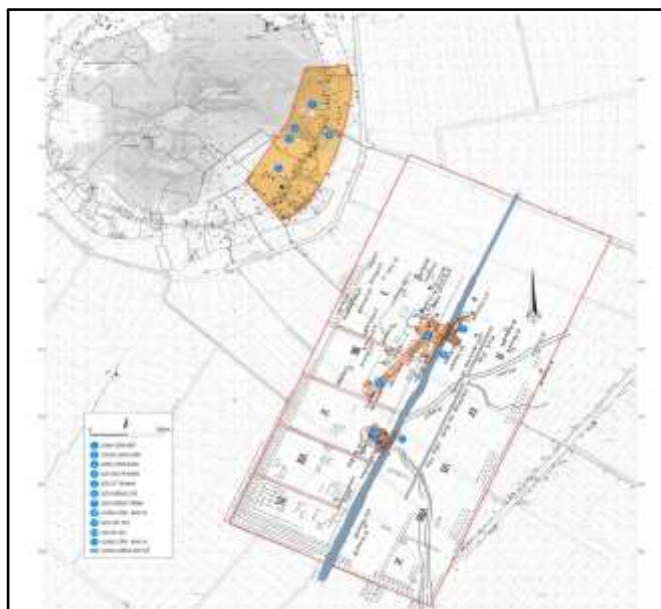


Fig. 15. Map of the Ba The religious center and ancient city of Oc Eo, incorporating the 1946 drawings by L. Malleret. *Source:* Institute of Imperial Citadel Studies

Evidence from Lung Long, Go Oc Eo, and Go Giong Cat suggests that there were large, high-tech, multidisciplinary workshops specializing in jewelry, glass, and gemstone processing in the ancient urban area of Oc Eo. Archaeological discoveries of Oc Eo's glass beads or gems in Thailand, Malaysia, China, and Korea indicate that Oc Eo's handicrafts were once popular in many countries. Using the examples of commercial goods found in the Mekong Delta and consumer countries, it is shown that international relations existed during the prosperous period of the Funan kingdom between the 2nd and 7th centuries [Nguyen Kim Dung, Nguyen Khanh Trung Kien and Le Hoang Phong 2020].

In the field of Oc Eo, the sites of Go Giong Cat, Go Giong Trom, Go Oc Eo, and Lung Lon are regarded as the place where golden memories of the ancient city of Oc Eo are preserved. Lung Lon is the lifeline of the

trade route that connects the city of Oc Eo to the eastern and western hemispheres in the region of the Southwest Sea of Vietnam (Gulf of Siam). Rich collections of foreign artifacts accumulated at the bottom of the canal, along with millions of pottery fragments unearthed in excavation pits in this region between 2017 and 2020, have revealed the history of the 2nd to 7th centuries maritime trade network. The city of Oc Eo was subsequently required for East-West travel. In particular, recent discoveries at Lung Lon and Go Giong Cat indicate that the current location of Oc Eo field was once the site of a thriving ancient city, as described by L. Malleret and confirmed by aerial photography of urban space in 1946



Fig. 16. Mosaic glass beads, Roman, 4th-6th centuries, Lung Lon site. *Photo:* Nguyễn Khánh Trung Kiên



Fig. 17. Beads of colored stone and glass engraved with birds, 1st to 3rd century, Lung Lon site. *Source:* Nguyễn Khánh Trung Kiên



Fig. 18. Quartz beads. *Photo:* Nguyễn Khánh Trung Kiên



Fig. 19. Beads adhered together, Go Oc Eo site. *Source:* Institute of Archaeology



Fig. 20. Gold bead, 4th-6th centuries, Lung Lon site. *Photo:* Nguyễn Khánh Trung Kiên



Fig. 21. Wuzhu coin, China, Han dynasty, 2nd-3rd centuries, Lung Lon site. *Photo:* Nguyễn Khánh Trung Kiên

Nen Chua archaeological site

The Nen Chua archaeological site is situated in Hon Dat district, Kien Giang province, approximately 12 kilometers south of Ba The mountain and Oc Eo field, as the crow flies (Fig.22–23).

Louis Malleret first discovered the location in 1938. In 1982 and 1983, following the reunification of the country, the Nen Chua site was excavated for the first and second time, respectively [Dao Linh Con 1983].

In December 2018, after nearly 38 years, the Institute of Imperial Citadel Studies conducted its third excavation at the Nen Chua site. This is the largest excavation ever conducted here.

Archaeologists have discovered numerous artifacts and relics vividly illustrating the existence and development of the Oc Eo culture in Nen Chua on an area of more than 8,000 square meters [Lai Van Toi, Le Dinh Ngoc 2019].

The most significant and remarkable discoveries at Nen Chua include traces of temple architecture, ancient lakes, wells and vestiges of stilt houses (Fig. 24-25).

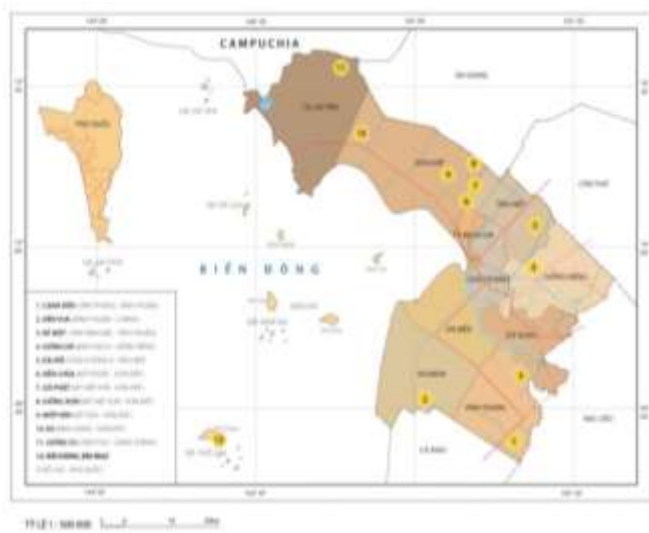


Fig. 22. Map of Oc Eo culture sites in Kien Giang province. *Source:* Institute of Imperial Citadel Studies



Fig. 23. Map of Nen Chua site in Kien Giang province. *Source:* Institute of Imperial Citadel Studies

The remains of the temple's architecture, which was made entirely of granite, have been severely damaged, but based on Malleret's records from 1946 and in particular the discovery of a stone linga dating to the 5th century on the southwest of the mound in 1982, along with the recent discoveries of the goddess Durga's body and the god Surya's hand, it is clear that the remnants at Nen Chua are the remains of a Hindu temple.



Fig. 24. Panoramic view of the ancient lake and water well, Nen Chua site, 5th-7th centuries. *Photo:* Nguyễn Tài Linh



Fig. 25. Vestiges of wooden stakes of stilt houses in Zone G, Nen Chua site, 1st-4th centuries. *Photo:* Lê Đình Ngọc

Specifically, a complex of works associated with this temple was discovered at the relic site, including two large lakes, two wells, and the "sacred column" or "symbolic column" of Lord Shiva surrounding the Nen Chua mound. This is a brand-new and extremely significant discovery

demonstrating that the Hindu temple in Nen Chua has a large scale and is planned and constructed in accordance with the religious model of India.

Under the temple architecture and along the ancient canals in Areas B and G, archaeologists have discovered the remains of residences on stilts dating from the 1st to the 4th centuries. Wooden stakes of different sizes are densely distributed across the surface of the ground. Archaeologists have identified an architectural system of houses on stilts along the canal by analyzing the rules of distribution and the connection between the wooden stakes. The floor of each of these houses on stilts is supported by a system of wooden stakes driven deeply into the ground; above the floor are the building's frame and roof.

In addition to architectural monuments, the Nen Chua site yielded 414,446 artifacts of all types, the majority of which were indigenous artifacts (Oc Eo cultural artifacts) and 1,407 foreign pottery artifacts. (Fig. 26–28). These types of artifacts are very diverse in terms of materials, types, and function, including stoneware, metalwork, jewelry, and pottery. These are utensils and items used in daily life and in agricultural and artisanal production, including stone jewelry molds, earthenware production tools, spinning of fabrics, glass materials, and glass jewelry scraps. These items are evidence of the Oc Eo residents of Nen Chua's craft and art production.

Archaeological evidence indicates that Nen Chua was a thriving population and religious center between the 4th and 6th centuries. In addition to attracting crowds and gatherings, this location is where many cultural and religious activities of the community took place, and foreign merchants who came to trade with the city of Oc Eo could also participate. At that time, the Nen Chua had close ties to the ancient city of Oc Eo, the religious center of Ba The, and the surrounding region. This is the "gateway" that connects the city of Oc Eo to the outside world via the sea trade route [Bui Minh Tri, Nguyen Gia Doi, Nguyen Khanh Trung Kien 2022].



Fig. 26. Fragments of Indian potteries, 2nd-6th centuries, Nen Chua site. *Photo:*Bùi Minh Trí



Fig. 27. Fragment of jars, Chinese potteries, Han dynasty (2nd-3rd centuries) and Tang dynasty (7th-8th centuries), Nen Chua site. *Photo:*Bùi Minh Trí



Fig. 28. 2 fragments of Western Asian green-glazed pottery vase, 8th century, Nen Chua site. *Photo:*Bùi Minh Trí

The role of Oc Eo Ancient City in the history of Funan

Since the excavation at Oc Eo site in 1944, L. Malleret has carefully studied the documents and reached the significant conclusion that the Oc Eo culture is a marine part of the kingdom of Funan with spatial distribution mainly on the wetlands of the lower Mekong Delta, primarily west of the Hau River, and partially in the Dong Thap Muoi region. This is an ancient culture with the highest and most brilliant stage of development in this region, dating from the 1st-2nd centuries to the 6th-7th centuries and possibly lasting until the end of the 8th century. L. Malleret also recognized the Oc Eo culture as a material product of the Funan –an Indianized civilization in the marine division, identifying the Oc Eo site as the largest and most significant center of this culture and Takeo (Nen Chua) as the front port [Malleret 1959; 1962].

L. Malleret identified a rectangular wall structure 1500 m wide, 3000 m long and 450 ha in area with "old inhabitants" or "ancient city" in the Hau River space, with the largest center as the Oc Eo field and the surrounding area by field survey in 1946 and aerial photography. In it, L. Malleret identified the close and unifying relationship of these monuments, in which Oc Eo played the role of a central city whose front port was Takeo (Nen Chua), and simultaneously recognized the relationship between the system of monuments in the West of Hau River, distributed widely from the Long Xuyen Quadrangle to the U Minh Thuong area and up to the Angkor Borei (Cambodia) ruins via an ancient canal. (Fig. 14–15).

Oc Eo relics have the nature of a Venice in Asia (*une maniere de Venise asiatique*), an "amphibian" city on water (*amphibie*), built on stakes of lightweight materials, along the length of many natural and manmade streams, as well as some temples made of marble and brick, only foundations and brick walls can be found buried beneath heaps of ruins.

The results of archaeological excavations and research at the Oc Eo - Ba The and Nen Chua sites from 2017-2020 continue to yield many important discoveries, helping to prove and clarify previous assertions by Western scholars, particularly L. Mallere's views on the nature and dating of the ancient city of Oc Eo. The discoveries at Lung Lon and Go Giong Cat at the central axis position of the ancient city of Oc Eo in the field of Oc Eo today also conclusively establish that the history of the formation and development of this ancient city dates back to the 1st to 8th centuries CE, with the period between the 4th and 6th centuries being the most prosperous. Moreover, it demonstrates that the space occupied by the Oc Eo – Ba The and Nen Chua sites occupies a central position in the history of the kingdom of Funan. It was a population center, urban center, economic center, political center, and the kingdom of Funan's largest and most significant religious center. Specifically, Oc Eo functions as an "urban" or "coastal" city and is connected to the Southwest Sea via the "gateway" of trade, Nen Chua, and waterways in the region. Ba The was an important religious center of the kingdom of Funan and an integral part of Oc Eo's urban landscape. The new discovery of large-scale Buddhist and Hindu temple architectures at Ba The along with vestiges of the gate and the ceremonial path connecting from Go Sau Thuan to Linh Son pagoda at the foot of Ba The mountain have proved convincingly that Ba The is the major religious center of Oc Eo city.

New discoveries about types of stilt houses residing along the ancient water canals of Lung Lon and Nen Chua, as well as a rich and diverse number of types of relics in Oc Eo field and Nen Chua, help to confirm that the Oc Eo culture was founded on an endogenous cultural base and strongly developed on the basis of convergence from multi-linear cultures [Ha Van Tan 1997]. Oc Eo culture is a large culture, with a view of the sea and expanding exchanges with the outside world; as a result,

it has made development steps beyond the spatial limit, transforming the marsh into a bustling and renowned metropolis in Southeast Asia during the early centuries CE.

In the ancient urban system of Asia and East Asia during the first millennium CE., Oc Eo – Ba The clearly demonstrated its role as a commercial center, wielding significant and pervasive influence as well as great sway over the region. Numerous precious relics of foreign origin have been discovered, such as Roman gold coins and medals, Persian bronze lamps, Chinese Han bronze mirrors, beads inlaid with glass or gilded, and boat wooden oars that have similarities with the oars of ancient inhabitants of India and island Southeast Asia, etc., demonstrating the significant historical interference of Oc Eo with Chinese, Mediterranean, and Southeast Asian cultures. In particular, new discoveries of foreign potteries in the excavation pits have provided new evidence of trade and exchange activities that were quite active in Oc Eo between the 2nd and 8th centuries. It is Roman pottery from the 2nd century; Chinese pottery from the Eastern Han Dynasty from the 2nd to 3rd centuries; pottery from the Sui – Tang dynasties from the 4th to 8th centuries; Indian pottery from the Gupta period from the 4th to 6th centuries; and Western Asian pottery from the 8th century (see Fig.26–28). This is the first extremely significant discovery that contributes to a greater understanding of the economic and cultural exchange relationship of Oc Eo city throughout history [Bui Minh Tri 2022].

The collection of typical artifacts, such as pottery and jewelry, demonstrates that from the 1st to the 4th centuries, Oc Eo – Ba The had robust and diverse trade relations with many regions. It has become a bustling coastal urban center in the East-West international maritime trade system, alongside other important centers formed along this trade route, such as Khao Sam Keo, Phu Khao Thong (southern Thailand), or monuments on the islands that are now Malaysia and western Indonesia (Bellina, Favereau, Dussubieux 2019).

According to the findings of the Project's research, Oc Eo – Ba The and Nen Chua are home to religious architectures, densely populated regions with typical traditional residence forms, interwoven with hills and mountains, and are close to the ocean. All of these elements combine to form an ancient coastal urban complex, the most active cultural center of the delta and the only surviving Oc Eo civilization center in the southern region. This culture plays a significant role and serves as the basis for the material culture of the kingdom of Funan.

Vietnamese archaeologists have clarified the function of the urban space at Oc Eo based on the results of excavations and archaeological research conducted at Oc Eo – Ba The and Nen Chua sites from 2017 to 2020. They have also clarified the connotations of the terms "urban city" and "port city." It is confirmed from this that Oc Eo is an "urban city" and not merely a "port city." This urban or city is situated in the interior of the coastal plain and is connected to the Siam Gulf via the Nen Chua and regional waterways. Oc Eo relic is not only a "urban" or "religious center in the city," but it is also closely associated with the Oc Eo – Ba The religious center.

Conclusion

The results of the Project's implementation have demonstrated and clarified the position, function, and significance of the Oc Eo – Ba The relic site in Oc Eo culture and the history of the kingdom of Funan, particularly the ancient Oc Eo Ancient city and Ba The Religious Center [Bui Minh Tri, Nguyen Gia Doi, Nguyen Khanh Trung Kien 2022]. Since the beginning of the Common Era, Oc Eo has been a bustling and renowned coastal city of the Funan kingdom, situated near the mouth of the Rach Gia Sea in the southwest through Nen Chua. It is the earliest coastal city in Southeast Asia. This unique metropolis was constructed on a fertile coastal plain and serves as the

political, economic, cultural, and religious heart of the kingdom of Funan, the oldest and most prosperous in contemporary Southeast Asia.

Archaeology has contributed to a clearer identification of the material and spiritual life of the ancient inhabitants of Oc Eo, the nature of architectural monuments, the role of the ancient Lung Lon canal, the form of residence and cultural ties of the ancient inhabitants of Oc Eo through the maritime trade system of the time. Those who study the history of trade can observe that the trade items present in the Oc Eo cultural relics were primarily imported from three major Asian and Mediterranean civilizations: China, India, and Rome. Following the process of commercial exchange, strong cultural exchange and acculturation occurred. In particular, the Indian influence on the social life of the ancient city of Oc Eo is quite pronounced [Phan Huy Le 2008].

It could be said that significant archaeological finds made between 2017 and 2020 will continue to bring back memories of the Oc Eo culture and the once-glowing Funan civilization. Oc Eo – Ba The and Nen Chua, which are located here, are not only recognized as an ancient urban complex but also for their significant contributions to the history of the Funan kingdom, which was established on the basis of indigenous culture. Notably, it also enjoys very open trade relations via international maritime trade with numerous ancient Southeast Asian kingdoms and countries in South Asia, Southwest Asia, and Northeast Asia.

The Oc Eo – Ba The is the largest and most significant urban, economic, political, and religious center in the kingdom of Funan. In it, Oc Eo represents a "city" or "coastal city," while Bahe represents a major religious center of the kingdom of Funan and a significant part of the Oc Eo city.

In the ancient urban system in Asia, Oc Eo – Ba The clearly shows its role as a commercial center, having great importance and influence in the region. Numerous types of precious relics from abroad, particularly new discoveries of pottery from Rome, India, China, and West Asia, have vividly reflected the transoceanic economic and cultural exchanges of Oc Eo city throughout its history. This discovery demonstrates the regional and international significance of Oc Eo – Ba The, demonstrating that Oc Eo is a major international trade center, a place where major Asian civilizations meet and interact. This is one of the pieces of evidence that demonstrate the significance of Oc Eo culture as one of the founding sites of Southeast Asian civilization.

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