

Some issues of the Oc Eo Culture in Materials Available in the Library of Social Sciences

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Abstract: *Oc Eo is a highly developed archaeological culture located in a large space of the Southern region. This culture is associated with the history of the Funan Kingdom, an integral part of Vietnamese history. Oc Eo - Ba The Relic has been affirmed by many scholars as an important city port, which used to have broad relations with many countries. Studying valuable documents, especially the EFEO's in the Social Sciences Library, Institute of Social Sciences Information (Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences), this article focuses on clarifying the following aspects: Oc Eo culture of the Funan Kingdom, economic activities of Oc Eo residents, as well as social, people, cultural and religious issues of Oc Eo culture.*

Keywords: Oc Eo Culture, The Southwest Region, Funan Kingdom, Library of Social Sciences

1. Oc Eo culture in the Funan Kingdom
Many documents, especially archaeological results since 1944 by Louis Malleret (1944: 75-88) so far show that the Oc Eo culture existed on a large area in the Mekong Delta from the 1st to 9th centuries. It had a close connection with the Funan Kingdom, considered as “functioning as an important economic and cultural center and the biggest international trade center of the Funan” (Phan Huy Le, 2007: 10).

According to Chinese ancient documents and other sources, especially archaeological achievements, scientists nowadays agree that the Funan Kingdom existed from the 1st to 7th centuries.

Different conceptions of the Funan State with its own specific territories have led to a controversial issue. In the EFEO dossier in the Social Sciences Library, there are many researches conducted by French scholars on the issue.

E. Aymonier (1904: 366) asserted that

Funan, a Khmer word, was Prom Penh and the territory of Funan included Tchenla (Chan Lap) and extended to Viet Nam, Thailand and the surrounding.

P. Pelliot was the first man collecting and translating Funan-related documents in China's ancient bibliographies. Through scrupulously translating and annotating Chinese documents and ancient epitaphs, criticizing E. Aymonier in identifying Funan with Tchenla (Chan Lap), P. Pelliot clearly pointed out that Funan and Tchenla were two different states existing in two different stages of history, and that Tchenla was a dependency of Funan, which occupied Funan later. He thought that Funan and Tchenla were different in terms of residing area, population and language. Tchenla was located to the north while Funan to the south in the Mekong Delta (P. Pelliot, 1903: 302-303). Furthermore, P. Pelliot offered a clear background and location of the Funan Kingdom: "The Funan Kingdom was located over 3,000 miles west of Linyi, in a large bay. Its territories extended 3,000 miles, with many towns, palaces and houses" (P. Pelliot, 1903: 63). With such features, according to Phan Huy Lê, "the Funan Kingdom at that time perhaps lay within the Mekong Delta" (Phan Huy Le, 2007: 8).

Regarding the time of the Funan Kingdom's existence, according to P. Pelliot: "From the 3rd to 7th centuries, Chinese texts frequently mentioned this Hindu state which seemed to be a must on the road linking India and China. In

the 7th century, the name disappeared without a trace" (P. Pelliot, 1903: 57-58). G. Coedès, several decades later, also conducted and published researches on this land, such as: *Les civilisations de l'Indochine* (Civilizations in Indochina) (1938), *A New Inscription from Fu-Nan: Reprinted from Journal of the Greater India Society* (1937), *Quelques précisions sur la fin du Fou-nan* (Some suppositions about the end of Funan) (1943); *Histoire du Monde, T. 8, Les états Hindouisés d'Indochine et d'Indonésie* (History of the World, T. 8, Hindu states in Indochina and Indonesia) (1948)... G. Coedès supposed that Funan was transcribed from *b'iu-nâm*, the Tang dynasty pronunciation of the ancient Khmer word *bnam* (now pronounced as *phnom*), meaning "mountain". And the King of Funan, or "king of mountains", was *parvatabhupâla* or *cailarâja* in Sanskrit and *kurung bnam* in Khmer. He asserted that the center of Funan was located in the Mekong Delta, and its territories also covered the southern part of Central Viet Nam, the middle of the Mekong River and nearly all the Ménam Delta, Malay peninsula (G. Coedès, 1948: 68).

Meanwhile, Bernard Philippe Groslier supposed that Funan's center was the region between the Bassac River and the Gulf of Thailand, perhaps including Southern Cambodia. Then the Kingdom expanded its influence and established its ruling over the entire coastal area around the Gulf of Thailand, even to the southern part of Burma (B.P. Groslier, 1961: 50).

The exploration and research on the Oc Eo Culture in the region of Ba Thè-Oc Eo started in the 19th century. Through studying documents left by French scientists and kept in the Social Sciences Library, we recognized that comprehensive archaeological research on the Oc Eo Culture was stated quite fully by Louis Malleret in his 4-volume *Archéologie du delta du Mékong* (Archaeology in the Mekong Delta), with drawings, photos and detailed descriptions on all aspects of the life of Oc Eo residents.

Regarding the Kingdom's *location*, in his studies, Louis Malleret determined quite concretely that Oc Eo held the status of an outpost port, with internal roads separated by coastal muddy areas. The site of Oc Eo followed a common principle applied to most of the ports in the Far East and the Gulf of Thailand: keeping a certain distance to the coast.

Then, L. Malleret also introduced some excavation findings and his newest suppositions of the Oc Eo vestige site. According to him, this is a very ancient site of residence, composing of a set of mounds covered by big rocks, scattering bricks and numerous bands of hollow terrains, sometimes forming straight lines that can figure out ancient canals. The scope of the Oc Eo site was re-identified as a rectangle, 3 km in length and 1.5 km in width, with a total area of 450 hectares. L. Malleret also considered the town of Oc Eo as an Asian Venice (*une manière de Venise asiatique*), an on-water amphibious town built on light

stilts, along natural or artificial rivers, with some marble and brick temples and palaces of which only foundations and base walls were found in ruins.

In terms of the *urban architecture* of Oc Eo, as watched from airplanes, this town is old and rectangular, with a big axis-canal running 15 km to the sea. Compared to other ancient towns in southern Indochina, such as Angkor Borei or Sambor Prei Kuk (7th century onwards) with an asymmetrical layout, the town of Oc Eo has a very different layout that is closely associated to traditions of old Indian towns like Mohenjo-Daro and Harrapa (L. Malleret, 1959: 201-202).

Regarding the stages of development of the Oc Eo Culture, if there were the early stage (2nd century BC to 3rd century AD) and the developed stage (4th to 7th centuries) of the Oc Eo Culture, the period from the 7th century onwards was defined by researchers as the post-Oc Eo stage (Dang Van Thang, Ha Thi Suong, 2013: 53).

After L. Malleret, scholars Marcel Pilo, G. Coedès and Paul Bahn continued researches and introduced their suppositions on Oc Eo - the most famous site in the early history of Southeast Asia. They studied the position of Oc Eo in the Mekong Delta within South Viet Nam and its connection with the State of Funan. In his article "Fouilles en Cochinchine, Le site de Go Oc Eo, ancien port du Royaume de Founan" (Excavations in Cochinchina, Position of the Oc Eo Mound - An Ancient port of the Funan Kingdom) published on the

magazine *Artibus Asiae* in 1947, Georger Coedès pointed out sites of excavation at the Oc Eo Mound, Ba The Mount and the areas adjacent to the center of Oc Eo civilization. In this articles, he introduced artefacts like bracelets, jewelry and pendants engraved with images and scripts on various materials. Some antiques originated from the Roman European or the late Han Dynasty... From that point, he offered a noteworthy conclusion: "Discoveries at the Oc Eo Mound help to form a much more accurate conception about the Funan civilization and its relations with the outside world, especially the Western Mediterranean region... Findings there provided a link in the merchant network or the international trade market..." (Georger Coedes, 1947: 193-199).

Through this conclusion, G. Coedes helped us better understand the position and role of Oc Eo in international commercial relations, especially with the Roman-time Western world, as well as the historical-cultural relationship between Oc Eo and Funan.

In his *The History of Southeast Asia*, D.G.E. Hall affirmed: "Oc Eo was an industrial and commercial center; the site of Oc Eo contains clear evidence of maritime relations with the Gulf of Thailand, Malay, Indonesia, India, the Persian Bay and even the Mediterranean region, both direct and indirect. This port lies in the then major sea route between China and the West" (D.G.E. Hall, 1997: 51)

Agreeing with that assumption, in Viet Nam, historian Phan Huy Le stated: "The port-city Ba The-Oc Eo became an international trade center of Funan and continental Southeast Asia quite early. This was not only a hub for exchanges and business between Funan and other countries but also a stop for vessels to get fresh water and supplies on their international trade journeys" (Phan Huy Le, 2007: 12). Luong Ninh also confirmed: "Oc Eo was an international port of the Funan Kingdom" and "it ought to own a Funan currency system" (Luong Ninh, 2011: 39, 43)

Therefore, it is possible to affirm that "the history of Funan, together with the Oc Eo cultural heritage in the Mekong Delta, was a flow comprising the history and culture of Viet Nam whose the mainstream was the cultures of Đông Sơn-Van Lang, Âu Lạc" (Phan Huy Le, 2007: 14). Though giving no evidence, Malcom Mac Donal concluded that "the owners of the Funan Culture were ancestors of residents in the present-day South Viet Nam delta rather than Khmers" (quoted from Luong Ninh, 1981:37). If so, "it should consider the Oc Eo Culture as that of the Kingdom (or State) of Funan, rather than of Funan as an empire, that is to say, the culture of the entire Funan Empire. Under the dominance of Funan, of course, its dependencies ought to adopt influences and some products from the mother state, or in other words, they also had elements of the Funan Culture-Oc Eo Culture" (Phan Huy Le, 2007: 11).

It is possible to say that, apart from discovering the Oc Eo vestige site and finding the Oc Eo-Funan Culture in the Mekong Delta, Louis Malleret (1944) is also the man who, above all others, introduced many important and fundamental suppositions about the vestige site and culture of Oc Eo-Funan. His research has been so far assessed as the most comprehensive, complete and meticulous one on the Oc Eo Culture which could not be surpassed by others. Later, through newly-found vestiges and artefacts in many post-1975 excavations by Vietnamese archaeologists, researchers generally agree that Oc Eo functioned as a port-city, an important economic-cultural center of the Funan Kingdom and Southeast Asia, having exchanges with the rest of the world. Upon different stages of history, Oc Eo was considered by scientists in its respective roles.

2. Economic activities of Oc Eo dwellers

Based on documents in the Social Sciences Library, especially those left by the French, it is possible to conclude that dwellers of the Oc Eo Culture reached a high level of civilization, particularly sea culture and *commercial* exchange and development that helped them become wealthy.

From 1942 to 1945, Louis Malleret collected 1,311 golden artefacts, about 1,120 grams in weight, including 1,062 gems and precious stones (L. Malleret, 1963: 3). In Pierre Gourou's article "La succession des paysages humains en Cochinchine occidentale" (Heritages, landscape and people in the western

part of Cochinchina), after mentioning geographical features of Oc Eo and Funan - as a frequently-flooded hollow region, the author revealed that he had collected 12,000 artefacts, many of which were made of gold. These are direct evidence confirming that Oc Eo was a commercial port with broad relations with other countries in the world (P. Gourou, 1950: 79-80).

Apart from well-developed trade in Oc Eo-Funan, according to researchers, many canals were built here, proving a developed irrigation. Those projects not only served transportation goals but also facilitated drainage at high tides and irrigated fields during dry seasons. On the one hand, the network of canals boosted agricultural development and, on the other hand, optimized water-borne trade.

In this aspect, Louis Malleret stated: "The system of canals could be dug since the 1st century BC, consolidated during the 1st-3rd centuries and expanded and connected to form a complete network in the 4th-8th centuries" (L. Malleret, 1959). Earlier, through aerial surveys between 1931 and 1942, Pierre Paris had also confirmed this supposition by discovering five canals (P. Paris, 1931). Later, Louis Malleret also conducted aerial surveys during which he found out 23 other canals. The most important and longest one, running 110 km, is the canal connecting Angkor Borei and Oc Eo and the Ca Mau Peninsula.

Though not as flourished as trade, *agricultural activities* of Oc Eo dwellers

were also demonstrated gaining specific achievements. Regarding rice cultivation, for the first time in Giong Cat, L. Malleret discovered an old ceramic pot containing some burnt rice grains inside. Unfortunately, at that time, because these specimens of rice were not in good conditions, he paid not much attention to them and they were subsequently lost. In 1944, during the first archaeological excavation in Oc Eo, he once again found out rice grains among castle skeletons in a water well (Louis Malleret, 1962: 347).

Paul Pelliot provided more specific analyses on economic activities of Funan-Oc Eo residents, with such commercial, agricultural and handicraft activities as follows: "They were involved in agricultural production, they grew rice for one year and harvest for three years. Besides, they liked carving decorative items and sculptures. Many eating utensils were made of silver. The tax was paid in gold, silver, pearls, perfumes" (Paul Pelliot, 1903: 63).

Apart from wet-rice cultivation, the vestiges found in L. Malleret's research also proved that Oc Eo dwellers had already used, exploited and caught marine products for daily use. A lot of molluscous shells (snails, oysters, clams) were used as jewelry. Some golden items of jewelry were shaped as tortoises, seahorses and some species of fish...

3. Social and human issues of Oc Eo

Among French researchers, P. Pelliot, after translating excerpts from the Qin Dynasty Historical Records, provided

detailed descriptions on social issues and people of the Funan-Oc Eo Culture, such as people's personalities, scripts, funeral and wedding customs and so on. He wrote "Men were ugly and black; their hair was curly; they were bare to the waist and walked barefoot. The nature of these dwellers was simple, and they never engaged in stealing... They had books, archives and others. Their written language was similar to that of Ilou. Their marriages and funerals were as solemn as those in Linyi (Champa)" (Paul Pelliot, 1903: 63).

Anthropological constituents of Oc Eo-Funan residents remain an issue for scientific researches because documents have provided no clear proof so far. In the past, L. Malleret found in Tram Pho within the Oc Eo vestige site the remains of seven individuals (L. Malleret, 1959: 166-167). According to researches of H. Vallois (published by Genet Varcin), among those remains, there are two intact Indonésian skulls (quoted by Phan Huy Le, 2007: 12).

Meanwhile, D.G.E. Hall stated that: "Funan residents belong to the Malay race^(*) and still maintain tribes like in the sunrise of the history" (D.G.E. Hall, 1997: 51).

Regarding the society of Oc Eo residents, through archaeological results, according to Vo Si Khai, it is possible to realize that their society was divided into various strata. The upper stratum included lords,

^(*)The word "race" was used in its broadest sense.

clergymen and perhaps rich people - the owners of temples, mausoleums and big tombs... The lower classes were laborers who were categorized in line with their crafts, including stone-cutters, brick-bakers, potters, weavers, carpenters, boat-builders, metallurgist, glass blowers; sculptors, jewellers, hunters, farmers, and wanderers (Vo Si Khai, 1985: 29-30).

According to researcher Vu Minh Giang, Funan was a country with its own population and cultural traditions, being established and developed in an interchange region, thus it was a concentration of various groups of residents. Therefore, Funan, like other countries in Southeast Asia, had a multiracial population. Apart from the races recognized by scientists, there are other groups who need further studies (Vu Minh Giang, 2008: 21).

4. Religion and culture issues

Based on different documents, scientists agreed that Oc Eo-Ba The was an important religious and cultural center. It covered a large area and had an old system of waterways spreading out. It also had a number of stone or/and brick temples, light big-sized structures made of timber, worshipping statues and objects, beautiful and rare artefacts (Dang Van Thang, Ha Thi Suong, 2013).

The Oc Eo Culture in the Oc Eo-Ba The region in particular and in the Mekong Delta, in general, is a culture having a native background but also being thoroughly influenced by the Indian

civilization. This is proved by ruins of temples, steles, statues of Buddha, Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva, lingas, lingas-yonis found in nearly all the vestiges of Oc Eo-Ba The.

The Temple of Sun God in Go Cay Thi that was excavated by L. Malleret for the first time from 10 February to 19 April 1944 was described as follows: At that time, Go Cay Thi was a mound nearly 3 m high, with two century-old trees atop. Before the excavation, there were a lot of broken bricks on the ground. After the excavation, L. Malleret described the architectural structure of Go Cay Thi (structure A) on a ground of 25 m x 22 m, at an altitude of nearly 4 m, consisting of two parts: a front temple and a main sanctuary, connected together by a supply compartment. In this excavation, L. Malleret made four drawings and six photos on the architectural plan, with stratigraphic sections of three pits and two "wells" in the main sanctuary (L. Malleret, 1969).

The linga found in the Cay Trom Temple, 1.73 m high, is one of the biggest discovered in the Mekong Delta. This stone linga is identified very ancient, dating back the 1st century. It was placed in the central temple - dedicated to God Shiva at Chennitalai in Travancore Village, South India. It is possible that the linga was a symbol of Shiva at the Cay Trom Temple right at the beginning of the temple's construction (L. Malleret, 1959: 380-381).

Through field trips, L. Malleret systematized and thoroughly analyzed the

translations of stele epitaphs and religious sculptures in terms of culture and art. Especially, he introduced the discovery of a number of antiques, such as the statue of Vishnu sitting on Garuda, a charming statue of Brahma, a statue of Surya - a god in Vedaism, and various Buddha statues. He also mentioned stone steles bearing ancient epitaphs (L. Malleret, 1959: 371-412). These are clear evidence confirming that there existed a Brahmin center in the Ba The Moun area.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, through documents kept at the Social Sciences Library, especially the EFEO dossier, we can affirm that Oc Eo was an ancient port-town located on the East-West commercial route and it had broad commercial connections. Various researches have clarified this region's economic, cultural, social and religious aspects comprehensively and thoroughly. It is hoped that this valuable archive will increasingly attract scientists' interest and further studies in order to provide better insights into the Oc Eo Culture □

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