

BOOK REVIEW

**ÓC EO CULTURE: NEW ARCHAEOLOGICAL FINDINGS AT ÓC EO
- BA THÊ AND NỀN CHÙA SITES IN 2017 - 2020**

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Phù Nam 扶南 (Funan) was an ancient kingdom, that played an important role in the history and culture of Vietnam and Southeast Asia. During its development, this kingdom used to have many economic, social, and cultural relations with Asian countries. Along with the agricultural economy, natural exploitation, handicrafts, and trade played a key role, creating momentum for Funan to become an economic power and a *Maritime polity* of Southeast Asia. Considered the center and core area in the development of the kingdom, the port city - the ancient city of Óc Eo once established and consolidated many connections with the outside world. The large extent and influence of the Óc Eo culture demonstrated Funan's status as a Southeast Asian-typical early-forming and early-developing kingdom.

Under the influence of the *General ecosystem*, with its hot, humid, and monsoon climate, and quite close to many major economic and cultural

centers in Asia, Óc Eo - Funan had early relations with many ancient kingdoms of Southeast Asia and also countries in Southwest Asia, Northeast Asia, etc. In those diverse relationships, as a natural interaction between the development model, the trade relationship between Óc Eo - Funan and the trading port system of Southeast India was very deep. That relationship was established, developed on a large scale, and maintained throughout the centuries. Economic activities (which were associated with diplomatic relations, cultural exchanges, etc) created a network of regional and inter-regional links between Óc Eo - Funan and the outside world.

In recent years (2017-2020), experts from three leading research institutes, including the Institute of Imperial Citadel Studies, Institute of Archeology, and Institute of Social Sciences in the Southern region, closely coordinated with each other, jointly

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conducted archaeological research at many important sites in the central region of the Óc Eo culture. Research results provided more authentic evidence about the formation process, distribution range, and typical features of this typical cultural-civilization center. The research work was carried out mainly in Nền Chùa (Kiên Giang) and Óc Eo - Ba Thê (An Giang) with 8 locations: Giồng Cát mound, Giồng Trôm mound, Óc Eo mound, Lung Lớn, Sáu Thuận mound, Út Trạnh, Linh Sơn Pagoda and Linh Sơn Bắc (Ba Thê mountain). The evidence found in the ground, in the cultural layers continued to contribute more arguments and scientific bases to understand the living environment; values of origin, chronology, and structure of a major political, economic, and cultural center, at the same time clarifying the imprints and values of tangible and intangible culture; the role and nature of architectural monuments; residence form; regional, inter-regional, inter-world relations of the ancient inhabitants of Óc Eo and the kingdom of Funan. The results showed that the Óc Eo - Ba Thê relic site was the largest and most important_urban - economic - cultural - religious center of the Funan kingdom.

Archaeological findings and many written sources also show that thanks to its economic and cultural potential, from the 1st - 2nd centuries CE, Funan developed into a strong kingdom and

quickly became a regional empire. That empire had a center (core area) and a system of subordinate kingdoms and territories (*kimi*). Within the framework of a complex and affected simultaneously by many political, economic, cultural and religious factors, Óc Eo - Ba Thê emerged as an urban complex, a first-rank center for the economy, diplomacy, and culture of Funan. Óc Eo's development path evolved over time. The research results in recent years have strengthened and increased the thoughts about the circles of diffusion, the spread, and the high density of the system of cultural heritages in the Nền Chùa and the center of Óc Eo - Ba Thê in the golden age of Óc Eo - Funan from the 2nd to the 6th centuries CE.

In Funan's international relations, India emerged as an important and essential partner. Trade with India and the world contributed to the creation of a chain of state-cities and port-cities in Funan and Southeast Asia. *Among typical cities and ports, Óc Eo - Ba Thê clearly showed the role of a political, economic, and cultural center of agglomeration and diffusion.* Funan's relationship with India, through its land and sea trade routes, was constantly strengthened by the vitality and circles of influence of this empire. Excavation results at Nền Chùa and Óc Eo - Ba Thê also show that, in the Southwest Sea space, Lung Lớn played an extremely important role, being the

lifeline of trade connecting Óc Eo - Ba Thê with the Eastern and Western world. Studying the huge and rich volume of relics also has revealed many regional and international imprints in the height and depth of cultural heritage. They are artifacts, products, and goods, but at the same time, they are also cultural heritages, many of which originate from India, China, and also from many other cultural and civilizational centers in the world. *These scientific findings are reliable and realistic proofs of the role, capacity of agglomeration, transmission as well as marine characteristics, and typical sea-oriented and commercial thoughts of the economic-cultural center of Óc Eo and the kingdom of Funan.*

Previously, in Óc Eo, artifacts of Roman origin were found such as gold coins of the time Antonius Pius (138-161) and Marcus Aurelius (161-180), *carved intaglios* in carnelian stone bearing style of the period Augustus and Hadrian, kerosene lamp has the shape with faucet (An Giang Museum), keys, Mosaic glass beads...; elephant and lion-shaped metal pendant (representing Ganesa) originated from India dating from the Gupta period (4th-5th centuries CE), *Polished black pottery* type, painted potteries; Wu Zhu coins, Eastern Han copper mirror etc. In the recent excavations, at the Nền Chùa and in the field - Óc Eo town, millions of pieces of pottery, glass beads, etc. have been discovered.

Among them, there are many precious artifacts originating from India, West Asia, Rome, and China dating from the 1st to the 8th centuries CE. These important discoveries have contributed to proving the regional and international position of Nền Chùa and Óc Eo - Ba Thê. These are also typical material cultural imprints of the Funan civilization and the kingdom of Funan in the history of Vietnam and Southeast Asia.

The results of research at Nền Chùa and Óc Eo - Ba Thê (along with many relics belonging to the Óc Eo culture in 13 provinces and cities in Southern region) show all 4 types of artifacts: 1. Items that originated from India, brought directly from India; 2. Indian-style items made in Óc Eo; 3. Items with Indian influence but with a blend of local traditions; and, 4. Locally produced items that clearly show the local character. If classified by material, design, function, production technique, etc., artifacts found in the Óc Eo culture can be divided according to many different criteria. Thereby, we also recognize that the influence of the Indian economy, technology, and culture on Óc Eo - Funan was very profound and diverse. In this book, the authors are very reasonable to assume that, with the high density of Indo-Pacific glass beads found in Lung Lón, it is possible to hypothesize the formation of a place that gathered jewelry made in Óc Eo mound (acting as a workshop) in the process of

gathering goods, raw materials, transferring and trading with the international market.

The research results also provide many arguments to think about an Óc Eo - Ba Thê port-city that played the role of a *multi-functional* city. This leading economic center displayed many of the characteristics of a major religious and political center of the Funan Empire. Thinking about the model and development path of this kingdom-empire, we can see, *Funan could not rise to the level of an empire without relying on the strength of the integrated economy with a focus on the activities of the handicraft industries and trades of Nền Chùa - Óc Eo*. The development of the Óc Eo economic and cultural center (as shown by historical documents and especially archaeological research results), always had integration and association with key political and religious factors. *Economy - politics and religion form three basic pillars, creating a solid position for Óc Eo - Ba Thê as well as the Funan kingdom - empire*.

The research results also show that *Óc Eo - Ba Thê and Nền Chùa are complex relics of a society, and perhaps higher than that, a model of early and typical state development of Southeast Asia*. This state was systematically organized, and efficiently operated and soon reached a high level of development compared to the regional

average. The authors have been very subtle in saying that studying the organization of production, the vast international relations of Funan, understanding the irrigation system (and also the transportation system) which was opened in the West of Hậu River, especially in Nền Chùa and Óc Eo - Ba Thê area, we can see the thinking, management capacity, and social organization of the ancient people. They had a very *high ability to locate and line up*, and that ability was usually only available in communities that were used to living with the sea, mastering the sea, possessing a rich treasure of knowledge about the sea, and having seafaring talent. Óc Eo culture is a diverse culture. But the sea imprint, marine cultural and civilizational characteristics in Óc Eo culture is typical and profound. The author's opinion considering Óc Eo - Ba Thê as a form/type of coastal urban area is an important discovery that clearly shows the nature of Óc Eo culture and this comment is very convincing.

Within seven centuries, the trade relationship between Funan and India gradually prospered thanks to the exchange and trade activities between Óc Eo and many ports in Southeast India, including Arikamedu. On the journey toward Southeast Asia, the land and sea trade routes were always promoted by the simultaneous participation of many groups of

merchants, craftsmen, and missionaries. The operation of Nền Chùa - Óc Eo port-city and Arikamedu showed the diversity and dynamism in economic exchanges. It was not only a trading center but also a place of production and multi-dimensional goods transshipment. Following the economic flow, cultural exchanges and religious propagation also took place. *Systemic connectivity was a prominent feature of the Óc Eo - Ba Thê port-city and the role as an entrepôt of Nền Chùa.*

The presence of Indian traders in Óc Eo and many relics belonging to this culture, along with the discoveries of relics originating from South Asia, West Asia, and the Mediterranean, show the regional and international extent and role of the Funan Empire. *Thanks to the close connection with the port system of Southeast India and the world, Óc Eo had not only risen to become an important trade and production center but also a focal point for cultural exchange between Southeast Asia and Southwest Asia, and many other distant regions in the world. The knowledge and technology received from the outside world boosted the creative ability of the Funan people and turned this kingdom into a leading maritime trading empire in Southeast Asia in ancient times.*

With an archeological and cultural-historical approach, combining specialized and interdisciplinary methodology, the authors of the book:

Óc Eo Culture - New Archaeological Findings at Óc Eo - Ba Thê and Nền Chùa 2017-2020, have shown many new thoughts and perceptions about the unique historical characteristics and cultural values of Óc Eo culture and the kingdom of Funan. Readers would be able to see the scientists' dedication and hard work through the book's content. A group of scientists from different generations, including Assoc. Prof. Dr. Bùi Minh Trí, Dr. Nguyễn Gia Đối, Dr. Nguyễn Khánh Trung Kiên (Co-Editors), and numerous researchers, including Assoc. Prof. Dr. Bùi Chí Hoàng, Dr. Lê Đình Phụng, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Lại Văn Tới, Dr. Phạm Văn Triệu, Dr. Ngô Văn Cường, Dr. Nguyễn Quốc Mạnh, Mr. Đặng Ngọc Kính, Mr. Lê Đình Ngọc... participated in writing the book. The authors have proven their capacity for thorough research and system analysis while also attempting to address a number of professional issues, among which there are undoubtedly still some that require discussion and debate in order to reach a consensus.

In this work, the authors have devoted many chapters and pages of in-depth writing on the position, role, and importance of the ancient city of Óc Eo - Ba Thê on three levels (or three circles of influence) namely Vietnam, Southeast Asia and Asia. The arguments and professional views presented in the book are an important basis for the active preparation of a dossier of nomination for UNESCO to consider and recognize the Óc Eo - Ba

Thê relic site as a World Cultural heritage.

With these achievements, the book: *Óc Eo Culture - New Archaeological Findings at Óc Eo - Ba Thê and Nền Chùa 2017-2020* has set an important milestone in the research process of Óc Eo culture - a typical cultural heritage of Vietnam and Southeast Asia. The book's ideas about the formation history and distinguishing characteristics of the cultural hub, the ancient city of Oc Eo - Ba Thê, were presented vividly and in great detail. The book details numerous brand-new and significant discoveries regarding the footprints, artifacts, size, and character of a bustling ancient city that originated in the current Oc Eo - Ba Thê region. A complex's functional diversity is demonstrated by the presence of temples, lakes, wells, settlements, and homes, craft production centers, trading posts, and other structures. Along with its economic importance, Eo Ancient Town once housed a sizable religious complex with numerous temples that vividly depict the fusion of Hinduism and Buddhism.

Considering the religious center formed in the ancient town of Óc Eo and the religious center of Ba Thê as two closely related entities existing in the same space and time, creating a unified whole is a new and creative look of the researchers. In the book, the authors

also mentioned: “Óc Eo - Ba Thê, Nền Chùa is an ancient urban complex and it played a very important role in the history of Funan - a kingdom established on the traditional indigenous foundation, which enjoyed a fairly wide trade relationship on the sea trade route from Southeast China to Southeast Asia to South Asia to Central Asia to India and Rome”. It is a significant conclusion and finding that reflects the Editors' and the Research Team's advanced scientific thinking.

I believe that the editors and authors, who have directly excavated and lived with the relics and artifacts, are a group of experts who have possessed a vast, rich, and in-depth knowledge of Óc Eo culture after reading their research papers and numerous other articles.

Researchers have delved deeply into the cultural environment; some have been associated with this culture for decades; they have observed cultural flows; they have diligently looked into the regional and interregional relationships of the c Eo culture; the culture's marine-commercial nature; the response to changes in the natural ecosystems; the ups and downs experienced in sea trade routes; and regional political and economic life, etc. It also means that the editors and authors are the ones with the power to speak for the times; they are able to write deeply and clearly

present the virtues, traits, and wisdom of a great culture, with many distinctive virtues that have been

formed and developed in the country's lower Mekong Delta.