



## OC EO CULTURE: A CASE STUDY OF OC EO ARTIFACTS IN SOUTHERN VIETNAM

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### ABSTRACT

One of the earliest cultures in the Christian era, which is formed from the first to the sixth centuries in Southern Vietnam, is Oc Eo culture. The archeologist findings and historical records helped to discover main traits of Oc Eo culture, and how the culture was emerged and developed. This writing would try to touch upon these issues by combining different documents to reappear the overview picture of Oc Eo culture in Southern Vietnam. This paper, furthermore, would make clear the distribution, characteristics of Oc Eo artifacts, and discovery the life of Oc Eo inhabitants at that time.

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## 1 GENERAL INFORMATION OF OC EO CULTURE

### 1.1 The concept of Oc Eo culture

It is said that Oc Eo culture refers the culture that was formed and developed in nowadays Southern Vietnam during the first to the sixth century period. The culture is named after a disinterment in Oc Eo (An Giang province) by Malleret, and Oc Eo has become the popular name of the culture where it is found (Khoo, 2003). Archaeologists say that there is a relationship between the Oc Eo culture with ancient ones in Indochina, including Sa Huynh, Dong Son, Vietnam and India, China and the Mediterranean.

Many scholars believe that Oc Eo had been one of important transit ports of the East – West maritime route, in which goods would be transported from the West to South China. According to Kenneth, this is possible that the communities in the Delta had traded with tradesmen for a long time before

their settlement and urban formation. Consequently, people from those communities had developed the idea of profits and the effects of trade that played as a base for the strong trade development in the Oc Eo time (Kenneth, 1985).

Apart from trade, the features of Oc Eo culture also are presented via the pile dwelling architecture of stone and brick, a special types of ceramic graves, and others objects, such as pottery, gold jewelry, tin, gems, religious statues, etc. Through archaeologist findings and historical records, the major traits of Oc Eo culture are somewhat revealed.

### 1.2 The distribution range of Oc Eo sites

So far, there have been 50 archaeological sites excavated in various areas in the Mekong Delta such as An Giang, Kien Giang, Can Tho, Dong Thap, Long An, Tay Ninh, Tien Giang, Vinh Long, Tra Vinh, Dong Nai, Ho Chi Minh city, which divided in three main geographical zones. The excavations have yielded concentration of relics of particular importance and interest (Khoo 2003).

### 1.3 Type of sites

#### 1.3.1 Sites of residential areas

Playing as a central role of the West – East trade route, many large urban centers were formed and developed in Oc Eo time, such as Ba The Mount (An Giang), Nen Chua, Canh Den (Kien Giang), Mound Hang (Long An), Mound Thanh (Dong Nai), Mound Thap Muoi (Dong Thap). The residential layers contain many wooden piles, wooden floors, wooden domestic items pottery, animal remains encompassing rice grains and jewelry of plentiful kinds (Khoo, 2003).

The excavations present that the residential areas of ancient inhabitants are likely settled nearly the waterways. The places are commonly located on the high mound, where houses were built on stilt and at the foot of the mound (Khoo, 2003). Thus, it cannot be denied that the style of dwelling houses found from excavations matches that of Funan people described by Chinese envoys Kang Tai and Zhu Ying: settlements ringed by wooden palisades, palaces, houses rose on stilts.

#### 1.3.2 Sites of religious architecture

Abundant religious architecture remains have been recorded at the Mekong Delta, for example, Oc Eo (1944, An Giang), Nen Chua (1982, Kien Giang), Mound Cay Trom (1944, 1983, An Giang), Linh Mieu Ba (1984, Dong Thap), Luu Cu (1986, 1987, Tra Vinh), Mound Roc Chanh (1986, Long An), Mound Sao (1987, Long An), Cay Gao (1987, Dong Nai), Mound Xoai (1987, Long An), Mound Don (1987, 1988, Long An), Mound Nam Tuoc (1987, Long An), Mound Tram Chim (1987, Long An), Mound Buong (1990, Dong Nai), Linh Son Nam (1993, 1998, An Giang), Mound Ong Tung (1995, Dong Nai).

Two remarkable sites of large urban settlements are Oc Eo and Nen Chua. Firstly, Oc Eo, whose cultural layers are dated from 170 CE to 430 CE, located about 15 km inland from the Gulf of Thailand and 30 km from the Bassac arm of the Mekong. Inside the town, there are remains of two temples in stone and brick for “impressively large structures” (Higham, 2002). Another significant religious architecture is Nen Chua that located closer to the sea to the South. Among many mounds in this area, the remains of a big temple with a Linga and gold ornaments were excavated. The rectangular structure in stone and brick 25.6 x 16.3 m in extend, had 16 lines of stone foundation. The scale of it raised the issue of the popularity of the religion, in the community, of the labor force,

of economic and political structure and social aspects in the time of Oc Eo (Khoo, 2003).

#### 1.3.3 Sites of burial grounds

It can be seen commonly that the discovery of burial at Nen Chua (1982, Kien Giang) is a significant contribution to the archaeology in Mekong Delta. It proves an important aspect of Oc Eo society, such as the traditions, customs and beliefs that reflect the spiritual life of the residents of the delta (Diem *et al.*, 1995). The following lists include Da Noi Grave (1985, An Giang), Ke Mot Graves (1990, Kien Giang), Mound Thap Graves (1984, 1993, Dong Thap), Mound Thanh Graves (1998, 1999, Tien Giang).

Generally, Oc Eo burials could be illustrated in some similar features. For example, the length of tombs from 1.2 m to 3.5 m, the central part involves a square platform, each layer embraces 4 bricks, forming a chimney filled with white sand in the bottom, and the upper part being filled with sticky grey sand or clay. Hence, they make the tomb pit a solid square block (Khoo, 2003).

## 2 OC EO ARTIFACTS

### 2.1 The concept of artifacts

Many efforts have been made to suggest the definition of artifact. Literally, the term “artifact” is mostly used to refer “an object that has been intentionally made or produced for a certain purpose”. The word “artifact” is often used in a more restricted sense to refer to simple, hand-made objects which represent a particular culture (Hilpinen, 2011).

According to Webster's Third New International Dictionary, “an artifact” is a usual simple object one a tool or an ornament, which presents human workmanship and modification as distinguished from a natural object. The Oxford English Dictionary defines an artifact or “artifact” as “anything made by human art and workmanship; an artificial product”.

It is commonly agreed that there are various concepts for artifact, however, the definitions of Archaeological Dictionary is more convincing than other ones.

An artifact or artefact (from Latin phrase ‘*arte factum*’, *ars*: skill, *facere*: to make) is “something made or given shape by man, such as a tool or a work of art, an object of archaeological interest”. In archaeology, an artifact is an object recovered by some archaeological endeavor, which may have a cultural interest, for instance, stone tools, pot-

tery vessels, metal objects, and items of personal adornment such as buttons, jewelry and clothing.

Remarkable artifacts from the archaeological record are stratigraphic features, which are objects of archaeological interest made by other organisms, such as seeds or animal bone. Other example involves natural objects, which have been moved but not changed by humans (called manuports), namely seashells moved inland or rounded pebbles placed away from the water action that would have fashioned them. Applying the mentioned concept of artifact, the essay would present the Oc Eo artifacts' features, which can reflect Oc Eo people and society.

## 2.2 Overview of Oc Eo artifacts

The evidence of Oc Eo's importance as a commercial center is patent with excavated artifacts. In fact, plentiful archaeological objects exhumed in Oc Eo sites prove that Oc Eo was the place, in which goods from the Mediterranean, India, China and others places in Southeast Asia were exchanged.

First of all, some artifacts produced in India such as intaglios, jewels, tin amulets with symbols of Vishnu and Sihva, gold rings and merchant seals which were inscribed in letters (early Indian scripts), Buddha images in Amaravati styles (Coedes, 1994, Khoo, 2003).

Secondly, the objects from China comprise a bronze mirror dated from the later Han dynasty (from the first to the third centuries) and some Buddhist statues from the Wei time (386 – 534 AD) (Higham, 2002). In addition, the proportion of objects of Chinese provenance is less, at Oc Eo, than those of Mediterranean origin.

Thirdly, the imports from the Mediterranean are divided into 2 main types, namely Roman materials and gold beads. In terms of Roman materials (from the second to the fourth centuries), they are emphasized by glassware fragments, gold coins minted in the reign of Marcus Aurelius (161 – 180 AD), gold medal of Antoninus Pius (152 AD). In addition, the gold beads include various types with the form of a twelve sided Solid, which identified as the power of certain numbers (Khoo, 2003).

Finally, many artifacts are unearthed in Oc Eo sites which came from other parts of Southeast Asia. For instance, gold objects from Oc Eo involved pieces of gold leaf, some with traced, engraved and stamped designs and D-shaped earrings that are also found in the Philippines and Indonesia. Therefore, archaeologists believed that gold materials

used in Oc Eo were imported from Southeast Asia, like the Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia (Khoo, 2003).

## 2.3 The classification of Oc Eo artifacts

Through excavations, archaeologists have collected thousands of artifacts. It is said that Oc Eo artifacts are so diverse, however, the sculptures, ornaments and potteries were found in the large number, and they can reflect about the Oc Eo people (Diem *et al.*, 1995). Therefore, they would be specifically examined.

### 2.3.1 Religious sculptures

According to archaeologists, religious sculptures can be divided into 3 main categories such as Buddhist sculptures, Hindu Gods sculptures and the sculptures of sacred objects. It is interesting to see that a large number of these sculptures were found in the Mekong Delta from the first to the tenth centuries. They could perhaps be considered as Funan styles with plentiful forms. Scientists believe that the 6<sup>th</sup> – 10<sup>th</sup> centuries' statues belong to the 'pre-Angkok art', which involve the styles of Phnom Da, Sambor Prei Kuk, Prei Kmeng, Kompong Preah, Prasat Andet and Kulen, and the 'Angkok art' called for the late 9<sup>th</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, such as the styles of Preah, Pnom Bakheng, Kok Ke, Pre Rup, Banteay Srei, Baphuon, Angkok Wat and Bayon (Miriam, 2006).

#### a. Buddhist sculptures

The Buddhist statues include wooden statues at An Giang, stone statues at Oc Eo and bronze statues in many other sites. The earliest are the wooden Buddha statues of different sizes, with the height from around 30 cm to 3 m, at An Giang, Mound Thap, Kien Giang. Archaeologists believe that they are carbon dated to about 200-300 CE. Most Buddha statues were carved in artist style of 'Amaravati', with the standing Buddha statue, slender body on the lotus throne, long ears, serious face, and the bodies are wore by monk's robes.

Other Buddhist statues were mainly found later in Angkor Borei, being made of bronze and stone, which are discovered in many places in the Mekong Delta. These statues could have some 'Dvaravati' influence, with the Buddha statue in sitting or standing posture.

It is widely accepted that the discovery of the Buddha statues, which were carved with various postures and styles, shows the cognitive ability and skills of the artisans in the carving statues, about the cross-cultural, religious, and the position of Buddhism to residents in the Oc Eo culture time.

b. *The sculptures of Hindu Gods*

It seems more likely that the stone and bronze Hindu Gods sculptures were discovered in almost provinces in the Mekong Delta. For instance, the God Vishnu statues at Oc Eo, Ba The Mount, Mound Xoai, Sap Mound, Da Noi (Kien Giang), Chau Doc, Tra Vinh, My Tho, Tay Ninh, Dong Nai; statues of God Brahma in Ba The Mount, Thap Vinh Hung; Sihva statues at Sam Mount, Can Tho; Ganesa statues at Truong son A, Mound Thanh, Mound Tram Quy, and other Hindu Gods sculptures. Some wooden God Vishnu statues were excavated at Mound Sao, Mound Bay Liep (Long An), Bien Hoa (Dong Nai), etc.

*God Brahma sculptures*

Brahma is the creator of the universe and of all beings, as depicted in the Hindu cosmology. In the Hindu pantheon, Brahma is commonly represented as having four heads, four arms, and red skin. Unlike all the other Hindu Gods, Brahma carries no weapon in his hands. He holds a water-pot, a spoon, a book of prayers or the Vedas, a rosary and sometimes a lotus.

In term of the God Brahma statues, they are dated to approximately the sixth century for stone God Brahma statues (Mound Xoai), and from the seventh to the tenth centuries for bronze Brahma statues (Thap Vinh Hung). The stone God Brahma statues are worn with the cylindrical hat, having four heads of the four directions, sad face, big eyes, straight nose, thick lips, long ears, while the bronze God Brahma statues are wore round pyramid hat and small eyes.

*God Vishnu sculptures*

Vishnu represents the aspect of the Supreme Reality that preserves and sustains the universe. Although there are variations in images and pictures of God Vishnu, He is generally symbolized by a human body with four arms, carrying a conch, a mace, and discus. He wears a crown, two earrings, a garland of flowers, and a gem around the neck. He has a blue body, wears yellow clothes and stand on a thousand-headed snake (Naga).

Basing on the art style, archaeologists divided the God Vishnu statues into four groups. The first group of God Vishnu statues was found in Mound Sao, Mound Bay Liep, Sap Mount. These statues were carved with the head wearing cylindrical hat, long face, four arms, arched eyebrows, straight nose, thick lips, slightly pointed chin, long ears. Analyzing the characteristics of the eyes, nose, mouth and body other traits of the statues presents

that they are close to Mediterranean residents or northern India, dated from the 5<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The second statues group was discovered at Mound Thap. These statues are dated to approximately the seventh century, which are carved in specification similarly with the first group. The statues of the third group were sculptured in quite big size, with four arms, long face, slanted eyebrows, straight nose, thick lips, curly hair into buds, slightly pointed chin, round chin, long ears. These statues were exhumed in Binh Hoa (Dong Nai), dated around the seventh century. The final group has the early date from the 7<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> centuries, which disinterred in Mound Thanh, Mound Tram Quy. It is said that these statues are localized, which their appearances are carved quite similarly with the local people.

*God Sihva sculptures*

Shiva is the destroyer of the world, following God Brahma and God Vishnu. God Shiva is responsible for changing both in the form of death and destruction and in the positive sense of destroying the ego, the false identification with the form. He has many forms, which are visible in his Panchavaktra form with 5 heads and 3 eyes.

God Shiva sculptures were found in Oc Eo (5<sup>th</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> centuries), Mound Don (7<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> centurie) and Mound Thap (9<sup>th</sup> – 10<sup>th</sup> centuries). These sculptures share some similar traits such as long face, three eyes, round chin, big long ears, slanted eyebrows, straight nose, thick lips, and round chin.

*The sculptures of other Hindu Gods*

**Ganesa statues:** Ganesa with an elephant head is widely revered as the remover of obstacles and more generally as the Lord of beginnings and the Lord of obstacles, patron of arts and sciences, and the deva of intellect and wisdom. The Ganesa statues were found in Truong Son A, Mound Thanh (dated from about 5<sup>th</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> centuries), Vam Co (7<sup>th</sup> century), and Mound Tram Quy (9<sup>th</sup> century).

**Dvarapala statues:** Dvarapala is a guardian often portrayed as warrior or fearsome asura giant, usually armed with a weapon; the most common is gadha mace. The statue of dvarapala is a widespread architectural element throughout the Hindu and Buddhist cultures. Archaeologists exhumed one Dvarapala statue in Mound Don with its dating around the 9<sup>th</sup> – 10<sup>th</sup> centuries.

**Yaksa statues:** Yaksha is the name of a broad class of nature-spirits, usually benevolent, who are caretakers of the natural treasures hidden in the earth and tree roots. There is one Yaksha statue, which was discovered in Sap Mount.



Besides, archaeologists also found some other statues of **Uma – Mahisvara, Surya, male and female Gods**, etc.

### c. *The sculptures of sacred objects*

Linga or Lingam is a very complex symbol of Hinduism. It is associated with Shiva, one of the three main gods of the Hindus. The scriptures say that a Linga represents energy and strength. In almost all the temples of Shiva, Shiva is shown in the form of a Linga. Yoni is a Sanskrit word for the vagina, which is counterpart of Linga.

The Linga, Yoni, Linga-Yoni statues and altar platforms are the unique collection of artifacts, more commonly founding in the Oc Eo ruins of the Mekong Delta. So far, a number of these statues have been about 60 pieces, which are quite in small size, made into materials such as marble, sandstone, ceramic and glass stones.

Apart from the altar platforms, which were carved with the Linga and Yoni, there are many intact statues and broken- statues were found in archaeological sites in the Mekong Delta, for instance, Luu Cu, Mound Bar, Oc Eo - The Third, Tam Au pagoda, etc. Most of altars are made of sandstone with similar structure.

### 2.3.2 *Ornaments*

According to Malleret, “*The time of Oc Eo could be considered as the golden time of jewelry*”, which can be implied as the style of Oc Eo phase fourteen to twenty centuries ago (Khoo, 2003). From the excavations at Oc Eo relics, there are more than one thousand objects including golden jewelry, engraved jewelry, silver, beads, tin, gems (quartz, chalcedony, silicate of all types, ruby, sapphire, diamond and so on), which are made into bodily adornment of rings, earrings, bracelets, necklaces, etc.

#### *Golden artifacts*

Malleret’s inventory of gold objects are found at Oc Eo lists about 1312 pieces, which are divided into two main categories: Golden jewelries and golden leaves.

**The golden jewelries** consist of rings, earrings, bracelets, necklaces, pendants, etc. Most of them were processed in a very sophisticated, meticulous and reached the high technique, which were excavated in various places scattered in the Mekong Delta, such as Nen Chua, Da Noi, Mound Thap, Mound Xoai, Ke Mot, and Oc Eo.

In terms of **the golden leaves**, the most outstanding characteristics of golden artifacts are the subjects for decorative motifs, namely 300 small repoussé

golden leaves, which were traced, engraved, stamped or embossed into various shapes. The subject was so plentiful such as people, animals, plants, objects, geometrical designs and ancient handwriting.

It is interesting to see that the fish and tortoise are two kinds of animals appearing on the golden leaves which are the symbol of the animal world in the Delta and a disguise of Vishnu also: God Vishnu – Kurma and God Vishnu – Matsya. The sophistication of these golden leaves could express the talent of ancient goldsmiths.

#### *Other ornaments*

In Oc Eo culture, **the bead** is one kind of artifacts which was found many in the residential relics and rarely in the burial areas. These beads include many shapes, sizes, colors and various materials. Most of them are made of precious stones, colored stones, glass and earthenware. The shapes of beads are so plentiful such as hexagon, tubular, diamond, cylinder and coat-button shapes.

**Gemstones** are collected in Oc Eo, Nen Chua, Mound Tower. These stones are usually small with many different colors such as transparent colors, light purple, purple, dark purple, blue, red, orange, and so forth. Among these gems, there are many pieces which are processed in the shapes of rectangle, square-shaped, circle, oval, hexagon, elliptical to attach on the surface of rings.

Besides, archaeologists also discovered plenty of **common metal, stone, glass jewelries**, which are made into products such as necklaces, bracelets, rings, amulet, earrings, medals, rattles, and so on.

### 2.3.3 *Potteries*

#### *a. Types of potteries*

Potteries present in most of the archaeological relics are one kind of artifacts which express the most clearly the indigenous tradition. A large quantity of potteries and shreds were found over the past two decades at Oc Eo, Nen Chua and neighboring provinces of the Mekong Delta. The ceramic artifacts were classified into four main types, such as constructive and architecture materials, manufacture tools, household items and pottery for worship. It is believed that there are many different kinds of ceramics, which could serve daily life of people. This shows handicraft development, craftsmen’s creativity with high technical qualifications.

#### *Constructive and architectural materials*

Bricks are the building material, which were decorated by reliefs with images of lions, cobras, a horned animal and the other animals. Both bricks

and reliefs were made of terracotta, and they are mostly artifacts in the ruins of the temples architecture in the Oc Eo culture.

#### *Manufacture tools*

The pottery used for manufacture purposes such as plaster's hawk, net sinkers, crucibles, spindle whorls, ceramic bells, stamps, pestles. They are excavated at Oc Eo, Mound Thanh, Canh Den, Mound Thap, Nen Chua and other Delta sites. The most popular type of production tools is plaster's hawk. This is a tool to process the small potteries such as pots, vases, spouted jars, which were made of fine clay. Nowadays, these instruments are still used in the production of jars in Tan Van (Bien Hoa, Dong Nai) and many other places.

#### *Household items*

The household items consist of a wide range of tools, for instance, earthenware stoves (Cà Ràng), spouted jars, candlesticks, pot lips, vases, pots, bowls, cups, etc. These items indicate the material life as well as the creation of Oc Eo inhabitants to adapt to the natural environment.

#### *Pottery for worship*

Kendy is a mean of jars, which have spherical shape, bulge in the middle, and shrink in the neck and bottom. The size of the jar is quite large with many decorative motifs. They were commonly found in the ruins of temples, most of them were broken tap. These artifacts used in religious ceremonies of Hinduism, the taps are similar the shape of Lingas – representing.

#### *b. Material of potteries*

It is said that except a large number of coarse pottery used for constructing, heating, cooking and food containing, the sense of art is embodied by the fine pottery.

#### *Fine potteries*

The potteries were made of refine clay and sometimes mixed with fine sand, which normally were wheel-thrown and have been fire at a high temperature. The color of the fire bodies wares were change from grey to red and white tones. The fine-bodied wares, which were excavated at many Oc Eo cultural sites, involving vases, stem-cups, pot lips, candlesticks, spouted jars, and ware fragments.

The fragments of fine-bodied wares show that a various decorative designs appear to have been used on the better quality vessels. It can be seen from the picture “sherd with moulded decoration of musicians”. This sherd has traits of two musicians

and ancient form of musical instrument, namely a harp. The sculptures are so lively with the carving to girl's curly and long hair. Archaeologists believe that besides the function of it, the spout vase could be an artwork of craftsmen in the Oc Eo cultural time.

#### *Coarse potteries*

These wares were made with clay from local sources and mixed with various tempers such as sand and plant remains (rice husks). Most of them were wheel-thrown and have been fire at a high temperature. Many coarse wares were found in the Mekong Delta, for example, basins, jars of various sizes, lids, bottles, sherds of cooking appliances, and other vessels.

It is interesting to see that fragments can be discovered quite easily in the soil and especially on the surface of dug canal and river banks. They were found with a large quantity of vessel kinds, consisting of both fine and coarse wares. “*There are three types of decorative designs which were probably incised with a comb-like tool. The designs include a combed band of inter-locking semi-circles, a band of finer angular waves, and a band of parallel lines*” (Khoo, 2003).

#### *2.3.4 Other artifacts*

##### *a. Reliefs and seals*

#### *Reliefs*

Reliefs collected in the Oc Eo, Nui Sap relics. At Nui Sap, the upper of reliefs are circular, rectangular cross-section. On one side of relief is embossed with the men and women embracing, and both have round face, broken eyes, big nose and wide mouth. Particularly, the women have big round chests like dancers in the carving art in India.

Other reliefs are on the tiled-valances, about 21 specimens in Oc Eo (An Giang). All the tiled-valances are made of fine clay, baked at high temperatures. On the reliefs are decorated as solar towers, wheel tower, the Buddha sitting in meditation, and so on.

#### *Seals*

It is said that the seal is kind of unique and artifacts in Oc Eo culture, which were found in the ruins like Oc Eo, Nen Chua, Canh Den. Despite the small numbers, this is the typical item with many subjects, which are vividly carved, reflecting the social picture in the Oc Eo time such as the position, role of the users. Most seals are made of metals and gemstones. The common feature is that the stamped seals in the concave shape, carving the

images of human, animal, ships, ancient writings and other objects.

The seals are quite diverse and plentiful, which can be divided into 6 categories based on their shapes, for example, conical shape of the fireman, pith helmet, the shape of Linga platform, ring shape, rectangle shape, and so on. Interestingly, the theme of human, animal has reached the level of sophistication; the pictures are quite small, but with complete layout and like real.

*b. Currency (coins)*

The currency is one of the rare artifact types, accounting for relatively small numbers of Oc Eo cultural relics, but they have great research value. Along with seals, the presence of money is associated with one civilized society, the high development level of market economy. There are about 12 pieces of coins, which have been discovered in the ruins like Nen Chua, Da Noi, Ke Mot, Mound Hang. Many Roman coins were found in these sites, which show the international position of Oc Eo at that time.

These coins were made of bronze, lead-tin or lead-iron, and so on, which were the commonly materials in Oc Eo culture. On the one or two sides of the coins are well casted with images of people, animal, and many other subjects.

*c. Stone materials*

In term of stone materials, it is widely believed that they are most often used for labor daily production, especially for craftsmen such as greater, grinder, millstone, plasterer's hawk, and so on. They were found in Oc Eo, Nen Chua, Mound Thap, Thanh Trung, Mound Thanh, Da Noi, Nhon Thanh, and Long Phung.

*d. Wooden materials*

Wooden artifacts are found pretty much in residential, architectural and burial relics. Apart from the Buddhist statues, they also consist of wooden candlesticks, pillars of the 'house on stilt', wooden floor, wooden bars with processed traces, wood used for shipbuilding, firewood, and so forth. Generally, the wooden artifact is one of the common artifacts in the ruins of Oc Eo culture. Wooden Buddha statues were discovered in the Mound Thap, Mound Xoai, Thanh Nhon, Vinh Hung. The other remains were discovered in Da Noi, Do Khi, Mound Sau Huan, Thanh Trung, etc.

*e. Plant remains*

Scientists found many plant remains in most of residential and burial relics of Oc Eo culture, for instance, burnt-rice grains, rice in clay (Oc Eo,

1979), some rice husks and many rice grains in bricks, traces of the roof was covered with coconut-water leaves (Mound Thap, 1984, 1993).

Besides, the archaeologists have found traces of many petals, leaves, which are relatively intact in the clay layer of Nen Chua. Most of relics help people found the traces of charcoal, bricks and rice husks.

*f. Animal remains*

Many animal remains have been recorded in the Oc Eo cultural layer of residential and burial relics. Scientists have collected dozens of animal bone specimens, including scallops, oysters, pigs, cattle, tortoises, fishes and so on. Most of the bones are the waste of chicken, others can be used for worship rituals.

### **3 THE LIFE OF OC EO RESIDENTS IS REFLECTED VIA OC EO ARTIFACTS**

Although there has strong evidence for large residential areas in Oc Eo time, not much has been known about the people and the society at that time. Concerning with excavations, archaeologists found some of the ancient skulls in Canh Den (Kien Giang), presented that the average man (1.62 meter tall) and woman (1.6 meter tall) were of the Austronesian race and had similar characteristics with upland people. In addition, many of customs point to the thoroughgoing 'Indianization' that the Delta Khmer had undergone. Nonetheless, others relate to Southeast Asian indigenous tradition, namely houses on piles, animal fights, long boat, interment burial, and relative freedom of sexes (Coe, 2003).

Findings at Oc Eo site show that the main occupations of Oc Eo residents were pottery, metallurgy, metal and glass casting, construction, statues carving, especially silver and gold jewelry making (Khoo, 2003). Many artifacts were excavated in Oc Eo, consisting of glass and bivalve moulds for casting tin ornaments, bronze awls and hammers, small gold plaques, so it is said that the area was an industrial center. According to Coe (2003), there were Indian traders in Oc Eo and other Delta places, who were both Brahmin priests and Buddhist monks. These merchants brought many Indian coins, such as silver coins carved with conch and trident – symbol of the god Vishnu.

In addition, archaeologists also found in Nen Chua (Kien Giang) the collections of pottery, jewelry, amulets, seals, coins, architectural works, which presents economic development with various careers, such as artists, potters, brick makers, stone carvers, sculptures, glass makers, goldsmiths, etc.

Findings at other sites lead to the same inference, namely Canh Den, Mound Thap, Binh Ta. It is said that industrial handicraft developed only when agricultural production reached the surplus level that could support persons who did not directly produced food. The surplus in agricultural goods and diversity of handicraft industry quickened the development of trade, local and inter-regional (Diem *et al.*, 1995).

According to Higham (2001), trade contacts would have accelerated social stratification, especially the emergence of social elites, people could organize commercial transactions. In addition, Kenneth (1985) believes that *“Exotic goods and additional income from trade enhanced an elite’s capacity to implement their gift-giving ritual sovereignty”*. It can be seen that the social hierarchy in Oc Eo areas lies in the excavation of different religious and burial sites. Higham (2001) points out that most monumental public building present the centralized government and state society. For instance, archaeologists discovered many religious sites in Nen Chua, Ke Mot, Da Noi, Mound Cay Thom, Mound Thap, Mound Xoai, Mound Nam Tuoc, Mound Ong Tung, etc. Moreover, scientists also mention that the class structure in the Oc Eo time includes the ruling class, monks, laymen, craftsmen and slaves.

Concerning about the environment, the outstanding traits which showed the effort to adapt to and control the nature of Oc Eo people. Firstly, the effort is presented in pile-dwelling. For example, the pile dwelling was the traditional way of Indonesian people in the monsoon area of Asia, while Oc Eo inhabitants lived in the high or low land to adapt to flood season. Secondly, the effort to control environment was found in the mounds of some hectares, which were used as foundations for temples and graves. For instance, on a heaped mound at Nen Chua, the remains of a huge temple, with 25.6 meters long, 16.3 meters wide, 16 lines of stone foundation. It has been widely acknowledged that the people lived in houses on stilts, whereas the Gods settled in a large temple on the mound. The temple was used to worship the Hindu Gods, such as God Vishnu statues, stone Linga statues (symbol of God Shiva), granite Yoni. It can be seen that the temples are concrete example of the religious architecture in the Oc Eo civilization. The scale of the temple shows the popularity of the region in the community, of the labor force. It also was employed for the religious construction, economic and political structure and social aspects in the Oc Eo period (Khoo, 2003).

Notably, the concept of life after death can be found clearly from the graves, such as Oc Eo, Da Noi, Nen Chua, Ke Mot, Canh Den, Mound Thap, etc. For Oc Eo community, the dwelling area for the dead was more important, permanent and stable than for the living. For example, Nen Chua grave, which was built on a heaped mound of more 2000 square meters and was composed of clay, bricks, sand and stone. It was constructed with a complicated manner: some flat layers, some slanting into each other, and so on. Especially, in the center of the grave, a brick or wooden column of square cross-section was built; the inside was filled with white sand and the surrounding area was supported by lot of stone or broken bricks, etc. Therefore, the concept of the life after death was forever, which was considered from the strength of the grave, like house and the community of the dead (Diem *et al.*, 1995).

In term of writing language of Oc Eo residents, there are approximately 36 small engraved metal ornaments, which were discovered at Oc Eo, dated from the first to the fifth centuries. These ornaments were inscribed in letters known as ‘brahmi’ (early Indian Script). For instance, many golden leaves were found at Oc Eo and surrounding areas, which were engraved with some Sanskrit words. Some small tin seals, maybe used for merchandise were inscribed with Sanskrit words, such as ‘opramadam’, ‘dhanapati’, etc. Other evidences were excavated in many places, including Mound Thap, Da Noi, Vo Canh, in which various stones were engraved with Sanskrit words. Especially, the writing contents on the steles present religious concept, for example: *“After saving the world sinking in the ocean of three creating conditions (sexual desire, physical desire, invisibility) and attaining the Nirvara, the highest land invisible, incomparable...that Venerated Teacher whose achievement aimed at creating happiness for all beings, now grants the happiness for others”* (Khoo, 2003). Besides, at Da Noi, some Devanagari words were carved in golden leaves that related to Hindu and Buddhist concept, such as, paduma (lotus), Saka (Heaven God), hansa (phoenix), Ksatriya (King), etc. It can be seen that the writing language of Oc Eo residents was strongly influenced by India. According to archaeologists, Sanskrit possibly as the original language to write about Hinduism and Buddhism in India, then was adopted by court, monks and elite of the Oc Eo society.

Interestingly, from the excavation of Oc Eo culture, there are major kinds of artifacts, which describe the delicate artwork in the Oc Eo time, including religious sculptures, ornaments and potteries.



Regarding *the religious sculptures*, a large number of Hindu and Buddhist sculptures were discovered in the Delta, involving bronze sculptures at Oc Eo, wooden Buddhist sculptures at An Giang, and stone sculptures in other areas. In general, with the diversity of discovered statues, it can be seen that the religious life of Oc Eo inhabitants was so developed. Hinduism was imported from India and rapidly occupied an important position, particularly the Shiva, Vishnu was worshiped in many places. Along with Hinduism, Buddhism also played a significant role in the life of Oc Eo residents. Especially, the statues in the Oc Eo period have naturalistic and gentle facial features, which reflects the sensitivity of Funan craftsmen towards religion, culture and art. These statues can be found in some temples and also appeared in normal houses, with the small beauty statues and others in humorous shapes. It is so interesting to note that although Oc Eo people were influenced by external religions from India, China, almost religious statues are localized, for example the Gods were not only threatening but so friendly, smiling like ordinary people.

As for *the ornaments*, it is said that the images, which were carved on the golden leaves, are related to Hinduism religion such as Vishnu, Shiva images, Ganesa, Naga, conch, trident, lotus flowers, etc. This shows that Hinduism was imported from India and rapidly accounted for an important position in the life of Oc Eo people. Moreover, through the carvings of God Vishnu and Shiva on the same golden leaf, it shows that Hari-Hara belief was popular in the Mekong Delta during the Oc Eo time. Harihara is the name of a combined deity form of both Vishnu (Hari) and Shiva (Hara) from the Hindu tradition, it as a form of the Supreme God. In brief, the appearance of various ornaments indicates that the Oc Eo economy was so developed because their life was guaranteed, people can focus on creating things for beauty. In addition, the jewelry also presented the social hierarchy in the period. While the golden jewelry, gems, beads were produced for the rich, ordinary people often used common metal, stone, glass jewelry. In addition, from the large quantity and diversity of Oc Eo ornaments, it shows the great demand for beauty of the ancient people in the Delta as well as the abundant thoughts, concepts and ideology of the craftsmen about human beings and Gods. Especially, the subjects were engraved, embossed on the golden leaves, mostly related to Hinduism, so it has confirmed the role of this religion in the life of Oc Eo inhabitants.

Turning to *the potteries*, it is said that potteries were found in most of the archaeological relics,

which probably present the most clearly of the indigenous tradition. For example, the earthenware stoves (Cà Ràng) appeared in the residential and burial ruins from prehistoric in the lower of Vam Co River, Dong Nai, which has become typical artifacts of the Oc Eo culture. "Cà Ràng" is one kind of terracotta stoves with the advantage of being simple, easy to use and transport, especially when people move on the boats. The ceramic stoves are very familiar items and so necessary for people, who live in coastal areas, rivers, on the floor or on boats. Currently, ceramic stoves still are popular in many parts of Southeast Asia, so when the life on boats still exist, even the appearance of terracotta stoves. Hence, with these ceramic tools ("Ca Rang", spouted jars, pot lips, candlesticks, etc), the Oc Eo residents had adapted to the terrain of crisscrossed rivers and "flood season" every year in Southern Vietnam. Moreover, the pottery might reflect the spiritual life through artifacts which used in religious ceremonies (like Kendy jar). It can be seen that the indigenous element from prehistoric have combined with the Indian culture, which made the typical feature of the residents in the Oc Eo period. Notably, most of potteries were decorated with geometrical patterns, which present the potteries' ability to combine geometrical traits, and the art of geometrical ornament is always classified as abstract art. Thus, the abundant potteries and their patterns indicate the demand for comforts and aestheticism in the Oc Eo time.

To sum up, pottery is the main character of the common people in the Oc Eo cultural period, which reflects the entire life of the residents at that time. In fact, the Oc Eo potteries pose the life of people living on the river, adaptation to the environment such as earthenware stoves, pot lips, candlestick, and so on. Moreover, the Oc Eo pottery also presents the spiritual life through artifacts used in religious ceremonies. Through ceramics, we can see that indigenous cultural elements from prehistoric were combined with Indian culture which is a particular trait of residents Oc Eo culture.

From the residential, religious architecture, burial grounds sites as well as typical artifacts in the Mekong Delta show the prosperity of Oc Eo residents with the remarkable development of religion and belief (Hinduism and Buddhism).

#### 4 CONCLUSIONS

According to Khoo (2003), after almost a century of research, the culture of ancient Southern Vietnam has been still mysterious. The ancient civilization in mainland Southeast Asia has still chal-

lenged the archaeologists and scholars, who are interested in decoding its mystery (Hall, 1981).

However, through the evidences found, the public can understand a certain part of the life of the inhabitants in the Oc Eo time. It may be true to say that Oc Eo culture was formed and developed in the Mekong Delta from the first to the sixth centuries. The features of Oc Eo culture are surely presented via the careers, religions, beliefs, writing language, artwork, etc of the residents, which proves the height of Oc Eo civilization. It seems that the most important reason for the prosperity of Oc Eo is due to its location on the maritime trade routes between a Malay Peninsula and India and crossing the Mekong River with China.

Archaeological discoveries in the Southern Vietnam with thousands of Oc Eo cultural relics are of various forms and rich materials. From the ruins of residence, architecture, burial and religious relics, such as religious statues, furniture and production tools, it is said that the Oc Eo inhabitants had well-developed material and spiritual life, especially the maritime trade were so prosperous. It is also presents both indigenous element and the elements of the Indian civilization, Persians, Romans, Chinese. This has proven indigenous origin of Oc Eo culture is the valuable resources for learning, researching on the various aspects of Oc Eo culture.

Nowadays, the Oc Eo artifacts are paid much attention in the preservation and promotion of the Oc Eo cultural values to clarify the history of the South of Vietnam, which expresses the gratitude for today's

generation to the ancestors. Apart from local authorities' properly exploiting, managing and protecting of relics, the propaganda should be strengthened in order to mobilize the whole society to participate in preserving and developing the value of Oc Eo culture in the future.

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