

Situated in the Mekong basin, Oc Eo and Nen Chua had access not only to ships engaged in international trade and in traveling the Gulf of Thailand, but also to the goods and traders of the hinterland. These inland traders brought the forest goods for which Southeast Asia was renowned—kingfisher feathers, aromatic and hard woods, and elephant tusks—to the bustling entrepôts, where international merchants converged. Recent excavations in Southeast Asia indicate the widespread influence of international trade on the inland regions as well as along the coast, as jewelry, sculpture, and metal goods were transported back from the coastal ports to the traders' homes.³⁴ Not only were the entrepôts of the early historical period hubs of commodity exchange, they were also centers for the exchange of ideas, beliefs, laws, and tastes.

Oc Eo and Nen Chua, lying in the agriculturally rich Mekong delta, would have had the surplus necessary to feed the merchants. Until modern times, Southeast Asia was sparsely populated, leading scholars to believe that control of population formed the basis for a ruler's power; wars were fought not for land, but for people. From at least as early as the second century A.D., contact with India, a region with sophisticated theories of state, would eventually (by the fourth and fifth centuries) provide ideas for an administrative structure necessary for the continued well-being of Southeast Asian ports. The importance of ports rose and fell owing to a variety of factors, not the least of which was the silting of rivers and bays. Always foremost was a port's reputation for fairness and safety, the knowledge that goods would not be confiscated or suffer at the hands of thieves or pirates.

In the sixth century, the primary sea route seems to have changed. Scholars in the past thought goods had been transported across the isthmus during the earlier period, a route that then changed to the Strait of Malacca, though scholars today believe this is unlikely. Just what transpired at that time to cause a shift is unclear, but from this period, the majority of ships passed through island Southeast Asia, then up the coast of Viet Nam to China. The period of prosperity that the ports of Fu Nan had enjoyed now passed to the "kingdom" of Srivijaya. Scholars become increasingly convinced that Srivijaya, along with other coastal-riverine polities of Southeast Asia, consisted of a series of loosely connected riverine ports. Each one's power ebbed and flowed, depending on the abilities of its various leaders. Manguin has convincingly proposed a model in which these polities were "defined primarily by a centre (the *negeri Melaka* or the *kadatuan Sriwijaya*) and by its relationship with a periphery." Furthermore, this territory was not clearly defined, but was a function of the relationship between the peripheral entities and the center.³⁵ Another similarly organized political entity was the kingdom of Champa, which lay along the central and southern coast of Viet Nam.³⁶

With the increased shipping in the Strait of Malacca and the rise of Srivijaya, the ports along the central Vietnamese coast replaced Fu Nan as the important mainland ports. On their northward journey to China, ships needed to sail near Viet Nam's coastline to avoid the perilous waters of the Paracel and Hainan islands.³⁷ The Cham occupied the coastal stretch of Viet Nam from Quang Tri Province to Ninh Thuan Province and the city of Phan Rang, an area well suited to the maritime commerce in which they engaged. Who were the Cham, and when did they arrive in this region? The Cham peoples are linguistically allied with the Austronesian language group that seems to have developed in Taiwan between the fifth and third millennium B.C.³⁸ By the first millennium B.C., Austronesian-