

## The Archaeology of Fu Nan in the Mekong River Delta: The Oc Eo Culture of Viet Nam

### THE "DISCOVERY" OF THE MEKONG RIVER DELTA

The first scientific article to be devoted to the early history of the Mekong River delta was written by French sinologist Paul Pelliot, and published in 1903 in one of the first issues of the *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient*.<sup>1</sup> This academic institution had been set up in Indochina only three years before to carry out research on and manage the historical and archaeological heritage of the French colony. In this pioneering article, Paul Pelliot presented and discussed a corpus of meager textual references drawn from Chinese historical sources, written at a time when China was barely starting to pay attention to the countries and peoples of the Southern Seas, during the first few centuries A.D. These texts allotted only a few lines here and there to a country known to them as Fu Nan [Vietnamese transcription: Phu Nam]. Based on a rigorous philological analysis, Pelliot concluded that the polity would have been located somewhere in the Mekong River delta, in the extreme south of the Indochina peninsula.

It should be noted that historians and archaeologists still refer to this country by its sinicized name, Fu Nan: indeed, none of the few contemporary Sanskrit inscriptions that have been found in the region mention this country by its local name. We must also acknowledge how little we still know about this early Southeast Asian polity: since no inscription was ever written in a local language during the period of Fu Nan's existence, there is still no way to determine with certainty what language its inhabitants spoke, and thus to which ethnic group they would have belonged. The most plausible hypothesis, however, is that they were Khmers who spoke an Austroasiatic language; but another hypothesis favors the neighboring Chams, who speak an Austronesian language (the region that now lies south of the modern Cambodia-Viet Nam border, where a large number of Fu Nan archaeological sites are located, and which was only integrated into the Vietnamese realm during the eighteenth century A.D.). Vietnamese historians and archaeologists have coined the expression "Oc Eo culture" (*Văn hóa Óc Eo*) to describe the regional cultural phase in their national history that corresponds to the period when Fu Nan was in existence. (We will return shortly to the eponymous archaeological site named Oc Eo).