

Europe for the study of Greek and Roman cultural expansions. In Eastern Asia, orientalist scholars of colonial times transposed such worldviews, considering Indian and Chinese cultures to be the civilizing traditions at the origin of all major cultural developments of historical times. They paid little or no attention to what archaeological excavations could have revealed about daily life of the ordinary people who produced the statues and inscriptions they studied, nor about the true nature of their relationship with such daunting neighbors as China and India. Local craft productions, considered too minor, rarely found their way into museum collections. Developments in the archaeological discipline took some time to reach the field of Asian studies. In the 1930s and 1940s, debates about the need for new archaeological approaches were rife at the *École française d'Extrême-Orient* as elsewhere in Western orientalist circles.

It so happens that the Mekong delta and Fu Nan found themselves at the center of this methodological upheaval. Louis Malleret, who had been the curator of the *Musée Blanchard de la Brosse* of Sai Gon (now the Museum of Vietnamese History in Ho Chi Minh City), was hired by the *École française d'Extrême-Orient* in 1943. As early as 1937, he had followed the trail of those artifacts that had been registered into the museum collections, and carried out surveys in various areas of the Mekong delta. In the early 1940s, owing to World War II, security conditions deteriorated in most remote places, and archaeological looting increased. Malleret noticed that a large quantity of ancient artifacts, many of gold and of an unusual quality, flooded the antique market of Sai Gon. After careful inquiries, he managed to trace their provenance back to a variety of sites in the western part of the Mekong delta, and after field surveys of the region, he pinpointed a group of sites some thirty kilometers southwest of Long Xuyen, halfway between the westernmost course of the Mekong and the coast of the Gulf of Siam. The area was still difficult to reach in those times. It encompassed the slopes of a granitic outcrop called Mount Ba The and the marshy floodplain at its southeastern foot, which was dotted by slightly higher earthen mounds. The whole area was then being intensively excavated by looters, who brought to light enough gold and other artifacts with market value to sustain their activities. The most productive of the earthen tells in the floodplain carried the local name of Oc Eo. It thus became for Malleret the eponymous site of the archaeological complex that was being brought to light. After the systematic archaeological research carried out during one single intensive campaign in 1944, and after a much longer period of analysis of the data gathered in the field, it became clear to Malleret and to his fellow historians at the *École française d'Extrême-Orient* that Oc Eo was the first archaeological site ever that could unmistakably be associated with Fu Nan. Furthermore, it became obvious that the artifacts gathered there during controlled excavations (a tiny minority), and from field surveys or plain acquisition from looters and collectors, were in many ways comparable to those that had been gathered randomly from the whole Mekong delta during the preceding decades. Forty years after its revelation by Paul Pelliot, Fu Nan and the "culture of Oc Eo" had thus become an archaeological reality.³

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF OC EO AND THE OC EO CULTURE

The dramatic historical events of the next three decades, however, prevented archaeologists from carrying out further fieldwork in Oc Eo and in most of the Mekong delta. The second campaign planned by Malleret