

was aborted when the Japanese took over the government of French Indochina in March 1945. Two liberation wars followed in Viet Nam, against the French, then the Americans. The *École française d'Extrême-Orient*, after the defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu and the partition of Viet Nam, transferred its headquarters to Paris in 1956.

Louis Malleret would never return to Oc Eo, but he remained in Viet Nam between 1944 and 1957 before settling back in France. In such troubled times, during which he also became the director of the *École française d'Extrême-Orient*, he managed painstakingly to bring together all his excavation reports, and all the information he had gathered from the Sai Gon museum, including all the numerous artifacts that kept appearing in the illegal antique market. He described, photographed, analyzed, dated, and classified hundreds of objects that had found their way into museum and private collections over the past decades.⁴ Not having access to the field, he nevertheless succeeded in having aerial photographs taken of the region by low-flying aircraft. As we will see later, these photographs turned out to be crucial for the overall interpretation of the archaeology of Oc Eo.

The two-months-long intensive campaign carried out by the *École française d'Extrême-Orient* in 1944 produced a considerable amount of material, which was publicized by Louis Malleret in a short preliminary report: foundations of brick monuments, statuary, and thousands of smaller artifacts locally crafted in a variety of materials: gold, silver, bronze, tin, glass, precious and semiprecious stones, sandstone, clay, and so forth. This profusion immediately placed Oc Eo and its surroundings among the most productive sites of Southeast Asia. The chance discovery near Oc Eo of two Roman medallions dated to the early to mid-second century A.D. added the link to Europe—tenuous as it was—that could not but stir the imagination of scientists and general public alike. During the next two decades, Louis Malleret devoted considerable energy to produce the work of a lifetime: between 1959 and 1963, he wrote and the *École française d'Extrême-Orient* published a monumental monograph on the archaeology of the Mekong delta.⁵

Louis Malleret may not have been a trained archaeologist to start with, but his remarkable work did take into consideration recent progress in the field, using stratigraphical techniques when needed, carrying out physical and chemical analysis, pioneering radiocarbon dating in the region (by dating the wooden Buddhas now in the Museum of Vietnamese History), and thoroughly comparing his finds with all that was then known in Southeast Asia and all over the rest of Asia. He was the first to apply scientific field and laboratory techniques to the historical archaeology of Southeast Asia. A few more decades would pass before this kind of work resumed in the region.

Four years after the reunification of Viet Nam in 1976, Vietnamese archaeologists resumed work in the Mekong delta. Surveys were performed in those extremely tough post-reunification times, with little manpower and harsh field conditions. Another difficulty came from the profound transformations of the field in the delta: the floodplain, almost totally abandoned after the demise of Fu Nan, was then being progressively transformed into the rice granary of Viet Nam, obliterating from the surface of the marshes what little that remained visible after so many centuries. They verified Malleret's indications, and soon started bringing to light new sites, with their related artifacts and architectural remains, further confirming the importance of the "Oc Eo culture" phase of the delta's history. Test excavations were soon carried out, and then more extensive programs began

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