

down in the Ca Mau Peninsula), were at the centers of their own local radiating canal systems.

Aerial surveys in low-flying planes of the newly excavated area of Oc Eo, ordered by Louis Malleret, also revealed that most of the sites he had excavated in 1944 in the floodplain were enclosed by a series of five parallel moats forming three sides of a large rectangle 1,500 meters by approximately 2,500 to 3,000 meters (the fourth side of the rectangle is not visible in the photographs). None of these moats, revealed from the air, had remained visible on the ground in Malleret's time, when the floodplain was only a deserted marshland. The area has now been transformed into the rice granary of Viet Nam, and the radical landscape transformation has totally obliterated whatever would have earlier been discernible. One main canal that connected with the other canal leading northwest toward Angkor Borei and southwest toward the coast, near the above-mentioned site of Nen Chua, intersected the moated rectangle, dividing it precisely in two halves along its longest axis.

Malleret rightly concluded that this ancient canal network, most of it invisible from the ground, and the symmetrical arrangement of the moated settlement at Oc Eo, could only have been man-made, and that the only candidate for such a vast venture was the polity known as Fu Nan, which he had revealed to the world through earlier excavations. Since Malleret was not given the chance to return to Oc Eo after his initial excavation, he was never able to further investigate the problem in the field. The moated rectangle, considering the concentration and the functional variety of archaeological finds it enclosed, was unsurprisingly interpreted as an urban enclosure. The function of the canals remained an open question: were they used to drain the floodplain, or to transport goods by boat? (In the Mekong delta environment, irrigation functions would make no sense.)

Recent programs aimed at dating and explaining the canal system and the urban moats have brought some fascinating preliminary results. Earlier views of the growth of Southeast Asian societies, views that coupled all major economic developments to their Indianization, had it that such a large-scale undertaking could only have been achieved after that process was accomplished in Fu Nan, during and after the fifth century. It turned out, after these recent studies, that canal and moat digging had started in Fu Nan long before Indianization took place. At the latest, the urban moat at Oc Eo had already been dug by the early third century A.D., and the main canal intersecting the urban site was in use before the end of the fourth century, and possibly as early as the second century. (Dating uncertainties arise from the margins of error inherent to radiocarbon age determinations.) On the Angkor Borei side of the canal system, chronometric studies yielded comparable dates for canal digging and usage, covering the first half of the first millennium A.D.¹³

The conclusion is inescapable. Sometime around the second century A.D., the political system known to foreigners as Fu Nan achieved a socio-economic maturity that allowed it to build, all over the lower Mekong delta, a multiplicity of urbanized centers in varied environments, and to generate enough revenue through agricultural and trade economic surplus to be able to build this extensive canal system, with enough control of its population to require from it the construction of such an imposing public works assignment. The canal network was then kept functioning for a few centuries, until the demise of Fu Nan in the sixth–seventh centuries. Research on these aspects of Mekong delta history is still in its early stages, and only a very few canal profiles have so far been closely investigated. The

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