

functions of these canals were certainly complex. Drainage of the waterlogged plains, as done again in present days, is a necessity for controlled, large-scale rice cultivation; those smaller canals, seen in aerial photographs radiating from settlement sites, would probably have mainly served such purposes. The drainage of the floodplain must then have helped open up new tracts of land for rice growing. Rice chaff is indeed commonly found in potteries and bricks at Oc Eo, and aerial photographs of the 1950s and 1960s reveal some rice-field patterns that appear to be associated with the canal network. Chinese sources also mention rice in passing, and agriculture in more general terms.

None of the canals studied so far is deep enough to allow for large boats to use them as waterways. As is so common in present-day Southeast Asia, however, one can imagine a multiplicity of shallow-draft boats sailing along the main canals. The longest of all, which connected the major urban centers of Angkor Borei and Oc Eo, and the latter to the sea near the rich archaeological site of Nen Chua, must no doubt have served as a major waterway. Its very existence also presents us with a clear political signal about the level of social integration of the Fu Nan polity: whether it was a closely knit federation of city-states or a more centralized state remains debatable. Its efficiency at such early stages of development before Indianization started, however, can no longer be doubted. After the mid-third century, Fu Nan appears to act vis-à-vis the outside world as a true state, sending multiple embassies to China. Chinese records certainly acknowledge its economic and political clout: they describe the Mekong delta polity as a statelike political system centered on major urban settlements. As we have just seen, archaeology has now for the most part confirmed such first-millennium sources.

#### THE INDIANIZATION OF FU NAN

By the end of the fourth century A.D., whatever its precise political status, Fu Nan had become a landmark in the process of formation of early states in Southeast Asia. Fu Nan, including the harbor cities it controlled along the coasts of the Thai-Malay peninsula, had by then also grown into the privileged partner of merchants of all nationalities who traded goods between the Middle East, Central Asia, India, Southeast Asia, and China. Contemporary coastal sites in southern Sumatra and on the east and west coasts of peninsular Malaysia (one of them in association with third – fourth century boat remains of Southeast Asian construction), yielded tin artifacts and shards of large decorated jars of the type commonly found at Oc Eo, all indicative of contact with Fu Nan. Rather than local produce, it is the trade with northwest India and western Asia that was reshipped in the peninsular harbors controlled by Fu Nan, and that most interested the Chinese government. It is also from Fu Nan harbor centers that the Chinese got hold of productions gathered from those trading polities of insular Southeast Asia to which they still had no direct access. Much of the trade was most probably carried out in local hulls, as attested by contemporary finds and excavations of boat remains of undoubted Southeast Asian origin.<sup>14</sup> With the exception of a few bronze mirrors of the Han dynasty, and two fifth-century small bronze statues of Buddha (cat. no. 26), the almost total absence of artifacts of Chinese origin in Mekong delta sites vouches for the indirect involvement of the Chinese in the trade of Fu Nan and the South China Sea.

Exchange with India had thus been prevalent for a few centuries when the first Sanskrit inscriptions made their appearance in the Mekong