

FIG. 1
Vishnu, Vinh Long, Stone, 5th century,
Museum of Vietnamese History, Ho Chi
Minh City.



delta during the late fourth or early fifth century A.D. (cat. no. 49), together with some contemporary religious brick monuments and their statues. Some seals inscribed with Sanskrit terms found in the delta may be as old as the second or third centuries, but such easily movable objects bear no information on the religious or sociopolitical context of the sites and of their population; the single inscription of Vo Canh, far to the north of the delta near Nha Trang, has been dated on paleographical grounds to the third century, but its content, its date, and its connection with Fu Nan remain very controversial. Only during the fifth century do we start getting data substantial enough to infer that Funanese society had by then significantly moved forward in the process commonly referred to as Indianization. Indian-inspired political and religious strategies had then clearly been adopted. One of the earliest Sanskrit inscriptions of Southeast Asia was found at the major site of Go Thap: it is paleographically dated to the mid-fifth century, and provides the name of a certain King Gunavarman, and his support for sectarian, devotional forms of Vishnuism, a cult known to have been closely associated in India, and then in Southeast Asia, with kingship and political power.¹⁵

This early emphasis on cults devoted to Vishnu (in association with secondary cults to his consort Devi, to Surya, and to Shiva, in the form of *lingas*; cat. no. 30) is clearly discernible in Fu Nan as well as in most contemporary sites of peninsular Thailand, in South Sumatra, or in West Java. The majority of statues brought to light in all these areas during chance finds, and now in controlled archaeological excavations, represent the god Vishnu: together with those of the associated divinities Surya (cat. no. 53) and Devi, they all belong to one stylistic family, known as “mitered” because of the miterlike crown they all bear. The style first appears around the turn of the fifth century on the Thai peninsula, only to spread along all trade networks of western Southeast Asia during the last two centuries of Fu Nan’s existence, which indicates that these Vishnavaite cults were favored among merchant communities active along maritime routes of the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea.¹⁶ The earlier Vishnu statues found in Southeast Asia are faithful, though not exactly similar, to Indian prototypes associated with the cults of Vishnu that materialized in urban sites of the Yamuna and Ganges valleys, and later in Andhra Pradesh. Some of these still-clumsy statues of Vishnu found in Oc Eo are dated on stylistic grounds to the fifth century (fig. 1). The “mitered Vishnu” style soon underwent local evolutions in peninsular Thailand and the Mekong delta, and thereafter presented Southeast Asian features removed from Indian prototypes, thus allowing local artists to produce, in bronze and stone, some masterpieces of Southeast Asian art (cat. nos. 39, 44, 45).

Parallel to such Vishnu-related developments, Buddhism, long known to have been associated with merchants plying networks linking Indian and Southeast Asian shores, appears prominently in sites of the Mekong delta. Mahayana Buddhism then uniformly spread to most coastal areas of western Southeast Asia.¹⁷ Buddhist cults produced art forms closely inspired by Gupta, and then post-Gupta Indian styles. Statues were made of wood, bronze, or stone (cat. no. 27) with, possibly, the earliest specimens again appearing on the coasts of the Thai-Malay peninsula. Some short inscriptions bearing the Buddhist credo are often associated with these sites; they are usually engraved on votive clay tablets or on small gold plates (cat. no. 49).¹⁸

Religious monuments where Vishnu-related and Buddhist cults were founded became prominent in Mekong delta sites during the fifth century.

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It is in... ascribed to... sons drawn... peninsular... spread of st... the region. T... covered with... whole bricks... earth and b... building ma... structures, w...

At Oc... plain that h... wooden ho... turies, now... ing most of... confirms th... ably owing t... tlements we... tlement pat...

Vietn... of the Meko... with temple... mounds of... The. These... meters deep... brick or wo... covered with...