

neylike structure; the hollow part of it was filled with what appears to be ashes, laid down with beads and votive objects, mostly inscribed or decorated gold foil plates of all shapes and motifs (all, it appears, associated with Hinduism). The latter structure and cavity were covered with sand, and then filled with pebbles all the way to above the surface of the ground, leaving only a heap of stones to be seen. Such structures have logically been interpreted as funerary monuments.²¹ They are so far unique in Southeast Asia. The only possible comparison would be with Indo-Scythian funerary monuments, many of which have recently been brought to light in Central Asia. The comparison may at first sound far-fetched, and no doubt would require further investigation, but one should keep in mind that multiple facets of the Oc Eo culture display relations with the Indo-Iranian world, as has been long observed by French and other scholars. In the early centuries of the first millennium A.D., the major role of merchants from Western Asia (Sogdania and Bactria) must indeed be emphasized. Many of them are said by the Chinese to reside in the harbor of Dunsun, which passed under control of Fu Nan in the third century. One most probably has to credit these merchant communities for introducing to contemporary Southeast Asia the outstanding array of precious Indian Ocean and Mediterranean artifacts, mainly in the shape of gems and jewelry, that have been recovered in the region during the past century (the vast majority of these lack any archaeological context). Their overall numbers are small, if compared, say, with indigenous pottery or locally made beads, but their dispersal all across the region is remarkable. The economic importance of Western Asia also finds its reflection in the religious and artistic spheres. Art historians and philologists have long been aware of marked influence on artistic styles of the fifth- to seventh-century Vishnu statuary; the associated cult of Surya (and the garments worn by Surya statues) is among the most notable contemporary features pointing toward the Iranian world (cat. no. 53). Whether this influence should be traced directly to the strong presence of merchants from Western Asia in the trading communities of the time, to indirect contact via northwestern India, or probably to both factors, remains to be ascertained.

Recent archaeological excavations and the chronological sequence inferred from stratigraphical and radiocarbon sequences indicate that this turmoil of building, artistic, and architectural activities was initiated under the aegis of Indianization after A.D. 400. Rice cultivation, as has been seen, must have played an essential part in the economy of Fu Nan. Overseas commerce no doubt also played a considerable role. The site of Oc Eo itself thrived on maritime trade and related activities. Considering the abundant archaeological proof of local manufacturing of a variety of artifacts (gold, tin, and bronze ornaments, beads, pottery, and so forth), it is quite possible that the urban center at Oc Eo would have progressively transformed itself into a kind of industrial site geared toward the production and exportation (inland and overseas) of objects of superior craftsmanship. Overall growth in South China Sea maritime trade was then encouraged by the disturbances in northern China and the subsequent movement of the Chinese elite toward the southern provinces, fostering a new emerging market that was cut off from its traditional overland access to western Asian commodities. The Chinese now only had access to the avidly sought-after western Asian productions and a few Southeast Asian commodities via Fu Nan and its trade network. The commodities obtained in return must have been fed into the Funanese hinterland via the canal and natural rivers network.

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