

THE DEMISE OF FU NAN

All recent archaeological excavations and the chronological sequence inferred from stratigraphical and radiocarbon sequences indicate that this turmoil of building, and artistic, architectural, and commercial activities, initiated under the impetus of Indianization in the late fourth or early fifth centuries, came to a halt about A.D. 650.

Again, the Oc Eo/Ba The site complex may present us with a paradigm for the whole of Fu Nan. Religious sites that had been built on the slopes of Ba The were abandoned for an undetermined period of time, but remained conspicuous in their stratigraphical sequences. Bricks of earlier monuments, dating back to Fu Nan times, were then reutilized to build new monuments that remained in use, going through various reconstruction phases over the course of five or six more centuries. The style of the statuary evolved in Oc Eo, as well as in other Mekong Delta sites, into what is known as a pre-Angkorian style, and later into clearly Angkorian styles. Glazed ceramics produced in Khmer kilns of the ninth to twelfth centuries are occasionally found in the upper layers of the excavated sites. Khmer monuments of pre-Angkorian and Angkorian styles, with their easily datable lintels and other stone architectural features, continued to be built or rebuilt on higher ground, on the granitic outcrops that punctuate the floodplain, all the way from Angkor Borei to the coast of the South China Sea. The scarcity of archaeological research on these later periods outside of Mount Ba The does not permit us to draw firm conclusions from the often circumstantial evidence at hand; it does, however, appear that the whole region, previously a center of economic and political power, now had turned into the periphery of the emerging Khmer state. The center of gravity of the latter, as is well known, shifted progressively inland, with a seventh-century capital at Sambor Prei Kuk, and finally, after the eighth century, at Angkor proper, in the fertile plains around the vast inland lake known as Tonle Sap.

Economic activities, however, appear to have trickled down to a regional, if not to a local, sphere. The floodplain urban center at Oc Eo seems to have been abruptly abandoned, and the canals, untended, slowly filled in. Not enough research has so far been carried out to provide reliable answers to the many questions raised by such radical transformations in settlement patterns and modes of production in the Mekong delta. Chinese sources, and to an extent, a growing body of inscriptions, some written in Khmer after the seventh century, provide political rationalizations of such events. According to Chinese authors, Fu Nan was replaced by a polity known to them as Zhenla, which historians logically associate with events and art styles of pre-Angkorian times. These discourses, however, do not answer the fundamental questions about the share of environmental, economic, or political factors behind such momentous socioeconomic changes.

Did the digging of the canals put into motion a silting process uncontrollable by means of then-contemporary hydraulic technology, bringing rice production to a progressive halt? Did the growth of agriculture in the interior plains of present-day Cambodia, and the progressive shift inland of the political centers of the southern Indochina peninsula, bring about as a consequence the abandonment of the larger coastal centers? It has been argued that, in the face of increasing competition from the Austronesian-speaking states fast developing in insular Southeast Asia in the fifth century, the maritime trade revenues of Fu Nan fell sharply, bringing about the end of the dominance by the people of Fu Nan in the trade