

31. SIMHAMUKHA ARCHITECTURAL ORNAMENT

Oc Eo site, An Giang Province, 6th century

Terra cotta, H: 24 cm × W: 33 cm × D: 12 cm

Museum of Vietnamese History, Ho Chi Minh City, BTLS 1751

Since lions are not native to Southeast Asia, a foreign source is indicated for its appearance in the art of the region. The *simhamukha* (lion face) appears in Indian art, where the lion symbolized royalty. Louis Malleret, who excavated the site of Oc Eo, suggested influence from Amaravati, Andhra Pradesh, on the eastern coast of India. Another relationship can be seen with Thai Dvaravati art; a seventh-eighth century socle, found at the Buddhist site of Nakhon Pathom in Thailand, displays a lion with a silly face surprisingly similar to this example.¹⁸ The Dvaravati lion is on a socle that formed the base of a pillar supporting a *cakra*.

This example was found amid the debris of bricks in the northeast corner of monument K at Oc Eo, and we might surmise that it was originally mounted in the brickwork of the temple's exterior. Most decoration of a Hindu temple is arrayed on its exterior, as the interior is generally a small space for use by individual devotees. Auspicious figures are the norm; they both demarcate the sacred space and create the appropriate atmosphere for that space. A similar pantheon

of auspicious beings—both animals and minor divinities—is found on the exterior of a Buddhist temple, hence this figure is not helpful in revealing the significance of the building it adorned.

The figure combines anthropomorphic features—the crossed arms and overall arrangement of the facial features—with the obvious leonine aspects of the face. Serving an auspicious function, the *simhamukha* appears welcoming rather than protective.

LITERATURE

Louis Malleret, *L'Archéologie du Delta du Mekong*, vol. 1, 1959.