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Buddhist Civilization on Óc Eo, Vietnam

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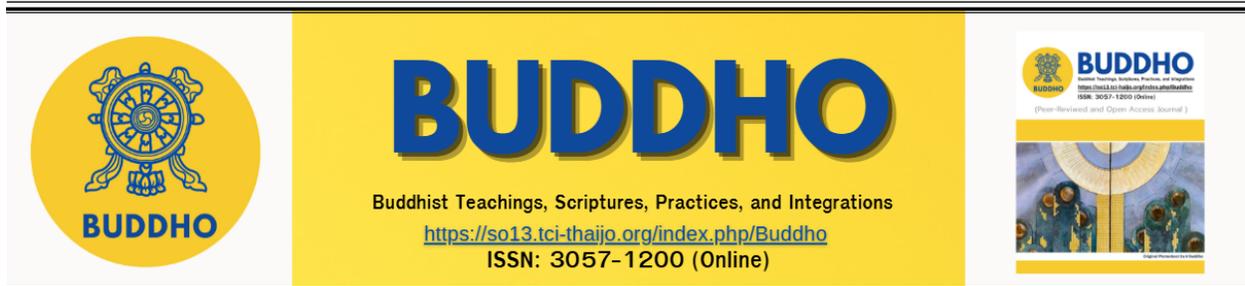
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Buddhist Civilization on Óc Eo, Vietnam **Phramaha Chakrapol Acharashubho Thepa***

Abstract

The Óc Eo culture, an archaeological site in southern Vietnam, represents a significant intersection of Buddhist civilization and ancient Southeast Asian maritime trade networks. This study explores the historical roots of Buddhist influence in Óc Eo, drawing on archaeological findings, inscriptions, and ancient texts to reconstruct the cultural and religious landscape of the region. The research highlights the role of Óc Eo as a vital center in the ancient kingdom of Funan (1st–7th century CE), where Buddhism coexisted with Hindu traditions, facilitated by extensive trade with India and China. By examining artifacts such as Buddha images, votive tablets, and structural remains, the study provides insights into the transmission of Buddhist thought and practices in early Vietnam. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how Buddhism integrated with local traditions, shaping the religious and cultural identity of Óc Eo.

Keywords: Buddhist, Civilization, Óc Eo, Vietnam

Introduction

The Óc Eo culture, an important archaeological site in southern Vietnam, offers valuable insights into the development of Buddhist civilization in ancient Southeast Asia. As a major trade hub of the Funan Kingdom (c. 1st–7th century CE), Óc Eo connected South and East Asia, facilitating the transmission of religious and cultural traditions, including Buddhism (Manguin, 2004). Archaeological excavations have uncovered a wealth of material evidence, including Buddha images, inscriptions in Sanskrit and Pali, and votive tablets, indicating the presence of an active Buddhist community in the region (Jacq-Hergoualc’h, 2002). These findings suggest that Buddhism coexisted with Hindu traditions and local beliefs, forming a unique syncretic culture in early Vietnam.

The historical study of Buddhist influence in Óc Eo relies on ancient sources, such as Chinese historical records, Sanskrit inscriptions, and early Buddhist texts. The Liang Shu (Book of Liang) and Nanqishu (History of the Southern Qi) provide accounts of Funan’s rulers and their adoption

of Indian religious traditions, including Buddhism (Coedès, 1968). Meanwhile, inscriptions found in the Mekong Delta region confirm the presence of Buddhist stūpas and monastic institutions, reinforcing the idea that Funan played a crucial role in the early spread of Buddhism in mainland Southeast Asia (Vickery, 1998).

This study seeks to analyze the Buddhist civilization of Óc Eo through a multidisciplinary approach, integrating archaeological data, textual sources, and historical interpretations. By doing so, it aims to reconstruct the religious and cultural landscape of the region and understand the factors that contributed to the emergence and development of Buddhism in southern Vietnam. Through an examination of ancient sources and recent archaeological discoveries, this research sheds light on the broader patterns of cultural exchange and religious adaptation that shaped early Southeast Asian civilizations.

The Óc Eo culture, located in the Mekong Delta region of southern Vietnam, represents a significant archaeological and historical phenomenon in Southeast Asia. Often associated with the ancient kingdom of Funan (c. 1st–7th century CE), Óc Eo is widely regarded as an essential hub in the maritime trade networks that connected India, China, and the broader Indian Ocean world (Manguin, 2004). This article critically examines the historical significance of Óc Eo, its material culture, and its role in shaping early Southeast Asian civilization. By analyzing archaeological findings and historical records, this study offers a narrative reconstruction of Óc Eo's influence while critically evaluating scholarly debates on its socio-political and religious dynamics.

The Óc Eo Culture of Important Archaeological Site in Southern Vietnam

Historical Context and Archaeological Findings

The discovery of Óc Eo in the early 20th century by French archaeologist Louis Malleret led to significant insights into Funan's socio-economic and cultural complexity (Malleret, 1959). Situated in the Mekong Delta, Óc Eo is characterized by an extensive network of canals, indicative of advanced hydraulic engineering and trade-oriented urban planning. These sophisticated water management systems suggest that the Funan civilization possessed a high degree of technological and infrastructural development (Stark, 2006; Vickery, 1998). The presence of large-scale canal networks, which likely served both agricultural and commercial functions, reinforces the idea that Óc Eo was a central hub in a vast trading empire that facilitated exchanges between the Indian subcontinent and East Asia (Bellina & Glover, 2004). These findings align with historical Chinese records, such as those by the Liang Dynasty historian Yao Silian, which describe Funan as a prosperous maritime power engaging in extensive international commerce (Pelliot, 1903).

Archaeological excavations at Óc Eo have uncovered a diverse range of artifacts that highlight the extensive cross-cultural interactions of Funan. Among these artifacts are Roman coins, including those from emperors such as Antoninus Pius (r. 138–161 CE) and Marcus Aurelius (r. 161–180 CE), suggesting direct or indirect trade links with the Mediterranean world (Miksic, 2013). Additionally, numerous Indian-style seals and amulets bearing Sanskrit inscriptions have

been found, indicative of deep religious and economic connections with South Asia (Jacq-Hergoualc'h, 2002). Buddhist votive tablets, along with statues of Hindu deities such as Vishnu and Shiva, further underscore the integration of Indian religious and philosophical traditions into Funan's social fabric (Coedès, 1968; Glover & Bellina, 2011). The presence of inscriptions in both Sanskrit and Pali supports theories that Indian influence was not merely imposed but was actively adapted and localized by Funan elites and religious communities (Hall, 2011).

Recent research has also emphasized the role of local agency in Funan's engagement with global trade networks. Studies suggest that rather than being passive recipients of foreign influences, the inhabitants of Óc Eo selectively adopted and modified external elements to fit their cultural and economic needs (Manguin, 2016). This challenges earlier notions of unilateral Indianization and instead presents a model of reciprocal interaction between South and Southeast Asia. Isotopic and compositional analyses of beads and ceramics found at Óc Eo indicate that the city not only imported goods but also produced high-quality items for export, contributing to its prominence in early Southeast Asian trade routes (Bellina, 2014).

The convergence of archaeological and textual evidence paints a picture of Óc Eo as a dynamic and cosmopolitan center within the Funan polity. The site's strategic position in the Mekong Delta facilitated its role as a conduit for goods, ideas, and technologies between the Indian Ocean, China, and the broader Southeast Asian region. Future excavations and interdisciplinary research will likely yield further insights into the complexities of Funan's trade networks, governance, and cultural adaptations.

Religious and Cultural Synthesis

One of the most critical aspects of Óc Eo is its role in the diffusion of Buddhism and Hinduism. The site contains numerous Buddhist relics, including depictions of Bodhisattvas and inscriptions referencing Mahayana doctrines (Vickery, 1998). However, Hindu iconography, such as representations of Vishnu and Shiva, also appears in the archaeological record, suggesting a pluralistic religious environment (Glover & Bellina, 2011). The presence of both Mahayana Buddhist and Hindu elements suggests that Funan's religious landscape was fluid, allowing multiple belief systems to coexist and interact within the same social and political framework (Higham, 2014).

This coexistence of Hindu and Buddhist elements aligns with broader Southeast Asian religious patterns, where indigenous traditions interwove with imported Indic beliefs. The adaptability of Funan's rulers in accommodating these influences may have contributed to the kingdom's economic and political resilience (Higham, 2014). This religious and cultural synthesis was further reinforced by inscriptions and sculptures discovered at Óc Eo, which demonstrate an amalgamation of local animist traditions with elements of Indian cosmology and mythology (Manguin, 2009). The widespread use of Sanskrit in religious texts, alongside Pali inscriptions linked to early Theravāda traditions, indicates an intellectual and theological exchange that shaped the spiritual and philosophical outlook of Funan's society (Coedès, 1968; Glover, 2018).

Artifacts such as ritual objects, votive tablets, and temple foundations indicate that Óc Eo functioned as a key religious center, attracting scholars, monks, and traders who facilitated the

transmission of spiritual knowledge across maritime routes (Bellina, 2014). The depiction of Avalokiteśvara and Prajñāpāramitā in Buddhist iconography, alongside Shaivite and Vaishnavite motifs in Hindu art, reveals a deep interconnection between different religious ideologies (Miksic, 2013). This pluralistic environment highlights the strategic role of Funan as an intermediary in the religious and cultural exchanges between South and East Asia.

The study of Óc Eo thus provides essential insights into how ancient Southeast Asian societies negotiated cultural exchange without wholly assimilating into external traditions. Instead, they selectively adapted and synthesized foreign elements, creating a unique and resilient cultural identity that would influence subsequent polities, including the Khmer Empire (Hall, 2011). Ongoing research into newly discovered inscriptions and temple sites promises to deepen our understanding of the spiritual dynamics within Funan and its lasting legacy on regional religious developments.

Critique and Scholarly Debates

Despite the wealth of archaeological and textual evidence, scholarly debates continue regarding the precise nature of Óc Eo's socio-political organization. Some scholars argue that Funan was a centralized state with a hierarchical governance structure, while others contend that it functioned as a loosely connected network of trading polities (Vickery, 1998). The lack of definitive inscriptions detailing a unified state structure makes it difficult to ascertain whether Óc Eo was the capital or merely a prominent city within Funan's broader economic system (Manguin, 2004).

Additionally, questions remain regarding the extent to which Funan's cultural elements were indigenous versus externally derived. Earlier colonial-era scholars emphasized an "Indianization" model that framed Southeast Asia as a passive recipient of Indian culture (Coedès, 1968). This perspective suggested that Indian merchants, Brahmins, and Buddhist missionaries introduced advanced religious, political, and economic institutions to the region, fundamentally shaping its early state formations (Mabbett, 1977). However, contemporary research challenges this unidirectional diffusionist model and instead highlights the agency of local actors in selectively adopting and transforming foreign influences (Hall, 2011; Glover & Bellina, 2011).

Recent archaeological findings indicate that Funan's engagement with Indian culture was not merely imitative but involved a process of adaptation and syncretism. Material evidence, such as inscriptions and trade artifacts, suggests a complex network of interactions in which indigenous elites played a central role in mediating external influences (Stark, 2006; Bellina, 2014). This reinterpretation aligns with broader scholarly trends that emphasize cultural hybridity and reciprocal exchange rather than passive reception (Kulke & Rothermund, 2004).

Moreover, the presence of indigenous animistic and Austroasiatic elements in Funan's religious and political structures suggests that Indian cultural features were often integrated into pre-existing local frameworks rather than imposed wholesale (Jacques, 1979). This hybridity is evident in epigraphic records that blend Sanskrit with local languages and in Funan's iconographic representations that incorporate both Indic and native motifs (Vickery, 1998).

Thus, rather than viewing Funan as merely a product of external Indianization, a more nuanced approach acknowledges the role of indigenous agency in shaping its cultural and political evolution. The shift from a diffusionist paradigm to one of reciprocal adaptation underscores the dynamic interplay between local traditions and foreign influences in early Southeast Asian history (Miksic & Goh, 2017).

The nature of Funan's decline is also a subject of scholarly contention. Some theories suggest environmental changes, such as shifts in the Mekong Delta's hydrology, contributed to its downfall (Stark, 2006). Others propose that internal socio-political transformations or the rise of competing polities like Chenla played a more significant role (Vickery, 1998; Miksic, 2013). The ongoing reassessment of Funan's historical trajectory highlights the importance of interdisciplinary approaches, incorporating archaeological, linguistic, and environmental evidence to construct a more comprehensive picture of this early Southeast Asian civilization.

The Buddhist Civilization of Óc Eo of Multidisciplinary Approach to Understanding its Religious and Cultural Landscape

The Buddhist civilization of Óc Eo, located in present-day southern Vietnam, represents a fascinating intersection of indigenous Southeast Asian traditions and foreign influences, particularly from India. This essay aims to reconstruct the religious and cultural landscape of Óc Eo through a multidisciplinary approach, integrating archaeological data, textual sources, and historical interpretations. By doing so, it seeks to understand the factors that contributed to the emergence and development of Buddhism in the region, a process that was deeply intertwined with both local traditions and external influences.

Archaeological Evidence: Unveiling the Material Culture

Archaeological excavations at Óc Eo have provided valuable insights into the material culture of the region, revealing the complex interaction between indigenous and foreign elements. Óc Eo was a thriving port city between the 1st and 7th centuries CE, serving as a hub for maritime trade and cultural exchange. Archaeological evidence, such as inscriptions, sculpture, and artifacts, offers a glimpse into the religious practices and cultural norms of the time. Notably, the discovery of stone sculptures of the Buddha and depictions of Hindu deities in the region suggests a syncretic religious environment where Buddhism and Hinduism coexisted and influenced each other (Bellina, 2014).

The presence of Buddhist relics in the archaeological record, including stupa remains, terracotta figurines, and votive tablets, further supports the idea that Buddhism played a significant role in the religious landscape of Óc Eo (Miksic, 2009). These artifacts indicate that Buddhist monasticism, rituals, and iconography were integral to the lives of the local population, highlighting the early spread of Indian religious traditions in the region. Furthermore, the art and architecture of Óc Eo reflect the adaptation of Indian religious iconography to local tastes and materials, illustrating the process of cultural negotiation (Glover & Bellina, 2011).

Textual Sources: Ancient Records and Religious Writings

In addition to the material evidence, textual sources from the period offer a deeper understanding of the religious and cultural milieu of Óc Eo. Early Chinese chronicles, such as the Hou Han Shu and Sanguozhi, provide references to the region's role in maritime trade and its connections with India. These texts mention the Kingdom of Funan, which included the Óc Eo region, and describe the spread of Buddhism through the region. The records highlight the presence of Buddhist monks and the establishment of Buddhist monasteries, underscoring the importance of religious exchange between India and Southeast Asia (Tachibana, 1993).

The Sanskrit and Old Khmer inscriptions found in the region also offer valuable information about the religious practices of the time. These inscriptions, often carved on stone or metal, reveal the patronage of local rulers and elites who supported Buddhist institutions. They also mention the construction of stupas and the dedication of religious offerings, which further emphasize the significant role of Buddhism in the political and social spheres of Óc Eo (Mabbett, 1997). These texts are instrumental in tracing the development of Buddhist thought and practice in the region and understanding the complex relationship between Buddhism and local traditions.

Historical Interpretations: Buddhism's Role in the Rise of Óc Eo

The emergence of Buddhism in Óc Eo can be understood within the broader historical context of the Funan Kingdom and its interactions with India. The Funan Kingdom, often considered one of the earliest Indianized states in Southeast Asia, was a center of cultural exchange where Indian religious and cultural practices were adopted and adapted by local rulers and elites (Coedès, 1968). The spread of Buddhism to Óc Eo was likely facilitated by the establishment of trade networks that connected Southeast Asia with India and other parts of the ancient world (Stark, 2006).

Historical interpretations of the rise of Buddhism in Óc Eo often focus on the role of political elites in promoting Buddhism as a tool for consolidating power and enhancing the legitimacy of the state. Rulers of Funan and neighboring regions may have adopted Buddhism to strengthen their political authority, utilizing Buddhist institutions and symbols to assert their sovereignty over both local populations and foreign trade networks (Jacques, 1979). Additionally, the establishment of Buddhist monastic centers and the patronage of religious rituals would have helped to solidify social cohesion and foster a sense of collective identity among the inhabitants of Óc Eo.

The Syncretic Nature of Buddhism in Óc Eo

One of the key features of Buddhism in Óc Eo was its syncretic nature, blending elements of Indian Buddhist traditions with indigenous Southeast Asian beliefs. The fusion of Hinduism and Buddhism in Óc Eo can be seen in the region's religious iconography, where Buddhist images are often depicted alongside Hindu deities (Vickery, 1998). This syncretism reflects the fluid nature

of religious practice in Óc Eo, where local traditions and foreign influences were not in opposition but were instead integrated into a cohesive cultural system.

The integration of Buddhist teachings with indigenous Southeast Asian religious beliefs may have helped Buddhism gain acceptance among the local population. For example, Buddhist concepts of karma and rebirth could be harmonized with local animistic beliefs about ancestral spirits and nature deities. This process of religious adaptation ensured that Buddhism was not only a foreign import but became an integral part of the region's spiritual and cultural fabric (Miksic & Goh, 2017).

The Buddhist civilization of Óc Eo was shaped by a dynamic interplay of indigenous traditions and external influences, particularly from India. By adopting a multidisciplinary approach that integrates archaeological data, textual sources, and historical interpretations, we can reconstruct the religious and cultural landscape of Óc Eo and gain a deeper understanding of the factors that contributed to the emergence and development of Buddhism in southern Vietnam. The archaeological evidence, along with historical texts and inscriptions, highlights the significant role of Buddhism in the political and social life of the region. The syncretic nature of Buddhism in Óc Eo demonstrates how local traditions and foreign influences interacted to create a unique religious civilization that influenced the broader Southeast Asian cultural sphere.

The Óc Eo culture stands as a testament to the dynamic nature of early Southeast Asian civilizations. Through extensive trade, religious synthesis, and localized adaptations of foreign influences, Óc Eo exemplifies the complexity of cultural interactions in antiquity. Ongoing archaeological research and critical re-evaluations of historical narratives continue to reshape our understanding of this significant site. As new discoveries emerge, Óc Eo will undoubtedly remain a focal point in studies of ancient global connections and Southeast Asian history.

Conclusion

The Óc Eo archaeological site offers invaluable insights into the complex religious, cultural, and economic landscape of the Funan Kingdom, illustrating a dynamic interaction between local traditions and foreign influences, particularly from India. Through a multidisciplinary approach combining archaeological findings, textual sources, and historical interpretations, it is evident that Óc Eo served as a major hub for the diffusion of Buddhism and other Indic traditions in Southeast Asia. The syncretic nature of Buddhism in Óc Eo, where it coexisted and intertwined with Hinduism and indigenous beliefs, showcases the adaptability and resilience of local cultures in embracing external religious ideologies. Moreover, the thriving trade networks, advanced infrastructure, and flourishing of religious centers suggest that Óc Eo was not only an economic powerhouse but also a vital center of cultural exchange. The site's significance extends beyond just the study of Funan's past—it continues to inform our understanding of early Southeast Asian civilizations and their role in the broader context of global historical development.

Suggestions

Future research on the Óc Eo culture should focus on several key areas to deepen our understanding of the region's historical and cultural significance. First, continued excavation efforts at the site may uncover further material evidence, including inscriptions and artifacts, that can shed light on the religious and political dynamics of the Funan Kingdom. Additionally, interdisciplinary approaches involving environmental studies, isotopic analysis, and further collaboration between archaeologists and historians will provide a more nuanced understanding of the socio-economic factors that influenced the region's development. Second, exploring the linguistic and cultural exchange between local communities and foreign traders could offer new perspectives on the degree to which local traditions shaped the adoption and adaptation of Indian religious and political models. Lastly, comparative studies with other Southeast Asian sites, particularly those that were part of the maritime trade network, will help place Óc Eo within a broader regional context, enhancing our understanding of the interconnectedness of early civilizations.

Body of Knowledge

The Óc Eo culture stands as a compelling case of cultural synthesis, where indigenous Southeast Asian practices and beliefs seamlessly integrated with foreign ideas and technologies. As a major trading port and political center of Funan, Óc Eo's role in the transmission of Buddhism and Hinduism highlights the dynamic nature of religious and cultural exchange in the region. The discovery of Buddhist artifacts, such as votive tablets and statues, alongside Hindu religious symbols, demonstrates the simultaneous coexistence and intermingling of these two major religious traditions.

The site's location in the Mekong Delta and its advanced hydraulic infrastructure reveal the technological and economic prowess of the Funan people. The region's participation in global trade networks, including exchanges with India, China, and the Mediterranean, facilitated the flow of not only goods but also religious and philosophical ideas. This exchange contributed to the gradual but significant spread of Buddhism in the region, as evidenced by the establishment of monastic centers and the patronage of religious practices by Funan elites.

Moreover, the interplay between local animistic beliefs and foreign religious traditions resulted in a unique syncretic religious environment in Óc Eo. The integration of Buddhist concepts with indigenous Southeast Asian notions of karma and ancestral spirits facilitated the acceptance of Buddhism among the local population, allowing it to thrive alongside Hinduism and other indigenous practices. The shared use of Sanskrit and Pali inscriptions further exemplifies the intellectual and theological exchange that occurred in the region, highlighting the fusion of local and foreign traditions to create a distinct religious and cultural identity.

In sum, the Óc Eo civilization exemplifies the richness and complexity of early Southeast Asian history, where cultural hybridity, religious pluralism, and economic prosperity were interwoven into a dynamic society that played a central role in the history of the region.

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