



Beyond Nandin: Iconography of Humped and Non-Humped Bovines on Oc Eo Gold Plaques

Võ Thị Huỳnh Như

Researcher, University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University – Ho Chi Minh city, Vietnam

* Corresponding Author: Võ Thị Huỳnh Như

Article Info

ISSN (online): 2583-8261

Volume: 04

Issue: 05

September – October 2025

Received: 02-07-2025

Accepted: 05-08-2025

Published: 25-08-2025

Page No: 22-30

Abstract

The iconography of bovines on gold plaques from the Oc Eo culture in the Mekong Delta (1st–7th centuries CE) has predominantly been interpreted through the lens of Indianization, with most depictions identified as Nandin, the sacred bull and vāhana of Shiva. However, this monolithic interpretation overlooks the morphological distinction between humped and non-humped bovines portrayed on these artifacts. This paper focuses on the bovine imagery on Oc Eo gold plaques, specifically examining the differences between these two types. Of the 503 gold plaques analyzed, 62 feature bovine figures, comprising 26 depictions of humped bovines and 36 of non-humped bovines. These two iconographic types exhibit distinct geographical distributions and do not co-occur on the same artifact. The research findings suggest that while the humped cattle are closely associated with the religious identity of Nandin, the non-humped cattle likely represent a different system of meaning, possibly related to the local fauna of the natural environment or distinct ritualistic functions. Therefore, the parallel presence of both bovine types indicates a complex symbolic system in which imported religious concepts coexisted and interacted with indigenous natural and social values.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.54660/IJSSER.2025.4.5.22-30>

Keywords: Bovine Iconography, Gold Plaques, Indianization, Local Symbolism, Oc Eo Culture

1. Introduction

The Óc Eo culture (1st–7th centuries CE), widespread throughout the Mekong Delta, is considered a crucial component in the formation and development of the ancient Funan kingdom. Within its rich repository of archaeological artifacts, gold plaques stand out as a distinctive category: thin gold sheets, with or without engraved motifs, typically discovered in sacred deposits or foundation pits at the center of religious architecture. Recent research has affirmed that these were not funerary goods, as previously thought, but rather votive offerings used in religious ceremonies, directly linked to communal worship practices. Consequently, these gold leaves have become an invaluable source for accessing the worldview and spiritual life of the Óc Eo populace.

Among the 503 gold plaques artifacts systematically cataloged and analyzed, 62 items depict bovine figures, comprising 26 humped and 36 non-humped cattle. This is one of the most frequently occurring themes, second only to prevalent symbols such as the Chakra wheel, the lotus, and the Shankha shell. However, while previous studies have often confined their analysis to identifying cattle as a general religious animal icon, a systematic differentiation between the two types—humped (Zebu) and non-humped cattle—has not yet been undertaken in depth. This research gap limits our understanding of the layers of symbolic meaning and the socio-religious roles that each type represented.

This paper thus poses the following research question: What the differences in morphology, spatial distribution, and accompanying symbolic assemblages of humped and non-humped cattle reveal about the religious beliefs, social stratification,

and the process of cultural acculturation within the Óc Eo community? It proceeds from the hypothesis that the humped cattle (Nandin) is an imported symbol associated with Shaivism, utilized within the orthodox religious spaces of the elite and ruling classes. The non-humped cattle, conversely, reflects the imprint of indigenous beliefs, connected to the natural environment and local ecosystem, or is a reflection of a native creed. By analyzing the bovine iconography on gold leaves—through morphological features, distribution across archaeological sites (such as Đá Nổi, Gò Tháp, and Giồng Xoài), and the relationship with accompanying symbols—this study aims to contribute to decoding the multi-layered and syncretic nature of Óc Eo religion.

2. Literature Review and Research Methods

Research on the Oc Eo culture and its gold artifacts has a long trajectory shaped by both foreign and Vietnamese scholars. Early foundations were laid during the French colonial period, with Paul Pelliot (1903) ^[1] identifying Funan's geographical extent and religious relics. The most significant milestone was Louis Malleret's four-volume *L'Archéologie du delta du Mékong* (1959–1963), which catalogued over 1,300 gold artifacts, though jewelry dominated over plaques ^[2, 3]. George Cœdès (1944) ^[4] further emphasized the link between Oc Eo remains and the Funan kingdom ^[4].

After 1975, Vietnamese archaeologists initiated systematic excavations at sites such as Oc Eo, Go Thap, Nen Chua, and Da Noi, uncovering hundreds of gold plaques in reliable contexts. This led to more rigorous studies, notably "*Văn hóa Óc Eo những khám phá mới*" (1995) by Lê Xuân Diệm, Đào Linh Côn, and Võ Sĩ Khải, which classified 298 plaques into six thematic groups ^[5]. Later syntheses by Bùi Chí Hoàng (2019) and Phạm Đức Mạnh (2019) expanded the corpus and highlighted both Hindu symbolism and local natural elements ^[6, 7].

Among individual scholars, Lê Thị Liên has made the most influential contributions. Through a series of publications, she analyzed the iconography, inscriptions, and symbolic contexts of gold plaques, linking them to Shaiva and Vaishnava traditions while also situating them within the Mekong's maritime trade and state-formation processes. Her recent work integrates iconographic and paleographic approaches, reinforcing the deep Indo-Vietnamese cultural connections between the 1st and 8th centuries CE ^[8, 9, 10, 11, 12].

Methodological Approach

A multi-faceted approach combining quantitative and qualitative methods was employed to analyze the data, guided by theories of semiotics and cultural acculturation. The analysis was conducted in three successive stages:

Typological and Morphological Analysis: The initial step involved a typological classification of the 62 bovine images on plaques based on the primary morphological distinction: the presence or absence of a hump. Each image was systematically described, noting key features such as posture (e.g., standing, lying down), orientation, anatomical details (horns, tail), and stylistic execution. This detailed morphological analysis established the foundational criteria for differentiating the two bovine groups beyond the simple

presence of a hump.

Iconographic and Contextual Analysis: To decode the symbolic meaning of each bovine type, a detailed iconographic analysis was performed. This involved identifying and cataloging all accompanying symbols that form a "symbolic assemblage" with each bovine figure. These associated motifs include prevalent Hindu symbols such as the Chakra wheel, Shankha shell, lotus, trident (Trishula), and crescent moon. The frequency and combination of these symbols were statistically analyzed for both the humped and non-humped cattle groups. Crucially, this iconographic data was interpreted in relation to its archaeological context. The spatial distribution of humped versus non-humped cattle plaques across different religious centers was mapped to identify patterns of prevalence. Special attention was paid to the specific depositional context, primarily the central ritual pits within religious architecture, as the function of these structures is integral to interpreting the ritualistic role of the artifacts.

Comparative Analysis: Finally, a comparative analysis was conducted to situate the bovine iconography within a broader regional and intercultural framework. The characteristics of the Óc Eo cattle plaques were compared with: (1)-Contemporaneous Hindu iconography from India to trace the origins and fidelity of the symbolic language; (2)-Artifacts from other Indianized sites in Southeast Asia, particularly the gold plaques from the Cát Tiên sanctuary complex in Vietnam, to highlight shared traditions and local divergences. This comparative method was essential for evaluating the processes of cultural transmission and local adaptation, allowing for a nuanced discussion of how imported religious ideas (Indianization) were interpreted and transformed to fit indigenous belief systems (localization).

3. Archaeological Background

To date, gold plaques artifacts have been discovered at 39 archaeological sites to date, located across the provinces of An Giang, Kien Giang, Tra Vinh, Tien Giang, Dong Thap, Long An, and Dong Nai.

Oc Eo (Óc Eo): Located in Vọng Thê commune, Thoại Sơn district, An Giang province. This is a vast complex, spanning approximately 15x15 km, extending from the eastern slope of Ba The Mountain to the Giồng Cát – Giồng Xoài field. During the 1983 excavation, a total of 5 gold plaques were found in structures designated 83OE-A5, 83OE-A7, and 83OE-GD1 ^[5]. In the 2017 excavation season, at the Go Sau Thuan site, 40 small and fragmented gold pieces were discovered in excavation pit KT08 ^[13].

Da Noi (Đá Nổi): Located in Hoa Tay B hamlet, Phu Hoa commune, Thoại Sơn district, An Giang province. Excavated in 1985, the site includes 7 locations designated by excavators as 85DN-M1 through 85DN-M7. A quantity of 316 gold plaques was found at locations: 85DN-M2, 85DN-M4, 85DN-M5, and 85DN-M7 ^[5].

Nen Chua (Nền Chùa): Located in Hamlet 3, Tan Hoi commune, Tan Hiep district, Kien Giang province. This site was excavated twice, in 1982 and 1983. In 3 of the 19 architectural ruins, 23 gold plaques were discovered: 83NC-NC1, 82NC-PN1, and 82NC-BCX6 ^[5].

Giồng Xoài (Giồng Xoài): Located in Son Hoa hamlet, My Hiep Son commune, Hon Dat district, Kien Giang province. Through excavations conducted from 1996 to 2002, two large brick structures were discovered. Within one of these, structure 02GX-KT1, 40 gold plaques artifacts were found ^[5].

Ke Mot (*Kè Môt*): Located in Hiep Hoa hamlet, Vinh Binh Bac commune, Vinh Thuan district, Kien Giang province. It was excavated in 1990, where 12 gold plaques fragments were found ^[5].

Luu Cu (*Luu Cù*): Located in Luu Nghiep Anh commune, Tra Cu district, Tra Vinh province. The site comprises numerous residential areas and ancient structures. Among them, the Luu Cu II structure, excavated in 1986-1987, yielded 20 fragmented gold pieces ^[5].

Go Thanh (*Gò Thành*): Located in Tân Thành hamlet, Tân Thuan Binh commune, Cho Gao district, Tien Giang province. Excavated in 1988–1989, the work yielded 106 gold plaques from the following structures: 88GT–M1, 88GT–M2, 89GT–M1, 89GT–M2, 89GT–M3, 89GT–M4, 89GT–M5, 89GT–M6, 89GT–M7, and 89GT–M8 ^[5].

Go Thap (*Gò Tháp*): Located in Hamlet 1, Tân Kieu commune, Thap Muoi district, Dong Thap province. This is a large archaeological complex, excavated multiple times

between 1984 and 2020. A total of 321 gold plaques and numerous gold fragments were found in the traces of the following structures: 84GTTS2-A7 (M1), 84GTTS2-A8 (M2), 93GT-M1, 93GT-M2, 93GT-M3, 93GT-M4, 93GT-M5, and 13GT-10 ^[5].

Go Xoai (*Gò Xoài*): Located in Duc Hoa Ha commune, Duc Hoa district, Long An province. During the 1987 excavation, 20 gold plaques and many gold fragments were discovered ^[5].

Go Tram Quy (*Gò Trâm Quy*): Located in Thuan Hoa hamlet, Hoa Khanh Nam commune, Duc Hoa district, Long An province. In the 1987 excavation, 50 gold plaques were found ^[5].

Go Hang (*Gò Hàng*): Located in Vinh Dai commune, Vinh Hung district, Long An province. During a test excavation in 1989, 1 gold plaque was discovered ^[5].

Rach Dong (*Rạch Đông*): Located in Ho Nai commune, Thong Nhat district, Long An province. During the 1992 excavation, 5 gold plaques were found ^[5].



Fig. 1: Map showing the distribution of Oc Eo archaeological sites with gold leaf findings (Compiled by the author using a Google Earth base)

Of the 1008 gold fragments recovered from these sites, 503 bear depictions of various motifs. Among these, the imagery on 436 artifacts has been identified, accounting for 86.68%; the content on the remaining 67 fragments (13.32%) could not be determined. The reasons for this include damage to the gold pieces (such as tears and oxidation), faint engravings, and the abstract nature of some depictions, which made identification difficult. Across the 436 identifiable artifacts, a total of 667 individual motifs were recognized, belonging to 45 different themes. These themes can be divided into six main categories: I - Deities, Ascetics, and Mythological

Figures; II - Mythical and Real Animals; III - Flora; IV - Objects; V - Geometric Patterns; and VI - Inscriptions.

The frequency of these themes is not uniform. Most motifs appear fewer than 10 times, and many images are unique, appearing only once. However, three motifs stand out with significantly higher frequencies: the Chakra wheel (90 instances), the lotus flower (89 instances), and the Shankha shell (75 instances). Additionally, depictions of cattle are relatively common, with a total of 68 occurrences, comprising humped bovines (29 instances on 26 artifacts) and non-humped bovines (39 instances on 36 artifacts).

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. The imagery of the humped bovines (Nandi bull) on Oc Eo gold plaques

Nandi, the vahana (mount) of the god Shiva. In Hinduism, Nandi is not only a symbol of strength, steadfastness, and loyalty, but also carries profound religious significance through his association with Shiva. Typically depicted as white to symbolize purity and justice, Nandi also represents steadfast devotion, loyalty, and a mind singularly focused on the divine. A total of 29 depictions of humped cattle have been

Depictions of the humped bull, appearing with high frequency on the gold plaque artifacts of the Oc Eo culture alongside other Hindu symbols, are commonly identified as recorded on 26 gold plaques, discovered at 9 different archaeological locations. Among these, the structure designated 85ĐN.M4 is the most prominent, yielding 16 gold leaf fragments, which accounts for more than half of the total number. The table below illustrates the specific distribution of these artifacts by site.

Table 1: Distribution of Nandi Imagery

Site	Structure	Number of gold plaques with Nandi Images	Number of Nandi Images
Go Thap	Go Thap 1984	1	1
Go Thap	Go Thap 1991	1	1
Go Thap	93GT.M1	1	1
Go Thap	13GTH10	2	3
Da Noi	85ĐN.M2	2	2
Da Noi	85ĐN.M3	1	1
Da Noi	85ĐN.M4	16	18
Nen Chua	NC83 – NC1	1	1
Ke Mot	Ke Mot	1	1
Total		26	29

Source: Compiled by the author

The data reveals two prominent characteristics:

1. **Uneven Distribution:** The artifacts are not randomly scattered but are highly concentrated at specific locations. The Da Noi site (specifically, structure 85ĐN.M4) is the most significant center, accounting for a disproportionately large share with 16 of the 26 artifacts (approx. 61.5%) and 18 of the 29 images (approx. 62%). This indicates the large scale and crucial role of the 85ĐN.M4 structure in the community's religious activities. Although found in smaller numbers, the discovery of similar artifacts at other important centers such as Go Thap, Nen Chua, and Ke Mot confirms that the humped bull motif was not exclusive to Da Noi. Instead, it was part of a shared system of beliefs and symbols, widely distributed among the elite class of Oc Eo society.
2. **Special Correlation between Artifacts and Images:** The number of images (29) is greater than the number of artifacts (26), indicating that some gold fragments bear more than one depiction of the Nandi bull.

The depictions of bulls on the gold plaques demonstrate the meticulous observation of the artisans, reflected in a diversity of poses and activities. Static postures such as standing or lying down, as well as dynamic actions like walking or lying with an upturned head, are all portrayed. Notably, many artifacts clearly depict specific actions such as bowing the head, stretching the neck, or turning the head back. In terms of figuration, the most prominent characteristic is the presence of a large hump on the back, a distinctive feature of the Indian bull (Zebu). Anatomical details such as curved horns, ears, tails, eyes, and muzzles are often sharply rendered. Manufacturing techniques include a combination of incision (engraving) and repoussé (embossing). The artifacts crafted using the repoussé technique often exhibit a formal style, characterized by intricate details and sophisticated compositions, demonstrating the high aesthetic standards and skill of the artisans. The level of detail in the engravings ranges from simple to exquisitely fine, with the artifacts from the 85ĐN.M4 cluster being particularly esteemed for their intricacy and technical execution.

Table 2: Postures of the Nandi on Gold Plaques

Posture	Quantity	Percentage
Standing	19	73,08%
Walking	3	11,54%
Lying down	4	15,38%
Total	26	100,00%

Source: Compiled by the author

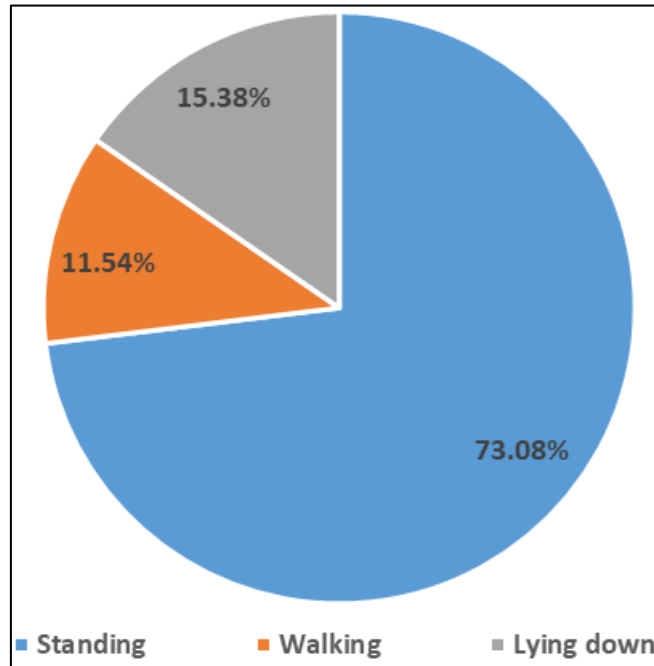


Fig. 1: Distribution of Nandi Postures on Gold Plaques

The standing posture is overwhelmingly predominant, accounting for nearly three-quarters of the depictions (19 out of 26 artifacts, or 73.08%). This strong prevalence suggests that the standing form was the normative or standard representation of Nandi within the visual lexicon of the Oc Eo culture. Symbolically, a standing posture connotes solemnity, vigilance, and reverential readiness. In the context of Nandi's role as the vahana (mount) of Shiva, this pose powerfully conveys his unwavering loyalty and his constant

preparedness to serve the deity, making it a highly suitable representation for sacred, votive objects.

While not as common, the lying (15.38%) and walking (11.54%) postures are also represented in the corpus. Their presence, though in the minority, is significant as it indicates a degree of artistic versatility and a broader iconographic repertoire. These alternative poses may have been intended to convey different aspects of the deity, such as tranquility and peace (lying) or to imply a narrative element (walking).

BTDT.CV.126



DTDT.CV.298



85DN.M4.37



85DN.M4.52



Fig.2: Gold Plaques with Nandi

Depictions of the Nandi bull appear either individually (7 instances) or in combination with other Hindu symbols. The table below summarizes these symbolic assemblages:

Table 3: Symbolic Combinations Associated with the Nandi

Symbol Group	Occurrences
Bull	7
Two Bulls	2
Bull - Shankha	4
Bull - Lotus	2
Bull - Crescent Moon	2
Bull - Chakra - Lotus - Shankha	1
Bull - Chakra - Shankha - Lotus - Triangle - Crescent Moon	1
Bull - Lotus - Crescent Moon	1
Bull - Lotus - Shankha - Triangle	1
Bull - Trident (Trishula)	1
Two Bulls (large & small) - Crescent Moon - Shankha - Lotus - Chakra	1
Garuda - Water Pot - Altar - Chakra - Shankha - Bull - Lotus	1
Bull - Inscription	1
Bull - Unidentified	1

Source: Compiled by the author

Nandi's image frequently appears alongside typically Vaishnavite symbols such as the Shankha shell (8 instances), the Chakra wheel (4 instances), and the lotus flower (at least 6 instances). Even more complex assemblages exist, simultaneously combining multiple symbols from both sects, for example: Bull - Chakra - Shankha - Lotus - Triangle - Crescent Moon. This combination indicates a non-exclusive religious environment. Such syncretism is a prominent

feature of early states in Southeast Asia, likely intended to promote harmony and often used by the ruling class to consolidate authority over populations with diverse beliefs. The co-occurrence of symbols from two major sects on a single votive object suggests an open society where religious ideologies were integrated, possibly to create a greater or more encompassing divine power.

85ĐN.M2.33



85ĐN.M4.56



85ĐN.M4.61



85ĐN.M4.151



Fig.3: Symbolic Combinations Associated with the Nandi on Gold Plaques

4.2. The imagery of the non-humped bovines on Oc Eo gold plaques

The non-humped bovine figure is represented by 36 artifacts distributed across six archaeological sites. Notably, the GX02-KT1 site has a significant concentration, with 22 artifacts, accounting for 61.1% of the total.

The high concentration of artifacts at the GX02-KT1 site suggests it may have been a significant ceremonial center within the Óc Eo culture. This site could have been a location for religious activities or offerings related to the non-humped bovine figure. This also raises the question of whether GX02-KT1 had a stronger connection to indigenous elements compared to other sites, given that the non-humped bovine differs from the Indianized Zebu cattle.

With the exception of GX02-KT1, the remaining sites exhibit a low number of artifacts (1-9). Sites such as 93GT.M5,

85ĐN.M3, 85ĐN.M4, and Nền Chùa each yielded only one artifact, while site 85ĐN.M2 had nine. This scattered distribution may indicate that the non-humped bovine figure was part of an indigenous belief system, utilized across various locations but not uniformly. The 85ĐN.M2 site, with nine artifacts, could represent a secondary center where indigenous beliefs coexisted with Indianized elements. With a total of 34 artifacts, the non-humped bovine figure was clearly a prevalent symbol in Óc Eo culture. While not absolutely dominant compared to other symbols (such as the Chakra, Shanka, or lotus), its quantity is comparable, and even surpasses, that of the humped bovine. This may signify a process of cultural acculturation among the Óc Eo people, where the non-humped bovine represented indigenous elements, while the humped bovine reflected influences from India.

Table 4: Distribution of non-Humped Bovine Symbols on Óc Eo Gold Plaques

Site	Structure	Number of Gold Plaques with non-Humped Bovine Images	Number of non-Humped Bovine Images
Go Thap	93GT.M5	1	1
Da Noi	85ĐN.M2	9	11
Da Noi	85ĐN.M3	1	1
Da Noi	85ĐN.M4	2	3
Nen Chua	NC83 – NC1	1	1
Giong Xoai	GX02-KT1	22	22
Total		36	39

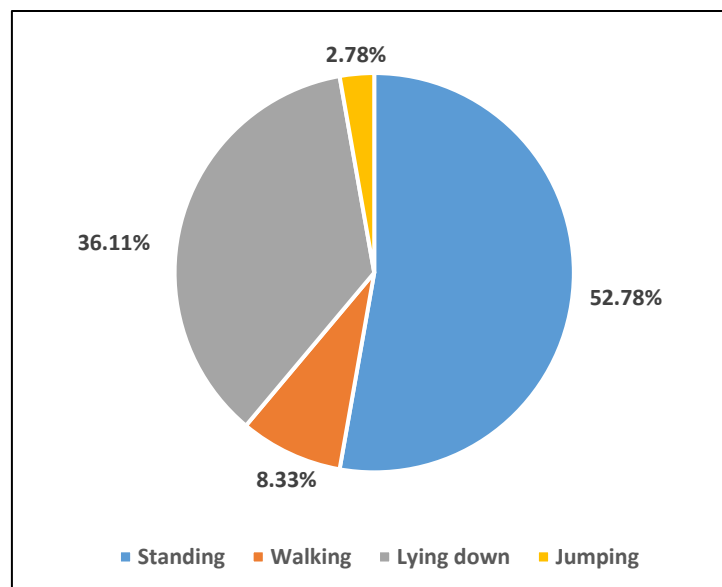
Source: Compiled by the author

The bovine figures on the artifacts display a relatively uniform artistic style. Common characteristics include a large, robust body with a back that is either straight or slightly curved. In terms of posture, the figures are primarily depicted standing, walking, lying and jumping, with the standing position being the most frequent with 52.78%. Anatomical details are generally simplified, with eyes, mouth, horns, and ears rendered through simple engravings, sometimes merely

as curves or small dots. The tail and legs are not always clearly delineated. Some figures feature a large neck and a thick dewlap, characteristic more of mature bulls than cows or calves. Regarding accompanying symbolic elements, some artifacts include the Shanka (conch shell) or small incised patterns on the back. Others bear undecipherable characters or geometric shapes on the underbelly.

Table 5: Postures of the non-Humped Bovine on Gold Plaques

Posture	Quantity	Percentage
Standing	19	52,78%
Walking	3	8,33%
Lying down	13	36,11%
Jumping	1	2,78%
Total	36	100,00%

**Fig.4:** Distribution of non-Humped Bovine Postures

Unlike the humped bovine, the non-humped bovine is typically depicted alone on the gold leaf (31 out of 36 artifacts), with minimal combination with other symbols.

Table 6: Combination of Symbols Accompanying the Non-humped Bovine

Symbol Group	Number of Occurrences
Single Bovine	31
Two Bovines	2
Bovine and Inscription	1
Bovine and Lotus	1
Bovine and Shanka	1

Table 6 demonstrates that the non-humped bovine figure predominantly exists as an independent symbol (86.1%), rarely integrated with foreign religious icons. This suggests that the figure may carry an autonomous meaning, not requiring combination with other symbols to convey its message. This reinforces the hypothesis that the non-humped

bovine represents an indigenous belief or a fertility symbol, rather than being entirely subsumed by Indianized religious systems. The rare instances of combination with the lotus or the Shankha indicate a degree of cultural acculturation, but this was not the prevailing trend.



Fig.5: Gold Plaques with non-Humped Bovine

The imagery of the non-humped bovine on Óc Eo gold leaf artifacts raises numerous questions about its origins and symbolic layers within the context of ancient Southeast Asian cultural exchange. This can be attributed to the following hypotheses:

Indigenous Beliefs: The non-humped bovine may belong to an endogenous belief system that existed independently of or parallel to Indianized influences before the adoption of Nandin. The predominance of the single bovine figure

4.3. Discussion

The clear dichotomy in the iconography, distribution, and symbolic associations of humped and non-humped bovines on Oc Eo gold plaques challenges the monolithic interpretation that casts all such figures as Nandin. The findings suggest a far more complex religious and cultural landscape, where imported ideologies were not merely adopted but were negotiated, integrated, and existed in parallel with robust indigenous belief systems.

The humped bovine, clearly identified as the Nandin of Shaivism, functions as a clear marker of “Indianization”. Its high concentration at the Da Noi site, particularly within the 85DN.M4 structure, points to this location being a prominent center for state-sponsored, orthodox religious practice. The sophisticated craftsmanship, often employing repoussé techniques to create detailed and formal representations, further suggests that these artifacts were commissioned by or for an elite class with the resources and desire to adhere to

(86.1%) supports this hypothesis. The non-humped bovine, with features such as a rounded belly and a resting posture, could symbolize prosperity and vitality within a wet-rice agricultural society, similar to the role of buffalo and cattle in ancient Southeast Asia.

Limited Craftsmanship Knowledge: It is possible that the artisans, lacking direct exposure to Zebu cattle, reproduced local bovine types, resulting in a depiction that deviates from the Indian prototype.

imported aesthetic and religious norms. However, this was not a simple transplantation of Indian religion. The frequent co-occurrence of Nandin with Vaishnavite symbols such as the Shankha and Chakra wheel is highly significant. This symbolic syncretism reveals a theological flexibility aimed at creating a more encompassing divine authority, a strategy commonly employed by early Southeast Asian rulers to consolidate power over diverse populations. The humped bovine was thus not just a symbol of Shaivism, but of a syncretic, elite religion adapted to the local socio-political context of the Funan polity.

In stark contrast, the non-humped bovine appears to represent a distinct and parallel symbolic system, likely rooted in indigenous values. Its geographical concentration at a different site, Giong Xoai (GX02-KT1), suggests a separate sphere of ritual activity. The most compelling evidence for its indigenous nature is its iconographic isolation; the figure is overwhelmingly depicted alone, without the accompaniment

of the mainstream Hindu pantheon. This autonomy implies that its meaning was self-contained and did not rely on the symbolic framework of Indian religions to be understood by the Óc Eo populace. As hypothesized, this figure likely represents local fauna and is connected to indigenous beliefs surrounding fertility, agriculture, and the natural environment, which were central to a wet-rice society. The simpler, less ornate artistic style may also reflect a more popular or vernacular tradition, distinct from the elite-sponsored art of the Nandin plaques.

The parallel existence of these two distinct bovine traditions, with their separate primary centers of deposition and their refusal to co-occur on a single artifact, indicates a structured coexistence rather than a merger. The Óc Eo spiritual landscape was not one where foreign religion simply replaced native beliefs. Instead, it was a space where different systems of meaning operated simultaneously, perhaps serving different communities, social strata, or ritual purposes. This dynamic acculturation process allowed the people of Óc Eo to participate in a broader, Indianized cosmopolitan world while retaining a distinct cultural and religious identity rooted in their local ecology and ancestral traditions.

5. Conclusion

This study's systematic analysis of bovine iconography on Óc Eo gold plaques demonstrates that the morphological distinction between humped and non-humped cattle is a critical variable for understanding the complex religious life of the Óc Eo culture. The research moves beyond the generalized identification of all bovine figures as Nandin, revealing two coexisting and largely separate symbolic systems.

The humped bovine, or Nandin, is affirmed as an imported symbol associated with elite, state-level religion. Its concentration at specific sites like Da Noi and its syncretic combination with both Shaivite and Vaishnavite motifs underscore its role in a political-religious framework designed to consolidate authority in the multi-ethnic Funan kingdom. In contrast, the non-humped bovine stands as a powerful symbol of indigenous belief systems. Its iconographic independence, distinct stylistic conventions, and separate geographical focus at sites like Giồng Xoài suggest it was tied to local values, possibly connected to agriculture, fertility, and the natural environment, retaining its relevance alongside newly introduced deities.

Ultimately, the parallel streams of bovine iconography on Óc Eo gold plaques provide a nuanced model of cultural interaction in early Southeast Asia. The process was not a simple "Indianization" but a sophisticated dialogue between the foreign and the local. The Óc Eo community actively navigated these influences, creating a unique syncretic culture that both embraced cosmopolitan religious ideas and preserved the integrity of its indigenous worldview. This research, therefore, refines our understanding of the Óc Eo culture, highlighting the agency of its people in shaping their own rich and multi-layered symbolic universe. Future research could extend this comparative approach to other iconographic themes to further map the intricate relationship between localized traditions and trans-regional cultural flows in the Mekong Delta.

6. References

1. Pelliot P. *Le Fou Nan (Nước Phù Nam) [Funan]*. Thuoc L, translator. 1993.
2. Malleret L. *L'archéologie du delta du Mékong, Tome II: La civilisation matérielle d'Óc-èo [The archaeology of the Mekong Delta, Volume II: The material civilization of Óc Eo]*. Ho Chi Minh City: Ho Chi Minh City General Publishing House; 2021. (Original work published 1960).
3. Malleret L. *Khảo cổ học đồng bằng sông Mê Kông, tập III: Văn hóa Phù Nam [The archaeology of the Mekong Delta, Volume III: Funan culture]*. Ho Chi Minh City: Ho Chi Minh City General Publishing House; 2023. (Original work published 1963).
4. Cœdès G. *The Indianized states of Southeast Asia*. Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers; 2008. (Original work published 1964).
5. Diem LX, Con DL, Khai VS. *Văn hóa Óc Eo - Những khám phá mới [Óc Eo culture - New discoveries]*. Hanoi: Social Sciences Publishing House; 1995.
6. Manh PD. *Di tích khảo cổ thời văn hóa Óc Eo – hậu Óc Eo ở An Giang [Archaeological relics of Óc Eo – post-Óc Eo culture in An Giang]*. Ho Chi Minh City: Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City Press; 2019.
7. Hoang BC, editor. *Khảo cổ học Nam Bộ thời sơ sử [Southern Vietnamese archaeology in the protohistoric period]*. Hanoi: Social Sciences Publishing House; 2018.
8. Lien LT. *Chủ đề các hiện vật vàng ở Gò Tháp (Đồng Tháp) [The theme of gold artifacts in Go Thap (Dong Thap)]*. In: *Những phát hiện mới về Khảo cổ học năm 2000 [New discoveries in archaeology in 2000]*. Hanoi: Social Sciences Publishing House; 2001. p. 778-80.
9. Lien LT. *Sự tiến triển của tiểu tượng Ấn Độ giáo ở Đồng Bằng sông Cửu Long trước thế kỷ X [The development of Hinduist small statues in the Mekong Delta before the 10th century]*. In: *Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on Vietnamese Studies - 2004*. Hanoi: Vietnam National University Press; 2005. p. 62-78.
10. Lien LT. *Nghệ thuật Phật giáo và Hindu giáo ở Đồng Bằng sông Cửu Long trước thế kỷ X [Buddhist and Hindu art in the Mekong Delta before the 10th century]*. Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers; 2006.
11. Lien LT. *Hindu deities in Southern Vietnam: Images on small archaeological artefacts*. In: *Early interactions between South and Southeast Asia: reflections on cross cultural exchange*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies; 2011. p. 407-31.
12. Lien LT. *Hindu beliefs and the maritime network in Southern Vietnam during the early common era*. *J Indo-Pacific Archaeol*. 2015;39:1-17.
13. Tri BM, Doi NG, Kien NKT. *Văn hóa Óc Eo những khám phá mới khảo cổ học tại Óc Eo và Nền Chùa [Óc Eo culture: new archaeological discoveries at Óc Eo and Nen Chua]*. Hanoi: Social Sciences Publishing House; 2022.