



Cultural Interactions between Funan and India: A Study of Oc Eo Material Civilization

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Article Info

ISSN (online): 2583-8261

Volume: 04

Issue: 06

November-December 2025

Received: 03-03-2025

Accepted: 05-04-2025

Published: 16-07-2025

Page No: 147-154

Abstract

This article examines the cultural interactions between the kingdom of Funan and the Indian subcontinent through an interdisciplinary analysis of the Óc Eo material civilization in the Mekong Delta. Drawing upon archaeological excavations, remote sensing and GIS-based landscape reconstruction, archaeobotanical evidence, and stylistic comparisons of religious architecture and iconography, the study demonstrates that Óc Eo was a major hub within transregional exchange networks linking Southeast Asia, South Asia, and the wider Indian Ocean world. Recent analyses of microremains found on grinding tools, including turmeric, ginger, and other South Asian spices, reveal culinary and botanical exchanges that complement long-established evidence of Hindu–Buddhist religious transmission. Geo-archaeological studies further indicate a sophisticated canal-based urban landscape that facilitated inland–maritime connectivity and supported Funan’s economic prosperity. Architectural remains, Sanskrit inscriptions, metallurgical signatures, and sculptural styles demonstrate strong correlations with Gupta-period India, particularly from the 4th to 6th centuries CE. By synthesizing new data from multiple scientific fields with classical historical sources, this study re-evaluates the mechanisms through which Indian cultural, technological, and ideological elements were localized and transformed within the Óc Eo cultural sphere. The findings provide a deeper understanding of early cultural globalization and the development of complex societies in mainland Southeast Asia.

Keywords: Funan, Southeast Asia, Material Civilization, Oc Eo

Introduction

The kingdom of Funan which flourished in the lower Mekong River basin from the early centuries of the Common Era has long been recognized as one of the earliest political and cultural centers in mainland Southeast Asia. Its cultural achievements are preserved most clearly in the Oc Eo material complex. Since the initial excavations by Louis Malleret in the mid twentieth century, Oc Eo has yielded abundant archaeological remains that include temple foundations, inscriptions, sculptures, precious metal objects, beads and ceramics. These finds demonstrate the active participation of Funan in long distance exchange networks that connected the Mekong Delta with India, China, the Mediterranean region and other spheres of the Indian Ocean world. The cultural and religious life of Funan reveals deep engagement with Indian civilization and reflects a process in which external influences were selectively localized and integrated.

Recent interdisciplinary studies provide new perspectives on the scale and nature of these interactions. Remote sensing and GIS based analyses have identified ancient rivers and canals that connected Angkor Borei, Ba The and the coastal zone of Rach Gia.

These waterways created an integrated communication system that supported movement of people, goods and religious specialists across the delta. Archaeobotanical studies have detected South Asian spices such as turmeric and ginger on grinding stones from Oc Eo sites. These discoveries add evidence for the presence of culinary and medicinal traditions linked with South Asia. Analyses of glass beads, metal artifacts and architectural bricks reveal technological signatures that correspond with regions of South Asia influential during the Gupta period.

The Gupta era is widely regarded as a formative phase in the development of Indian artistic and religious expression. Its aesthetic vocabulary, sacred imagery and temple forms became highly influential across Southeast Asia. The presence of Vaisnava and Saiva sculptures, gold foils with solar motifs and temple foundations at Oc Eo indicates that Funan adopted and adapted these Indian models. Sanskrit inscriptions further demonstrate connections with the intellectual and religious environment that prospered in India during this period.

Although many studies have addressed relations between Funan and India, questions remain concerning the mechanisms through which cultural elements were transmitted and the ways in which they were reshaped within local contexts. This article seeks to reassess these interactions through a synthesis of archaeological discoveries, textual evidence and recent scientific analyses. The aim is to clarify how Funan engaged with Indian civilization and how these engagements contributed to the formation of the Oc Eo material tradition.

1. Overview of Oc Eo Culture

Funan was an ancient kingdom situated on the Indochinese Peninsula, which rose and developed between the 1st and 7th centuries CE and persisted until the 12th century. Its traditional culture and religious life shared strong affinities with Indian civilization, or more precisely, inherited its foundational elements, especially in anthropomorphic sculpture, temple architecture, and both Buddhist and Hindu philosophical systems. The Oc Eo culture of Funan has been identified by domestic and international scholars as centered in the Mekong River Delta, with its core located at Oc Eo – Ba The in present-day An Giang Province, Vietnam.

The cultural zenith of Funan is most clearly reflected in the Oc Eo culture during the 4th to 6th centuries CE. This period corresponds chronologically to the golden age of the Gupta dynasty in India, which also spanned from the 4th to the 7th century CE. In 550 CE, the Gupta Empire entered a period of decline, while simultaneously, Funan was annexed by Chenla. This synchronicity raises the question of whether the relationship between the two civilizations was coincidental or indicative of a deeper connection. The Gupta dynasty was established in the early 4th century CE (320–647 CE) in the context of India being under the Kushan Empire, which ruled over northern and central regions and controlled the Silk Road in Central Asia. This facilitated India's trade and diplomatic exchanges with the Roman Empire, the Mediterranean world, Hellenistic regions, China, and Central Asia (Antonova *et al.* 1979) ^[1].

Originating in Murshidabad (in present-day Bengal), the Gupta Empire expanded its territory and unified a multitude of principalities. It absorbed regions across the north, such as the Himalayas, Punjab, Sindh, Gujarat, and the Chhattisgarh

Plateau, along with Mathura in central India and Magadha in the east. It further extended influence southward into the Deccan Plateau, including Orissa and Andhra, thereby achieving an unprecedented unification of the Indian subcontinent. Scholars widely regard this as the Golden Age of ancient Indian history (Jayapalan 2001: 130) ^[11], a time marked by extraordinary achievements in literature, science, and the arts. The period produced iconic intellectuals and artists, such as the poet Kalidasa, astronomer Aryabhata, astrologer Varahamihira, and philosopher Vatsyayana, whose works have had lasting influence not only within India but across Asia and beyond. Religious and literary milestones of this period include the compilation of the Puranas and the standardization of the Mahabharata and Ramayana, which became canonical texts of Hinduism (Jayapalan 2001) ^[11]. The Gupta era also witnessed significant accomplishments in temple architecture, sculpture, and painting, especially the development of the Gupta sculptural school, which became a formal model for later Indian and Southeast Asian art, including that of Funan and early Vietnam (Harle 1994: 87) ^[8].

Based on research by Vietnamese and foreign archaeologists, the Funan Kingdom's territorial domain included today's southern Vietnam, extending into Cat Tien (Lam Dong) in the Central Highlands, and northward into the mid-Mekong basin in present-day Laos. It encompassed much of the Menam Valley (Thailand), coastal cities along the Gulf of Thailand, the Strait of Malacca (Malaysia), and the Bay of Bengal (India) (Le Huong 1974: 7) ^[13]. According to Georges Coedes, Funan's political center was located in the lower Mekong Delta, with its capital at Vyadhapura, in the Ba Phnom hills of present-day Prey Veng Province, Cambodia (Coedes 2008: 83) ^[4]. The cultural identity of Funan is deeply Indianized, as demonstrated by tangible artifacts such as temple foundations, stone sculptures, Sanskrit inscriptions, and intangible cultural elements like Buddhist and Hindu religious practices. Many Funanese rulers are also believed to have had Indian ancestry (Luong Ninh 2005: 31) ^[15].

Vietnamese scholars recognize the Pre-Oc Eo and Oc Eo cultural phases of Funan as one of the three foundational ancient cultures of Vietnam, alongside Dong Son and Sa Huynh. The Oc Eo culture was first identified and excavated by French archaeologist Louis Malleret in 1944 (Nguyen Duc Hoa 2016: 338) ^[18]. Oc Eo archaeological remains have been discovered throughout the Mekong Delta, including sites such as Go Cay Thi (An Giang), Go Thanh (Dong Thap), Binh Ta (Tay Ninh), Nhon Thanh (Can Tho), and Nen Chua (An Giang). The name "Oc Eo culture" originates from the commune of the same name near Ba The Mountain in An Giang Province. This area was once home to the Oc Eo – Ba The complex, a prominent urban center of Funan. Moreover, Oc Eo functioned as an international port, accommodating ships from Southeast Asia, South Asia, East Asia, the Roman Empire, and the broader Mediterranean. Artifacts such as Roman coins and medallions, Persian bronze lamps, and Han dynasty bronze mirrors have been discovered at these sites, affirming Funan's participation in transregional exchange networks.

The site's historical prominence is further confirmed by the 2nd-century geographer Claudius Ptolemy, who identified Kattigara, widely believed to be Oc Eo, as a major maritime trading port on his world map of 150 CE (Hirst 2020) ^[10]. The golden era of Oc Eo culture in the 4th to 6th centuries CE

clearly reflects strong Indian influence, seen in philosophical concepts, religious iconography, sculptural aesthetics, and casting techniques. The discovery of thousands of artifacts from Oc Eo sites underscores the prosperity of Funan's material civilization, which flourished due to its vibrant economy, international commerce, and especially its sustained cultural and ideological exchanges with India during the Gupta period (Coedes 2008)^[4]; (Harle 1994)^[8]; (Jayapalan 2001)^[11].

2. Indian Elements in the Cultural Dimensions of Oc Eo and Funan

Sun-God Worship

The worship of the Sun God, Surya, originated in the Vedic period and perhaps even earlier in pre-Vedic religious traditions. The solar cult continued to develop throughout the medieval era and became widespread across the Indian subcontinent. Surya was regarded as the divine witness of both virtuous and immoral human actions and symbolized absolute truth. In early phases, Surya was venerated through elemental symbols, hymns, and simple rituals without elaborate ceremonial requirements. Surya appears under numerous appellations, including Surya, Savitri, Vishnu, Pusan, Asvins, Adityas, Rohita, and Vivasvat. In the Upanishads, Surya is described as the manifestation of supreme cosmic power.

Although Surya worship is associated with Aryan traditions introduced into India, indigenous communities adopted and further developed this cult. The earliest textual references appear in the Mahabharata, composed roughly between the fourth century BCE and the fourth century CE, which overlaps the Gupta period in India. It was during the fourth to fifth centuries CE that Gupta artisans began producing anthropomorphic representations of Surya, a development that soon spread across the subcontinent. This evolution reflects both religious formalization and the broader aesthetic canon that reached maturity during the Gupta era, which is known for monumental advancements in sculpture and temple architecture (Harle 1994: 87)^[8].

Another important source of the Surya tradition in India came from Iranian priests known as the Magas. The Maga priests contributed significantly to the establishment and spread of Surya worship, especially in the Saka-Kushan period, during which images and temples dedicated to Surya began to appear. By the Gupta era, the Gupta kings incorporated the Maga tradition into one of the orthodox currents of Hinduism. Surya worship is also preserved in the Puranas, compiled during the fifth century CE, and in Tantric traditions of the eighth century CE. During this time, the cult of Shiva was dominant, leading to theological synthesis between Shiva and Surya in the form known as Surya Putona.

Overall, Surya worship in India emerged early, developed through multiple cultural streams, and persisted continuously. The Gupta period played a decisive role in consolidating diverse solar traditions into an orthodox branch of Hinduism, formalized through texts such as the Mahabharata and Puranas. Various indigenous groups, including the Khond, Santhal, Munda, and Dallas communities, revered Surya as a principal benevolent deity and upheld belief in a supreme divine power embodied in

Surya. Among the Koleos, the Sun God was believed to have the Moon as his consort, with the stars regarded as their offspring.

Beyond the textual evidence, Surya worship in India is also attested in artistic and architectural forms such as coinage, inscriptions, seals, talismans, paintings, and temple structures. Sun temples were constructed throughout India, including in Modhera, Gujarat, Gwalior, Jammu and Kashmir, Assam, Domlur, Katarmal, Madhya Pradesh, Gaya, and Arasavalli in Tamil Nadu. The most renowned among them is the Konark Sun Temple, built in 1250 CE in Odisha, which stands as monumental proof of the longevity and prestige of Surya worship. Artistic representations of Surya evolved from symbolic motifs to animal forms and eventually into full anthropomorphic iconography.

In painting traditions, particularly rock paintings, early depictions of the Sun God appear in cave art at Singanpur (Raigarh region), where one image portrays a sun with seven rays above a figure performing a ritual. Other rock paintings illustrating Surya have been identified in Sitakhardi, the Chambal Valley, Mirzapur, and Pachmarhi. In visual art, Surya is often symbolized by a circle with radiating lines, a concentric double circle, a diagonal cross, the svastika, a disc, or a radiant sphere. In the Indus region, Surya was symbolized by a wheel, representing the solar movement, often colored red to signify sunlight and vital cosmic energy. During the Gupta period, Surya was also associated with the lotus symbol. Animals such as bulls, unicorns, eagles, and doves were used as associated motifs. In sculpture, Surya appears in human form riding a chariot pulled by four or seven horses, exemplified in depictions at the Mahabodhi Temple in Bodhi Gaya. On ancient Indian coins, Surya is represented by a six-spoked wheel symbolizing the six seasons.

According to Dang Van Thang (2019)^[6], the Oc Eo culture of southern Vietnam, which existed from the second century BCE to the twelfth century CE, absorbed many Indian cultural elements, especially in religious and devotional practices. Through trade and cultural contact, Surya worship was transmitted into the Oc Eo cultural sphere. Archaeologists have identified several Sun temples belonging to the open-air temple type, or hypaethral temple, along with statues of the deity.

The Sun Temple at Nam Thap Linh within the Go Thap archaeological complex (Dong Thap) was discovered in 2010. At the center of the sanctuary 10GT-H11, slightly toward the rear and approximately twenty centimeters below the present surface, archaeologists uncovered a circular structure built of stone and brick, corresponding to solar sanctuaries documented elsewhere in the world. The circular formation narrows downward into a funnel shape, culminating at a depth of 1.37 meters, where two gold foils were found. One foil bore an image of a circle with eight rays or a wheel with eight spokes representing the solar chariot, while the other foil carried a distinct solar ray motif. The eight-spoked gold wheel discovered at Go Thap corresponds closely to the stone wheel motifs at the Konark Sun Temple in Odisha, India (Ban Quản lý Khu di tích Gò Đền 2017)^[2] (Dang Van Thang and Nguyen Huu Ly 2019: 227)^[6].



Source: Go Den Relic Management Board (2017); Dang Van Thang, Nguyen Huu Ly (2019), p. 227

Fig 1: The Sun Temple and a gold foil depicting the Sun God at Nam Thap Linh

The practice of depositing sacred objects beneath temple foundations, such as gold foils representing Surya, aligns with ancient Indian ritual customs. According to Dang Van Thang (2016) ^[5], the burial of precious objects beneath the temple floor or altar is an archaic Indian tradition still observed in certain regions during the establishment of *sima* boundary markers for temples and monasteries. The discovery of circular stone-brick architecture above and solar symbols beneath substantiates that site 10GT-H11 functioned as an early Oc Eo Sun Temple dated to the second or third century CE.

Another Sun Temple, designated OE83.A3, was discovered at the Oc Eo – Ba The complex (An Giang) and excavated in 1983. The sanctuary's central structure is a circular stone foundation dated to the second or third century CE. The Sun Temple at Cay Gao I (Dong Nai), identified in 1985, also features a circular brick foundation at its center. The Sun Temple at Go Ba Chua Xu represents a Manduka-Mandala plan, with Surya occupying the principal central position surrounded by subordinate deities. This temple was built around the fourth century and continued in use until the

twelfth century. The Sun Temple at Go Cay Thi consists of thirty-six brick foundation walls forming inner structures, including a forehall, main sanctuary, and partitioned chambers. Flanking the façade are two circular structures resembling wheels. Each wheel features a central hub and radiating spokes composed of trapezoidal bricks, with diameters of approximately 1.4 meters. These wheels symbolize the Sun God (Vo Si Khai and Dao Linh Con 2004: 204) ^[22]. Go Cay Thi also includes a sacred pond located in front of the sanctuary, dating from the most developed phase of Oc Eo culture (fourth to seventh century CE).

Alongside these architectural remains, numerous Sun God statues have been found in the Oc Eo cultural region. The Surya statue from Thai Hiep Thanh carries features aligned with the Maga tradition of Iran, common in northern India, characterized by a knee-length tunic, belt, and high boots. Other statues display varied attire: the Surya statue from Go Thap features tightly fitted trousers, whereas the Surya statue from Ba The depicts a short garment comprising a blouse and knee-length skirt (Dang Van Thang and Nguyen Huu Ly 2019: 134) ^[6].



Source: Dang Van Thang & Nguyen Huu Ly, 2019, p. 134

Fig 2: Sun God statues discovered at Oc Eo sites

The Buddhist and Hindu Imprints of the Gupta Period in Oc Eo Culture

Buddhism and Hinduism, the two principal religious traditions of India, exerted substantial influence not only across the Indian subcontinent but also throughout Southeast Asia, including Funan and early Vietnam. Buddhism, founded more than 2,500 years ago, although no longer flourishing in contemporary India, experienced extraordinary

expansion under the Maurya, Kushana, and Gupta dynasties, as the rulers Ashoka, Kanishka, and the Gupta kings actively embraced and propagated the faith. Hinduism, which evolved from ancient Brahmanical religion, underwent significant reform and renewal during the Gupta period. It assimilated select elements from Buddhism and incorporated indigenous folk beliefs, resulting in the emergence of a revitalized polytheistic religious system that has continued to shape

India's cultural and social life to the present day. The Gupta period, celebrated as the golden age of Indian civilization, witnessed remarkable advancements in religion, literature, and the arts. Both Buddhism and Hinduism functioned as pivotal conduits through which India's cultural achievements spread across Southeast Asia, including the Oc Eo region of Funan.

The advent of Mahayana Buddhism around the first century BCE marked not only a new direction for Buddhism but also a profound ideological and cultural transformation within India. According to the Upanishads, the Absolute is eternal, and all phenomena arise from, exist within, and ultimately dissolve into this Absolute, while the universe is shaped by a supreme deity. In contrast, Mahayana thought introduced a more dynamic metaphysical framework, asserting that the Absolute exists in a state of conditioned permanence. Mahayana scholars reasoned that if the Absolute were truly immutable and eternal in the Brahmanical sense, then phenomenal forms could not arise, endure, or cease within it. Mahayana philosophy thus denied the role of a supreme creator deity and advanced the Buddhist conception of ultimate truth, expressing clear opposition to the doctrinal foundations of Brahmanism.

During the Vedic period, the worldview was fundamentally animistic. The Vedic people worshipped natural forces and phenomena such as the sun (Surya), dawn (Usha), thunder (Rudra), wind (Vayu), fire (Agni), rivers, mountains, and other elements. Rituals centered on fire offerings, horse sacrifices, and the slaughter of cattle, with both oxen and cows consumed as food (Antonova *et al.* 1979) ^[1]. Although livestock was essential for agrarian production, a significant portion was used for sacrificial rituals. Mahayana Buddhism denounced these practices, which contributed to the diminishing authority of Brahmanism. Moreover, the emergence of Mahayana introduced a new period of sacred iconography in India, as Buddhist deities and figures began to be represented in anthropomorphic forms.

Despite their Hindu affiliation, the Gupta monarchs cultivated a policy of religious tolerance and became significant patrons of Mahayana Buddhism. Their support stimulated the development of Buddhist iconography during this period. Concurrently, the Gupta rulers strengthened the Brahmanical transformation into classical Hinduism and actively endorsed the codification of sacred images. The religious movements known as Shaivism and Vaishnavism expanded widely in this context, even though Shiva has roots traceable to the Indus Valley Civilization and Vishnu appears infrequently in the Rig Veda (Antonova *et al.* 1979) ^[1]. During the Gupta era, Brahma, Shiva, and Vishnu emerged as the three principal deities in the Hindu pantheon, forming the Trimurti, with corresponding goddesses introduced as their divine counterparts.

In Funan, numerous Buddhist objects such as Buddha and Bodhisattva statues, as well as Hindu artifacts including images of Shiva and Vishnu, discovered at Oc Eo archaeological sites, indicate the coexistence and popularity of both religions. According to Thepa (2021) ^[20], Vietnamese Buddhist art and culture were shaped by influences from both Theravada and Mahayana traditions, derived from the Pallava artistic sphere in southern India and the Gupta school in northern India. The iconographic representations of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas characteristic of Gupta art have also been found in Funan, affirming the transmission of

Gupta aesthetic norms across the region.

Similar to the Indian cosmological framework, the Funanese believed that deities resided upon Mount Meru. Hindu deities became prominent subjects in sculptural art, demonstrating Funan's integration of Indian religious symbolism. Vishnu is frequently depicted wearing the ceremonial crown called the mala, and the syncretic deity Harihara, embodying the combined attributes of Shiva and Vishnu, has been uncovered in Oc Eo sites. These works reflect Funan sculptors' mastery of and adherence to Gupta stylistic conventions. Sanskrit inscriptions referencing King Kaudinya II, who died in 434 CE, and King Jayavarman I, who reigned from 478 to 514 CE, correspond chronologically to the golden age of the Gupta Empire, generally dated from 319 to 550 CE, though some sources extend it to 660 CE (Coedes 2008: 83) ^[4] (Luong Ninh 2005: 31) ^[15] (Jayapalan 2001: 130) ^[11]. Historical texts from the Sui and Tang dynasties affirm that Funan embraced a syncretic religious environment in which Hinduism and Buddhism, as well as Mahayana and Theravada, coexisted harmoniously. The period of Funan aligns with the transformation of Brahmanism into classical Hinduism during the Gupta era, and at the same time, Mahayana Buddhism flourished parallel to Theravada. The fact that Funan dispatched Buddhist missions to Nanjing, including eminent monks such as Sanghapala and Mantraseb who translated Pali scriptures into Chinese, demonstrates not only the vitality of Funan's Buddhist tradition but also its standing as a major Buddhist center of the southern Mekong region.



Source: Ho Chi Minh City Museum

Fig 3: The Buddha, wood material, 4th–6th century CE, Óc Eo

3. Architectural Legacy of the Gupta Period in Oc Eo Buddhist Architecture under Gupta

Prior to the Gupta era, during the Maurya and Kushana dynasties, Buddhism had already received significant imperial patronage. Great rulers such as Ashoka (269–232 BCE) and Kanishka (78–103 CE) were notable for supporting and propagating the Buddhist doctrine abroad. Despite this royal sponsorship, independent Buddhist monasteries or temple-complexes of the later type had not yet emerged. In the Maurya period architectural remains are primarily stupas and the celebrated Ashokan pillars. Similarly, the Kushana period is known through gold coins embossed with images of the Buddha and relief sculptures depicting scenes from his life. The Gandhara school of art,

patronized by Kushana, produced for the first time anthropomorphic representations of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas, coinciding with the doctrinal split between Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism. Nonetheless, in this pre-Gupta period no incontrovertible archaeological evidence of standalone temple structures has been documented.

With the rise of the Gupta dynasty, sacred architecture underwent a major transformation. Although Gupta rulers were devotees of Vishnu (Bhagavata Vaishnavism), carried out reforms of the old Brahmanical order, and helped establish the principal Hindu sects Shaivism and Vaishnavism, they also embraced Buddhism, promoting its development and bringing it into closer proximity with Hindu tradition. The Gupta emperor Narasimha (495–530 CE), a disciple of the Mahayana scholar Vasubandhu, is credited with founding the Sangharama monastery, establishing the monastic institution Baladiya-rajya, restoring the renowned monastic university Nalanda after its destruction by Hunnic invasions, and subsequently abdicating to renounce worldly life and become a Buddhist monk (Heras 1928)^[9]. He is also said to have built a Buddhist sanctuary (chaitya) within his royal palace (Jayaswal 1934: 33–39)^[12]. Under Gupta rule the building of viharas (monastic dwellings), rock-cut cave temples, and independent temple structures became widespread. Notable examples include the cave-temple complexes at Ajanta (through 480 CE) and Ellora (5th–10th century), as well as the monumental Mahabodhi Temple at Bodhi Gaya in Bihar, constructed under Samudragupta (335–380 CE). These represent defining achievements of Gupta-era Buddhist architecture, combining refined spatial design with religious iconography and structural sophistication. Furthermore, under Kumaragupta I (414–455 CE), the university at Nalanda was reestablished and became the first Buddhist university in Asia — its existence later recorded by travelers such as Xuanzang (Tang Dynasty) and Korean pilgrims like Prajnavarman, confirming the extensive cultural and educational influence of Gupta Buddhism beyond India.

Hindu Temple Architecture in the Gupta Period

Concurrently, the Gupta era witnessed the widespread emergence of independent Hindu temples across India. Early temple architecture included flat-roofed structures, typified by Temple No. 17 at Sanchi, the Vamana temple dedicated to Vishnu, and the Beṭī Math temple. Over time, temple architecture evolved to include multi-tiered structures with shikhara towers, as evidenced in temples such as Deogarh, Aihole, Tigwa, Nachna Parvati, and Bhitargaon. These temples, constructed of brick or a combination of brick and stone, are among the oldest surviving independent Hindu temples in India. Of these, the Bhitargaon temple stands out as the earliest extant brick temple of the Gupta period. Also significant is the emergence of Hindu cave-temples: the earliest known example was carved at Udayagiri (Bhubaneswar, Odisha) under the patronage of Gupta emperor Chandragupta II Vikramaditya (375–415 CE), a devout Vaishnavite who styled himself “Parama-Bhagavata” and bore Garuda as his emblem. He commissioned nineteen of the twenty cave-temples in the Udayagiri complex, marking a turning point in Hindu sacred architecture.

Evidence from Oc Eo-Funan: Architectural and Epigraphic Traces

In the context of the ancient kingdom of Funan and its Oc Eo cultural zone, archaeological records have not yielded definitive traces of Buddhist rock-cut caves or major monastic viharas. This absence may be due to the alluvial geography of the Mekong Delta’s lowlands, which lacks the stable geological formations required for cave carving. Nonetheless, there is substantial evidence indicating that independent Hindu temples were built at Oc Eo during its peak phase. Excavations led by Dang Van Thang and colleagues have documented a variety of Hindu sanctuaries including: Vishnu temples (e.g. site 85ĐN-M4 at Da Noi, An Giang; the “Go Den Muoi” temple in Đồng Tháp); Shiva temples (e.g. Go Cay Trom in An Giang; Linh Son Nam near Ba The Mountain, An Giang; Go Minh Su, Đồng Tháp; Bình Thanh, Tây Ninh); and composite Shiva–Vishnu shrines (e.g. sites 93GT.M1, 93GT.M3, 93GT.M4, 93GT.M5, 10GT.H10 at Go Thap; and site 85ĐN-M2 at Da Noi) (Dang Van Thang & Nguyen Huu Ly 2019)^[6]. The architectural diversity and the presence of both major Hindu sects, Shaivism and Vaishnavism, together with syncretic temple forms, strongly suggest that Gupta architectural and religious models played an important role in shaping the sacred architecture of Funan. Radiocarbon (C¹⁴) dating of Oc Eo sites provides further support for this connection. According to the study by Le Xuan Diem, Dao Linh Con and Vo Si Khai (1995: 436 to 448)^[14], the earliest and latest C¹⁴ dates at Oc Eo range from 530 BCE to 800 CE. Within this sequence, twelve sites correspond to the period before the Gupta era, from 530 BCE to 275 CE. During the Gupta era, from 320 CE to 670 CE, as many as thirty sites fall within this timeframe, and only five sites continue into the period after the Gupta era, from 704 CE to 800 CE. The concentration of a large number of sites in the Gupta centuries, especially from the fourth to the sixth centuries CE, aligns with a phase of vigorous architectural development. This distribution suggests sustained cultural interaction as well as construction activities that reflect influence from Gupta artistic and religious models.

Moreover, one of the most compelling pieces of evidence for Gupta influence in Oc Eo is the widespread use of Sanskrit. The Gupta dynasty is renowned for elevating Sanskrit as the language of scholarship, liturgy, epic poetry, astronomy and dramatic literature. By contrast, the earlier Maurya period used Brahmi, Prakrit, Greek or Aramaic scripts as seen in Ashokan inscriptions such as pillar number thirteen, and the Kushana domain, which was centered in northwest India and Central Asia, employed Bactrian or Prakrit languages written in Greek script. The Kushana tradition was oriented largely toward commercial activity along the Silk Road. In Oc Eo, sculptures, gold leaf inscriptions, votive tablets and seals are engraved in Sanskrit, which firmly situates the Oc Eo culture within the wider Sanskritic sphere shaped by Gupta intellectual and religious ideals. The political expansion of Gupta authority, described by the poet Kalidasa as encompassing twenty one principalities, also coincided with maritime routes that opened toward the Bay of Bengal. This geographic orientation provides a plausible path for the transmission of cultural and religious elements from the Gupta world to Funan. (Ganguly 1987: 7–11)^[7].

Collectively, the architectural remains, epigraphic data, and temple typologies provide compelling evidence of a deep and multifaceted connection between Gupta India and Funan. The

prevalence of Hindu temple architecture, the dominance of Sanskrit inscriptions, and the concentration of Oc Eo sites during the Gupta period all indicate that Funan's material culture absorbed significant elements of Gupta religious and architectural heritage. Through these archaeological and epigraphic traces, the imprint of Gupta civilization remains visible in the ancient Mekong–Funan world, pointing to a complex history of cultural interaction between India and Southeast Asia.

Beyond the existing architectural parallels, recent geoarchaeological and analytical findings from the Oc Eo cultural complex further substantiate sustained Indo-Funan interaction during the Gupta period. Archaeobotanical, metallurgical, and geochemical examinations of artefacts such as glassware, semiprecious stone beads, and construction bricks reveal technological features consistent with Indian practices, especially those associated with northern Indian traditions under the Guptas. Thermoluminescence dating of fired bricks excavated at Go Cay Trom and Binh Thanh sites confirms construction activities during the fourth to sixth centuries CE, contemporaneous with the architectural developments of Gupta temples. These findings suggest that religious architecture in Funan was not only stylistically influenced by Indian prototypes but also contemporaneously implemented. In addition, spatial analysis of sacred sites within the Oc Eo system demonstrates the use of cosmological planning principles such as axial symmetry, cardinal orientation, and centralized sanctum layouts. These are remarkably similar to vastu-shastra conventions found in Gupta-period temples at Deogarh, Tigwa, and Nachna. Even sculptural motifs such as the stylized makara, padma (lotus), and the kalasha-shaped finials adorning temple bases in Oc Eo reflect the Gupta visual idiom, underscoring the pervasive transmission of symbolic forms (Nguyen, Q. M. *et al.*, 2020) ^[19]. Isotopic profiles of metal slag and alloyed artefacts uncovered at An Giang also align with metallurgical signatures typical of South Asia, indicating a flow of technological knowledge in parallel with religious exchange]. These converging lines of material, technological, and architectural evidence reinforce the hypothesis that Gupta India exerted a deep and multidimensional influence on the built environment and sacred geography of Funan.

Conclusion

The material evidence from the Oc Eo cultural complex provides a solid foundation for understanding the depth and character of cultural interaction between Funan and India. The archaeological record, which includes temple foundations, circular sanctuaries dedicated to the Sun God, statues of Surya, Vishnu and Shiva, gold foils with solar iconography, and Sanskrit inscriptions, presents a coherent picture of a society that engaged actively with the religious and artistic world of the Indian subcontinent. These findings correspond chronologically with the Gupta period, a formative era in Indian civilization when religious philosophy, iconography and temple architecture reached a high level of refinement. The parallels observed in sculptural styles, sacred symbols, epigraphic practices and architectural planning demonstrate that Funan did not merely borrow isolated elements but selectively absorbed and transformed Indian cultural forms within its own social and spiritual environment.

Scientific approaches employed in recent studies further strengthen this conclusion. Archaeobotanical analyses that identified South Asian spices on Oc Eo grinding tools suggest the existence of daily contact with broader culinary practices associated with the Indian Ocean region. Geoarchaeological studies and remote sensing data that reveal extensive canal systems highlight the importance of water management and the flexibility of a landscape shaped to accommodate trade and communication. Material analyses of beads, metal artifacts and bricks indicate technological connections with regions that were active cultural centers in India during the Gupta era. The convergence of these different lines of evidence confirms that Funan participated in a dynamic network of transregional exchange.

The spiritual environment of Funan also reflects this pattern of multidimensional interaction. The coexistence of Mahayana Buddhism, Theravada Buddhism, Shaivism and Vaishnavism, together with the cult of Surya, reflects a broad and inclusive religious foundation that developed through contact with diverse Indian traditions. This environment made it possible for Funan to adapt external ideas and integrate them with indigenous beliefs. The appearance of syncretic deities such as Harihara, the widespread use of Sanskrit for inscriptions and ritual objects, and the presence of cosmological layouts in temple sites demonstrate the extent to which Indian religious ideas and artistic principles became embedded in Funanese society.

Taken together, the archaeological, textual and scientific data show that the relationship between Funan and India was neither incidental nor superficial. It was a sustained process that unfolded over many centuries and involved the exchange of ideas, technologies, symbols and aesthetic values. The Oc Eo cultural complex stands today as one of the most important testimonies to this interaction. Its material civilization illustrates how cultural transmission operated within early Southeast Asia and how local communities transformed external influences into distinct and enduring forms. Understanding this process contributes not only to the study of Funan and Oc Eo but also to broader discussions on cultural mobility, early state formation and long-distance maritime connectivity in the ancient world.

Acknowledgement

This research is funded by Vietnam National University HoChiMinh City (VNU-HCM) under grant number B2023-18b-02

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