

Giong Lon Site and Study of Oc Eo Culture's Formation on Vietnam's Southeastern Coast

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Abstract: The Oc Eo culture is a major scientific topic that has been attracting the research interest of domestic and foreign scholars. However, to this day, the origin of the Oc Eo culture has not yet been thoroughly clarified. In general, researchers agree that the Oc Eo culture was formed by a combination of endogenous and exogenous factors, with many different routes, and, up until now, there has not been any comprehensive work on the transition of this culture to southern Vietnam. Based on archaeological sources discovered in the Can Gio-Long Son area, especially at Giong Lon site, the author provides some comments on the formation process of Oc Eo culture in the southeastern coastal region.

Keywords: Oc Eo culture, transformation from Pre-Oc Eo period to Oc Eo culture, Giong Lon site.

Subject classification: Archaeology

1. Introduction

The Oc Eo culture can be regarded as a major scientific research topic, not only for Vietnamese but also other regional scholars as it is closely related to the early formation history and development of many ancient nations in the region. The vestiges of the Oc Eo culture in southern Vietnam have been discovered since the late nineteenth century, and an important milestone in the history of discovering and researching this culture was the large excavation of L. Malleret at the Oc Eo-Ba The site in 1944. After more than 70 years of research and a huge repository of

material resources, the appearance of the Oc Eo culture has gradually been identified, including the special features of sites and their remains, among others. The current research results show that Oc Eo was a thriving society with many achievements in agriculture, handicrafts, and trade, especially on the sea. However, there are still many questions about this culture that need to be answered, some of which regard its origins. In this article, besides reviewing the remarkable statements about the origins of the Oc Eo culture, the author will present some remarks on its formation in the southeastern coastal region based on the

latest research findings at the Giong Lon site on Long Son island, Vung Tau city, Ba Ria-Vung Tau Province.

2. Research status of the origin of the Oc Eo culture

2.1. International scholars

The first international scholar to address this issue was L. Malleret, who excavated the Oc Eo site and identified this ancient culture. In Volume III, Chapter XX of the massive work of *Archaeology in the Mekong River Delta*, he devoted a few lines to discuss the origin of the Oc Eo culture. Based on the presence of early artefacts such as stone axes, chisels, bracelets, some ceramic containers, as well as bronze axes and spears, among others, collected in Oc Eo-Ba The, Da Noi, Nui Sap, and other sites, he said that Oc Eo was formed around the Late Neolithic-Early Metal era. According to L. Malleret, the Oc Eo culture is the crystallisation of indigenous and extraterritorial factors, in which foreign influences gradually invaded this land, not through force, but firstly in the form of economic promotion, that did not encounter any significant reaction from the locals, which made it quite profound and uninterrupted. However, according to the interpretation by L. Malleret, the exogenous factors were important and made up the key factors leading to the development of the Oc Eo culture. More specifically, in his opinion, the relationship between indigenous and foreign culture is a dependent relationship, in which the latter is dominant, while the former is dependent [23, pp.179-180].

After L. Malleret, almost no other foreign scholar directly discussed the origin of the Oc Eo culture. Instead, this issue has been mentioned indirectly in studies of the Funan kingdom and ancient Southeast Asian history. In such works, like L. Malleret, most foreign scholars thought that the formation of the Funan kingdom or other Indianised states in Southeast Asia was the establishment of colonial lands of the Indian. For example, R.C. Majumdar, an Indian scholar, in the work *Ancient Indian Colonization in South-East Asia*, suggested that a large number of Indians came to settle in Southeast Asia, and these residents dominated Funan as well as other early civilisation centres in this region [45, pp.6-10]. Meanwhile, G. Coedes, a French scholar, in his book *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia*, stated that the inhabitants of Southeast Asia were still at the Late Neolithic level before encountering the Brahmanic and Buddhist cultures of India. And thus, all civilised achievements that the region made, met Indian culture, while indigenous peoples played a passive role of reception [39, pp.7-8].

The above-mentioned views can be seen as the common Western historians' when reflecting the early civilisations in Southeast Asia, which were popular from the early 20th century until the 1970s. Nevertheless, there have been other voices among scholars. Justin van Leur, as early as 1955, emphasised the active role of Southeast Asian residents, more specifically local leaders, in their relationship with India. He argued that merchants were never and could not be able to convey India's philosophical or religious ideas, but the local leaders themselves took in some of

these ideas proactively and selectively for their benefit (as cited in [42, p.50]).

Like J. v. Leur, O.W. Wolters argued that the process of forming Indianised countries in Southeast Asia was a two-way reciprocal relationship and that the proactive people in this process were Southeast Asian residents rather than Indians [52]. Moreover, this process happened gradually, not with a massive and sudden change as described by G. Coedes [39], which was also supported by K.R. Hall [42].

In the same view as the aforementioned historians, P. Manguin - a French archaeologist - highlighted that Southeast Asian inhabitants had a regular and long-lasting exchange relationship with the Indian continent, and to a lesser extent with China. This process took place long before the inscriptions and temples of in the style of the Indian civilisation appeared. This persuasively rebutted the notion that early civilisations in Southeast Asia came abruptly together with the arrival of foreigners. It is worth noting that, by artefacts excavated at Oc Eo-Ba The, Manguin recognised an early cultural layer, dating from the middle of the first century to the middle of the third century. Based on the discovered relics and artefacts, and by comparison with contemporary relics in Southeast Asia, Manguin stated that at such stage there was no such thing called *Indianisation* in Oc Eo or Funan [46, pp.291-292].

2.2. Vietnamese scholars

Vietnamese researchers only just began to study southern archaeology after 1975. Combining documents from the previous period with findings after the liberation,

Vietnamese researchers made different judgments about the formation of the Oc Eo culture in the South. There are the following notable points:

Firstly, it is the view of Le Xuan Diem, considering the main origin of Oc Eo culture to be from Dong Nai culture, more specifically from the group of stilt houses in the mangrove areas around the Dong Nai and the Mekong River Delta [6], [7].

The second view is of Vo Si Khai and Pham Duc Manh. Both considered all archaeological cultural layers and sites dating back to the early Iron Age and earlier throughout southern Vietnam as the indigenous foundation of the Oc Eo culture [19], [20], [24].

The third view is of Luong Ninh and some other researchers, such as Nguyen Manh Cuong and Ngo The Phong, who agreed that the Oc Eo culture originated from the Sa Huynh culture, whose people were those speaking Austronesian languages and migrating from the sea [25], [26], [27], [28], [3].

The fourth view is of Ha Van Tan that considered the Oc Eo culture to be the combination of various types of culture during the Metal Age, which were mainly Early Iron Age in southern Vietnam [30], [31], [32].

Sharing the same viewpoint with Ha Van Tan, the authors like Bui Phat Diem, Dao Linh Con, and Vuong Thu Hong, Vu Quoc Hien, Nguyen Thi Hau and Tong Trung Tin, based on the study of archaeological sites in Southern Vietnam, pointed out that in the Early Iron Age in Southern Vietnam, there were various types of culture such as Doc Chua, Dau Giay, Go O Chua, Bung Bac, Can Gio, Go Cay Tung types, etc., and

these types of culture, when interacting with new agents, were all unified in Oc Eo culture [5], [13], [14], [12], [36].

The above are the views of Vietnamese and international scholars related to the origin of the Oc Eo culture. Although it is acknowledged that this culture was formed from a combination of endogenous and exogenous factors, the interpretation of the issue is somewhat different, based on the availability of materials as well as the understanding of each scholar.

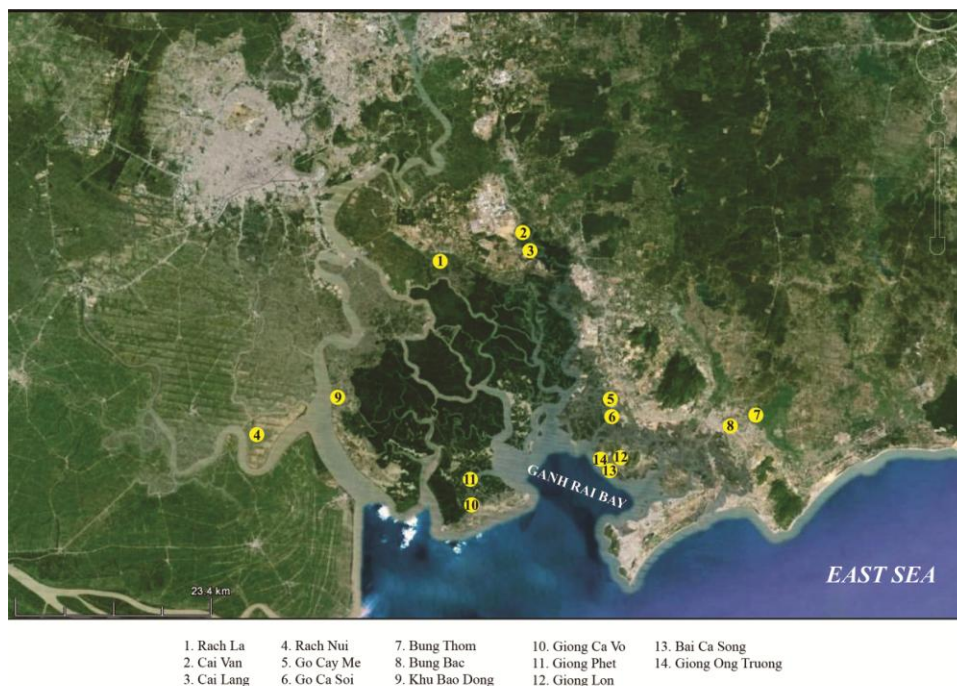
In the author's opinion, the standpoint of Ha Van Tan and some other archaeologists, such as Dao Linh Con, Vu Quoc Hien, Nguyen Thi Hau, and Tong Trung Tin, that considers the Oc Eo culture being formed by many development paths, is more reasonable, because it is not only theoretical

but also well adapted to the available archaeological materials. However, to prove and clarify the routes leading to the Oc Eo culture is not easy. So far, there has not yet been any comprehensive work on the transition to the Oc Eo culture in the South.

Based on available material sources, the following routes or groups of Pre-Oc Eo sites may be outlined:

- *Sites in the Mekong River Delta:* These include sites distributed mainly in An Giang Province, such as Go Cay Tung, Go Tu Tram, Go Me - Go Sanh. Besides that, Giong Noi in Ben Tre or K9 and Giong Cu in Ha Tien should be mentioned. These sites date back to the Early Iron Age and their late layers began to contain Oc Eo elements [37], [10], [2].

Map 1: Distribution of Archaeological Sites in the Southeastern Coastal Region



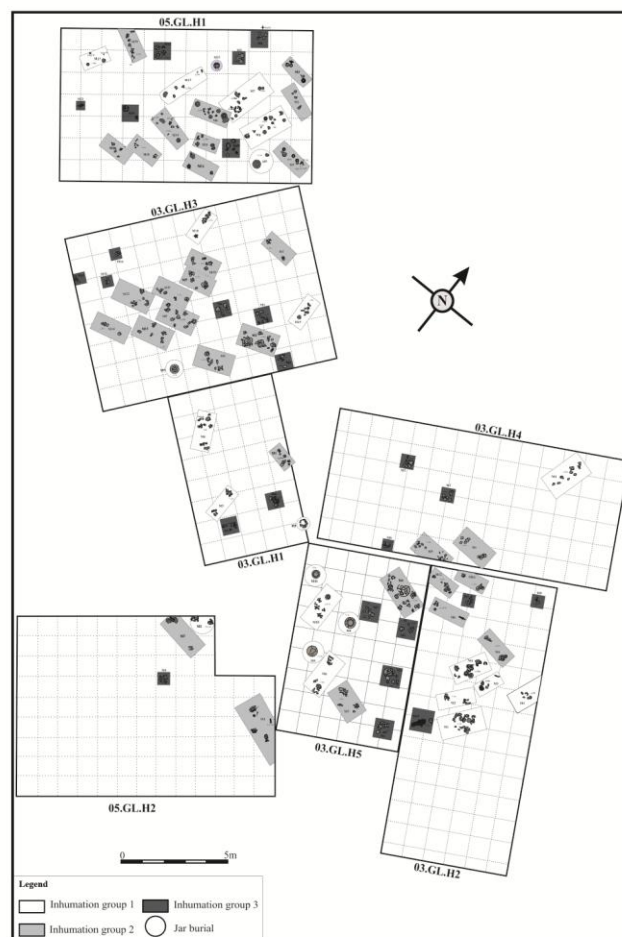
Source: Author.

- *The site group in Vam Co River delta:*
 This group includes sites distributed in Long An Province, such as Go O Chua, Go Cao Su, Lo Gach, Go Hang, Go Dung, Go De, and Trap Gao Mieu. Their stratigraphy ranges usually from 1.0 to 2.0m thickness, consisting of two cultural stages, early and late, of which the early cultural layer is of the Early Iron Age and, the late layer dated back to close to AD [9], [29], [18], [4], [21].

- *The site group in the southeast coastal region:* Giong Ca Vo and Giong Phet sites

are distributed in the coastal mangrove zone of Can Gio district, Ho Chi Minh City. These sites have characteristics of both residential places and handicraft centres for making pottery, jewellery, and glass, and then gradually turned into burial sites. This site group dates back to the Early Iron Age, for which Giong Phet had a later starting date, therefore, a little later ending date. In the relics were starting to appear Oc Eo elements, though they were still not quite clearly seen [33], [34], [11].

Figure 1: Burial Groups at Giong Lon Site



Source: Author.

Among these three groups, the southeastern coastal group is closely related to the theme of this research (Map 1).

Through studying the archaeological remains collected at Giong Ca Vo and Giong Phet, some researchers have noticed Oc Eo elements in this site group, and, based on that, they concluded that there was a development route to Oc Eo in the southeastern coastal region [33], [31], [32], [1]. However, the researchers also claimed that those Oc Eo elements are only “subtle” and “primitive”, and, in terms of chronology, from Giong Ca Vo and Giong Phet to the proven Oc Eo vestiges (such as Giong Am from the fourth to the fifth century) exists still a gap of several hundred years. Therefore, it is important to find a passage from Giong Ca Vo and Giong Phet to Oc Eo. With the discovery of the Giong Lon site on Long Son Island (Ba Ria-Vung Tau), the evolution of the Oc Eo culture in the southeastern coastal region may be stated more clearly. In the following section, the author will, therefore, discuss the features of this important site.

3. Giong Lon site: Features and dating

The Giong Lon site is located in Rach Gia 3 village, Long Son island commune, Vung Tau city (Ba Ria-Vung Tau Province). This site was discovered in 2002 and excavated twice in 2003 and 2005. Within an area of 536m², separated into seven excavation units, 80 graves were found, with two types of inhumations and jar burials, among which the inhumations are divided into three groups with different ages (Figure 1).

This site is important as it contributes to our understanding of the transition process from the Pre-Oc Eo period to the Oc Eo culture in the southeastern coastal region. The cultural characteristics of the site may be summarised as follows:

3.1. Distribution characteristics and site's nature

First, Giong Lon is located in the mangrove ecology of the estuarine coastal region. This is a newly created terrain, therefore unstable, and affected by tides every hour every day. However, the dunes, where the site is located, are less affected by tides as they are not too close to the sea and have relatively high altitude (about 3-4m). Perhaps due to these features, people chose this place to build the cemetery. About 1.5-2.0km southwest of Giong Lon, towards Long Son island on the edge of Ganh Rai Bay, are some yellowish-brown sand-soil dunes, such as Giong Ong Truong, Bai Ca Song, Hang Xom Lon, and Rach Gia Nuoc. The author's research and excavation results in recent years show that there were both residential sites and ceramic workshops - and most likely those who resided and worked on these coastal dunes also established the burial site [15]. At these sites, along with thousands of potsherds with the same style as the ones from Giong Ca Vo and Giong Phet, archaeologists also found other ceramics such as spindle whorls, stoves (Vietnamese: *cà ràng*), lids, pots, vases, among others, even including the carinated-shoulder pots with carved patterns similar to the burial ceramics in Giong Lon both in shape and material. In terms of dating, the results of a coal sample analysis in Giong Ong Truong

and Rach Gia Nuoc are quite similar to those of Giong Lon, respectively 2140 ± 140 years BP and 1860 ± 125 years BP [35]. These sites, combined with Giong Lon, form an archaeological complex of settlement, production, and burial sites along Ganh Rai Bay, contributing to enriching the nuances of *giong* (Vietnamese: *giông*) culture in the mangrove areas.

Regarding the nature of this site, Giong Lon is a rare (if not unique) burial site from the protohistory in Southern Vietnam that is located far from any settlement. According to current research, during the Iron Age, most of the burial sites in Southern Vietnam were placed right at the settlement, for example, Giong Ca Vo, Giong Phet, Go O Chua, Doc Chua or Suoi Chon. In Southern Vietnam, probably only Phu Chanh (in Binh Duong) has the same features as Giong Lon². But it is important to note that Phu Chanh is dated much later than the aforementioned site - it existed during the first to the second century, equivalent to the late period of Giong Lon [17]. Another site like Giong Lon is Prohear (Prey Veng, Cambodia), which dates back to

the same age as Giong Lon, to about 200 BC to 100 AD. Thus, the fact that burial sites were separated from the residential areas is a special feature of the communities in the Dong Nai - Vam Co basin at the end of the prehistoric to early history period.

3.2. Artefacts

The offerings found at Giong Lon are very rich in quantity and types, with outstanding features that help us identify the cultural background as well as the relationships of this site.

3.2.1. Pottery

Potteries are the most popular burial objects found at Giong Lon (237 samples), of which most are utensils but have ceremonial and religious significance. Among the daily-life items, pots (carinated shape) and pedestal bowls are two main types. However, no production tools such as net sinkers or spindle whorls were found among the offerings.

Figure 2: Some Typical Potteries: Concave Lids with Knob (3.1); Decorated Lids (3.2 - 3.4); Ewer (3.5); Lids or Supporters (3.6 - 3.8)



Source: Author.

Stoves were also completely absent, though that was not uncommon in other sites on Long Son Island. In addition to pottery, particularly of the Iron Age, there some pottery from the early Oc Eo period, such as black temper and white slip in the shape of crab-baskets, concave lids with knobs, supporters, bird-shaped lid, and or ewers with spouts (Figure 2).

3.2.2. Stone objects

Stone items were not many (109 samples), and came in the forms of beads, bracelets, and some sea pebbles. The beads were mainly made of carnelian in the truncated diamond shape, some beads were even not yet drilled, or the drilled hole was not going from one end to the other. Noticeably, there is a string of spherical beads with similar diameters and in pinkish-white colour, which was likely agate being baked by fire. Bracelets were primarily made of nephrite stone, some of agate or quartz. The highlight of Giong Lon's bracelet collection is that all bracelets made of nephrite were tubular, while that of other materials is triangular or have polygonal cross-sections. The presence of sea pebbles buried in the tombs is also a remarkable feature.

3.2.3. Glass objects

Most of the burial items found at the site were glass objects (1720), mainly beads. There is also a piece of an open-loop earring and two triangular bracelets. Giong Lon's beads are all monochromatic (*Indo-Pacific beads*), with the two main colours being green and blue. Additionally, the presence of mutisalah

brick-red string beads is also very noticeable. In shape, the beads are mainly spherical, cylindrical, and wheel-shaped.

3.2.4. Bronze and iron objects

The collection of bronze and iron offerings is quite modest. Only two bronze items were found, namely a rattle and a Wuzhu coin (of Chinese Han dynasty). Despite the small number, the presence of Wuzhu coin somehow helps us to identify the age of the burial site and its relationship with the cultures in the North.

Meanwhile, more iron objects were found (24 items). All iron objects were weapons or tools. Prominent among this group are rather large spears and swords. Giong Lon's swords are often bent or folded in half then buried in the grave. Perhaps these objects are not merely weapons but also a symbol of power and status of the deceased.

Besides the two above-mentioned types of weapons, the remaining objects were tools of two kinds, namely knives and chisels. Giong Lon's chisels have a similar shape to modern ones, while the knives feature a special S-shaped curved handle. Notably, iron chisels were often buried together with iron knives. This suggests that these two items could be a set of tools of a specific craft, which itself was very important to contemporary society.

3.2.5. Gold objects

Giong Lon's gold collection contains early gold objects in large quantities (198 items) with the most diverse and special types in Southeast Asia³. The gold burial items at Giong Lon were not only jewellery but

also votive items of spiritual significance (Figure 3).

Beads are the most common type of gold objects and mainly rhombus-shaped. Other types come in smaller quantities but are very special, such as tubular, hexagonal, and wheel-shaped beads.

Giong Lon's gold earrings come in two different styles: The first type has the form of split circles, which are ribbed earrings.

These are similar to the artefacts found in Lai Nghi (Quang Nam), Prohear (Prey Veng, Cambodia), Oc Eo (An Giang), Go Hang (Long An), and Pesentren (Java, Indonesia) [54, Pl.XX]. The second type is quite different, with the ring part of a split circle, which goes through a gold leaf with an eccentric hole. Such style of earrings has not been found in any other site in Southeast Asia.

Figure 3: Gold Objects from Giong Lon Site: Masks (4.1 - 4.3); Earrings (4.4 - 4.7); Beads (4.8 - 4.10); Phallus (4.11); Gold Foils (4.12 - 4.14)



Source: Author.

The three gold masks found at Giong Lon are the most special artefacts, which not only present the noble status of the buried person but also prove the important position of the site in the context of regional history. Giong Lon is the only site in Southeast Asia so far, where such gold masks could be discovered in this clear archaeological context. These three masks have been analysed with scientific methods, and the results showed that they could be manipulated from different sources. The analysis also suggests that the first mask (03.GL.H3.M2.88a) may have belonged to a local group, situated somewhere in the area of Central Vietnam and Southern Cambodia. Meanwhile, the other two masks were likely imported products from more remote regions, possibly from islands.

Other artefacts such as a phallus and gold foils are also very special. These items did not have any practical function but were buried with the deceased as votive objects or because they carry spiritual meanings, thereby showing the rich spiritual life of the deceased person.

3.3. Dates

Based on the overall features and artefacts, the author will discuss the chronology of the site and its development stages in more detail in the following part:

- The early stage lasts approximately from the third to the second century BC and is being represented by a group of north-south inhumations (burial group 1) and jar burials of type 1. Studying Iron Age burial sites in Southern Cambodia and Southern Vietnam, archaeologists realised a general

trend that tombs from this period often were turned southwards [48, p.145], i.e. being buried along the north-south axis like those of burial group 1 in Giong Lon. In addition to the tomb direction, the burial items in these graves also reflect its early age. The burial objects in the first group are mainly ceramics, stone artefacts, and glass beads. Meanwhile, iron and bronze objects, as well as jewellery made of carnelian, agate, and quartz is very rare; and gold objects are completely not present. The burial potteries mainly consist of pots and pedestal bowls being made of clay mixed with sand. The black temper with white slip, which is typical for early Oc Eo sites, is also very rarely found (8 out of 51 items). Stone objects mainly include nephrite tubular rings and sea pebbles. However, the presence of monochromatic Indo-Pacific glass beads shows that the age of this group cannot be earlier than the third century BC⁴.

Besides determining the dates with the archaeological method, there are two tombs of group 1 that have been precisely dated by the radioactive carbon method (C14). The charcoal sample taken from the grave 03.GL.H2.M1 is dated to 2220 ± 70 BP, and the charcoal sample taken from the grave 03.GL.H2.M2 gave the result of 2680 ± 55 BP. While the absolute date of M1 is consistent with the artefacts in the grave (there are 209 glass beads in the tomb), the C14 result of M2 seems to be too early compared to the burial items, because in the grave, the buried objects include pedestal bows made of black temper with white slip. In short, with the aforementioned features, the early stage of Giong Lon was between the third and second century BC, still belonging to the Iron Age.

- The later stage lasts from the first century BC to the first and second centuries AD, represented by the east-west inhumations (burial group 2) and jar burials of type 2. While the early stage burials often tended to turn south, in the later stage, the tombs turned east or west, such as in the case of Phum Snay site in Southern Cambodia [48, p.147]. This feature is similar to the group of inhumations in Giong Ca Vo and Giong Phet [11, p.38]. The burial objects in group 2 have features that reveal their dates. Among the ceramic burial items, some of the less common objects in group 1 began to become popular (such as carinated pots or pedestal bowls made of black temper with white slip), and new objects appeared (such as concave lids with knobs, ewers, ceramic supporters, bird statues, and high stem bowls). Among the stone items, jewellery made of carnelian, agate, and quartz began to appear and become popular. Iron objects were also present more often in the graves. However, bronze objects were still very few but the presence of a Wuzhu coin is worth mentioning. The most notable feature is the presence of gold burial items, such as beads, earrings, and masks. All these items suggest that group 2 cannot be dated earlier than the first century BC. Besides these objects, elements of Oc Eo culture were present in the graves of the group. Early Oc Eo elements could be identified through the following types of artefacts:

- A significant number of fine ceramics like black temper with white slip.
- New types of ceramics, such as crab-basket pots with narrow mouths and necks, concave ceramic lids with knobs, ceramic supporters, and pedestal bowls.

- Commonly present gold offerings, and the phenomenon of gold foils buried in the tombs.

Within the collection of Giong Lon's offerings from this period, there are black temper ceramics with white slip pots, with narrow necks and mouths, and ceramic supporters - both objects often found in Oc Eo sites. Meanwhile, the concave lid with knob found in Giong Lon is very similar to that of the same type found in Giong Xoai (An Giang). These lids are some of the common objects of Oc Eo culture, in which the lids with hook-rings often appeared in early stages, while the concave lids with knobs were often dated later [29, p.33]. This fact shows that the late Giong Lon period was within the Oc Eo culture. The collection of gold items also contributes to further confirming this conclusion, because the custom of using gold as jewellery and burying it in tombs is a typical feature of the culture. Moreover, Giong Lon's ribbed earrings are very similar to items of the same type in L. Malleret's collection. The human face on the mask No. 05.GL.H1.M1.88 is very similar to the embossed face on a gold mask that he collected in the region, where Oc Eo once existed, in 1944. The types of Giong Lon's gold beads are also present in Malleret's collection. In addition, the jar burials of type 2 with covers in Giong Lon could be compared with the burial objects found in early cultural layers at the Ba The site in 1998 [53, p.25], [46, p.291]. Thus, through the features of the sites and artefacts mentioned above, the dating frame from the first century BC to the second century AD for the later stage of Giong Lon is reasonable.

In summary, the Giong Lon site dates from around the third century BC to around the second century AD, with the early period dating from the third to the second century BC - represented by the inhumation group 1 and jar burials of type 1 - and the late stage dating from around the first century BC to the second century AD, represented by the inhumation group 2 and the jar burials of type 2. This later period can also be seen as the peak period of the site. The dating frame shows that Giong Lon could evolve from the end of the Prehistory to the Early History, or in other words from Pre-Oc Eo period to Oc Eo - the key historical period of the region.

4. Giong Lon site in the context of the transformation from Pre-Oc Eo period to Oc Eo culture

4.1. Giong Lon site and its relationships

There are many archaeological sites or groups thereof from the Protohistoric period, distributed over a vast area throughout the Southeast and Southwest regions. According to the typical regions, the protohistoric archaeological sites in southern Vietnam may be divided into groups, such as the Dong Nai river basin group, the Vam Co river basin group, the Mekong River Delta group, and the group along the southeastern coastal area. In this section, the author will focus on the relationship of Giong Lon site with typical archaeological sites of the above-mentioned groups. Besides this, Giong Lon will be placed in a broader context to understand its relationship with other cultures and regions, such as the Sa

Huynh culture in Central Vietnam, some sites in Southeast Asia, and with Indian and Chinese civilisations.

Based on comparing Giong Lon with other sites cultural groups in a wider space and chronological context, the following conclusions can be drawn:

- *First*, Giong Lon has the closest relationship with archaeological site groups in the southeastern coastal area, especially with those in Can Gio. The close contact between Giong Lon and this group is not merely geographically but the similarities in relics and artefacts have also revealed a traditional and original relationship. With other groups Giong Lon shares some similarities and differences, in which the relationship with the Vam Co river basin group is the clearest, reflecting frequent interactions between the eastern seaport region and the ancient western alluvial area. Meanwhile, the similarities between Giong Lon and some sites in the Dong Nai river basin are mainly periodic with little traditional connection. The situation is similar when comparing Giong Lon to sites in the Mekong River Delta.

- Furthermore, when looking at other areas, Giong Lon is influenced by the Sa Huynh culture in Central Vietnam, shown through the funerary custom and some typical burial objects. In the Southeast Asian extent, Giong Lon has also extensive connections with the sites on islands and in the mainland, including aspects closer to those on the islands. In the continental extent, Giong Lon reflects more similarities with sites in southeastern Cambodia than those in Thailand. The relationship of Giong Lon with India and China has also been recognised, showing that previous

generations at these sites were involved in international trade flows quite early.

4.2. Giong Lon site and the process of forming the Oc Eo culture in the southeastern coastal area

In this section, the author will present an overview of the context of cultural exchange and interaction in the centuries corresponding to the transitional period from Pre-Oc Eo period to Oc Eo, along with the process of occupying and exploring the southeastern coastal area, thereby identifying the process of forming the Oc Eo culture in this area.

4.2.1. Cultural exchange and interaction

The historical context of cultural exchange and interaction during the second half of the first millennium BC to the early centuries AD may be generalised with the following key features:

- *Firstly*, the development of internal and inter-region trade networks in Southeast Asia happened fast, based on the existing platform of previous exchange networks. The excavations at sites such as Dong Son, Sa Huynh, Giong Ca Vo, Ban Don Ta Phet, and Khao Sam Kaeo have found many valuable artefacts of various origins, reflecting the multidimensional relationship of the creators of these sites. The large-volume and high-value artefacts, such as the Dong Son drum or the gem jewels of Sa Huynh culture, went on water routes to reach many remote areas in Southeast Asia [41], [38], [43], [44].

- *Secondly*, the commercial activities on the Indian continent grew strongly with the creation of guilds, which operated as banks

dominating the issuance and circulation of currency. Besides this, there was also the emergence of specialised trading communities in the middle part of the Ganges, focusing on products such as salt, garment, metal, and pottery. The long-distance trade, for example, between the middle part of the Ganges and the western coastal area also developed rapidly during this period. Moreover, the development of Buddhism and Jainism was also a factor that stimulated trade activities, because both these religions recognised equality, regardless of social class, and recognised rightful income-generating activities of all classes [38].

- *Thirdly*, the India-Roman trade relations made significant strides, especially after the Indian expedition of Alexander the Great in 326 BC⁵. At that time, in the Mediterranean cities, the demand for rare and precious items of tropical origin was high. To meet such demand, Indian traders had to sail eastward towards the Southeast Asian mainland and islands, which were rich in natural resources [38].

- *Fourthly*, the formation of the Maritime Silk Road around the second century BC as the result of the Han dynasty's foreign trade policy had strong impacts on East-West trade activities. This road linked China with regions such as Europe, West Asia, and South Asia, of which the Southeast Asian sea played an important role with increasingly busy trading activities [47], [8].

This historical background has contributed to the explanation for the blooming trade and cultural relations that took place in Southeast Asia in the last centuries BC [22]. An extensive trading network was established, extending from Western Europe, across the Mediterranean Sea, the Persian Gulf, and the Red Sea to India, Southeast Asia, and

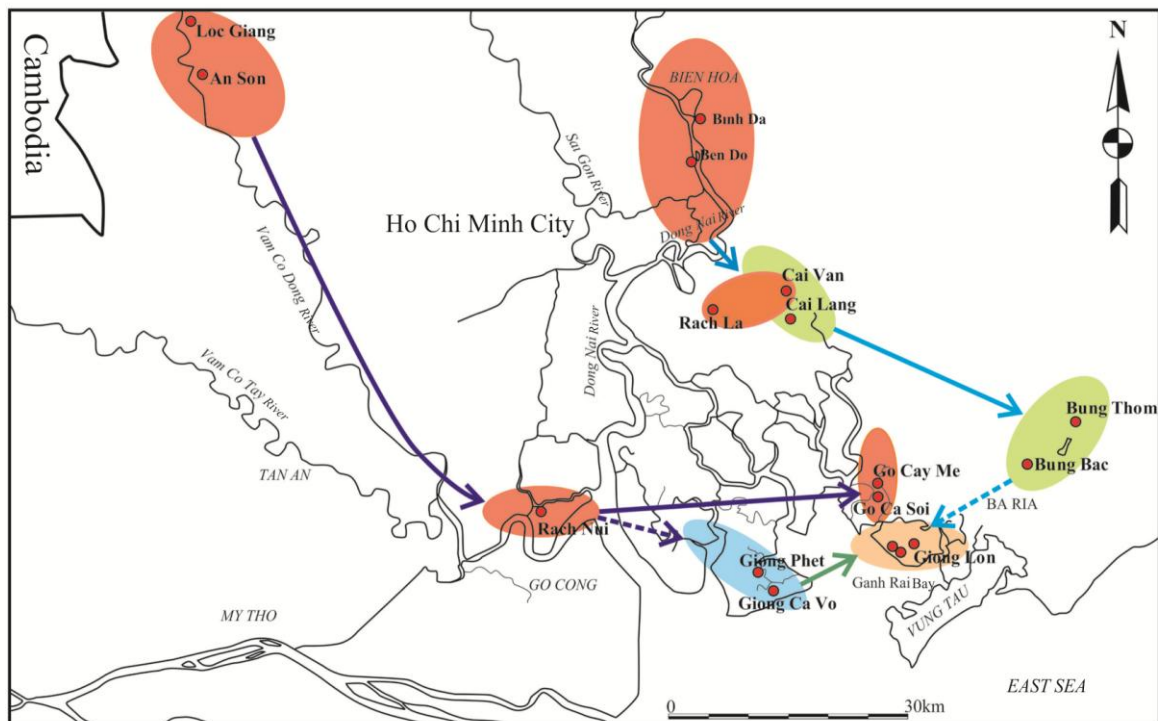
China, causing tremendous impacts on the economic and social aspect of Southeast Asian communities.

4.2.2. The process of occupying and exploring the southeastern coastal area

In the context of cultural exchange and exposure with the region and the world as aforementioned, the southeastern coastal area, located right at the crossroads between Southeast Asia, East Asia, and South Asia,

had favourable conditions for cultural exchange and interaction between inland areas and coastal areas, as well as with large civilisations in more remote areas. In such context, the ancient resident communities here had internal movements and developments. As such, archaeological documents show that, about 3,000 years ago, there were groups of people starting to occupy and exploit the coastal mangrove areas in Southeastern Vietnam, which is visualised in Map 2 [16], [1, pp.17-37].

Map 2: Map of the Process of Occupying the Mangrove Areas in Southeastern Vietnam



Source: Author.

- The first route consists of sites such as Rach La, Cai Van, Cai Lang (Nhon Trach, Dong Nai), and Bung Thom and Bung Bac (Long Dat, Ba Ria-Vung Tau). This route

began with the residents in Rach La and Cai Van (early layer), dating from 3,500-3,000 years BP, starting from the middle region of Dong Nai, carrying with it the traditions of

the Ben Do and Binh Da cultures, moving down to settle in the mangrove watershed area of Thi Vai River, on the low-lying strip along the edge of ancient alluvial soil in Bien Hoa and Nhon Trach (Dong Nai). Following the residents in Rach La-Cai Van were the Cai Lang residents. When reviewing the sites and artefacts, it can be seen that the Cai Lang group was directly developing from the preceding Rach La-Cai Van group, dating from 3000-2500 years BP or later. While the Cai Lang group is the on-site development of the Rach La-Cai Van group, the Bung Thom-Bung Bac resident group (Ba Ria-Vung Tau) was the further spread to the sea by this community with Dong Nai traditions. How the development of this resident lineage continued is still an unanswered question. Nevertheless, the similarities between some Bung Thom and Giong Lon pottery, in addition to the phenomenon of living in stilt houses recorded in Bai Ca Song site on Long Son island, somehow hints the possibility that this group of residents integrated into the later group of sites on Long Son island to jointly transfer towards the Oc Eo culture.

- The second route includes sites such as Rach Nui (Can Giuoc, Long An), Go Ca Soi, and Go Cay Me (Tan Thanh, Ba Ria - Vung Tau). While the first route was with residents from the middle of Dong Nai River, the second route was with residents from the Vam Co river basin who were carrying the traditions of An Son and Loc Giang sites, moving further to the sea, settling on floating mounds in the area of Can Giuoc (Long An) and Tan Thanh (Ba Ria-Vung Tau), dating from 3,500-2,500 years BP. Where the residents of Rach Nui-Go Ca Soi went to still needs to be further

investigated, but the possibility is not ruled out that this group later merged with the residents in the Can Gio-Long Son area, because of the typical style of pottery mouths of Rach Nui with curved rims and bevelled edges that is very similar to the typical style of Giong Ca Vo in the early time.

- The third route includes sites in Giong Ca Vo and Giong Phet (Can Gio, Ho Chi Minh City) and Giong Lon (Long Son, Vung Tau city). While the first and second routes represent the process of moving to the sea, the third route with the appearance of Can Gio and Long Son residents shows the moving process from the sea into the mainland.

People engaged in non-agricultural activities, the Can Gio group, with their vision, occupied high floating sand and soil dunes in the mangrove zone in the southern estuary of Ganh Rai bay, the so-called "southern gateway" to the East Sea in southeastern Vietnam. Here, based on inheriting and combining the life experience of the previous communities, the Can Gio residents further exploited the advantages of this mangrove area to reach a higher development stage compared to the Prehistory. Can Gio was then seen as the largest craft centre in the region, with handicrafts such as pottery and jewellery from glass, gemstones, and molluscs, for which the scale of ceramic production reached the factory model. In addition, Can Gio also acted as a primitive trade-port, where trade and exchange activities with outsiders took place intensely, reflected in the significant presence of various artefacts with overseas origins. It may be concluded that the appearance of Can Gio residents marked an epochal change in this mangrove

area, from the dominant economic method of exploitation to the economic method of trade and production [34], [14].

Like the Can Gio group, the Long Son group is also a physical relic of non-agricultural residents, occupying coastal sand and soil dunes in the northern Ganh Rai bay, the so-called “the northern gateway” to the East Sea of southeastern Vietnam. The similarities of ecological environment, residence modes, and economic activities reveal that the Long Son group was the spread of the Can Gio group across Ganh Rai bay. Perhaps in the later period, when resources (clay, firewood, and habitable land) in Can Gio began to be limited, residents of Giong Ca Vo and Giong Phet moved to reside on Long Son island, where they found similar ecological conditions to Can Gio, to continue their production and trading activities.

The above-portrayed outline of the activities of occupying and exploiting the mangrove areas along the southeastern coast has shown the process of development of the Oc Eo culture from the pre-historic period. In thousands of years, from the first exploration and exploitation steps of Cai Van and Rach Nui residents to the peak development of Can Gio and Long Son residents, the elements of the Oc Eo culture were gradually shaped and became the typical features, such as the tradition of living in stilt houses in floating areas, the manufacturing and use of wooden furniture, and the manipulation and use of jewellery made of gold and glass. Along with that, taking advantage of the strategic position on the East-West trade route of Ganh Rai Bay, the residents here received new winds of the era, turning this area into a primitive

trade-port and attracting international boats to do business here. As a result, a new class of commercial services emerged, linking the residents of the Dong Nai and Vam Co river basins with foreign traders.

After a thousand years of sea encroachment, from Rach La, Cai Van, Rach Nui, Go Ca Soi to Cai Lang, Bung Thom-Bung Bac, and from Giong Ca Vo and Giong Phet (Can Gio) to Giong Lon (Long Son), the image of an early Oc Eo period can be observed.

5. Conclusion

The study of Giong Lon site made an important contribution to the research work of the formation of the Oc Eo culture in the southeastern coastal region. Based on the data collected from Giong Lon and some archaeological sites in the southeastern coastal region, the development route to the Oc Eo culture in this area has been revealed. Archaeological documents show that the Oc Eo culture in the southeastern coastal region was formed thanks to the interaction between the process of occupying and exploring this land, and the context of cultural exchange and exposure to the region and the world during the centuries before and after AD. More specifically, the Oc Eo culture in the southeastern coastal region was created by combining the cultural layers of Can Gio-Long Son mangrove areas with elements of the Sa Huynh culture and the Dong Nai - Vam Co culture. It is a combination of indigenous and cultural elements coming from the outside, such as Southeast Asia, South India, and South China.

The combination of the endogenous and exogenous elements mentioned above are

presented in Giong Lon site, which is a testament to the process of development and integration of many different cultural lines to jointly advance to the Oc Eo civilisation in Southern Vietnam.

Notes

¹ This paper was published in Vietnamese in: *Khảo cổ học*, số 6, 2018, then developed into this English version. Translator: Van Thi Thanh Binh. Language editor: Etienne Mahler.

² Phu Chanh is a burial and settlement site. However, there are no traces of the cultural layer in the positions where the burials were found.

³ According to Dr. Reinecke, along with Prohear and Bit Meas, Giong Lon is the site with the most special collection of gold items in Southeast Asia in the early centuries AD [50].

⁴ The earliest dating of this type of glass beads in Southeast Asia is from the third century BC [40].

⁵ During the conquest, the army of Alexander the Great and his allies crossed the Indus River and opened the door into a world they had never known before: India and East Asia. The Romans began to realise that India was no longer the end of the world and that the Indus River did not flow into the Nile as they thought it had before, but into the sea and led to Asia [50], [51, pp.58-67].

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