

# GOLD PLAQUES AND THEIR CULTURAL CONTEXTS IN THE OC EO CULTURE

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## BACKGROUND

The artefacts described here as gold plaques have been excavated from brick structures at many archaeological sites in the Mekong delta. The first plaque recovered in Vietnam, during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, depicted 'a monster riding an elephant' (Duc 1998:32). Malleret (1962: 315, pls. 1,2) also recovered several of these items of material culture during his excavations at Oc Eo in the 1930s. As with the above-mentioned 19<sup>th</sup> century example, the gold plaques recovered by Malleret were decorated. One depicted a woman playing a harp; a second figure was depicted in the *tribhanga* posture and a third plaque featured the *palmette* motif. Although all of the plaques were found within brick structures at Oc Eo, Malleret was undecided as to whether the structures containing these artefacts were 'graves' or 'worshipping places'.

During the 1980s and 1990s, large numbers of plaques were recovered from brick foundations during excavations in South Vietnam, and many of them were also decorated. Archaeologists recovered examples during the 1982-1983 excavations at Nen Chua (Ta Kev), where 19 vestiges of so-called 'graves' containing plaques were reported (Fig. 1). More than 300 gold plaques were also found during excavations at the site of Go Thap in Dong Thap Province in 1982, 1993 and 1996 (Dao Linh Con 1995: 48-55). Again, the plaques were described as coming from 'grave mounds'.

In terms of iconography, the most important assemblage of gold plaques yet found comes from the 1985 excavations at the site of Da Noi in Kien Giang Province. These excavations produced 7 brick structures. The 1988-89 excavations at the site of Ke Mot in Kien Giang Province produced, for the first time, gold plaques associated with sculptures. Undoubtedly, the most significant gold plaque yet found in South Vietnam was that unearthed during the 1987 excavations at the site of Go Xoai in Long An Province. This gold plaque was inscribed (Fig. 2) and provides us with new insights into the functions of some brick architectural features and the spread of Buddhism into Southeast Asia. This paper discusses these recent finds and their cultural contexts. The sites under discussion are located in Fig. 4.

## ARCHITECTURAL REMAINS

Scholars have long debated the function and meaning of the architectural remains that contain gold plaques in Vietnam. Generally, the architectural remains comprise

brick structures that have square brick pedestals in their interiors with hollowed-out sections where gold plaques and other prestigious items of material culture occur. The French archaeologist, Louis Malleret (1959:315), considered the brick structures unearthed on the stone hillocks at Oc Eo to have functioned as 'worshipping places', or 'graves'. The same structures have also been described by Vietnamese archaeologists (Le Xuan Diem et al. 1995: 213-270) as 'graves', and have been perceived as having the same function (see Dao Linh Con 1995: 70-81). Recently, several Vietnamese scholars, including Le Xuan Diem, have expressed reservations about general interpretations of all huge stone blocks and architectural features unearthed in the areas of Oc Eo, Da Noi, Go Thap (Fig. 3) and Go Thanh as 'graves'. Instead, these scholars have suggested that some of the structures may actually have functioned as worshipping places (Le Xuan Diem et al. 1995: 269-270). Luong Ninh (1996: 67-74) believes that the brick pedestals in these structures were not components of graves but *sima*, or secret repositories constructed specifically in temples for certain religious observances.

## THE ARCHITECTURAL COMPLEX AT CAT TIEN

The four excavations (1993 to 1996) conducted at the site of Cat Tien, Long An province, have drawn attention to the presence of several different types of architectural complex along the banks of the Dong Nai River in southern Vietnam. A huge stone *linga-yoni* was found on Mound 1A at Cat Tien, along with a large number of gold plaques decorated with images of gods, goddesses and religious symbols, and two small gold *linga*, all inside the hollow sections of the brick pedestals in the centres of the structures. On this basis, Nguyen Tien Dong (2001) classified Cat Tien as a Hindu temple complex. This interpretation has significance for a number of other similar sites, although it is not applicable to all architectural complexes in South Vietnam where, in some instances, there are marked temporal and spatial differences.

## THE GO THAP AND GO XOAI ARCHITECTURAL COMPLEXES

The writer has examined the plaques and their cultural contexts at the two sites of Go Thap (Dong Thap Province) and Go Xoai (Long An Province). The research suggests that the manufacturing techniques and motifs



Figure 1. Gold plaques from Ke Mot (the top two) and Nen Chua, Kien Giang Province. Photos by Le Thi Lien.



Figure 2. Gold plaque with Buddhist inscription from Go Xoai, Long An Province.

used to decorate the gold plaques from these two sites are very different from those of the plaques from the Hindu temple complex at Cat Tien.

The site of Go Thap is located in Thap Muoi Village, Tan Kieu Commune, Thap Muoi District, Dong Thap Province. The site is actually known by several different names: Prasat Pream Loven, Chua Nam Gian and Thap Muoi. Discovered at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Go Thap has a long history of research, but scholars are generally

agreed that the inscriptions and artefacts found at the site indicate that Go Thap was an important religious centre for the period it was used. The inscriptions also indicate that it was an important religious centre related to Prince Gunavarman, who was appointed by Rudravarman to rule the area. The excavations also indicate that the area was densely populated (see Le Xuan Diem et al. 1995: 81-86; Dao Linh Con 2001; Le Thi Lien 2001). The 1984 excavations of test pits GT84, TS2.M1 and M2, located



Figure 3. Architectural remains at Go Thap, Dong Thap Province. 1,2 (the two brick structures of types 1 and 2, discussed below): photo Dong Thap Museum. 3,4 (excavated temples at Go Thap): photo Le Thi Lien

on a low hillock at the site, produced two brick structures containing more than 100 gold plaques. The 1993 excavations in the same area produced a further six brick structures containing 253 gold plaques. The plaques were associated with gold rings, precious stones and pieces of glass. At that time, the structures were identified as 'graves' and divided by the excavators into two main types:

- (1) The structures in the first group were distinguished by a rectangular brick walled enclosure positioned in an east-west, north-south direction (Fig. 3.1). Some had brick paving, and a rectangular recess in their eastern ends. The so-called 'grave chamber' was a pit located in the western corner, filled with sticky greyish sand, clay and brick debris. These pits contained a square brick pedestal with a hollow inside that contained the gold and stone artefacts. The bricks in the upper courses of these pedestals were red or brown, whereas those in the bottom two courses were greyish white.
- (2) The second group had no surrounding brick enclosure. Apart from this, they shared the same features as those in the first group, including the brick pedestal (Fig.3.2). So-called 'grave chambers' were identified in the centres of flat brick platforms made from clay mixed with sand, debris and charcoal. The 'grave chamber' itself was also filled with alternate

layers of sand and debris. The lowest layer comprised a thick layer of grey clay or sand, between 40 and 100 cm in thickness. More than 300 gold plaques were unearthed from the brick pedestals in these 'grave chambers', more than 180 of which were decorated (Fig. 5). A terracotta human head was also found within another of the architectural remains in the same area.

#### GO XOAI

Late in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, French scholars discovered the site of Go Xoai, also called Chom Ma. It was on a small hillock of about 1000 m<sup>2</sup> in Binh Ta Village, Duc Hoa Commune, Duc Hoa Ha District, Long An Province. In 1987, a brick foundation measuring 15.2 m by 15.5 m was unearthed during Vietnamese excavations at the site. The structure was aligned to the cardinal points and was described as 'almost square'. The eastern side has a simple recess at each end and a stepped entrance in the middle. The excavators also reported finding several brick pedestals, of which two (nos 5 and 6) were constructed primarily from basalt, laterite gravel and brick debris. The structures were irregular. A square brick chamber measuring 2.2 m by 2.2 m was unearthed at a depth of 0.5 m in the western part of the foundation. A brick pedestal in the centre of this chamber was 16 brick courses high,

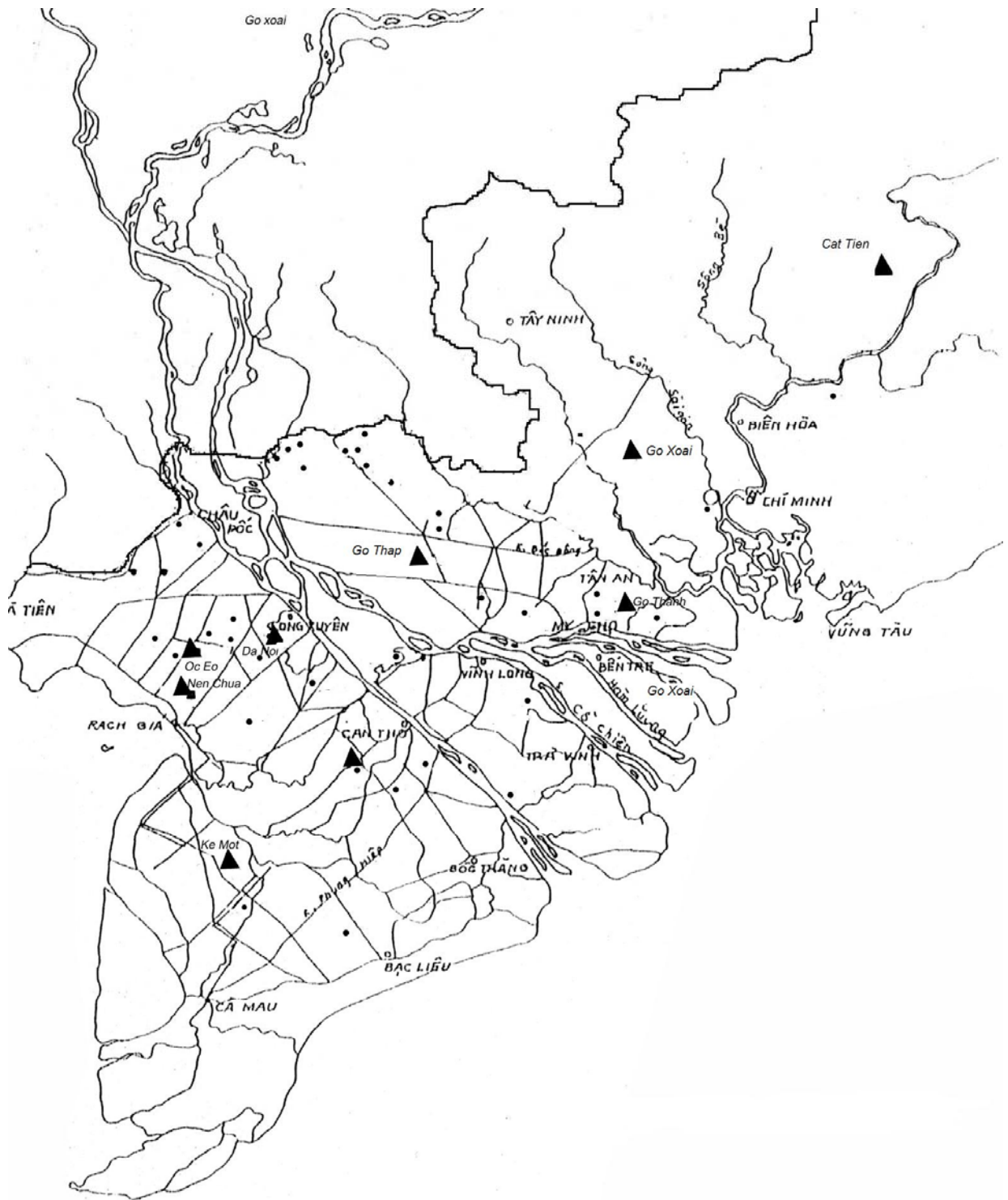


Figure 4. Map of Oc Eo Phase sites in the Mekong delta. Triangles represent sites referred to in text.

with a *swastika* shape and laid on a layer of blackish clay. Under the pedestal, a trapeze-shaped hole filled with pure sand was found to contain 26 gold objects. One was an inscribed rectangular plaque (Fig. 2). Eight were square and incised with elephant motifs. One gold foil item was

in the shape of tortoise, another a snake, two were in 12-petal lotus shape, and one a lily (Fig. 6). An irregularly shaped plaque was incised with a female figure, and four gold rings inlaid with gems in different colours and a pendant were also in the cache. One of the lotus-shaped



plaques contained ash. All these items were found undisturbed (Le Xuan Diem *et al.* 1995: 186-189; Le Thi Lien 1999; Bui Phat Diem *et al.* 2001:89-92).

The excavators defined this site as a 'worshiped grave'. The inscription was translated as an edict of King Bhavavarman, who ruled in the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD. Recently, however, it has been re-interpreted by several scholars (Ramesh 1991; Ha Van Tan 1994: 318, 2001: 212-214; Thai Van Chai 1996) as a Buddhist formula. On this basis, the site is now defined as a Buddhist site.

#### MANUFACTURING TECHNIQUES

Gold plaque manufacturing involved several different processes, such as forging, cutting, embossing, stamping and incising. These processes required pointed metal tools and small hammers of types found at Oc Eo (Malleret 1962: Pl. 1). Many stone rectangular slabs used in the manufacturing process have been found at Nhan Nghia (Can Tho Province), as well as at Go Thap and Oc Eo. The presence of goldsmith's tools in the same area suggests local production. Ethnographic research shows that the same types of tools are still used by goldsmiths, along with moulds, which strongly suggests that the prehistoric equivalents had the same function.

The plaque assemblages from the two sites represent different stages in the manufacturing process. The gold artefacts from Go Thap are generally irregular in shape; many have been cut or torn into tiny pieces. Some are round in shape and exceedingly thin. Those from 93 GT.M4 (Go Thap) differ in shape. Some are quadrilateral, others semi-circular; some are irregular and a few are leaf-shaped. The latter are larger than the plaques from GT (1993) M1, M2 and M3. Except for a few tiny fragments, most measured from 1-1.5 cm by 1.5-2.2 cm at the smaller end of the range, to 1.5-2 cm by 2.2-3.6 cm at the larger end.

Almost all plaques in the assemblages are decorated. In GT M5, the large plaques were irregular in shape, with very thin edges, many of which were cracked or torn. Smaller pieces were cut from larger ones. The 12 gold plaques excavated from the grave in 1996 were all tiny, irregular and undecorated. This site also produced a small glass fragment. The artefacts led us to doubt that they were relics belonging to the Hindu religion. A detailed report on the site is not as yet available but we can say that the plaque assemblage represents a different stage in the manufacturing process and seems to have a different meaning to those from the Hindu site.

Stylistically, the artefacts from Go Xoai belong to the art of the Oc Eo culture. However, closer examination of the gold plaques reveals that the goldsmiths who produced the Go Xoai artefacts had more advanced techniques and greater skill than the goldsmiths who produced the counterparts from Go Thap. Using delicate lines, the Go Xoai plaques were incised with lively images using all of the space available on the plaques. The outlines were created with a pointed metal instrument that was also used to create the dotted infill. The elephants on some of the plaques were depicted in action,

either walking with heads turned the left or, in one instance, with the head to the front. The snake, tortoise and floral motifs were created by first cutting an outline on the gold plaque, then incising the infilled areas with small dots. One pendant of *triratna* shale has a halo and twisted floral border. The female figure was depicted simply but delicately in the *tribhanga* posture and the body draped in a soft garment with many folds, and adorned with rich ornaments. The image has previously been compared to images in Indian art from Mathura and Ajanta (Le Thi Lien 1999).

#### THE GO THAP MOTIFS AND THEIR MEANINGS

Apart from the tortoise, lotus and snake, all of the motifs found at Go Thap are recognized as Hindu symbols. Out of the 100 or more pieces in GT84.TS1.M.1 and GT84.TS.M2, only 9 pieces were symbolic drawings. The worship of Vishnu, the Goddess of Fertility and Water are represented by the wheel, bull, conch, lotus and *kendi* (Fig. 5, nos 4,6,7). Short straight lines, irregular curves and circles are used to depict the motifs in 93GT.M1 but most of the drawings are complicated and difficult to interpret. Many of the animal drawings lack detail and are unrealistic. Apart from the unambiguous religious symbolism in the tortoise, lotus, *vajra*, *varaha*, fish and wheel, the meaning of the other motifs remains unclear.

Hindu symbols, however, are recognizable and symbolic motifs from Sivaism and Vishnuism. Most are symbolic representations. Altogether, there are 24 representations (single and multiple) in 93GT.M4. All are Hindu in character with *Vishnu* the most prominent. An anthropomorphic figure of *Vishnu* appears for the first time in this group, repeated on two gold plaques. The symbols of *Lakshmi* combined with those of *Vishnu* also frequently appear. The *linga*, the representation of Siva, is a very simple form. Plants, wavy lines, circles and crescent moons represent the natural world and the universe. While the drawings are very simple and sketchy, the motifs become more stylized.

Most of the motifs found in 93GT.M5 occur singly, with only seven instances where motifs are combined in one composition. Most symbols are simply articulated. The most popular religious symbols in the assemblages are the conch, the lotus and the wheel. These symbols are also depicted in more detail. Many of the plaques bear inscriptions that are depicted more clearly than the depictions from 93GT.M4. The most prominent deity symbols are those of *Vishnu* and *Lakshmi*.

Some symbols are worthy of further discussion. These are the very simple and sketchy representations of *Matsya avarata*/the fish incarnation of *Vishnu* in Go Thap, shown without any scales or fins; simply a large fish-head with rounded eyes. The *Kurma/avarata* (tortoise) incarnation is depicted with simple short lines representing heads and legs, devoid of details. The same motifs from Da Noi (An Giang Province) are depicted more realistically (Le Xuan Diem *et al.* 1955: 355) (Fig. 7). Two of the symbols from Go Thap that were originally defined as *Varaha varata* of *Vishnu* are questionable and unclear. At Da Noi, typical

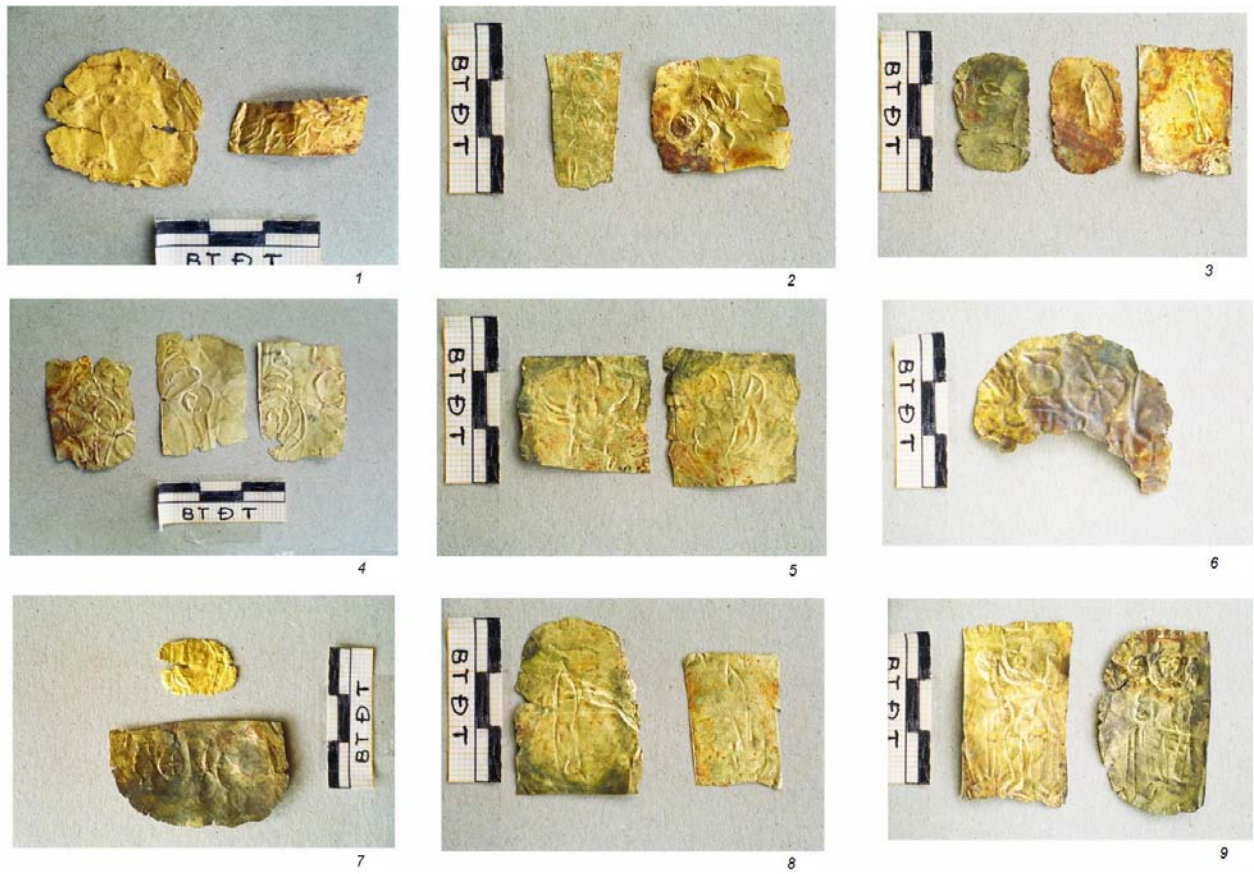


Figure 5. Gold plaques from Go Thap. Photos by Le Thi Lien.



Figure 6. Gold plaques from Go Xoai. Photos by Le Thi Lien.

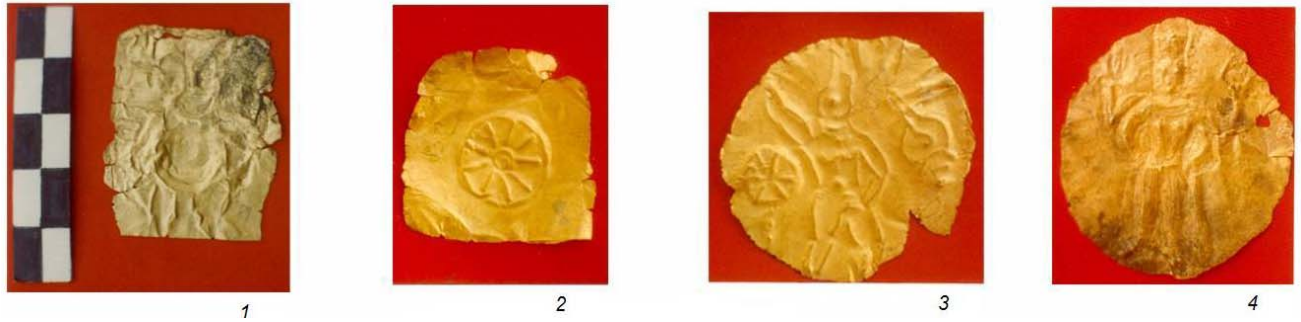


Figure 7. Gold plaques from Da Noi, An Giang Province. Photos by Le Xuan Diem.

forms of *Vishnu* (in posture) are discernible, especially 85DN.M4: 16, 24, 59, 65, 74, 76). Most are depicted standing in an *akimbo* position and some in *Trivikrama* (Fig. 7.3). These images are characteristic of Indian temple art from the Gupta period (see Harle 1974: Ill.26; Desai 1973: Figs. 58, 59)

The most common religious symbol at Go Thap and other sites was the *chakra*/secret wheel of *Vishnu*. At Go Thap, the images are badly shaped and hastily depicted, without clear hubs. The *Sankha*/secret conch, *Sesha*/secret snake and *padma*/secret lotus are all depicted in the same way. All of the conch symbols are asymmetrical and incomplete. Snakes are depicted sketchily with one or four heads. There are only two images of *Garuda* from Go Thap. These are from 93 GT.M5 and 93 GT.M4. Both portray birds with the only anthropomorphic features being curvilinear depictions of heavy bodies and broad chests. Both examples are depicted in the typical standing position; the second is recognizable as a divinity bird by its squarish face (Fig. 5, 1 left, 5 left). Human images of *Garuda* also occur at Da Noi (especially 85DN.M4), with all details characteristic of Gupta art (Fig. 7.1).

The two anthropomorphic images of *Vishnu* at Go Thap are almost identical. These iconographical representations of *Vishnu* compare favourably with *Vishnu* images and stone sculptures from Da Noi (An Giang) (Figs 5.9 and 7.4). The *tribhanga* posture of *Vishnu* has not as yet been seen in sculptures from South Vietnam. The anthropomorphic form of *Siva* is also missing from the Go Thap assemblage. However, the simplest form of *Sivalinga* is represented: the remains of three pieces come from GT93.M4 as well as a drawing of a *linga* in two parts. The pointed head looks like an arrowhead and the lower portion of the body is enlarged. A small rectangular piece found at the foot of a *linga* appears to represent the *Vedika*. Excavations at Da Noi have also produced well-proportioned *lingas*, even in sculpture [85DN.M2] (Dao Linh Con 1995:Pl.XLI, XLII).

The most frequent non-anthropomorphic symbol of *Siva* is the *trisula*/trident. The simplest form at Go Thap is very similar to incised versions on tortoiseshell found at Oc Eo and Go Thap (Tran Van Nam 2001; Malleret 1962:Pls. LXXXV, LXXXVII). More complicated forms having long shafts and occasional horizontal bolts were found at Da Noi (An Giang).

Anthropomorphic images of goddesses were rarely found on gold plaques. However, one exceptional image came from 93GT.M5 (Fig. 5.7 upper). Although the lines are faint, the image appears to be seated with two widely opened thighs depicted. The anthropomorphic head has been replaced by a cross, with a circle on top and a *nandipada*-like motif beneath. This could be *Lajja-Gauri*, the Goddess of Fertility, as defined by Bolon (1992: illus.1-7). One piece from 93GT.M3 also depicts an image of a goddess holding a lotus in her hand. While images of goddesses holding lotus rarely occurred (especially in sculptures) in the early days at Oc Eo, those from Go Thap represent early influence from the Indus Civilization.

#### THE GO XOAI MOTIFS AND THEIR MEANING

According to the excavators at Go Xoai, ashes were contained in two lotus flowers that fold to form a kind of casket covered by gold plate (Bui Phat Diem et al. 2001: 91). Images of lotus, tortoises and snakes mainly occur in South Vietnam and their meaning can be explained by examining sites such as Go Thap, Ke Mot (Kien Giang). However, these are not Hindu symbols, exclusively. If Go Xoai is actually a Buddhist stupa, then the meaning of the gold plaques differs.

In Buddhist iconography, the lotus is a symbol of the goddess who stands independently as a maternal symbol of fertility, good fortune and happiness. In Buddhist Art, the lotus is frequently the main decorative element and serves as the *Padmasana* of Buddha. At Taxila in India, tortoises made from carnelian were found in the relic casket in the stupa UI at Dharmajika (see Marshall 1951:Pl. 53). They may be the symbols of the Immortal, Everlasting Buddha, and have a similar meaning to that represented when building a Hindu temple (Kramrisch 1946). The tortoise may also serve as the base for the Lord Buddha. The tortoise is seen as a previous incarnation of Buddha (Buddhist *Jataka*) who rescued 500 people shipwrecked at sea during a storm. The snake is a symbol related to water-source, life-force and the mother-goddess. In Buddhist cosmology, all the gods (nature gods and super gods) were pleased with the appearance of the Buddha. Like all of the creatures of the world, the snakes were pleased to serve the Cosmos Teacher. Images of snakes called *Naga* appear very early in Indian *stupas* such as *Sanchi* and *Bharhut*. The story of

the snake king, *Muchalinda*, who used his seven heads to protect the Buddha from the storm, is often found in Southeast Asia (Cambodia, Thailand, Champa) at sites dating from the 9<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> Centuries. At these sites, the story is represented by an image of a Buddha sitting on the base of a snake having from five to seven heads. Some scholars believe that the first proselizers of the Buddhist religion used the *Naga* to explain the religion when earlier Buddhist teachings were not accepted.

The elephant is another Buddhist symbol that was frequently reported in the so-called graves in the Oc Eo culture. This symbol was also found in three 'graves' at Go Thanh (Tien Giang Province). Gold plaques incised with this particular image were found strategically placed in each of the four-corners of the hollow in the middle of the structure. A similar arrangement was found Go Xoai. There, plaques decorated with eight elephants were arranged in the four-corners of both the upper and lower relic chambers. The presence of four or eight elephants in the four-corners or sides of the relic chambers is connected to the concept of *Dig-Gaja*, the eight elephants of directions. They support the four directions and four interval points of the cosmos.

The female figures that were found at Go Xoai share features with the female attendants who appear on either side of the Buddha in Indian art, as well as with the representations of *Avalokitesvara* and *Maitreya* in Cave 5 and the aisle of Cave 10 at Ellora, at Ajanta, and in Cave 6 Aurangabad. These caves are dated to the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD and belong to Mahayana Buddhism with some elements of *Vajrayana* (Kim Inchang 1997). However, the goddess image at Go Xoai displays some local features. *Pallava* characteristics in the Go Xoai inscription (Fig. 2) and their context have led to doubts about the Theravada Tantric interpretation and support the Mahayana interpretation. In this way, the gold plaques at Go Xoai suggest that the groups followed the original Buddhist tradition with many modifications.

#### THE FUNCTION OF THE ARCHITECTURAL REMAINS AT GO THAP

Not only do the objects from Go Thap represent Hindu cosmology, but analysis of the architectural remains suggests that the structure may have originally been constructed as a Hindu temple, as it complies with the definitions of the same proposed by Kramish (1946:17, 104-105, 110). In 1984 and 1996, two huge architectural foundations were unearthed in the same area. Both are rectangular; one has several recesses at the eastern end and the other has recesses at the western end. The first structure has a square secret chamber in the form of a solid brick block situated in the western section (Fig. 3.3). The second structure is similar. It lies on several layers of brick and sand debris with the deepest layers strengthened by timber planks (Fig. 3.4). Drawings of the remains at the grave mound share similar features, although some are smaller in size. In some instances, recesses are recognizable at one end (Dao Linh Con 2001: Bv.i-iv).

In 2001 and 2002, further excavations were conducted

at the southern foot of Minh Su mound at Go Thap. Excavators found many vestiges of round grave pits dug into virgin soil, and the bottom of each pit had been filled with fine sand or occasionally sticky clay. Grave contents included pottery (mainly), roundish potsherds, small gravel and marker stones. These indicate different burial customs to those evidenced in the grave mound (Le Thi Lien et al. 2002).

#### THE FUNCTION OF THE ARCHITECTURAL REMAINS AT GO XOAI

There can be little doubt that the structure at Go Xoai is a Buddhist stupa with a relic chamber with brick as the principal material used in construction. This leads us to conclude that the architecture at Go Xoai is consistent with Indian traditions, maintaining some archaic elements from Northwest India (Marshall 1951:pls. 73, 91; Le Thi Lien 1992: 25). The firm base was for a tremendous superstructure, now lost. However, it differs from original structures by having a hollow brick block containing religious relics; the simple structure inside was devoid of decoration. There is no other site in Vietnam that can be definitely defined as Buddhist.

A large number of relics from the early part of Dvaravati period have been found at other Southeast Asian sites. In Thailand, the site of U Thong is generally considered to be the earliest centre of Dvaravati culture. At U Thong, 40 Buddhist stupas (square and octagonal) were unearthed. There are also remains of a square structure at Nakon Pathom in Thailand. This centre developed at the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> Century. The structures are tremendous in size, with flights of steps on all four sides leading up to the *pradakshinapatha*. The walls of the foundations are decorated with lion figures and many Buddhist motifs such as the Buddhist *Jataka*. The *stupas* at Kubua are different in that they have miniature *stupas* in the protruding corners attached to the main rectangular *stupas*. The *stupas* are distinguished by extremely large bases, large mouldings, pilasters and protruding corners. They have long steps at the eastern entrances. These are dated between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> Centuries AD.

Large numbers of *stupas* have also been found in southern Thailand, although these are mostly smaller in size. From 1993 to date, explorations and excavations in Yarang (Songkhla Province) have unearthed 37 structures of this type. Some are defined as Buddhist *stupas*, distinguished by square plans and single entrances. The inner sides of the *stupas* are hollow; this constitutes a room. The walls of the bases have simple terracotta mouldings and pilasters. Some are decorated with floral or *kudu* motifs. Many contain votive tablets in *pipa* leaf form. Some tablets are decorated with images of the Buddha, Bodhisatva, or *stupas*. The inscriptions on the tablets indicate that the *stupas* can be dated between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> Centuries AD (Le Thi Lien: unpublished report).

Thus, there are many differences between the art and architectural features unearthed at Go Xoai and those from the other sites mentioned in this study. Many belong to different periods of history and different cultural



traditions. Many are of Indian inspiration, but this explanation cannot at present be applied to all of them.

## CONCLUSIONS

It is not possible to be definitive about all of the structural remains found to date in Vietnam. However, those brick structures that have produced gold plaques bearing religious symbols can be defined as religious remains, with confidence. Notwithstanding local modifications, we can conclude that Indian ceremonies were carried out at these sites using Indian religious symbols. The assemblages at Go Xoai and Go Thap indicate that the same symbols (such as the turtle, lotus and elephant) were used in both Hindu and Buddhist structures, but the rituals and their meanings differed in each particular context. It is clear from the large number of brick structures from the mature period at Oc Eo that Hindu beliefs were predominant throughout the first millennium AD. Although the earliest examples of gold foil plaques come from Go Thap, the small cut pieces of gold in these Oc Eo structures can still be interpreted as offerings, the material remains of people praying. Based on inscriptions and art styles, the structures at Go Thap can be dated before the 5<sup>th</sup> Century AD.

The more developed art styles at later sites such as Da Noi, Nen Chua and Ke Mot (found with inscriptions of the 5<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> centuries AD at Da Noi) indicate that the same religious ceremonies continued through to the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> Centuries AD. The study has already shown that the earliest symbols of Hindu cosmology at Go Thap are very simple. The earliest anthropomorphic representations of Hindu gods are imitations of sculptural forms in stone produced at the height of the Gupta period. Certainly, gold plaques would have been more convenient for followers to carry to religious ceremonies than sculptures but further research into the chronology of these religious artefacts is needed before we can fully understand their function. It is important to continue the study of Buddhist relics in their cultural contexts in southern Vietnam to get a better understanding of the processes of development.

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