



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Exploiting the Value of Archeological Sites connected to Tourism Development: The case of Oc Eo culture in Thoai Son (Thoại Sơn) district (An Giang, Vietnam)

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: Nov 14, 2024 Accepted: Jan 15, 2025	This article summarises the results of archaeological studies about Oc Eo culture in the Thoai Son (Thoai Son) district, An Giang province, in particular, and the southwestern region of Vietnam in general. The outcome provides information illustrating that the area of Oc Eo–Ba The (Thoai Son district, An Giang province) played a significant role in the time of existence and development of the Kingdom of Funan from the early Common Era to the 7th century. This area used to be the ancient urban Ba The–Oc Eo, having the Oc Eo port—a well-known commercial centre of Southeast Asia and the world. Concurrently, the article reviews the potential and remarkable value of the Oc Eo remains and explores the existing condition of preservation and recent initiatives to promote the value of the Oc Eo archaeological cultural heritage in the Thoai Son area. Based upon these results, the paper provides strategies for safeguarding cultural heritage, helping to uncover the region's tourism potential, and increasing the attraction of Thoai Son, An Giang, as a tourist destination. The research findings can help stakeholders indicate effective strategies for maintaining, protecting, promoting the value of this cultural heritage and contributing to the long-term growth of tourism in An Giang, Vietnam by utilising the potential of the Oc Eo archaeological site and cultural assets.
Keywords Archeological Sites Tourism Development Culture Thoại Sơn	
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INTRODUCTION

An Giang is one of 13 provinces that make up the Mekong Delta region. In 2019, the province covered 3,536 km² and had a population of 1,908,352 people (General Statistics Office, 2020, p. 39). An Giang now has four primary ethnic groups: Kinh, Hoa, Khmer, and Cham (An Giang Provincial Party Committee Official Website, 2024). As of 2025, An Giang has 11 administrative entities, comprising two cities (Long Xuyen and Chau Doc), one town (Tan Chau), and eight districts (An Phu, Tinh Bien, Tri Ton, Chau Phu, Chau Thanh, Thoai Son, Cho Moi, Phu Tan).

Thoai Son District is one of An Giang province's 11 districts and towns, situated in the southeastern section of the Long Xuyen Quadrangle in the southern region of An Giang. The district's geographical boundaries are as follows: to the east, it borders Long Xuyen city and Can Tho city; to the west, it neighbours Tri Ton district and Kien Giang province; to the south, it borders Can Tho city and Kien Giang province; and to the north, Chau Thanh district. Thoai Son district covers 470.82 km² and has a population of around 163,427 in 2019. The population density is 347 residents per km². Thoai Son

is the territory that was part of the Kingdom of Funan (from the first century to the early seventh century) and is notable for its Oc Eo culture. (Thoai Son District Official Website, 2024).

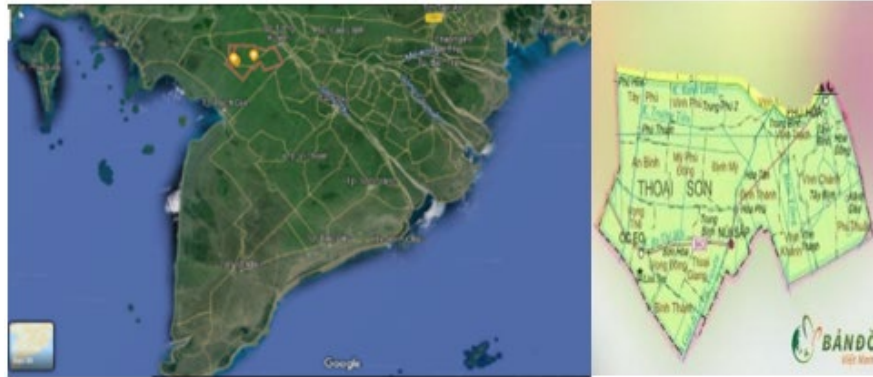


Fig.1. The location of Thoai Son District on the map of the Mekong Delta (Source: <https://www.google.com/maps>).

The Oc Eo culture was named after the place where it was originally discovered. This culture developed over 10 centuries, from the 2nd century BCE to the 7th century, and was separated into three stages: the early - Oc Eo (from the 2nd century BC to the 2nd century AD), the developed - Oc Eo (from the 3rd century to the 6th century), and the post - Oc Eo (from the 7th century to the 8th century). This culture is widely spread over southern Vietnam. The Oc Eo culture represents the material culture of the Kingdom of Funan, a historic Southeast Asian monarchy. According to ancient Chinese historical sources, the Kingdom of Funan existed between the first and seventh centuries in the lower reaches and delta of the Mekong River.

Funan was not merely a kingdom; during its development (from the third to the sixth centuries), it became a major power, an ancient empire in Southeast Asia (Luong Ninh, 2006, tr.70). This kingdom was made up of several ethnic groups and small kingdoms. At its peak, the Mekong River Delta may have included "the small state of Na Phat Na" - Oc Eo, Ba The (An Giang); the small state "Conquered from the Swamps," Go Thap (Dong Thap); the small state of Cat Tien (Lam Dong); and the small state of Angkor Borei (Takeo). There were some more dependent minor states, like Do Con, Cuu Tri, Do Ton, Kim Lan, and others, with a total of over ten states (Nguyen Huu Tam, 2008, p.272).

Numerous Oc Eo cultural sites have been unearthed in provinces and cities across southern Vietnam, including An Giang, Kien Giang, Dong Thap, Can Tho, Bac Lieu, Vinh Long, Tien Giang, Long An, Tay Ninh, Ho Chi Minh City, and Dong Nai. The Oc Eo civilisation was widespread in southern Vietnam, centred in the southwestern region, according to research findings. An Giang is an ancient territory that was originally part of the Kingdom of Funan. The core of Oc Eo culture is located in Oc Eo-Ba The (now Thoai Son district, An Giang).

Thoai Son (An Giang) is an archaeological site of the Oc Eo culture that has been known and studied from an early date. In February 1944, Louis Malleret conducted studies on Cay Thi Mound (Thoai Son, An Giang). These investigations show that the Oc Eo-Ba The area was a significant port city and religious hub during the existence of the ancient Kingdom of Funan (6th-7th century).

To summarise, Oc Eo culture is distinct from other cultures in Vietnam's southern region. The Oc Eo historical and cultural sites play a key part in rebuilding southern Vietnam's historical and cultural environment from ancient times. Today, the system of archaeological sites and cultural treasures not only provides vital historical evidence, but it also has enormous potential for long-term tourism growth. The Oc Eo cultural site in Thoai Son district (An Giang, Vietnam) is a significant landmark in southern Vietnam's history, with potential for sustainable tourism development.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHOD

Oc Eo culture was named after go Oc Eo, which was found and reported in 1942. However, papers regarding Oc Eo culture and the Kingdom of Funan have been associated with French archaeologist

Paul Pelliot since the early nineteenth century. He gathered several antique materials from China related to the Kingdom of Funan. In 1903, he published his research findings in the journal of the *École Française d'Extrême Orient* (French School of the Far East), titled "Le Founan" (The Kingdom of Funan) (Paul Pelliot, 1903). This is a remarkable textual source with a wealth of material that contributes to a complete picture of Funan's cultural and social life.

Louis Malleret, a French archaeologist, identified the Oc Eo culture in 1944. The series *L'Archéologie du delta du Mékong* (Archaeology of the Mekong Delta), published between 1960 and 1962, was one of the first books to consolidate research findings on the Oc Eo culture.

After 1975, Vietnamese archaeology formally began conducting scientific studies on the Oc Eo culture. Le Xuan Diem, Dao Linh Con, and Vo Si Khai published *Oc Eo Culture—New Discoveries* in 1995, based on the findings of multiple surveys and excavations. Various study initiatives on the Oc Eo culture have recently been carried out, particularly in An Giang. Studies, surveys, and excavations have revealed tens of thousands of indigenous items that reflect economic contacts with major cities including India, China, Rome, and Persia.

In 2015, the Government of Vietnam assigned the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences to lead the project "Archaeological Heritage Research of Oc Eo - Ba The, Nen Chua (Oc Eo Culture in the South)." This study was being carried out by three of archaeology's major institutions: the Imperial Research Institute, the Archaeology Institute, and the Southern Region Institute of Social Sciences. This is currently the largest scientific effort in Vietnam investigating Oc Eo culture. The primary goal of the project is to excavate and study the Oc Eo cultural heritage sites in Oc Eo - Ba The (Thoai Son District, An Giang Province) and Nen Chua (Hon Dat District, Kien Giang Province). The project lasted nearly four years from 2017 to 2020, involved extensive excavations and archaeological surveys, brought significant findings and provided valuable insights into the Oc Eo culture of Southern Vietnam.

This paper's principal research approach is historical scientific research method, namely the specialised methods of archaeology. We have led and participated in surveys, and excavations of archaeological sites in An Giang, as well as surveys, accessing, and analysing artefacts at the Oc Eo Cultural Heritage Management Department of An Giang Province and the An Giang Museum. To address the difficulties posed, the study uses interdisciplinary methodologies (public policy, conservation, ethnology, cultural studies, sociology, tourism, and so on), comparative research, and an analysis of heritage exploitation models linked to tourism. As a result, it provides a foundation for suggesting conservation strategies and increasing the value of Oc Eo cultural assets in the current context.

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

OC EO CULTURAL HERITAGE IN THOAI SON DISTRICT

During the passage of time and countless cycles of sun and rain, the tangible remnants of the renowned Oc Eo culture still lie hidden beneath the soil of An Giang. This province serves as a focal point for archaeological sites, particularly those from the Funan Kingdom era and the post-Funan period, concentrated in the Long Xuyen Quadrilateral region. Over the course of more than 80 years of exploration and research (1944-2024), numerous archaeological sites linked to the Oc Eo culture have been uncovered in An Giang, brought about tens of thousands of artefacts in a variety of materials and forms. In Thoai Son District, a wealth of architectural relics—most notably Hindu temples—remains preserved, accompanied by a rich and diverse system of artefacts, including the following highlights:

Archaeological Relics

Some of the most significant and representative archaeological sites in the region include:

(1) Oc Eo–Ba The Archaeological and Artistic Architectural Relics: Situated in Oc Eo town, Thoai Son District, An Giang Province, the Oc Eo–Ba The site encompasses two distinct areas: the Oc Eo field and Ba The mountain. The total conservation zone spans 33.1 hectares, with Zone A (the slopes and

base of Ba The mountain) covering 143.9 hectares and Zone B (Oc Eo field) spanning 289.3 hectares. The site features various types of relics:

Architectural Relics: These include temples, wells, and stone-brick ponds, primarily located around the slopes and base of Ba The mountain, near Linh Son Nam, Linh Son Bac, and Linh Son Pagoda. Notable locations include Go Ut Tranh, Go Danh Sang, and Go Cay Trom (Dwl Samron). Recent excavations (2017–2020) across 10,185 square meters at sites such as Linh Son Pagoda, Linh Son Bac, Go Sau Thuan, and Go Ut Tranh have uncovered a significant religious complex at the mountain's base. This complex, dating from the 1st to the 12th centuries, consists of temples, ceremonial paths, gates, walls, sacred wells, and other religious structures. Of particular importance are stone-built temple structures at Go Giong Cat, including dolmen-style stone constructions (Architecture K) from the 5th–6th centuries and stone architectures with wooden pillar remnants and "mong be" (foundation bases) dated to the 2nd–3rd centuries through AMS analysis (Nguyen Khanh Trung Kien, 2023, p. 52).

Residential Sites: These are scattered throughout the region, including Ba The, Go Tu Tram, Go Cay Da, Go Cay Me 2, and Go Sau Thuan. Go Sau Thuan, in particular, exhibits two primary phases: residential activity from the 2nd–6th centuries and architectural construction from the late 6th to 11th centuries.

Other Relics: Additional discoveries include meeting sites (Go Oc Eo, Go Giong Cat), ancient waterways, and Baray (water reservoirs) (Canh Toan, 2013). The most recent excavation phase (2017–2020) revealed that the Lung Lon site in the Oc Eo field is the newest and most significant discovery at Oc Eo. This is an ancient canal that was backfilled since the 1980s. (Bui Minh Tri, 2023).

(2) National Heritage Site: Nam Linh Son Tu

Nam Linh Son Tu is one of the key sites within the Oc Eo cultural complex in Thoai Son District. Nestled in Oc Eo town, this site lies on the eastern slope of Ba The Mountain, about 60 meters south of Linh Son Pagoda. As a significant architectural relic, it reflects the advanced level of civilisation achieved by the ancient Funan people over ten centuries ago, showcasing the cultural richness of the Cuu Long Delta region and An Giang Province in particular.

(3) National Heritage Site: Go Cay Thi

Located in the Oc Eo field, Go Cay Thi sits roughly 500 meters east of Giong Cat and 1,600 meters west of Nam Linh Son Tu on the slopes of Ba The Mountain. Excavations here have uncovered a variety of relics and artefacts, including remains of religious architecture, residential sites, and hundreds of ceramic items from the Oc Eo culture, giving an overview into the daily lives and spiritual practices of the ancient community.

Archaeological artefacts

Thoai Son District has found out a remarkable system of archaeological artefacts, reflecting the diversity and sophistication of the Oc Eo culture. These artefacts include household and production tools, architectural and decorative materials, statues of deities and Buddhas, jewellery, ancient coins, and more. The artefacts are crafted from various materials such as wood, stone, ceramics, metals (gold and silver), artefact glass, gemstones, and beads.

One particularly fascinating discovery was made during excavations at Lung Lon between 2017 and 2020. Archaeologists unearthed wooden boat paddles with wide, pointed blades, resembling those used by ancient seafarers in India and the Southeast Asian islands. This discovery highlights the extensive cultural interactions of the Oc Eo civilisation with other regions, including China, the Mediterranean, and Southeast Asia (Bui Minh Tri, 2003, p. 26).

Among these are eight unique artefacts and artefact groups from An Giang Province designated as national treasures, including two discovered in Thoai Son. They include:

The Linga group-Yoni Linh Son was discovered in 1985 in the eastern base of the mountain in the Linh Son Tu region (Trung Son hamlet, Oc Eo town, Thoai Son district). The Linga group-Yoni is a monolithic object made of fine-grained, dark brown soapstone. The base for the Linga-Yoni is 0.460 meters high and made by stacking three flat square bricks. The largest square block is at the bottom, the smallest in the middle, and the second-smallest on top (Le Xuan Diem, Dao Linh Con, Vo Si Khai, 1995). The Bộ Linga-Yoni Linh Son relic, dating back to the 7th century, was classified as a national treasure in 2020 (Decision No. 2283/QĐ-TTg, dated 31/12/2020—Phase 9). It is currently preserved at the An Giang Province Museum.

Mukhalinga Ba The was discovered in 1986 in Vong The commune, Thoai Son District, An Giang Province. Linga is a rather widespread form of item found in Oc Eo and post-Oc Eo archaeological sites. Lingams are commonly classified into five types: realistic linga, partial linga, two-part linga, three-part linga, and Mukhalinga. Mukhalinga Ba The is predominantly composed of soapstone, which is dark grey in colour and has a gleaming grey patina surface. The object weighs 90 kg, is 91 cm tall, and measures 20-22 cm wide. Mukhalinga Ba The is a representative artefact of the three-part linga construction that adheres to Hinduism's high criteria while maintaining the basic style of the realistic two-part linga group. From the bottom up, the three sections form an elongated square cylinder with equal dimensions. Mukhalinga Ba The is the unique object that shows how the artistic style of linga evolved, bridging the gap between the two-part realistic linga and the three-part Mukhalinga. Mukhalinga Ba The is the earliest dated sculpture representing the "mukha" emblem in the Southern Oc Eo culture (Ho Thi Hong Chi, 2024). Mukhalinga Ba The dates from the sixth century. The artefact was designated as a national treasure in 2023 (Decision No. 41/QĐ-TTg, dated 30/01/2023, Phase 11) and is now housed at the An Giang Province Museum.

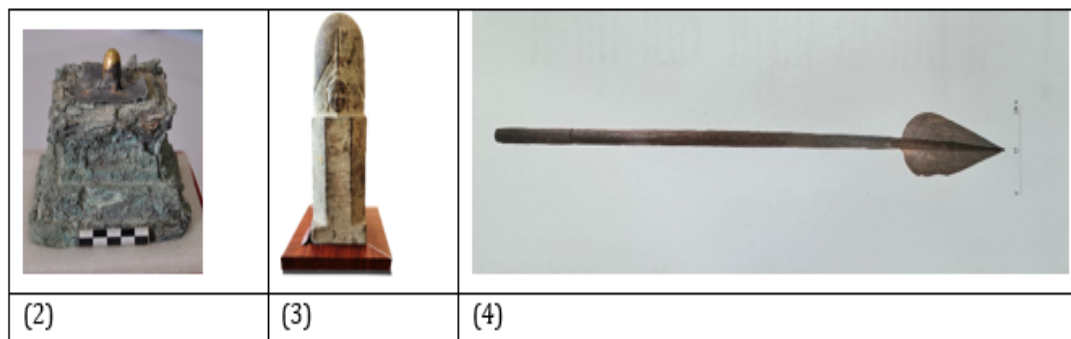


Fig.2,3,4. (2) Stone Linga-Yoni Set (Source: The An Giang museum); (3) Mukhalinga Ba The, (Oc Eo Cultural Relics Management Board of An Giang Province); (4) The oar found in a ancient canal at Oc Eo (Source: Tri et al 2022: 170)

2. THE VALUE AND TOURISM POTENTIAL OF THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES OF OC EO CULTURE IN THOAI SON DISTRICT, AN GIANG PROVINCE

2.1. Archaeological, Historical, and Cultural Values

Archaeological sites form the cornerstone of archaeological research, as comprehensive studies of such sites are critical for reconstructing the historical narrative of humankind (Han Van Khan, 2008). According to Article 22 of the 2024 Vietnam Cultural Heritage Law, an archaeological site is defined as a location where evidence of human activity has been uncovered. These sites must feature cultural layers containing artefacts and relics that reflect historical, cultural, and anthropological significance and hold representative value for one or more historical periods.

The research and excavation efforts conducted in Thoai Son District have identified numerous archaeological sites, providing a diverse system of artefacts. These discoveries have provided substantial insights into the formation and evolution of Oc Eo culture, the ancient city of Oc Eo, and the Funan Kingdom. Archaeological investigations in Thoai Son, An Giang, have achieved the following outcomes:

Establishing the Chronology of Oc Eo Culture

At Oc Eo Town in Thoai Son District, An Giang Province, significant progress has been made in dating the Oc Eo culture. Charcoal samples collected from the deepest layer (3.30 meters) of the cultural stratum in the excavation pit at Go Cay Da (OE83-GDTS) were carbon-dated to 2120 ± 50 BP, equivalent to 170 ± 50 BCE (Vo Si Khai, 2008, p. 354). Similarly, analysis of ceramics and tiles using the typology and stratigraphic methods yielded notable findings. Japanese archaeologist Yuko Harino presented results from the second excavation at Go Tu Tram, located at the base of Ba The Mountain, in the 19th Indo-Pacific Prehistory Association Congress (IPPA 19) in Hanoi (November 29–December 5, 2009). According to Yuko Harino, Go Tu Tram represents three distinct stages:

Early Stage (2nd century BCE–3rd century CE): Characterised by black- or red-painted ceramics, red-painted Kendi jars, and rectangular Bodhi-leaf-shaped tiles with 7–8 drainage grooves. C14 dating indicates 2020 ± 80 BP.

Developing/Typical Stage (3rd/4th–6th century CE): Features flat tiles with one hooked edge, patterned undersides, and 4–5 drainage grooves.

Late Stage (7th–12th century CE): Includes tube tiles with hooks and eave tiles adorned with lotus motifs or seated human figures (Yuko Harino, 2009).

Distinctive Archaeological Characteristics (2017–2020): Excavations conducted from 2017 to 2020 have uncovered distinctive features of archaeological sites in the foothills of Ba The Mountain and the Oc Eo plain. In the Ba The foothills, structures built with durable materials date back to the 1st–3rd centuries CE, while in the Oc Eo plain, remnants of stilt houses were discovered along ancient canals. Architectural remains in both areas reached their zenith during the 4th–7th centuries CE, corresponding with the peak of the Oc Eo port town's prominence (Pham Van Trieu, 2023).

Contribution to highlighting the position of Oc Eo and confirming Thoai Son, An Giang as the centre of Oc Eo culture in Southern Vietnam

Oc Eo - Ba The is a major archaeological site that includes a variety of relics and artefacts. Archaeological discoveries at Oc Eo - Ba The have revealed that the Thoai Son area was an important settlement for the Oc Eo cultural community during the ancient Funan Kingdom's existence (from the beginning of the Common Era to the 6th-7th century). The Oc Eo - Ba The location has a distinct geographical and ecological setting. The location is ideally placed along a significant waterway near the sea, serving as a centre or hub for both inland and offshore activity (Le Xuan Diem, Dao Linh Con, 2009, p. 340). Ba The Mountain is the region's central peak, with its eastern slopes located only about 1,500 meters southeast of Go Oc Eo and the antiquities that surround it (Vo Si Khai, 2001, p. 237).

Archaeology has helped to create a realistic picture of the material and spiritual lives of the ancient Oc Eo people. The community had reached a particular stage of economic, social, and cultural growth. Evidence from Lung Lon, Go Oc Eo, and Go Giong Cat suggests the presence of huge, high-tech, multi-disciplinary workshops specialising in the production of jewellery, glass, and gemstones in the ancient Oc Eo urban region.

The ancient Oc Eo society exchanged cultural ideas with ancient cultures from Southeast Asia, India, China, and the Mediterranean region. Indian influences on the social life of the ancient Oc Eo city are especially noticeable (Phan Huy Le, 2008). Thoai Son was also a prominent religious centre, as evidenced by the presence of numerous religious artefacts. The people of Funan, including the king, venerated Hindu and Buddhist deities. Temple ruins, inscriptions, Buddha statues, deities, and sacred symbols have been uncovered at locations such as the Go Cay Thi Sun God Temple, the Go Cay Trom Shiva Temple, and the Linh Son Nam Shiva Temple. Architectural artefacts such as brick temples best portray religious and spiritual life. These places have statues of the deity Brahma, sacred Linga-Yoni symbols, and Buddha statues, which demonstrate the religious content and symbolism of Hinduism and Buddhism. These two major religions were first introduced to the Funan Kingdom by missionaries who accompanied India's booming commerce ships. A significant number of merchants,

Brahmin priests, and Kshatriya royals who practiced Brahmanism settled permanently in the Mekong Delta region (Geetesh Sharma, 2012, p. 55).

The Oc Eo – Ba The relic site retains a major place, purpose, and meaning within the Funan Kingdom's history, particularly the Oc Eo Ancient City and the Ba The Religious Centre (Bui Minh Tri, Nguyen Gia Doi, Nguyen Khanh Trung Kien, 2022). This area was home to the well-known harbour city of Oc Eo, as well as a unique cultural hub. The Oc Eo – Ba The place was an economic, cultural, and religious hub, bringing together cultures and groups from the mainland, islands, and other regions. Its extraordinary geographical location and natural characteristics, particularly the famous Oc Eo harbour, enabled the "Ancient City of Ba The - Oc Eo to become an early international trading centre of Funan and the entire Southeast Asian mainland" (Phan Huy Le, 2008, pp. 229-246). Archaeological discoveries of Oc Eo glass beads and jewels in Thailand, Malaysia, China, and Korea show that Oc Eo artistry was formerly common in many nations. Trade products discovered in the Mekong Delta and other nations indicate that international ties occurred during the Funan Kingdom's prosperity from the 2nd to the 7th centuries (Nguyen Kim Dung, Nguyen Khanh Trung Kien, and Le Hoang Phong, 2020). Notably, this region maintained open commercial links through international maritime commerce with numerous ancient Southeast Asian kingdoms as well as countries in South, Southwest, and Northeast Asia (Bui Minh Tri).

2.2. Tourism Potential of Oc Eo Culture's Archaeological Sites and artefacts

According to Article 15 of the Vietnam Tourism Law (2017), tourism resources encompass both natural and cultural elements. Cultural tourism resources include historical and cultural sites, revolutionary sites, archaeological and architectural relics, traditional cultural values, festivals, folk arts, and other creative works that can be leveraged for tourism (National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2017).

The scientific research on Oc Eo culture in An Giang and the southwestern Mekong Delta has generated invaluable data for archaeology, history, and cultural studies, particularly regarding the historical development of Southern Vietnam. These research achievements also provide a solid scientific and legal foundation for the management, conservation, and promotion of cultural values in alignment with sustainable economic, cultural, and social development, particularly in fostering sustainable tourism.

The system of archaeological sites and artefacts, especially the national treasures of Oc Eo culture, represents an irreplaceable resource for multidisciplinary research in fields such as archaeology, cultural studies, history, architecture, art, economics, and diplomacy. These resources hold immense potential for tourism, attracting both domestic and international visitors for purposes of sightseeing, scientific research, education, and exploration of history and culture.

An Giang Province is uniquely endowed with a rich historical legacy and diverse tourism resources in the Mekong Delta. As of December 2024, the province has 90 recognised heritage sites, including one intangible cultural heritage representative of humanity, one special national relic, 28 national-level relics, and 60 provincial-level relics (Thu Thao, 2024a). Two of these are Special National Relics: the archaeological and architectural site of Oc Eo–Ba The and the Tôn Đức Thắng Memorial Area in My Hoa Hung, Long Xuyen City (Decision No. 548/QĐ-TTg, May 10, 2012). Additionally, Nam Linh Son and Go Cay Thi (both in Oc Eo Town) are recognised as National Archaeological Sites.

The Oc Eo cultural heritage, including its relics and artefacts, can be integrated into the broader cultural heritage system of An Giang Province and Thoai Son District. This integration would enhance the region's tourism potential by leveraging its tangible and intangible cultural assets, including Nui Sap, Ba The Mountain, and the Thoai Son Inscription, the Four-Armed Buddha Statue, Linh Son Pagoda, Truc Lam An Giang Zen Monastery, and the Oc Eo Cultural Artefact Display Centre.

By combining these cultural tourism resources, the region can diversify its tourism offerings, promoting innovative and sustainable forms of tourism such as archaeological tourism, heritage tourism, and cultural tourism.

3. Current Status of Management, Conservation, and Promotion of Oc Eo Cultural Heritage in Thoai Son District, An Giang

3.1. In Scientific Research, Management, and Conservation of Oc Eo Cultural Heritage

Archaeologists have spent many years studying Oc Eo culture. An Giang Province has worked with local and international agencies to conduct surveys, excavations, and studies on the relics and artefacts of Oc Eo civilisation. Archaeological studies and excavations have discovered several architectural and residential relics, as well as a huge quantity of artefacts from the Oc Eo culture. These finds have continued to help researchers learn more about Funan's old civilisation. The Prime Minister of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam has recognised and ranked numerous archaeological sites in Thoai Son District due to their historical, cultural, and scientific significance. Specifically: In 2002, Nam Linh Son and Go Cay Thi (in Oc Eo Town) were designated as national archaeological sites. In 2012, the Oc Eo-Ba archaeological site was classified as a Special National Relic. By the end of 2024, An Giang had eight unique artefacts and groups recognised as national treasures, including two found in Thoai Son. The ranking of relics and artefacts linked with Oc Eo culture in Thoai Son has confirmed the historical, cultural, and scientific significance of Oc Eo cultural heritage in the An Giang province.

Statistical Table 1: Archaeological Sites and Artifacts in Thoai Son Ranked by the Prime Minister of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam

N o.	Name of heritage or relic	Classification Type	Location of Research and Discovery	Recognition Decision Number	Note
	The Oc Eo - Ba The Archaeological and Architectural Artistic Site	Special national heritage	Oc Eo town, Thoai Son district, An Giang province	Decision No. 1419/QĐ - TTg on 27/9/2012	
	Nam Linh Son tu	National Archaeological Site	Oc Eo town, Thoai Son district, An Giang province	Decision No. 39/2002/QĐ - BVHTT, on 30/12/2002	
	Go Cay Thi				
	The Linh Son Stone Linga-Yoni Set, dating back to the 7th century	National treasure	Linh Son pagoda area (Trung Son hamlet, Oc Eo town, Thoai Son district, An Giang province), 1985	Decision No. 2283/QĐ-TTg, on 31/12/2020 (Batch 9, recognising 24 national treasures)	Preserved at the An Giang museum
	The Ba The Stone Mukhalinga, dating back to the 6th century	National treasure	Vong The commune, Thoai Son district, An Giang province, 1986	Decision No. 41/QĐ-TTg, on 30/01/2023 (Batch 11, recognising 27 national treasures)	Preserved at the An Giang Museum

Depending on the features of each site, competent authorities have implemented on-site conservation for some antiquities and built protective roofs for excavation sites. Notable examples are the Nam Linh Son Tu, Go Cay Thi A, and Go Ut Tranh sites. The majority of artefacts are preserved and displayed at two locations: the An Giang Provincial Museum and the Management Board of Oc Eo Cultural Relics in An Giang Province.

Given the exceptional scientific significance of the Oc Eo cultural heritage in the southwestern Mekong Delta of Vietnam, particularly the archaeological accomplishments at the Oc Eo - Ba The site (An Giang Province) and the Nen Chua site (Kien Giang Province), and Go Thap site (Dong Thap Province), the provinces of Dong Thap, An Giang, and Kien Giang have been collaboratively preparing a comprehensive scientific dossier. This dossier is intended for submission to the United Nations

Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) to seek recognition of the Oc Eo Cultural Heritage Complex as a World Cultural Heritage Site.

3.2. Efforts to Promote the Value of Oc Eo Cultural Heritage

The People's Committee of An Giang Province, in collaboration with cultural heritage management, has strengthened steps to manage, conserve, and promote the value of Oc Eo cultural heritage.

The province and district have adopted a strategy named "Promoting the Value of the Special National Relic Site Oc Eo-Ba The as One of An Giang Province's Four Tourism Hubs, 2018-2025." Nui Sap and Nui Ba Thoai Son have two important tourist zones. Unique tourism programs have been established, including the "Mystical Oc Eo" tour, a visit to Nui Ba The to examine the "Linh Son Ancient Pagoda," the "Oc Eo Cultural Artefacts Display Centre," and a cultural heritage discovery trip of Oc Eo Town.

Furthermore, the district continually invests in and upgrades tourism infrastructure and services, such as the Truc Lam An Giang Zen Monastery, Nui Sap Lake Tourism Zone, Oc Eo Cultural Relics, and Thoai Ngoc Hau Communal House rehabilitation project.

The tourism industry in An Giang has made great progress. According to data, An Giang received around 9.1 million tourists in 2024, a 7% increase over 2023, and met 101% of the yearly objective. Notably, the number of overseas visitors reached 25,000, a 14% rise over the previous year, demonstrating An Giang's growing popularity among international tourists. Tourism revenue was predicted at 10.25 trillion VND, increasing 74% from 2023 and far exceeding the established target (Thu Thao, 2024).

An Giang is focusing on attracting investments in four key tourism areas with strong competitive advantages in the Mekong Delta region: Sam Mountain National Tourism Area (Chau Doc), Nui Cam Tourism Zone, Tra Su Melaleuca Forest (Tinh Bien), My Hoa Hung - Phu Ba Islet Tourism Zone (Long Xuyen), and Oc Eo - Ba The Cultural Relic Complex (Thoai Son).

Thoai Son has become a popular destination for domestic and foreign travellers seeking education, research, tourism, and relaxation. In 2022, the district received over 250,000 tourists, an increase of 110,000 over the previous year. Popular attractions include the Ho Ong Thoai Tourism Area, the Truc Lam An Giang Zen Monastery, and the Oc Eo Cultural Relic Complex. On top of Nui Ba The is the Oc Eo Cultural Artefacts Display Centre, a well-equipped facility open to tourists from Tuesday to Sunday. The Oc Eo-Ba The Relic Site has been officially available to tourism since 2005, with attractions including the Go Cay Thi Relic, Nam Linh Son Tu Relic, Four-Armed Buddha Temple, and Nui Ba The's Artefact Display Centre.

Oc Eo Cultural Relics established its Management Board in 2013. In 2016, a new Oc Eo Cultural Display Centre was completed and opened. The management board began accepting and serving tourists, eventually garnering a sizable and continuously rising number of visitors. While there were just 5,032 visitors in 2014, the figure increased to 8,603 in 2015. By 2023, the management board had hosted over 27,000 visitors, more than doubling prior years' figures (Phong Diep, Thanh Binh, 2024). Aside from domestic tourists, overseas visitors to the relic site are largely scholars and tourists from Australia, Belgium, Japan, South Korea, China, Cambodia, and Thailand.

Thoai Son has also incorporated current technologies into its exhibitions and tourism services. Visitors can now experience the Oc Eo - Ba Archaeological Relic Site via the VR 360 TOUR (Vuong Le, 2024). Recently, on November 22, 2024, an event was held at the Oc Eo Cultural Display Centre (Thoai Son District, An Giang Province) to inaugurate the "Exhibition of Oc Eo Cultural Artefacts Donated by the Public (2016-2024)" and introduce the smart tourism product based on VR 360 technology for the Oc Eo - Ba The Archaeological Relic Site.

The VR 360 product provides tourists with a dynamic digital view of the Oc Eo - Ba archaeological legacy, saving them time while giving a fascinating experience. The Information and Communication

Technology Centre of the Department of Information and Communications developed and invested in the product, which is now integrated into An Giang's digital platform, iSpace, which can be found at ispace.angiang.vn. This combination of cultural heritage conservation and digital transformation represents a big step forward in maintaining and promoting cultural heritage using modern technology. It promises to pave the door for more heritage tourism in An Giang (Thuy Van, 2024).



Fig.5. Panoramic View of Archaeological Sites at Ba The – Oc Eo through VR 360 TOUR
(Source: <https://smartravel-vr.mobifone.vn/vr-tour/di-tich-van-hoa-oc-eo-an-giang/65865229571db028db04a59c>)

On Public Awareness Campaigns: An Giang has organised numerous exhibitions of artefacts and national treasures for the public and tourists to view. The Ministry of Information and Communications, in partnership with the People's Committee of An Giang Province, released a stamp set titled "Oc Eo Culture." The series features three stamps and one block with designs inspired by national treasures from the Oc Eo Culture. Artist Nguyen Du, who works for the Vietnam Post Corporation, developed these in a graphic manner. Face values include 4,000 VND, 6,000 VND, 8,000 VND, and 19,000 VND. The stamps are borderless and measure 24x49.5 mm, while the block is 80x100 mm. The third stamp in the series (3-3) displays Giong Xoai's Brahma Statue, while the block has Da Noi's Linga-Yoni. The collection was formally launched on August 20, 2020 (Thu Huong, 2023). The Oc Eo Culture stamps, with their specialised visual language, have efficiently communicated and promoted the once-great Oc Eo civilisation to both domestic and worldwide audiences.

Despite considerable breakthroughs in the study of Óc Eo culture, most of the potential associated to the relics and artefacts concealed beneath the soil of An Giang Province remains enigmatic. Some places have deteriorated and fallen into disrepair over time as a result of the effects of conflict, particularly urbanisation. The preservation of relics and artefacts, especially archaeological sites associated to Óc Eo culture, has been inadequately handled in the past, putting them in risk of being "erased" from history.

Thoai Son's tourism is becoming an important economic engine, the district has yet to fully utilise its inherent advantages, particularly the cultural tourist resources provided by its unique ancient remains and artefacts. Tourism development in Thoai Son has faced multiple hurdles, including: Heritage conservation, current tourist products lack attractiveness, resulting in low competitiveness and short tourist stays, and insufficient investment in infrastructure upgrades has resulted in key transport lines remaining undeveloped, making visitor mobility challenging. Professionalism in tourist: The tourist business faces challenges such as a dearth of qualified human resources, insufficient lodging facilities, and a scarcity of high-end restaurants, culinary zones, and resorts. The environmental integrity of heritage sites and tourist regions continues to be a challenge, and the quality of tourism services, such as cuisine, entertainment, and recreational facilities, has failed to satisfy visitors' increasing expectations.

4. Proposals to Maximise the Value of Archaeological Sites and Artefacts of Oc Eo Culture in Thoai Son District for Tourism Development

First, Strengthening Scientific Research and Conservation of Oc Eo Cultural Heritage

Thoai Son District should collaborate closely with An Giang Province to explore, manage, and preserve the significance of Oc Eo cultural sites and artefacts. Specifically:

- Archaeological research: The scientific research of sites and artefacts, particularly the subsurface system of Oc Eo archaeological sites, is required in order to more fully and accurately assess the heritage's value.

- After-Excavation Conservation: Excavated archaeological sites require effective implementation of specific solutions for researching and conserving Oc Eo cultural treasures and objects. This includes: Improving protective structures like roofing or open-air museums can help to maintain and increase the value of exposed cultural monuments. Addressing potential hazards such as mould, termites, and environmental effects on exposed antiques. Developing solutions for preserving and displaying antiquities housed in museums or display facilities.

- Comprehensive, multidisciplinary studies should be prioritised in order to get an objective and holistic understanding of the significance of Oc Eo sites, artefacts, and Southern Vietnamese culture. Dang Van Thang noted, "The research process is also a teaching activity for raising awareness about cultural asset conservation. This awareness is increased by improving the quality of study findings" (Dang Van Thang, 1999, p. 222). Scientific research not only provides data to support conservation efforts, but it also helps to promote the importance of heritage. This can be accomplished by broadly disseminating study findings via media outlets such as books, magazines, and the Internet. As a result, tourism activities and growth will expand.

Secondly, promote the unique significance of Oc Eo cultural heritage in relation to sustainable tourism development.

Cultural tourism is a notion that has been introduced and widely adopted since the mid-20th century. At its 22nd session (2017), the United Nations World Tourism Assembly defined cultural tourism as "a type of tourism activity in which the visitor's essential motivation is to learn, discover, experience, and consume the tangible and intangible cultural attractions/products of a tourism destination." These attractions/products refer to a society's distinct material, intellectual, spiritual, and emotional characteristics, which include art and architecture, historical and cultural heritage, culinary heritage, literature, music, creative industries, and living cultures with their lifestyles, value systems, beliefs, and traditions (UN Tourism, 2023). To put it simply, cultural tourism is a sort of tourism in which visitors want to immerse themselves in a country's or region's rich cultural history through historical and cultural artefacts, as well as existing practices and traditions.

Furthermore, when building an archaeological tourism site, it is critical to address local needs and the consequences for the local population (Surabhi Srivastava, 2015, pp. 35-36). Given the extraordinary values and possibilities of the Oc Eo cultural heritage in Thoai Son district, it must be used wisely to strike a balance between conservation and the region's comprehensive, long-term economic, cultural, and social development, notably in tourism.

Thoai Son District has intrinsic capabilities in cultural tourism. As a result, the district should prioritise tourism development by maximising the value of archaeological, historical, and cultural artefacts. The culture and tourism sectors should include noteworthy archaeological sites on their list of tourist destinations and attractions. Tourism destinations associated with the Nam Linh Son Pagoda site, Go Cay Thi A, B, and other archaeological relics such as Go Oc Eo, Go Cay Me, Go Ut Tranh, Giong Cat, and Go Cay Trom, among others, should be linked to visits, educational experiences, and research into southern Vietnam's distinct Oc Eo culture.

Furthermore, archaeological remnants in the Oc Eo – Ba The cultural heritage site can be linked to other cultural and spiritual tourism sites in the Thoai Son district. This integration seeks to create a

separate kind of "cultural heritage tourism" for the district, attracting local and foreign visitors for sightseeing, pleasure, and scientific study, with the following goals:

Form of tourism	Visitors' objectives
Visiting	Enjoy the scenery, explore, entertain, and enhance knowledge.
Conducting research	Archaeology, history, culture, and interdisciplinary studies... serving the research needs of individuals, as well as scientific research projects of individuals or organizations,...
Exploring	Discover, develop and study
Synthesis	Purposes mentioned above
Others	Other objectives

Finally, comprehensive solutions are required to safeguard history in conjunction with tourism development

An Giang province is making major efforts and exhibiting resolve to expand its tourism industry, thereby cementing its place as a desirable destination in the Mekong Delta. Decision No. 1369/QD-TTg approved An Giang Province's Planning for the period 2021-2030, with a vision of 2050. This includes the goal of establishing An Giang into a cultural, spiritual, and ecological tourism hub in the Mekong Delta region. As a result, tourism development must be integrated into An Giang province's long-term, medium-term, and short-term plans, with a focus on maximising the potential of archaeological, historical, and cultural relics.

In terms of tourism development, Thoai Son district should prioritise the coordinated and effective implementation of three programs: the Action Program on Tourism Infrastructure Development, the Human Resources Training Program, and the Tourism Promotion and Marketing Program. The project aims to improve access to archaeological sites like Go Cay Thi, Linh Son Bac, and Ba The Mountain by upgrading and expanding bridges and roads. It will also invest in main tourism roads like Provincial Road 943 and Vo Van Kiet Road.

- Create a cable car system for visitors to travel to mountain summits and explore the region. - Enhance heritage sites with welcoming gates, interpretative signs, flora, and decorations.
- Investing in and improving hotel quality, diversifying tourism products and souvenirs, and promoting tourism products and images. Furthermore, stakeholders must prioritise tourism quality in accordance with sustainable tourism development in order to accommodate increasing tourist demand. Human resources, particularly scientific personnel for heritage research and conservation, as well as tourism staff, play an important role. As a result, developing awareness of the tourism industry through communication skills and foreign language training for locals, particularly those owning companies near tourist destinations and sales staff at tourist attractions, is critical.

Thoai Son should also improve tourist promotion and development by creating a tourism map and handbook for the district. Technology and digital change should be used to preserve history and boost tourism. Furthermore, the area must actively seek out and foster a good, open business environment in order to attract investors and promote tourism activities locally.

Thoai Son District should put emphasis on connecting archaeological sites to cultural heritage tourism sites and other tourist areas. Along with existing tours, efforts should be undertaken to increase and improve the quality of various tours and travel routes connecting the district to neighbouring regions, thereby expanding tourism offerings. Furthermore, the district's tourism should not be limited to closed loop routes inside An Giang Province, such as "Thoai Son - Long Xuyen - Chau Doc - Tinh Bien - Tri Ton - Thoai Son." Instead, Thoai Son has the ability to connect regionally with other locations such as Long Xuyen City, Chau Thanh District, Tri Ton District, Can Tho City, Kien Giang Province, and others. For example, a tourism route through An Giang may include four provincial tourism hubs: the Chau Doc tourism hub (which includes both An Phu and Phu Tan

Districts), the Tinh Bien and Tri Ton tourism hub, the Long Xuyen, Chau Thanh, and Cho Moi tourism hub, and the Oc Eo, Thoai Son tourism hub.

The World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO), also known as the United Nations tourist Organisation (UN Tourism), has stated that the convergence of tourism and culture creates unique potential while also posing complicated problems to the tourist industry. As a result, tourism laws and activities should be implemented in a way that respects artistic, archaeological, and cultural legacy, which must be maintained and passed down to future generations. Monuments, places of worship, archaeological and historical sites, and museums should all be conserved and upgraded to make them more accessible to tourists (UN Tourism).

For Thoai Son District, adopting comprehensive solutions for maintaining, preserving, and promoting the cultural and archaeological values of Oc Eo legacy in tandem with tourism growth necessitates coordination among many departments and organisations. This mostly entails collaboration between the Thoai Son District People's Committee and An Giang Province's Oc Eo Cultural Heritage Management Board, as well as between the district and investors, and between enterprises within and outside of the district, province, and region. Community engagement (including local inhabitants, tourists, and younger generations) is essential for fostering understanding, pride, and a shared commitment to preserving and promoting the value of Oc Eo cultural heritage.

CONCLUSION

Since the Oc Eo civilisation was discovered and recognised 80 years ago (1944-2024), research has shown that it was founded and evolved on a local basis and flourished brightly during the early centuries of the Common Era. Oc Eo-Ba The (now a relic site in Vong The Commune, Thoai Son District, An Giang Province) is the major archaeological site linked with the Oc Eo culture in Vietnam's southwestern area. Thoai Son plays an important role in the development of Oc Eo culture and the Funan Kingdom. This ceates credence to the claim that Oc Eo people lived throughout southern Vietnam, with considerable concentrations in places like Oc Eo - Ba The (An Giang), Nen Chua (Kien Giang), and Go Thap (Dong Thap).

The heritage of the Oc Eo culture and the Funan Kingdom unearthed in Thoai Son is extremely valuable. It is a rare and essential resource for researching the history of An Giang Province and southern Vietnam. Furthermore, it adds to studies on the history and culture of the Oc Eo period and the Funan Kingdom, which is consistent with the ancient historical development of Vietnam and Southeast Asia. Oc Eo's cultural history is not only scientific in its meaning, but also economically and politically valuable. However, utilising the archaeological significance of these monuments for sustainable tourism development continues to face several obstacles.

Thoai Son District has numerous favourable conditions for tourism growth, especially cultural tourism. It is envisaged that the area will soon be able to effectively use the Oc Eo culture's archaeological history in tourism development, developing distinctive and unique tourism products that will contribute to long-term economic development. This would allow for the preservation of heritage while also increasing the quality of life for local residents and promoting overall economic, cultural, and social development in the district.

Showcasing the lifestyle and living environment of ancient Oc Eo people provides compelling evidence for Criterion 5 - Outstanding Universal Value - as part of the heritage dossier submitted to UNESCO. With its numerous remarkable scientific values, it is hoped that in the future, UNESCO would officially recognise the Oc Eo culture as a "World Cultural Heritage of Humanity." If recognised, this will lay the groundwork for better integration of management, conservation, and promotion of heritage values. It will serve as the "universal key" for Thoai Son to become a popular tourist destination in the Mekong Delta, as well as a significant focus on both Vietnam's and the world's tourism maps.

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