

## The Chosen Avatars: Religious Meaning and Iconography of Vishnu Depicted on Gold Plaques from Ancient Funan Kingdom

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper focuses on the study of gold plaques from the Óc Eo culture that have depictions of Vishnu and his avatars, discovered at key sites in the Mekong Delta such as Gò Tháp, Gò Xoài, Đá Nổi, Nền Chùa,... This is a special group of artifacts, possessing both artistic value and profound religious significance tied to Hindu rituals within the context of the Funan kingdom (1st–7th centuries CE). Using an integrated methodological framework of typological and iconographical analysis, the study identifies depictions of Vishnu in his original form with four arms holding attributes, along with several prominent avatars such as Matsya (Fish), Kurma (Turtle), Varaha (Boar), Narasimha (Man-Lion), and Vamana (Dwarf). These figures are rendered with exquisite engraving techniques on thin gold plaques, featuring harmonious compositions and details characteristic of Hindu art. The analysis reveals that the selection and representation of these Vishnu avatars on gold plaques not only reflect Hindu doctrines and cosmology but also carry political significance—serving to legitimize and reinforce the authority of the Funanese monarchy, while also reflecting local reception and creative adaptation in religious and artistic expression.

**KEYWORDS:** Avatar, gold plaques, Funan, Hinduism, Óc Eo, Vishnu.

### I. INTRODUCTION

#### A. Historical Context

The Funan was an ancient kingdom that existed from the 1st to the 7th century CE, centered in the Mekong Delta region of present-day Southern Vietnam. At its zenith, Funan developed into a powerful empire, with its territory extending across mainland Southeast Asia, including parts of Cambodia, Thailand, Laos, and the Malay Peninsula. The kingdom's prosperity was linked to its strategic position on the “Maritime Silk Road”, a vital trade artery of the ancient world. Funan's port cities, notably Óc Eo, served as cosmopolitan hubs connecting trade flows between major empires such as Rome, India, and China. This central role in trade also made Funan a recipient and transmitter of profound cultural influences, especially from Indian civilization. This process of “Indianization” is clearly reflected in the surviving material culture, identified as the Óc Eo archaeological culture, wherein religious artifacts play a particularly crucial role in understanding the intellectual life of the Funanese people.

One of the most unique and representative artifacts of this culture are the gold plaques. These are pieces of thinly hammered gold, yet they are firm enough to maintain their shape, distinguishing them from the softer gold leaf used for gilding statues or architectural decoration. They have been found in very large numbers, in various shapes such as square, round, rectangular, and semi-circular, with common sizes ranging from small (0.5-2 cm) to medium (2-5 cm) and light weights, primarily from 0.0375g to 0.75g) (Lê Xuân Diễm et al., 1995: 341). One of the most significant scholarly questions surrounding these gold plaques is their function. Previous views often considered them funerary goods, based on the assumption that pits containing ash and charcoal were evidence of cremation (Đào Linh Côn 1997, p.113; Higham 2001, pp. 29-31). However, recent studies have presented compelling evidence that they were votive offerings in Hindu religious ceremonies. These gold plaques were not buried randomly but were an integral part of sacred rituals. Archaeological evidence shows they were often placed in sacred pits or deposit boxes in the foundations of temple-tower structures. This was part of the Shilanyas ceremony, the laying of the first brick to sanctify and protect the temple. In this ritual, gold plaques were buried along with precious stones and various types of seeds. The practice of this foundation ritual was not confined to Óc Eo but was also common at many temple sites in South and Southeast Asia, indicating a shared religious practice across a broad cultural region (Slaczka A. 2011; Đặng Văn Thắng and Võ Thị Huỳnh Như, 2012). The most outstanding feature of the gold plaques is the incredibly diverse and rich variety of engraved themes, offering a valuable window into the belief world of the Funanese population.

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## B. Literature Review

The history of research on the Óc Eo culture and its related gold artifacts is a long process involving contributions from both domestic and international scholars. As early as the French colonial period, the works of Paul Pelliot (1903) and Henri Parmentier (1927) laid the groundwork for defining the geographical extent of the Funan kingdom through ancient texts and identifying religious artifacts in the region. However, the true foundation for the concept of “Óc Eo culture” was shaped by the monumental work of Louis Malleret, the 4-volume series: “L’Archéologie du delta du Mékong” (1959-1963). Volume III of this work meticulously cataloged, described, and compared 1312 gold artifacts, also discussing their manufacturing techniques and decorative motifs. Concurrently, the work of George Cœdès (1944) reinforced the organic link between Óc Eo cultural artifacts and the historical kingdom of Funan. Nevertheless, research from this period was primarily based on collected artifacts without clear excavation contexts, and in Malleret’s collection, jewelry predominated over gold plaques.

After 1975, Vietnamese archaeologists initiated a new phase of research, shifting from collection to large-scale, systematic excavations at key sites like Óc Eo, Gò Tháp, Nền Chùa, and Đá Nổi, ... This period led to the discovery of hundreds of gold plaques in reliable archaeological contexts, providing an abundant source of data for numerous subsequent comprehensive and specialized studies. Specialized research on gold plaques became more systematic. The work “Văn hóa Óc Eo những khám phá mới” (Óc Eo Culture: New Discoveries) (1995) by Lê Xuân Diễm, Đào Linh Côn, and Võ Sĩ Khải is considered the first to present a relatively systematic overview of the gold plaques, classifying 298 items into 6 thematic groups (human figures, animals, plants, objects, geometric shapes, and inscriptions). Later comprehensive works by Bùi Chí Hoàng (2019) and Phạm Đức Mạnh (2019) updated the count to hundreds of artifacts and further clarified the typological groups, affirming that these symbols bore both Hindu characteristics and were set within a local natural context.

The studies of Lê Thị Liên have made the most prominent contributions to the research of gold plaques and Óc Eo culture. She asserted that gold plaques were the “earliest and most easily transferable medium” for the personification of Hindu gods in the Mekong Delta in her work “Sự tiến triển của tiểu tượng Hindu giáo ở Đồng Bằng sông Cửu Long trước thế kỷ X” (The Evolution of Hindu Iconography in the Mekong Delta before the 10th century) (2004), reflecting the development of a Hindu symbolic complex from the 5th to the 7th century CE. In “Nghệ thuật Phật giáo và Hindu giáo ở đồng bằng sông Cửu Long trước thế kỷ X” (Buddhist and Hindu Art in the Mekong Delta before the 10th Century) (2006), she provided detailed analyses of gold plaques and identified their iconographic content. In “Gold plaques and their cultural contexts in the Óc Eo Culture” (BIPPA, 2007), the author analyzed the symbolic meaning of gold plaques at Gò Tháp and Gò Xoài, thereby inferring the function and nature of the religious architecture at these two sites. Her articles, such as “Chủ đề của các hiện vật vàng ở Gò Tháp” (Themes of the Gold Artifacts at Gò Tháp) and “Thêm một cách đọc các chữ viết trên vàng ở khu mộ Đá Nổi” (Another Reading of the Inscriptions on Gold from the Đá Nổi Burial Site) (2011), continued this line of inquiry. The paper “Hindu Deities in Southern Vietnam: Images on Small Archaeological Artefacts” (2011) expanded the identification to a Hindu temples, including Vishnu, Shiva, and their avatars. At a regional level, “Hindu Beliefs and the Maritime Network in Southern Vietnam During the Early Common Era” (2015) emphasized the role of the maritime trade network in the spread of Hinduism, viewing gold plaques as evidence of rituals associated with early state formation. More recently, her 2023 publication in the *Journal of Indo-Pacific Archaeology* combined iconographical and Brahmi paleographical analysis to affirm the deep connection between Southern Vietnam and the Indian subcontinent from the 1st to 8th centuries CE.

However, despite their immense value, previous works either provided a general overview of all artifacts or sketched the entire pantheon, leaving several issues for further investigation. There has been no study that specifically and systematically analyzes the avatars of Vishnu on gold plaques, explains why only certain avatars of Vishnu were chosen and prominently featured, delves deeply into the religious and iconographical meaning of each Vishnu avatar based on the corpus of gold plaques from multiple sites, or assesses their role in the politico-religious context of Funan. This paper, therefore, is built upon the aforementioned archaeological works and iconographical analyses, focusing on: identifying the Vishnu avatars represented on the gold plaques, explaining the religious and iconographical meaning of these figures, and discussing their role in the context of Funan.

## II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

### A. Corpus of gold plaques

The research material for this paper comprises gold plaques from the Óc Eo cultural tradition, discovered at representative archaeological sites in the Mekong Delta region, associated with the cultural-political space of the Funan kingdom. Within the scope of this paper, the research will focus specifically on the group of artifacts that depict themes related to the god Vishnu and his avatars. To ensure authenticity and context, the study prioritizes the analysis of artifacts discovered in archaeological excavations with clear stratigraphy. Furthermore, to clarify issues of origin and cultural exchange, these artifacts will also be compared with similar objects found in other parts of Southeast Asia and India.

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## B. Methodology

To achieve the stated objectives, this study adopts an interdisciplinary approach grounded in archaeology, combined with theories and methods from other social sciences.

### 1) Theoretical Approach:

**Theory of Cultural Exchange and Acculturation:** This theory is used as a basis to explain the process by which Indian religious symbols (specifically, the avatars of Vishnu) were introduced into Funanese society. It helps to clarify how the indigenous population did not just passively receive but actively selected, adapted, and recreated these symbols to fit their own cultural context and belief needs.

**Semiotic and Post-structuralist Approach:** The study uses semiotic tools to “decode” the meaning of the images on the gold plaques. Following a post-structuralist perspective, the meaning of a symbol is not fixed but is formed in its interaction with the socio-cultural context in which it exists. This allows for the interpretation of Vishnu's avatars not only based on their Indian origins but also within the specific context of the Funan kingdom, explaining local variations and creative innovations.

### 2) Analytical Methods:

**Archaeological Method:** The study employs traditional methods of the discipline such as typological classification, quantitative statistics, detailed description, tabulation, photography, and artifact illustration. The statistical method is applied to determine the frequency of each avatar's appearance, thereby highlighting patterns of deliberate selection.

**Historical Method:** All iconographical analysis is placed within its specific historical context and archaeological stratigraphy. This ensures that interpretations do not stray into a “forest of symbols” but remain firmly tied to material evidence, avoiding baseless speculation.

**Comparative Method:** The study conducts both synchronic and diachronic comparisons. The images on the Óc Eo gold plaques are compared with prototypes in Hindu art and scriptures, as well as with contemporary artifacts from other Southeast Asian cultures (such as Champa, Dvaravati, etc.). Through this, it is possible to identify which elements are inherited and which are indigenous innovations.

## III. RESULTS

Vishnu is one of the three supreme deities in the Hindu Trimurti, alongside Brahma (the Creator) and Shiva (the Destroyer). Honored as the Preserver, Vishnu's role is to maintain Dharma (cosmic order) and to intervene whenever the world falls into chaos. One of the most prominent features of Vishnu's mythology is the concept of the Dashavatara—his ten avatars (incarnations) to save humanity in different eras. Vishnu is believed to have countless avatars, but the most popular are ten: Matsya (the fish), Kurma (the turtle), Varaha (the boar), Narasimha (the man-lion), Vamana (the dwarf), Parashurama (the warrior), Rama (the ideal king of the Ramayana), Krishna (the compassionate deity of the Mahabharata), Buddha (in some traditions), and Kalki—the future avatar who will appear at the end of the world (Gopinatha Rao T.A. 1985, pp.119-120). The roles of Vishnu and his avatars are central to the formation of Vaishnavism theology. On the Óc Eo gold plaques, Vishnu is depicted in his original form as well as his avatars.

### A. Vishnu in his Original Form

A total of four gold plaques depict Vishnu in his original form, with two found at the 93GT.M4 site, one at the 85ĐN.M4 site, and one at the 85ĐN.M5 site. All four images show Vishnu standing, wearing a cylindrical mitre, a common motif in the Hindu art of ancient Southeast Asia. The god's four hands hold his characteristic attributes: the Sudarshana Chakra (discus) and the Panchajanya Sankha (conch), while the lower two hands hold the Kaumodaki (mace) and a Padma (lotus bud, often rendered in a near-spherical shape). Although the artifacts share many similarities in composition and iconography, there are minor differences in shape, size, and level of detail.

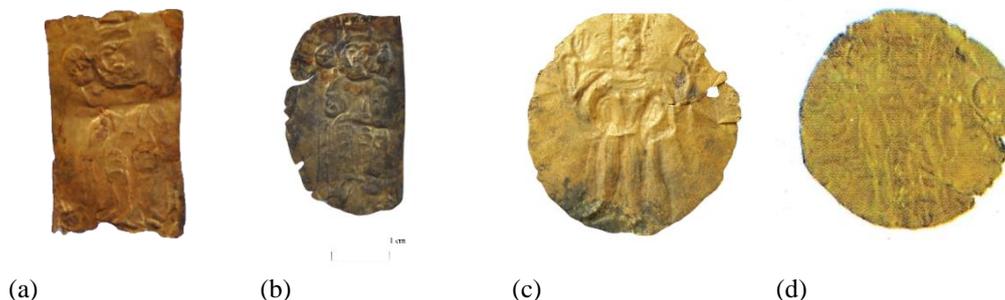
The artifact numbered BTĐT.CV246/KL808 (93GTM4-1) is a rectangular gold plaque, measuring 3.4 x 2 cm. The surface is engraved with the figure of a standing Vishnu. The deity is depicted with a cylindrical mitre, a round face, a large nose, and a high neck adorned with jewelry. He has four arms: the upper two hold the Sudarshana Chakra (discus) and the Panchajanya Sankha (conch), while the lower two hold the Kaumodaki (mace) and a spherical object (a form of lotus bud). The curved lines on the lower body represent present fabric folds of a sampot garment.

The artifact numbered BTĐT.CV247/KL809 (93GTM4-2) is a semi-circular gold plaque, measuring 3.5 x 2.1 cm. The image shows Vishnu in a frontal standing pose, wearing a cylindrical mitre, with a nearly round face, large ears with jewelry, and a necklace. He has four arms: the upper two hold the Sudarshana Chakra and Panchajanya Sankha, while the lower two hold the Kaumodaki and a spherical object. The lower body has curved lines similar to the folds of a sampot.

The artifact numbered 85ĐN.M4: 39 is rectangular, measuring 3.2 x 2.9 cm. It depicts Vishnu standing frontally, wearing a cylindrical mitre, with an oval face and a thin garment covering his body. The two upper hands are raised, holding the Panchajanya Sankha and Sudarshana Chakra; the lower left hand holds the Kaumodaki, and the lower right hand holds a sphere.

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The artifact numbered 85ĐN.M5: 13 is circular, with a diameter of 2.6 cm. It is engraved with a standing Vishnu wearing a cylindrical mitre. The god has four arms, with the upper right hand clearly identifiable as holding the Sankha conch. To the left of the deity are small marks that may be ancient script.



**Figure 1: Gold plaques with depictions of Vishnu (Source: Author)**

The stylistic features of Vishnu on the gold plaques show clear similarities to several stone Vishnu statues of the Óc Eo culture, dated to around the 6th–7th centuries, particularly in the frontal standing pose, round face, high neck, thin garment clinging to the body, and symbolic attributes. On early stone statues, especially in the 5th–6th centuries, when sculpting techniques had not yet perfected the execution of extended raised arms, artisans often had to include a curved or horizontal connecting strip at the back, which acted as a technical support to maintain the statue's structural balance. Later, as techniques developed (from the 7th century onwards), works could completely omit this support element while still ensuring balance in three-dimensional space. However, on the gold plaques, with their characteristic flatness, this support detail is absent. This raises two plausible possibilities: either this element was omitted because the two-dimensional surface did not require structural support, or the image of Vishnu on the gold plaques reflects a more established iconographic model from a later period, when the technique of round sculpture no longer needed the support detail. In other words, one might question whether the model on the gold plaques is a reflection of a pre-established standard for round sculpture or if the gold plaques themselves played a role in forming the iconographic canon for deities in Óc Eo religious art.

### B. The Avatars of Vishnu on Gold Plaques

#### 1) Matsya Avatar

The image of the fish appears on many gold plaques in the Óc Eo culture, mostly in a realistic style and often depicted independently, without direct association with a deity or a specific religious composition. However, some cases are elaborately rendered and found in contexts related to Hindu symbols, suggesting a possible link to the Matsya avatar of Vishnu. A total of 8 artifacts engraved with fish have been discovered at Óc Eo culture sites (see Table 1). These artifacts show considerable diversity in craftsmanship and level of detail, reflecting different artistic styles.

**Table 1. Distribution of Gold Plaques with Fish/Matsya Theme**

No.	Structure /Site	Location	Quantity
1	93GT.M1/Gò Tháp	Đồng Tháp	2
2	93GT.M5/ Gò Tháp	Đồng Tháp	1
3	85ĐN.M3/Đá Nổi	An Giang	2
4	85ĐN.M4/ Đá Nổi	An Giang	2
5	KT08/Gò Sáu Thuận	An Giang	1
<b>Total</b>			<b>8</b>

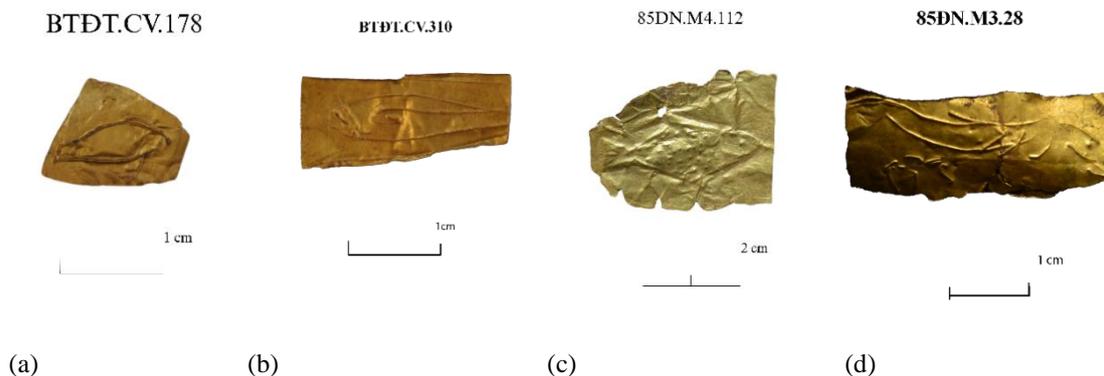
*Source: Compiled by the author*

Based on these descriptions, the depiction of fish on Óc Eo gold plaques has the following characteristics:

**Form and Craftsmanship:** The depiction is highly varied, ranging from simple incised outlines of a fish to more detailed representations that are elongated with a flat head and possibly inscriptions below, or fish bodies fully detailed with fins, scales, and a soft tail in a well-composed layout using repoussé technique. An example of the simple style is artifacts BTĐT.CV.178 and BTĐT.CV.310 (Figure 2a), created with just a few single-line incisions to sketch the basic form of a fish. Conversely, the two artifacts 85ĐN.M4:10 and 85ĐN.M4:112 (Figure 2c) are a testament to a high level of craftsmanship. Found in a context rich with Vaishnavite symbols at the Đá Nổi religious center, this gold plaque uses a refined repoussé technique to create a realistic fish with soft lines, clearly showing details of fins, scales, and tail. Artifact 85ĐN.M3:31 is unique with its incised depiction of two fish, one

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large and one small, complete with eyes, mouths, fins, and tails. Artifact 85ĐN.M3:28 depicts a long, slender fish with a flat head, and possibly has writing engraved below its belly (Figure 2d). Artifact P.249 from Go Sau Thuan has deep, clear engravings depicting a round-bodied fish with a large head, wide mouth, and what appear to be barbels.



**Figure 2: Gold plaques showing the fish/Matsya theme (Source: Author)**

Attributes: Although not depicted with divine attributes, they were found alongside gold plaques with distinct Hindu motifs such as Vishnu, Varaha, Chakra, Sankha, and Srivatsa... in the 85ĐN.M4 structure. These factors suggest that the fish image could represent the Matsya avatar of Vishnu.

Matsya is the first avatar in Vishnu's Dashavatara series. According to the legend in the Matsya Purana, Vishnu took the form of a fish to save Manu, along with the seven great sages and the seeds of all living things, from a great flood, thereby re-establishing the universe after a cycle of destruction. The Matsya symbol is therefore associated with acts of creation, salvation, and the restoration of order, in which the deity guides humanity through chaos to a reborn, orderly world (G. M. Williams, 2008). The Matsya avatar symbolizes cosmic origin, the re-establishment of order after a catastrophe, and the image of a savior guiding humanity. In an early society like Funan, where political and religious institutions were not yet fully distinct, the Matsya figure could have served as a symbol of protection and ritual, reflecting an effort to legitimize social order through mythology. Burying gold plaques depicting the divine fish under the foundations of religious structures may have carried the implication of establishing a cosmic-social foundation through sacred ritual. However, unlike avatars such as Vamana or Varaha, the Matsya figure does not directly carry elements of political power, but leans more towards a cosmological role. This suggests that the concept of the God-King was not yet prominent in this period, but iconographic elements that prepared the ideological groundwork were used as part of early theocratic rituals. It should also be noted that the image of the fish on Óc Eo gold plaques exhibits multi-layered symbolism: from a familiar creature in the daily life of a riverine population to its potential representation of the Matsya avatar in Hinduism. Some fish may carry indigenous spiritual value, while others (like those at 85ĐN.M4) demonstrate the adoption and localization of Vaishnavite ideology, showing profound selectivity and cultural adaptation within the ancient communities of Southern Vietnam.

### 2) Kurma (Turtle) Avatar

In Óc Eo culture, the turtle is depicted on gold plaques in various forms and levels of detail. The presence of this symbol raises questions about the relationship between indigenous beliefs and influences from Indian culture, especially in the context of Hinduism's strong spread in the region from the early Common Era.

A total of 14 artifacts have been discovered at the sites of Gò Tháp, Đá Nổi, Nền Chùa, Kè Một, Gò Xoài, and Rạch Đông. The number of turtle images on gold plaques found in the structures at these sites is shown in the following table (Table 2)

**Table 2: Distribution of Gold Plaques with Kurma /Turtle theme**

No.	Structure /Site	Location	Quantity
1	93GT.M1/Gò Tháp	Đồng Tháp	5
2	93GT.M4/Gò Tháp	Đồng Tháp	1
3	93GT.M5/Gò Tháp	Đồng Tháp	1
4	85ĐN.M2/Đá Nổi	An Giang	1
5	85ĐN.M4/Đá Nổi	An Giang	2
6	Nền Chùa	An Giang	1
7	Kè Một	An Giang	1
8	Gò Xoài	Tây Ninh	1
9	Rạch Đông	Đồng Nai	1
<b>Total</b>			<b>14</b>

Source: Compiled by the author

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The 93.GTM1 structure at the Gò Tháp site alone yielded 5 gold plaques depicting turtles, whereas other structures mostly had only 1-2 pieces. This indicates the prominent role of this symbol for the 93.GTM1 structure and the Gò Tháp religious center. At the same time, although not numerous, the turtle image was found in the most structures (9 structures) compared to other themes, indicating its widespread popularity.

The image of the turtle on Óc Eo gold plaques is rendered with a variety of characteristics in form and technique. In terms of perspective, the artifacts mainly depict the turtle from a top-down view or a side profile. The level of detail ranges from minimalist representations to highly realistic images. The techniques include both incision and repoussé, reflecting differences in craftsmanship and aesthetic preferences across various sites. The artifacts from Đá Nổi, Nền Chùa, and 85ĐN.M4 generally exhibit a higher level of finish and realism compared to those from Gò Tháp, which tend to be more schematic and symbolic. The turtles at Gò Tháp are depicted relatively simply with a circle and lines representing the four legs and head. In contrast, the artifacts from Đá Nổi show turtles with more delicate and realistic features; some are stationary, others are swimming, and the patterns on their shells are carefully detailed. Artifacts from Gò Xoài and Rạch Đông are cut out entirely in the shape of a turtle with four limbs, a tail, and a head. The carapace on the plaques is shown with a high dome, and the shell shape is oval or somewhat round. These are basic characteristics of freshwater turtle species.

On most artifacts, the turtle is depicted alone; there is only one case where a turtle is shown with a multi-headed serpent (Shesha), a characteristic symbol of Vaishnavism, suggesting a possible link between the turtle image and the Indian mythological system.

Currently, two main hypotheses can be proposed regarding the symbolic meaning of the turtle in Óc Eo culture:

1. An indigenous symbol related to the Mekong Delta environment: The turtle is a familiar animal in the riverine ecosystem of the Mekong Delta. Its depiction may reflect indigenous beliefs venerating animals associated with water, fertility, and life.
2. Influence from the Kurma in Hinduism: In Hinduism, Kurma is the second avatar of Vishnu in the form of a turtle, who supported the universe during the myth of the churning of the ocean of milk. However, since only one plaque shows a turtle accompanied by a multi-headed Shesha, a clear Vaishnavite symbol, there is insufficient evidence to definitively claim that all turtle images on Óc Eo gold plaques represent Kurma. Nevertheless, in the context where many artifacts depicting Vishnu, Varaha, Garuda, etc., have been found concurrently, the possibility that some turtle figures carry Vaishnavite meaning remains a plausible hypothesis that requires further research.

### 3) *Varaha Avatar (Boar)*

In the Dashavatara system of Vishnu, Varaha is the third avatar, taking the form of a giant boar. The myth of Varaha is one of the most important and deeply symbolic stories in Hindu mythology. According to the narrative, when the demon Hiranyaksha dragged the Earth (personified as the goddess Bhudevi or Prithvi) to the bottom of the primordial ocean, Vishnu incarnated as the boar Varaha, dived into the ocean, defeated the demon, and used his tusks to lift the Earth goddess, rescuing the world from chaos and darkness. With this act, Varaha became the ultimate symbol of the victory of righteousness (dharma) over evil, the embodiment of protective power, the restorer of cosmic order, and the savior of the world (Gopinatha Rao T.A. 1985, pp.128 – 145).

In the collection of Óc Eo gold plaques, seven artifacts depict the Vishnu Varaha avatar. A particularly noteworthy point is that all of these artifacts were discovered concentrated at a single location: the 85ĐN.M4 structure within the Đá Nổi archaeological site (An Giang), an important religious center of the Óc Eo culture.

The artifact numbered 85ĐN.M4:16 is a nearly circular gold plaque, (3.0 x 3.2 cm). Its surface is embossed with the figure of Vishnu Varaha in a standing posture, left hand on hip, right hand holding a Chakra. The deity is surrounded by secondary symbols including a Sankha conch, a lotus with a stem, and a crescent moon (Fig.3a).

The artifact numbered 85ĐN.M4:24 is a circular gold plaque, 2.7 cm in diameter. Its surface is embossed with Vishnu Varaha, his right hand holding a Chakra wheel, his left arm bent across his chest. In front of his right leg is a Sankha conch, and behind his left leg is a shape resembling a Gada mace and a circle symbolizing the Earth (Mahi). The artifact combines incision, repoussé, and embossing techniques: the body is outlined by incision, while the muscle masses are embossed from the back. Details like the mace and the Earth are incised; the wheel is embossed; the Sankha conch is fully embossed, with the mouth detailed by incision. The overall effect is a vivid image with clear dimensionality (Fig.3b).

The artifact numbered 85ĐN.M4:51 is a circular gold plaque, 3.0 cm in diameter. Its surface is embossed with Vishnu Varaha in a standing posture, left hand on hip, right arm raised, with the animal head held high. On either side of the god are a 7-spoked Chakra wheel and a Sankha conch. The figure is rendered using repoussé technique (Fig.3c).

The artifact numbered 85ĐN.M4:59 is a circular gold plaque, 6.1 cm in diameter. Its surface features a repoussé image of Vishnu Varaha standing, right hand holding a Chakra, left hand on hip. To the god's right are a Sankha conch and a lotus; to the left are a two-headed serpent and a crescent moon (Fig.3d).

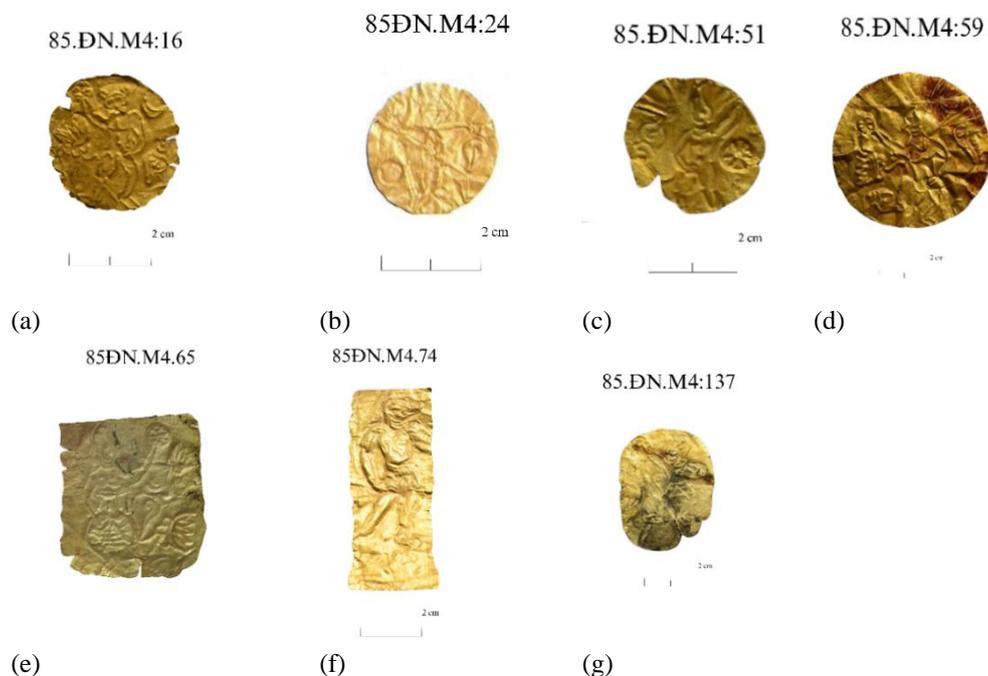
The artifact numbered 85ĐN.M4:65 is a rectangular gold plaque (4.0 x 3.5 cm). Its surface is embossed with Vishnu Varaha, right hand holding a Chakra aloft, left hand on hip. The upper torso is bare, while the lower body wears a skirt with horizontal and vertical lines. To the god's right is a Sankha conch with two lotuses growing vertically from its head and tail. The image is created

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using repoussé combined with light embossing from the back to create thickness and powerful musculature, clearly expressing the might of the god Varaha in the myth. The edge of the artifact is torn (Fig.3e).

The artifact numbered 85ĐN.M4:74 is a rectangular gold plaque (8.5 x 3.9 cm in size). Its surface is embossed with Vishnu Varaha, his right hand resting on his right thigh, left arm missing. The upper torso is bare, while the lower body is wrapped in a *sampot* with a belt. The image is rendered using repoussé technique (Fig.3f).

The artifact numbered 85ĐN.M4:137 is an oval gold plaque (3.7 x 2.7 cm.) Its surface is embossed with Vishnu Varaha, left arm raised holding a wheel, right arm across the chest, with the god's head held high. On the left hip are a serpent and a crescent moon. The edge of the artifact is torn (Fig.3g).



**Figure 3: Gold plaques showing Varaha (Source: Author)**

The identifying features (iconography) on these gold plaques are very consistent and clear:

**Form:** Varaha is always depicted in a therianthrope form (human body, boar's head), in a powerful standing posture.

**Attributes:** The deity often holds Vishnu's characteristic attributes, most commonly the Chakra (discus) and the Sankha (conch). Some artifacts also show the Gada (mace) and a small circle believed to symbolize the rescued Earth (Mahi).

**Craftsmanship:** These artifacts are exquisitely crafted, skillfully combining chasing (incision) and repoussé (embossing) techniques to create images with volume and depth, indicating that they were meticulously invested, high-value items for ritual use.

#### 4) Narasimha Avatar (Man-Lion)

In Hinduism, the god Narasimha is one of the ten avatars (dashavatara) of Vishnu, depicted in a half-man, half-lion form (lion's head, human body) in order to destroy the demon Hiranyakashipu, who could not be killed by any man or beast, by day or night, indoors or outdoors. This avatar clearly expresses Vishnu's supreme nature, transcending worldly rules, and is also a symbol of shakti (power), dharma (righteousness), and the protection of his devotees (bhakta). In Indian art, Narasimha is often depicted in a combat pose, tearing apart the demon king, or seated in meditation with a majestic air (G. M. Williams, 2008, p. 223; G. D. Flood 1996, p. 111).

Among the corpus of Óc Eo gold plaques, one artifact may represent this avatar of Vishnu. The artifact, cataloged as BTKG/292, is a rectangular gold plaque measuring 2.6 x 1.3 cm. It is engraved with a male figure in a kneeling-sitting posture, legs folded together, buttocks resting on the heels, with both hands clasped before the chest. The face is in profile, with curly hair resembling a mane, and the ear wears a disc-shaped earring. A tail curves up from the back towards the shoulder. The overall appearance is quite similar to a man-lion with a lion's head and human body. Notably, the features of curly, mane-like hair, the profile view, and the disc-shaped earring are similar to the depiction of lion heads in Indian art, along with the tail curving up over the shoulder, clearly indicating a hybrid-animalistic nature. The entire form constitutes a type of man-lion, a motif that can be understood as a local reinterpretation of the Narasimha figure within a local semantic framework (Fig. 4).

The fact that the figure is not depicted in Narasimha's usual combat pose but in a static posture: hands clasped, kneeling - may indicate an iconographic adjustment: from a violent image to a form of meditative guardian, suitable for ritual functions within a

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religious architectural space. This is a prime example of the localization process of Indian deities in Óc Eo culture, where the “half-man, half-beast” nature of Narasimha was adopted but adjusted in form, posture, and function to suit local spiritual needs. It is noteworthy that if this figure is identified as Narasimha, then artifact BTKG/292 is one of the earliest pieces of evidence for the man-lion avatar of Vishnu in Southeast Asia.



**Figure 4: Gold plaques showing Narasimha**  
(Source: Author)

**Figure 5: Gold plaques showing Narasimha**  
(Source: Author)

### 5) Vamana Avatar (Dwarf)

Among the discovered artifacts, only one gold plaque depicts a form similar to a dwarf. This is artifact cataloged as 85ĐN.M4:81, a rectangular piece measuring 3.6 x 3.0 cm. The engraving shows a short, stout man with a flat forehead and a large, round face, with full facial details including eyes, nose, mouth, and ears. His body is bare, with a round belly and short legs, posed as if he is stepping forward. His right arm is raised to shoulder level, while his left arm hangs down by his side. The technique combines incision to define the overall shape and embossing to emphasize the body's mass, especially the abdomen (Fig. 5).

This figure could be Vaman, the avatar of Vishnu in the form of a dwarf. In the Puranic and Vedic traditions, Vamana is the fifth avatar of Vishnu, appearing in the form of a short Brahmin boy but possessing boundless power. The story tells that when the Asura king Mahabali, who ruled with generosity and virtue, had extended his power over the three worlds, upsetting the balance of the gods, Vishnu descended to restore cosmic order. As Mahabali performed a sacrifice, Vamana approached and asked for three paces of land. When the request was granted, Vamana transformed into Trivikrama, a colossal form, measuring the earth with his first step, the heavens with his second, and placing his final step on Mahabali's head, sending him to the netherworld, Patala.

The symbol of Vamana-Trivikrama carries profound theological meaning, reflecting the victory of Dharma over Adharma and affirming Vishnu's omnipotence. Trivikrama's three steps are not just an act of measuring the universe but also symbolize all-encompassing presence and sacred sovereignty. In Southeast Asian culture, this figure transcended legend to become a sacred political symbol, attesting to the legitimacy and cosmic scope of royal power linked to divinity. Although artifact 85ĐN.M4:81 lacks conclusive details to definitively identify it as Vishnu Vamana, two other gold plaques engraved with two footprints were discovered at the same site. This could be a representation of Vamana-Trivikrama, supporting the hypothesis that a gold leaf fragment depicting the Vamana incarnation of Vishnu was present.

## IV. DISCUSSION

An analysis of the Vishnu avatars on Óc Eo gold plaques shows that the selection of these figures was not a random collection, but a carefully curated ideological program. When considered as a whole, the five emphasized avatars: Matsya, Kurma, Varaha, Narasimha, and Vamana, together create a coherent and multifaceted narrative about the role of an ideal monarch, fitting for the context of a kingdom in the process of formation and assertion of power.

**Role of Initiation and Establishing Stability:** The avatars Matsya and Kurma are both associated with foundational myths. Matsya saves the seeds of life from a great flood to re-establish the world, while Kurma uses his body as a pivot for Mount Mandara in the myth of the churning of the ocean of milk, creating the stability needed for the gods to reclaim immortality. For a state formed on a flood-prone plain that had to be “conquered from the swamps”, the choice of these two symbols in foundation rituals indicates an effort to sacralize the act of creation, affirming the king as the one who brings a firm foundation and order to the kingdom.

**Role of Savior and Restorer of Order:** Varaha is the most potent symbol of the king's role as a savior. The myth of Varaha diving into the primordial ocean to rescue the Earth Goddess Bhudevi from a demon is a perfect metaphor for the ruler's mission: to rescue the territory from chaos, destroy enemies, and re-establish dharma. The fact that all seven artifacts with Varaha were concentrated at a major ritual center, Đả Nôi, and all in the structure 85ĐN.M4, suggests that this may have been a deliberate cult, sponsored by the monarchy to promote its image as the “king-savior”.

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Role of Supreme Protector: Narasimha represents transcendent power, capable of overcoming all conventional rules to protect the faith and its devotees. By destroying a demon who could not be killed by man or beast, indoors or outdoors, Narasimha symbolizes the ultimate power of the king as a protector, capable of dealing with all threats, whether tangible or intangible.

Role of Universal Sovereign: Finally, Vamana in his giant form as Trivikrama, used three steps to reclaim the entire universe. This is the clearest symbol of the sacred sovereignty and universal scope of royal power. It asserts that the king's authority is not limited to a physical territory but is recognized by the cosmos, encompassing all three realms.

Thus, this collection of avatars constructed a comprehensive model of monarchy, where the ruler is simultaneously a founder, a savior, a protector, and a supreme sovereign, a powerful ideological - political message aimed at legitimizing and consolidating the power of the Funanese elite.

### V. CONCLUSION

This study has clarified the value of the group of Óc Eo gold plaques with images of Vishnu and his avatars, demonstrating that they are a crucial source for understanding the relationship between art, religion, and politics in the Funan kingdom. Typological and iconographical analyses indicate that the selection of avatars was not random but was linked to a message of cosmology and royal authority, while also reflecting the creative adaptation of the local community to the Vaishnavite pantheon. Cross-cultural comparisons show that the iconographic features contain both elements influenced by Indian art and distinctive local traits of Southern Vietnam. This proves the role of the lower Mekong region as a center for the reception, transformation, and recreation of religious symbols within the maritime exchange network of Southeast Asia in the early Common Era. In the future, combining material analysis, craftsmanship studies, and other interdisciplinary research will help to further illuminate the context of production, distribution, and meaning of this group of artifacts, thereby contributing more deeply to our understanding of the region's religious and art history.

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