

Professor George Coedès - An Appreciation

I had heard of Dr. Coedès before I met him and I had been wanting to know him for some time because I felt that there were many things to learn from him. We finally met here in Bangkok where he had been appointed Chief Librarian of the Vajirañian National Library. He was also a high Executive of the Council of the Siam Society. I was later elected to serve that Council where our interests were common. I found him to be a pleasant and very interesting colleague. His personality was sympathetic and he had a broadmindedness which enabled him to get on with all who came into contact with him.

My association with Dr. Coedès was continued longer in our lifetime since he retired from the librarianship to become Director of the Ecole Française d'Extrême Orient in Hanoi. He was on his way one day to enjoy a furlough in Paris and stopped in Bangkok for four days. On such a visit he always managed to look me up and, on the occasion referred to, I asked him whether he, as a former President of the Siam Society, had anything to read to the Society. He said that he had brought an article entitled "L'Empire du Sud" in which he had assembled facts from epigraphy and pieced them into a whole story of the history of the Empire of Śrīvijaya.

On reading it, I found it most interesting and invited him to present the paper to a special meeting of the Society, but, considering our audience, I suggested that he should present it in English instead of French. Coedès said that he had only those 4 days in Bangkok which was too short a time in which to make a translation but if I could help translate it for him he would agree to read it. He would be against anybody else he could think of to do the translation because a translator should be closely acquainted with the author. The article was duly translated and read before the Society under its name in English—"The Empire of the South". I hope it found sufficient favour with the public as it presented Śrīvijaya in an aspect of being mistress of the Seas of the Golden Chersonese and that locality was, at the time of Coedès's visit to Bangkok again united under another power—the Japanese. It gave rise to a comparison as to whether the occupiers of those days would be as successful as the navigators of Śrīvijaya of old.

I met again Coedès some half a dozen times after this in Paris and each time he would be meeting me at the railway station or at the aerodrome so that our friendship never relaxed.

The news of his death therefore leaves a sad gap in my feelings and if another visit to Paris were possible for me, it would be to recall Coedès and his hospitable wife.

D.

Professor George Coedès

A distinguished scholar and a prolific author, Professor Coedès worked in Thailand for 13 years from 1917. A former President of the Siam Society, he was Foreign Secretary of the Royal Institute at the time Prince Damrong was its President. He left Thailand before the 1932 revolution for Hanoi to join the Ecole Française d'Extrême Orient, from which he retired after the Second World War.

