George Cœdès and Śrīvijaya: From Epigraphy to Archeology

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Abstract—In 1918, George Cœdès was instrumental in revealing the existence of the maritime polity of Śrīvijaya (7th–13th century). In doing so, he also initiated the study of Old Malay, the main language used in the inscriptions issued by Śrīvijaya. This article examines the intellectual process that led him to this "discovery". It also discusses the debates that followed, particularly concerning the location of Śrīvijaya's capital—whether in southeast Sumatra or in the Thai–Malay Peninsula. Finally, the article reviews recent advances in Sumatran archeology that confirmed Cœdès's conviction that the political heart of Śrīvijaya was located in Sumatra and examines aspects of the polity's history that he left unexplored.

Keywords: George Cœdès; Indonesia; Malaysia; Śrivijaya; Sumatra; Thai Archeology

Introduction

The maritime empire of Śrīvijaya, which flourished between the 7th and 13th centuries, remains one of Southeast Asia's most enigmatic and influential polities. Its rediscovery in the early 20th century owes much to the pioneering work of French scholar George Cœdès (1886–1969), who, in 1918, revealed the existence of Śrīvijaya through a meticulous analysis of inscriptions written primarily in Old Malay. Cœdès's groundbreaking research not only established the historical significance of this thalassocratic kingdom but also sparked enduring debates about the precise location of its political center—whether in southeast Sumatra, or somewhere in the Thai–Malay Peninsula.

This article traces the intellectual journey that led Cœdès to this landmark "discovery", examines the subsequent scholarly controversies, and considers how advances in Sumatran archeology have largely confirmed his original conviction, while also highlighting areas of Śrīvijaya's history that remain open for further inquiry.

Śrīvijaya Discovered

George Cœdès was 32 years old when he published the article that serves as the birth certificate of the polity known today as Śrīvijaya in Southeast Asian historiography (Cœdès 1918) **[Figure 1a]**.[2] The Sanskrit proper name Śrī Vijaya had already been read by Hendrik Kern

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[2] An English translation of Cœdès's 1918 article and related studies by him and Louis-Charles Damais was published in Manguin & Sheppard 1992. An Indonesian translation with additions appeared in Manguin, Griffiths & Degroot 2015.

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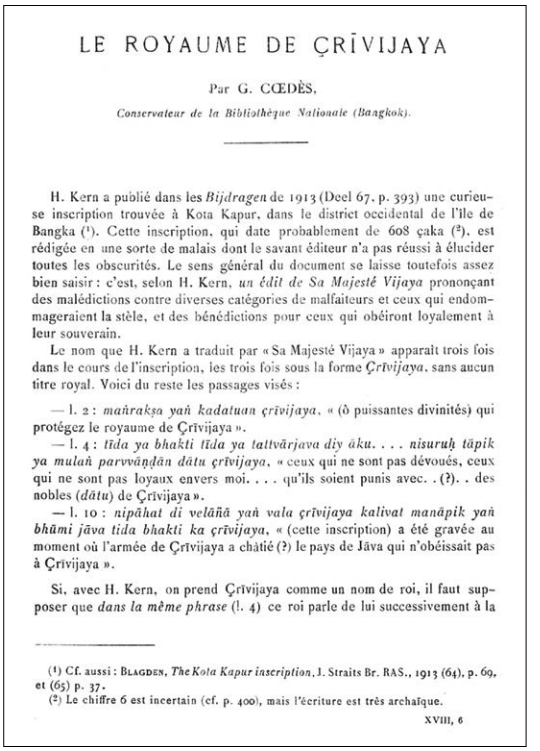

LE ROYAUME DE ÇRĪVIJAYA

Par G. CŒDÈS,

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H. Kern a publié dans les *Bijdragen* de 1913 (Deel 67, p. 393) une curieuse inscription trouvée à Kota Kapur, dans le district occidental de l'île de Bangka (1). Cette inscription, qui date probablement de 608 çaka (2), est rédigée en une sorte de malais dont le savant éditeur n'a pas réussi à élucider toutes les obscurités. Le sens général du document se laisse toutefois assez bien saisir : c'est, selon H. Kern, *un édit de Sa Majesté Vijaya* prononçant des malédictions contre diverses catégories de malfaiteurs et ceux qui endommageraient la stèle, et des bénédictions pour ceux qui obéiront loyalement à leur souverain.

Le nom que H. Kern a traduit par « Sa Majesté Vijaya » apparaît trois fois dans le cours de l'inscription, les trois fois sous la forme *Çrīvijaya*, sans aucun titre royal. Voici du reste les passages visés :

— l. 2 : *maṅrakṣa yaṅ kadatuan çrīvijaya*, « (ô puissantes divinités) qui protégez le royaume de Çrīvijaya ».

— l. 4 : *tīda ya bhakti tīda ya tattvārjava diy āku. . . . nisuruḥ tāpik ya mulaṅ parvvāṇḍān dātu çrīvijaya*, « ceux qui ne sont pas dévoués, ceux qui ne sont pas loyaux envers moi. . . . qu'ils soient punis avec. . (?). . des nobles (*dātu*) de Çrīvijaya ».

— l. 10 : *nipāhat di velāñā yaṅ vala çrīvijaya kalivat manāpik yaṅ bhūmi jāva tīda bhakti ka çrīvijaya*, « (cette inscription) a été gravée au moment où l'armée de Çrīvijaya a châtié (?) le pays de Jāva qui n'obéissait pas à Çrīvijaya ».

Si, avec H. Kern, on prend Çrīvijaya comme un nom de roi, il faut supposer que *dans la même phrase* (l. 4) ce roi parle de lui successivement à la

(1) Cf. aussi : Blagden, *The Kota Kapur inscription*, J. Straits Br. RAS., 1913 (64), p. 69, et (65) p. 37.

(2) Le chiffre 6 est incertain (cf. p. 400), mais l'écriture est très archaïque.

XVIII, 6

a

b

Figures 1a–b: Cœdès's article in 1918 (a); rubbing of Face A of the Wat Sema Mueang inscription (b), published as Plate 1 © EFEO

in his first translation of the 686 CE inscription from the site of Kota Kapur, on the island of Bangka (Bangka–Belitung Province, southeast Sumatra). However, it was then thought to record a king's name, "His Majesty Vijaya" (Kern 1913).

In this seminal 1918 article, Cœdès established a direct link between a diverse range of sources:

- The late 7th-century Kota Kapur inscription in Old Malay, naming Śrīvijaya.
- An 8th-century Sanskrit inscription from southern Thailand **[Figure 1b]** mentioning Śrīvijaya.
- Two 11th-century Tamil inscriptions by Chola rulers referencing the country of Śrīvijaya.
- An 11th-century illustrated Nepalese Buddhist manuscript also mentioning Śrīvijaya.
- Numerous Chinese texts from the 7th to 14th centuries describing a merchant state on Southeast Asia's western façade under various transcriptions of Śrīvijaya (Foshi, Shilifoshi, Sanfoqi) and at times identified with the site of Palembang, in southeast Sumatra.
- Arab accounts referring to Sribuza, another transcription of Śrīvijaya's name.
- A limited set of archeological remains known in 1918 from Palembang and its surroundings, mainly Buddhist statues.

By comparing these diverse sources, George Cœdès concluded—without subsequent serious challenge—that

the name Śrīvijaya did not refer to a sovereign individual, as Kern had first proposed, but rather to a polity with a remarkable lifespan stretching from the late 7th to the end of the 13th century. Based on this evidence, he identified the political heart of the polity in southeast Sumatra, at Palembang. This conclusion rested on converging Chinese sources and the discovery of inscriptions and archeological remains—then still scarce—found in or around modern Palembang. He placed other polities mentioned in Chinese, Arabic, and Tamil texts on the periphery of this center, elsewhere in Sumatra, and on the isthmus of the Thai–Malay Peninsula **[Map 1]**.

In the following years, several late 7th-century inscriptions were uncovered in and around Palembang, some closely matching the Kota Kapur inscription first published by Cœdès in 1918. Through colleagues in the Oudheidkundige Dienst in Nederlandsch Indië, Cœdès obtained rubbings of these steles and produced accurate transcriptions and translations in a second foundational article published over a decade later (Cœdès 1930). The richness of these texts allowed him to deepen his understanding of their contents and to found the study of Old Malay—publishing the first comprehensive glossary and morphological analysis of the language ancestral to modern Malay–Indonesian. Accompanying these translations with detailed historical commentary grounded in philological analysis, he reinforced his 1918 hypothesis: the political center was most likely in Sumatra, initially at Palembang and later, during the polity's final phase, in the neighboring region of Jambi.

In his pioneering article, Cœdès (1918: 29–36) devoted three appendices to epigraphic documents from Thailand, then Siam, which clearly placed the peninsula within the sphere of influence of the maritime state he had just uncovered. He included a translation of an 8th-century Sanskrit inscription that had been brought to Bangkok without a recorded provenance, based on the inventory by Commandant Lunet de Lajonquière and Louis Finot (first published in 1910). Cœdès initially associated this with the Wiang Sa site. In 1927, he corrected this attribution: following further research, he reassigned its origin to Wat Sema Mueang in Ligor, now Nakhon Si Thammarat (Lajonquière 1909a: 256–259; Finot 1910: 149–153; Cœdès 1927). As will be discussed below and underscoring its importance, this inscription has since undergone multiple revisions and reinterpretations by Cœdès and other scholars.

Additionally, Cœdès provided an initial reading of a challenging later Sanskrit inscription from Chaiya, in Peninsular Thailand, dated 1230 CE **[Figure 2a]**, as well as of the Khmer-script inscription on the statue known as the "Grahi Buddha" from Wat Wieng in Chaiya, presumably dated 1183 CE, written in Old Khmer in a script strongly influenced by Insular Southeast Asia **[Figure 2b]**.[3]

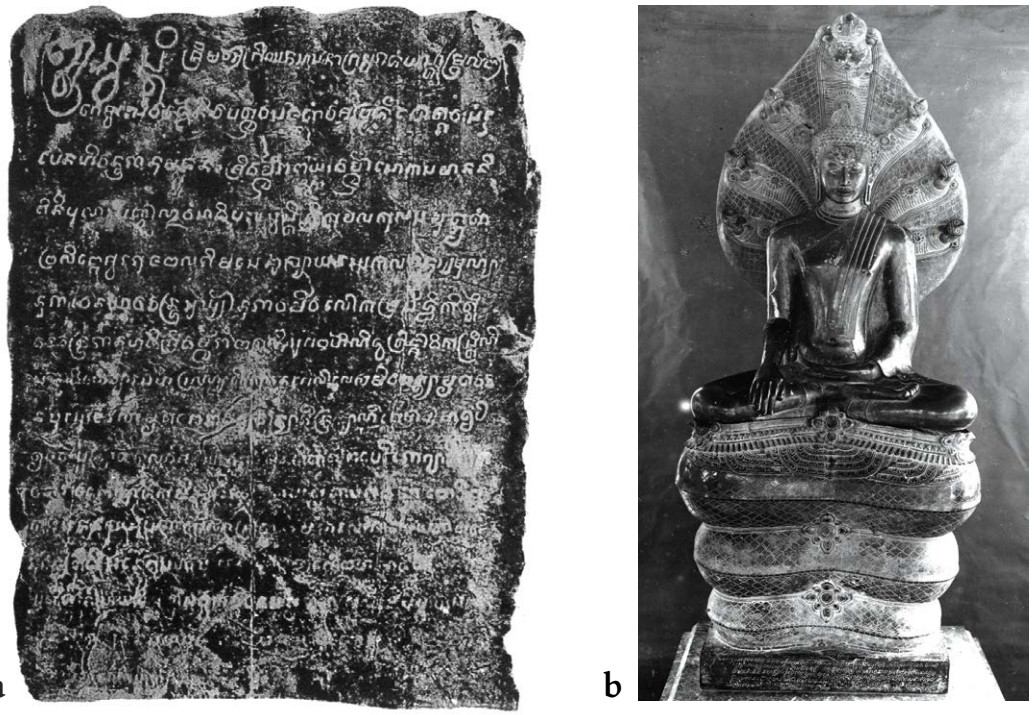
The first scientific reactions to the seminal 1918 article were not long

[3] The readings, dates, and interpretation of these two inscriptions were taken up and corrected by Cœdès in an article devoted to the fall of the state of Śrīvijaya. We give here the date of the Grahi inscription as corrected in Cœdès 1927: 469.

Map 1: Major archeological sites in maritime Southeast Asia discussed in this article © P.-Y. Manguin

in coming. As early as 1919, several renowned Dutch and French scholars accepted Cœdès's initial conclusions, further discussing and supplementing them (Krom 1919; Vogel 1919; Ferrand 1923).

In 1928, Cœdès represented both the Royal Society of Siam (*Ratchaban-ditthayasapha*; ราชบัณฑิตยสภา) and the Siam Society at ceremonies celebrating the 150th anniversary of the Royal Society of Arts and Sciences in Batavia



Figures 2a–b: Rubbing of the Chaiya inscription, dated 1230 CE, in Cœdès 1918: pl. 2 (a); inscribed Buddha from Chaiya, possibly dated 1183 CE, photo THA24351 (b) © EFEO

(modern-day Jakarta). Mr van Kan, who presided, awarded Cœdès the title of honorary member of the Royal Society and delivered a cordial address in which he recalled the 1918 article on Śrīvijaya:

> We salute you as a true founder of empire, founder of empire not in the way of the great conquerors, but in the way of the great thinkers who fight their battles in the study, with weapons forged of science and assiduity, peaceful founder of a peaceful and solid empire that will survive all the vicissitudes of revolts and struggles and that nothing can henceforth strike from the golden book of history where you have inscribed it.[4]

Regardless of the style of this address, it can be acknowledged that it opened a new field of study for historians of Southeast Asia. Since then, it has continued to be nourished by an abundant bibliographic output, with close to 2,000 titles devoted in one way or another to Śrīvijaya in various languages, as of 2025.[5]

Cœdès's main conclusions have been upheld by most philologists, epigraphists, and, more recently, art historians and professional archeologists: (1) that the political center of the great polity founded in the 680s CE by a Malay ruler (named Jayanāga or Jayanāśa) was located in southeast Sumatra—first at

[4] This episode is recalled in Paul Mus's report (1928) on the event in Batavia, where he represented the EFEO. See also Cros, this Special Edition.

[5] An initial bibliography of around 1,000 titles appeared in Manguin 1989. I have compiled the updated count presented here over years of research.

Palembang, then at Jambi[6]—and (2) that it endured in this region until the 13th century, its fortunes tied to broader political and economic shifts across Asia.

Nonetheless, the past century has seen its share of polemics. While some arose from legitimate scholarly inquiry, many were driven by nationalist sentiments—originating in various regions of Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, or even India—each seeking to claim the prestigious legacy of Śrīvijaya as their own.[7]

Śrīvijaya and the Thai–Malay Peninsula

This article cannot cover the full scope of Śrīvijaya scholarship or its wide geographic reach. It focuses instead on Cœdès's later research on the Thai–Malay Peninsula, where, along with Kedah, scholarly debate has been most active.[8]

Between 1918 and 1929, while seconded by the French government to the Kingdom of Siam as Curator of the Watchirayan Library and later Secretary General of the Royal Society, Cœdès began publishing his *Recueil des inscriptions du Siam*. The second volume titled *Inscriptions de Dvâravatî, de Çrîvijaya et de Lavo* included key inscriptions from Peninsular Thailand (Cœdès 1929) **[Figure 3]**. Though primarily an epigraphist, he also compiled and published the only systematic catalog of the Bangkok National Museum's archeological collections that exists today, in both French and Thai (Cœdès 1928).

Among the inscriptions, the double-sided stele from Wat Sema Mueang—commonly called the "Ligor inscription"—has generated the most debate **[Fig. 1b]**. Cœdès published its first full edition in 1918. Face A, in Sanskrit and dated to 775 CE, praises an anonymous Śrīvijaya ruler and lists Buddhist foundations. Face B, in a different script, unfinished and undated, refers to a king named Viṣṇu, titled Śrī Mahārāja, described as a "destroyer of his enemies", and linking him to the Śailendra dynasty. R.C. Majumdar (1933) was the first to propose that the two faces refer to different rulers.

With growing scholarly interest in the stele—including studies by Dutch and Indian researchers—Cœdès revisited the inscription in two major articles. In the first (1950), he reviewed prior literature, refined the stele's origin (favoring Nakhon Si Thammarat over Chaiya), and argued, based on philological analysis, that Face B was slightly later than Face A. He proposed the two Śailendra figures mentioned on Face B might be related—possibly father and son—and linked the "destroyer of his enemies" to a similarly titled king in Javanese inscriptions and the famous Nālandā inscription in India (Shastri

[6] Among well-known art historians, only the controversial works of Piriya Krairiksh (1980, 2012) maintain that Śrīvijaya was centered in Peninsular Thailand. Michel Jacq-Hergoualc'h (2002: 493) rather cavalierly dismisses what he calls "the cumbersome presence of Śrīvijaya" in the history of the Peninsula, arguing that the misperceptions of a hegemonic "empire" held by Cœdès and his contemporaries should be rejected.

[7] For Thailand, see especially the writings of Chand Chirayu Rajani (1974–76, 1982, 1986).

[8] There are many key post–World War II works on Śrīvijaya in Sumatra and Kedah. See full references in Casparis 1956; Wolters 1967, 1979, 1999; Bronson 1979; Shuhaimi 1990; Kulke 1993; Manguin 1993, 2000, 2017; Bambang & Shuhaimi 2008; Griffiths 2011.

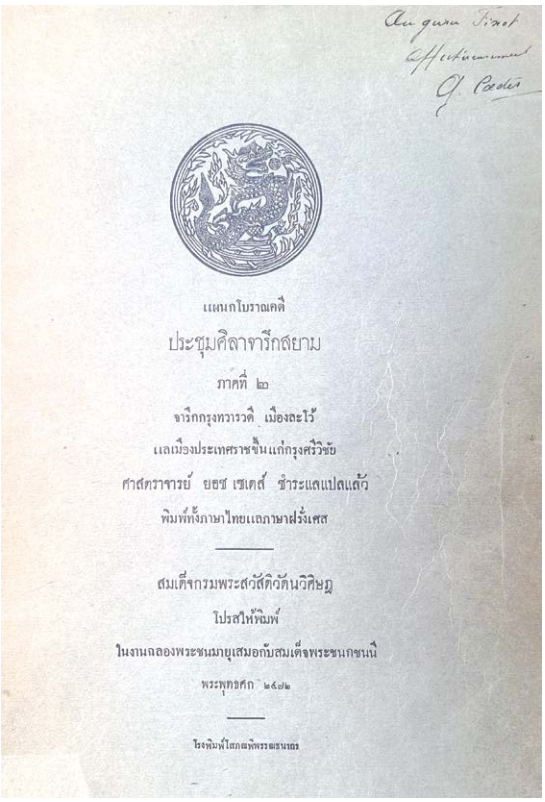


Figure 3: Cover of the first Siamese edition of Cœdès 1929, dedicated by the author to his "guru" Louis Finot, volume kept at the EFEO Library, Paris. Public Domain

1942).[9] He also cautiously suggested that the ruler on Face A was not of Śailendra descent and that the dynasty only established itself in Sumatra in the 9th century, under Bālaputradeva.

Following new studies by Casparis (1950, 1956), Bosch (1952), Poerbatjaraka (1958), and his own subsequent close examination of the stele, Cœdès (1959) returned to the subject. He revised some earlier views, reaffirmed others, and outlined a set of conclusions he believed should now be accepted:

- The two faces refer to different polities—Face A to Śrīvijaya, Face B to the Śailendra dynasty.
- The ruler on Face A, builder of a Buddhist foundation in 775, is likely Dharmasetu, named in the Nālandā charter.
- He abandoned the hypothesis of two kings on Face B: the single ruler is Sangrāmadhanañjaya of Javanese epigraphy.
- His title Śrī Mahārāja marks his affiliation with the Śailendra.
- Face B, engraved later than Face A, likely postdates 782 and commemorates a marriage alliance between a Śailendra prince and a Śrīvijaya princess.

These conclusions were retained in the third edition of *Les États hindouisés* (1964) and in its English translation (1968), which Cœdès personally revised.[10]

Locating Śrīvijaya

Majumdar (1933) and Quaritch Wales (1935) were the first professional scholars to open the long-running controversy over the location of the "capital" of Śrīvijaya. The main arguments used in attempts to counter the theses of Cœdès and his placement of the heart of the polity of Śrīvijaya in southeast Sumatra—originally in Palembang and then moving to Jambi—can be summarized as follows. The main point is a divergent interpretation of the significance of the change, between the 8th and 9th centuries, in the transcription of the name of the state of Śrīvijaya used in Chinese

[9] The Sailendra dynasty also reigned in Central Java, where its rulers were responsible for the construction of Borobudur and many other Buddhist monuments.

[10] On these inscriptions of the Śailendra from the Thai–Malay Peninsula, and for new interpretations, see now Marc Long's *Voices from the Mountain* (2014).

sources. While in the 7th and 8th centuries the Chinese used the term *Shilifoshi* 室利佛逝 (or *Foshi* 佛逝), they employed a new name, *Sanfoqi* 三佛齊, from 904 onwards. Nobody has yet provided a fully satisfying explanation for this name change. While (*Shili) foshi* poses no phonetic problem for transcribing (*Śrī*)*vijaya*, the *san* 三 character of the second-place name is problematic, unless we invoke a spelling error or consider its literal value, "three", rather than its phonetic value; we would then translate the terms as "the three Vijayas". Majumdar took advantage of this ambiguity to dissociate the countries cited by the Chinese: he placed the capital of the kingdom of the Śailendra (*Sanfoqi*) in Nakhon Si Thammarat, thus attributing this dynasty a purely Indian origin—a proposal not subsequently accepted.

The 10th-century switch in Chinese sources from *Shilifoshi* to *Sanfoqi* served more recently as a pretext for two articles asserting new "relocations" of the polity outside of Sumatra; both articles, based only on a radical rereading of Chinese textual sources, totally ignore progress in the field of archeology, epigraphy, and navigation (Haw 2017; Kelley 2022) and are therefore far from convincing. Two additional arguments were put forward in support of the hypothesis of a center located in Thailand: (1) the place name *Chaiya* (ไชยา) and that of a nearby hill called Khao *Siwichai* (เขาศรีวิชัย) to the south of the same city were presented as Thai renderings of the name Śrīvijaya itself; and (2) peninsular Thailand could be said to present a greater wealth of archeological remains that dated from the Śrīvijaya period.

All of these arguments were refuted by Cœdès as early as 1936 in a short article that constituted a response to the arguments put forward by Quaritch Wales. Regarding Chinese transcriptions, Cœdès admitted that the *san* of *Sanfoqi* "remain[ed] embarrassing", but because, in Chinese historical texts, the placename *Sanfoqi* is closely associated with its predecessor *Shilifoshi* and that, geographically, later Chinese sources unambiguously place *Sanfoqi* in Palembang, seemed to him to remove any discussion. He also considered the argument of Thai toponyms phonetically deriving from Śrīvijaya as of little value, pointing out that place names formed on the Sanskrit term *vijaya* (victory) are exceedingly common throughout Indianized Southeast Asia, including elsewhere in Thailand, without links to the kingdom of Śrīvijaya. Furthermore, modern toponyms forged from Sanskrit are also widely found in Thailand, such as *Nakhon Si Thammarat* (นครศรีธรรมราช; *nagara śrī dharmarāja*), with HRH Prince Damrong Rajanubhab credited with introducing some of these new names in Peninsular Thailand.

For Cœdès, however, the strongest argument against a peninsular capital for the great maritime state of Śrīvijaya remained geographical: a port located on the east coast of the peninsula could not be in a position to control the major trans-Asian trade routes; such a location would be irreconcilable since Śrīvijaya made such control the very basis of its merchant economy. Only a polity located at the crossroads of the straits was in a position to secure a dominant position in the region, to the detriment even of Java.

Cœdès felt that the argument for the purported scarcity of archeological remains uncovered at Palembang no longer held water, following the numerous discoveries of inscriptions, statues, and other remains made *in situ* from the 1920s onwards. Several other remains, but above all a new group of inscriptions dating from the 7th century, were discovered in Palembang during Cœdès's lifetime. These were the subject of in-depth research by Johannes de Casparis. One of them, then known as the Telaga Batu Old Malay inscription, now referred to as the Sabokingking inscription, is monumental in its aspects and wide-ranging in contents. It was found in Palembang and dates from the 680s. Its text is unambiguous: it can only have emanated from the political center of the state of Śrīvijaya, providing both an administrative and a spatial perception of its local beginnings in the 7th century.

These new data are, of course, incorporated into the numerous pages that Cœdès devoted to Śrīvijaya in his *Les États hindouisés* (1964; trans. 1968). There, they reinforce the interpretation of the historical data that he had, consistently, since 1918, made his own, regularly adapting them to the many advances in knowledge during this first half-century of research on the question.[11]

[11] De Casparis's reading of the Telaga Batu/Sabokingking inscription (1956: 15–46) was incorporated into Cœdès's later works. See Kulke (1993) for a revised interpretation based on more recent discoveries, further confirming the inscription's role as a marker of Śrīvijaya's political center.

Śrīvijaya Rediscovered

When it came to offering a broader historical interpretation of his findings, Cœdès produced a doubly biased discourse on Śrīvijaya—reflecting both the worldviews of the Chinese and Indian textual sources he used and his own perspective as a historian of his time. His approach remained partial to the end, emphasizing the civilizing role of "great civilizations"—first and foremost his own European heritage, followed by China and India.

While he avoided the overt nationalism of some Indian scholars writing about the "Greater India" they believed Southeast Asia to participate in, Cœdès remained, as with many of his pre-war contemporaries trained in Indian or Chinese studies, largely unable to identify the local forces that contributed to Southeast Asia's cultural, political, and economic autonomy. For much of the early historiography, the region was defined in relation to its powerful neighbors, referred to in terms such as "Greater India", "Farther India", "Outer India", "Insulinde", or "Indochina".

In the first chapter of *Les États hindouisés d'Indochine et d'Indonésie*, Cœdès maintained:

> So we can say, without great exaggeration, that the people of Farther India were still in the midst of late Neolithic civilization when the Brahmano-Buddhist culture of India came into contact with them (trans. 1968: 7).

We now know this is far from accurate. Archeological research over the last thirty years has demonstrated that "Indianization" during the early centuries of the Common Era was preceded by over a millennium of sustained contact with the Indian subcontinent. During this period, Southeast Asian communities—already forming increasingly complex political systems—played a decisive role in establishing deep-sea trade networks for resins, spices, gold, and tin, and in developing advanced shipbuilding technologies. These innovations positioned them not just as intermediaries, but as active shippers and entrepreneurs in the expanding Indian Ocean trade (Wolters 1967; Glover 1990; Manguin 2023).

From this new perspective, research on Śrīvijaya—while grounded in the solid foundations laid by Cœdès—soon took a new direction. In the absence of major new inscriptions or radically different foreign sources, scholars turned to two avenues for advancing knowledge: first, reinterpreting known sources through updated conceptual and methodological frameworks; and second, launching systematic archeological excavations at urban and religious sites within Śrīvijaya's presumed orbit, both near its core and across wider Southeast Asia.

The first major impetus came from Oliver W. Wolters (1915–2000), a British historian and sinologist who would become a key figure in the study of early maritime Southeast Asia. His doctoral thesis on the origins of Śrīvijaya, later published in 1967, appeared while Cœdès was still alive—but too late for him to fully respond to.[12] Through a meticulous re-reading of Chinese sources from the 3rd to 7th centuries CE, Wolters reconstructed the process by which small Malay polities in the Straits of Melaka secured profitable roles in the South China Sea economy. These states exported forest products as substitutes for Middle Eastern resins and aromatics, precisely when Buddhism's spread in China was fueling growing demand.

Wolters also argued that rulers based in Palembang were able, by the 680s, to consolidate these scattered economic energies under centralized leadership. They did so through both direct political control and the formation of a sphere of economic influence and alliances—an entity that came to be known as Śrīvijaya.

Śrīvijaya Unearthed in Sumatra

Cœdès did not live long enough to see the essential arguments he advanced on Śrīvijaya conclusively confirmed. His insistence on placing the core of the polity in Sumatra, however, was soon verified. It is worth recalling that, until the 1970s, archeological excavation of settlement sites was still largely neglected in Southeast Asia. It came as a surprise to discover that Cœdès had never really set foot in Indonesia, apart from a brief stay in Batavia as mentioned above, followed by a very short visit to the temples of Central Java (see Bernard

[12] Later works by Wolters refined aspects of his early research and offered new data and interpretations, reflecting advances in the field and broader understandings of state formation in Southeast Asia. His final contribution appeared in 1999, in a greatly expanded edition of his monograph *History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives*.

Cros, this Special Edition). Although he played a decisive role in uncovering the history of Śrīvijaya, he never visited Sumatra. Dutch scholars also largely ignored territories outside Java—the *buiten bezittingen*, or outer possessions—focusing instead on philology and Java's monumental art and architecture. Much of what was done in Sumatra relating to Śrīvijaya was thus left to amateur archeologists.[13]

In reaction to this neglect, Satyawati Suleiman, then Director of Indonesia's Pusat Penelitian Arkeologi Nasional (National Center for Archeological Research), launched new archeological initiatives in Sumatra in the late 1970s.[14] These were supported by renewed readings of Chinese and other sources by Wolters, who famously concluded: "The terrain is now the superior text in Sriwijayan studies" (1986: 41).[15] In Thailand, MC Subhadradis Diskul, son of Prince Damrong, supported a parallel revival of such studies. The SEAMEO Regional Centre for Archeology and Fine Arts (SPAFA), in turn, sponsored four itinerant conferences between 1979 and 1985 across Indonesian and Thai sites linked to Śrīvijaya's history, sparking renewed fieldwork and interest.[16]

In Indonesia, annual surveys in and around Palembang soon revealed a rich concentration of remains relevant to Śrīvijaya. These led to intensive excavation campaigns between 1989 and 1996, jointly conducted by Indonesia's Pusat Penelitian Arkeologi Nasional and the École française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO). In sum, the results of this intensive archeological research largely confirmed Cœdès's early hypothesis about the central role of southeast Sumatra in the history of Śrīvijaya and can be summarized as follows:

- Old Malay inscriptions dating from the polity's foundation in the 680s—now twice as many as known to Cœdès—originate exclusively from Palembang and its immediate surroundings **[e.g., Figure 4a]**.[17]

- Excavations in Palembang uncovered dense settlement remains from the 7th century onward, demonstrating its role as a major port city and religious-political center.[18] These sites fulfill varied urban functions—residential, commercial, religious; a recent ecological study has

[13] On Dutch neglect of Sumatra's history and archeology, see my introduction to Manguin 1989.

[14] A 1973 American–Indonesian excavation in Palembang had wrongly concluded the site lacked Śrīvijaya-period remains, due to misidentification of Chinese ceramics (Bronson & Wisseman 1976; Bronson 1979; Manguin 1987: 340–342).

[15] This renewed attention to the archeological terrain, following Wolters' exhortation, is discussed in detail in Manguin 2001.

[16] SPAFA Final Reports, *Consultative Workshops on Archaeological and Environmental Studies on Śrīvijaya* (1979–1985).

[17] Three new 7th-century Old Malay inscriptions, similar to those from Kota Kapur and Karang Brahi, were found in Palembang and southern Sumatra in the 1970s and 1980s. While their texts added little new information, they reshaped the understanding of the early political center and its control over southeast Sumatra. More recent Old Malay fragments from Palembang confirm this area as the polity's core (Griffiths 2011, 2018).

[18] Archeological work in Palembang and its surroundings is documented in English by Manguin (1992, 2009, 2017) and in Malay by Bambang & Shuhaimi (2008).

Figures 4a–b: Boom Baru inscription from Palembang, Sumatra, late 7th c. (a); standing buddha from Candi Tingkip, Sumatra, 8th c. (b)
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confirmed the city's capacity to sustain a large population (Charras 2016).

• Śrīvijaya's early core was not a single city but a complex upriver-downriver system centered on the Musi River basin, with more than twenty satellite sites identified and now partly excavated upriver. Some early sculptures and temple sites date to the 7th–8th century (e.g., Candi Tingkip, Candi Bingin) **[e.g., Figure 4b]**. A complex of monuments at Bumiayu, dating from the 9th to 12th centuries, reveals Hindu worship in the polity's interior.[19] Riverine access to hinterland resources—mainly resins and gold exchanged against salt and manufactured goods—supported Palembang's rise.

• Three historical phases are now visible: (a) a rapid rise in the late 7th century; (b) a 9th-century economic boom, possibly linked to Śailendra

[19] The site, formerly called Tanah Abang, yielded some early 10th-century *terracotta* architectural pieces, some now in the National Museum of Indonesia. Rediscovered in the 1980s, its brick temples were partly restored afterward. Currently, Indonesian archeologists and the EFEO are jointly focusing on the archeology of the Bumiayu settlement.

involvement and increased Chinese demand (evident in ceramic imports); and (c) a gradual economic decline from the 11th century, correlating with a shift of political gravity to Jambi, as hypothesized by Cœdès and Wolters.

Recent epigraphic reanalysis confirms that Śrīvijaya was not a centralized kingdom in the Chinese or Indian mold. The Old Malay term *kadatuan*, once translated as "kingdom" or "empire", is now understood as "the seat of the ruler (*datu*)", denoting a political node within a loosely structured network of alliances and dependencies (Kulke 1993; Christie 1995; Wolters 1999: 126–175; Manguin 2002).

Continued annual research in Indonesia fully confirms the early hypotheses of Cœdès and other pioneers. No comparable concentration of epigraphic and archeological evidence for Śrīvijaya's origins exists elsewhere in Southeast Asia. Malay harbor cities—made mostly of wood and often rebuilt—left few permanent traces. Buried beneath modern urban development, their remains are difficult to excavate and interpret.

Recent archeological advances have otherwise decisively overturned older views of Indianization as a sudden imposition. Sites downriver from Palembang, some dating to the 3rd century CE or earlier, reveal local agency in trade and state formation. They link Śrīvijaya to earlier sites across the Thai–Malay Peninsula, Vietnam, and the Java Sea (Nguyen et al. 2006; Bellina et al. 2014; Calò et al. 2015; Manguin 2017).

Among these proto-historic polities was Melayu (Jambi), visited by Yijing in the 670s, which he described as a Buddhist center, and which was soon incorporated into Śrīvijaya. Another was uncovered at Kota Kapur on Bangka Island, where a Vaiṣṇava complex, built atop an earlier metallurgical site, was likely destroyed by Śrīvijaya (Lucas et al. 1998). The famous 686 CE inscription from Kota Kapur—erected on this earlier site—records a naval expedition against Java and suggests Śrīvijaya's early ambition to dominate regional trade.

The Kota Kapur site is comparable to pre-Śrīvijaya Vaiṣṇava sites in Peninsular Thailand (Wannasarn 2013; Manguin 2019; Revire 2021) and early Indianized sites in Kedah (Shuhaimi 1990; Chia & Andaya 2011). Though these sites predate Śrīvijaya by centuries, their incorporation into its network remains poorly documented.

Cœdès had already hypothesized that the Thai–Malay isthmus played a central role in the region's early Indianization.[20] Some polities there likely joined Śrīvijaya's economic sphere by the late 8th century.[21]

[20] See also Quaritch Wales 1935. Cœdès followed earlier work by Pelliot (1903) and Lajonquière (1909a, 1909b, 1912); see also Cœdès 1929. For a critique of Quaritch Wales, see Cœdès 1936. At Cœdès' instigation as EFEO director, Jean-Yves Claeys led a mission studying Peninsular Thai sites (Claeys 1931; see also Kourilsky, this Special Edition). Pierre Dupont (1955) and Stanley O'Connor (1972) later confirmed these sites' early dates. The key role of Peninsular Thailand in spreading Indian culture, especially Vaiṣṇava practices, to Funan and Insular Southeast Asia was recently reaffirmed by new discoveries and dating (Manguin 2019).

[21] Since the late 1960s, numerous Śrīvijaya-period remains have been found across Peninsular Thailand,

However, centralized Chinese sources, biased toward unitary models, obscure the fluid and federated nature of these arrangements.[22]

The Wat Sema Mueang inscription, with its references to Nakhon Si Thammarat, Śrīvijaya, and the Śailendra dynasty, illustrates these interconnections. Rather than proving conquest, the texts imply religious patronage, as in other overseas examples: Nalanda, Nagapattinam, and Guangdong. Religious donations marked the polity's expanding international role.

Finally, excavation data on both sides of the Strait of Melaka confirm a regional economic boom in the 9th–10th centuries. Activity surged in Palembang in Southeast Sumatra **[Map 2]** as well as across the Peninsula (Takua Pa, Chaiya, Laem Pho, Kedah).[23] This synchronicity reflects shared growth—not a shift of the political center.

The Future of Śrīvijaya Research

The debate on Śrīvijaya, initiated over a century ago by George Cœdès, remains far from settled. While Cœdès established remarkably solid foundations for understanding this influential polity, several key questions remain unanswered—most notably, the nature and structure of the political system that governed one of Southeast Asia's most dynamic maritime regions for nearly five centuries.

A striking aspect of Śrīvijaya's epigraphic record is the sudden burst of Old Malay inscriptions produced in Palembang and its environs in the 680s by the founding ruler, who proclaimed a far-reaching political, military, and religious agenda. Yet these early declarations stand alone. His successors remained largely silent in their home territory. When they did speak, it was abroad—in Thailand, India, or China—to promote Buddhist patronage or secure commercial networks essential to their prosperity. This long silence leaves a significant gap in our understanding of the polity's internal mechanisms and the local powers that operated within its sphere of influence.

One of the main challenges in reconstructing Śrīvijaya's political and institutional structure lies precisely in this scarcity of local inscriptions throughout most of its history. Without them, the workings of its broader regional alliances and the degree of centralized versus decentralized control remain elusive. In this context, as in the 1980s under SPAFA's aegis, archeological fieldwork should once again be prioritized as a key source of historical data. Future excavations should be followed by comparative, interdisciplinary analyses—especially systematic campaigns in Peninsular Thailand, Kedah, and Sumatra—to build a more integrated understanding of the networked polity that Śrīvijaya represented.

showing urbanization, trade, and Brahmanical or Buddhist practices. This summary relies on Western -language sources, including the SPAFA Reports (1979–1985) and later studies by Amara (1996), Tharapong (1996), Stargardt (1983), Jacq-Hergoualc'h (2002), Jacq-Hergoualc'h et al. (1996, 1998), and Wannasarn (2013, 2017). For Sumatran connections, see Amara 2014.

[22] Amara Srisuchat (2014: 12, 61) even refers to "The Federal States of Śrīvijaya".

[23] See Khemchati 1983; Ho 1991; Ho et al. 1990; and Bronson 1996. In Kedah, which was until then mostly known for its Bujang Valley sites rich in Song ceramics, a later discovery at the nearby Sungei Mas site revealed abundant ceramics from the late Tang and Five Dynasties periods (Shuhaimi & Zakaria 1993).

MAP 2: Archeological sites in southeast Sumatra © H. David & P.-Y. Manguin

Rather than returning to the worn questions—"Where was Śrīvijaya"? or "Who ruled Śrīvijaya"?—future research might more fruitfully ask: "What was Śrīvijaya"? and "How did it function"? Such a shift moves the focus away from searching for a fixed capital or a singular ruler and toward investigating the operational logic of a flexible and regionally embedded maritime polity.

Cœdès himself recognized, albeit late in his career, the limitations of his generation of Orientalist approaches. In a lecture to the Académie des inscriptions et belles lettres, he acknowledged that the social and economic structures of Southeast Asian societies remained poorly understood, and he urged younger researchers trained in the social sciences to take up the challenge (Cœdès 1960). More than half a century later, this call is finally being answered.

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