

## IN THE SHADOW OF GEORGE CÔEDÈS: JEAN-YVES CLAEYS AND THE MISSION TO SIAM (1929)

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**ABSTRACT**—In October 1929, the young French architect Jean-Yves Claeys (1896–1978), newly appointed as a permanent member of the *École française d’Extrême-Orient* (EFO), embarked on a two-month archeological mission in Siam. He traveled from south to north—Chaiya to Chiang Saen—passing through Ayutthaya, Phetchaburi, Chiang Mai, and other historic cities. Working in the shadow of George Cœdès, who played a key role in shaping the mission, Claeys nonetheless contributed original observations and documentation. His fieldwork resulted in a substantial article published in 1931 and was also captured in a silent documentary film that now serves as a valuable archival record. This article revisits the origins and trajectory of Claeys’s mission and examines its significance within the broader context of the EFO’s relations with Siamese scholarly institutions at the time.

**KEYWORDS:** Archeology in Thailand; *École française d’Extrême-Orient* (EFO); George Cœdès; HRH Damrong Rajanubhab; Jean-Yves Claeys



**FIGURE 1:** Jean-Yves Claeys in Indochina, ca. 1927, photo CAM1992 © EFO

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### Introduction

This article revisits a little-known episode in the history of early archeological research in Thailand: the mission to Siam undertaken in late 1929 by Jean-Yves Claeys, then a young archeologist with the *École française d’Extrême-Orient* (EFO) [FIGURE 1]. Organized at the initiative of George Cœdès, shortly before his departure from Bangkok to assume the directorship of the EFO in Hanoi, this mission sought to strengthen scholarly and diplomatic ties between France and Siam. Claeys’s journey resulted in a detailed survey of Buddhist monuments across the country and culminated in the publication of a richly illustrated article of monograph size, “*L’archéologie du Siam*” (1931). Though largely overlooked today, Claeys’s work stands as the first attempt to systemati-

cally describe the major archeological remains then visible in Siam. Drawing on archival materials, excerpts from Claeys's writings, and previously unpublished photographs, this article reassesses the aims, outcomes, and legacy of the mission—situating it within both the intellectual orbit of Coëdès and the broader development of archeological inquiry in Thailand.

### A Brief Biography

Jean-Yves Pierre Alfred Claeys was born on 3 May 1896 in Nice, France. Trained in decorative arts and architecture, he interrupted his studies to serve in the First World War, earning the Croix de Guerre. In 1923, he was awarded a prize at the Salon des artistes français and subsequently moved to Indochina, where he joined the Indochina Public Works Department (Travaux publics de l'Indochine), designing buildings in Hanoi and Dalat.<sup>2</sup>

He joined the EFEO in 1927, marking a decisive step in his archeological career.<sup>3</sup> He directed major excavations at Trà Kiệu in central Vietnam, where he uncovered the foundations of Brahmanical temples associated with the Cham civilization.<sup>4</sup> He became a permanent member in 1928, and carried out fieldwork across Annam, collecting Cham artifacts and manuscripts.<sup>5</sup> In late

1929, he conducted a major archeological mission to Siam—the focus of this article—which appears to have been his only recorded visit.

Following this mission, Claeys held several senior positions in the EFEO, including curator in Hué and head of the Tonkin Monuments Conservation Department from 1933.<sup>6</sup> He led projects across Vietnam [FIGURE 2], Cambodia, and Laos, including the restoration of Po Nagar (Nha Trang) and Wat Phra Keo (Vientiane).<sup>7</sup> In 1934, he directed excavations at Tháp Mẫm—an archeological site in central Vietnam, named by Claeys himself—recovering 58 tons of statuary (Clémentin-Ojha & Manguin 2001: 113). In October 1937, he succeeded Henri Marchal (1876–1970) as head of the EFEO's Archeological Department.<sup>8</sup> He also oversaw the enlargement of the Musée Henri Parmentier in Tourane, now the Museum of Cham Sculpture in Đà Nẵng (Claeys M. & Claeys H. 2012: 38).

Promoted to "Directeur d'études" in 1939, Claeys served as a captain in the air force during the Second World War, using aerial photography for archeological and geographic surveys.<sup>9</sup> He resumed his EFEO duties in 1941 and contributed to monument inventories and border commission work in Indochina.<sup>10</sup> Health issues forced his

<sup>2</sup> Claeys's letter of application to the Director of the EFEO (6 Dec. 1926) and the decree of the Gouverneur Général de l'Indochine appointing him (20 Dec. 1923), both in AEFEQ, FR EFEO AAS/D/C5, "Carrière".

<sup>3</sup> Letter from the Director of the EFEO to Claeys (14 June 1928), *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> For details on Claeys's excavation at Trà Kiệu (also known as Simhapura), see Glover 1997.

<sup>5</sup> Letter from the Acting Director of the EFEO to the

Inspector General of Public Works (18 August 1928), *Ibid.*; see also BEFEQ 28(3): 55; and Labbé 2022.

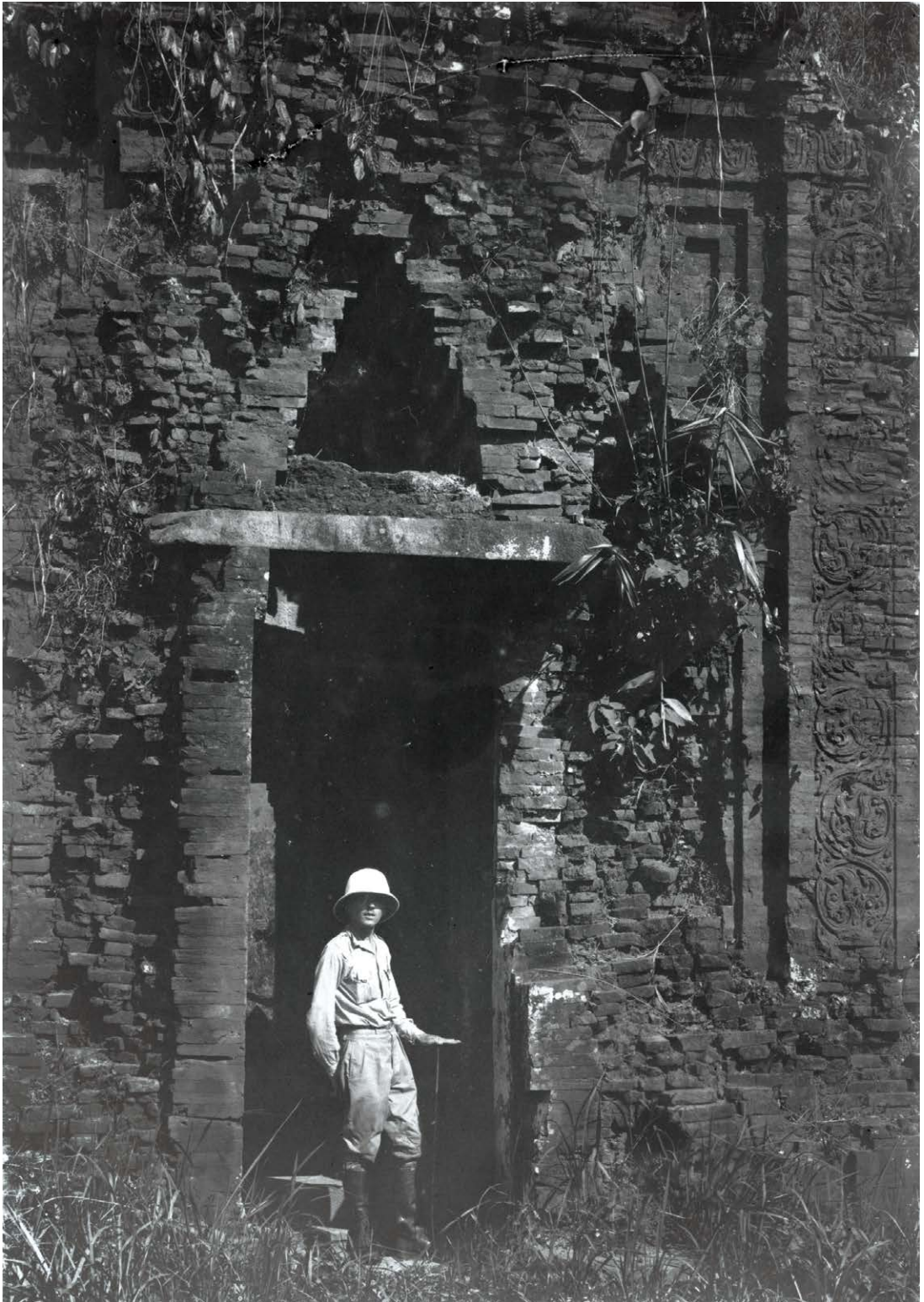
<sup>6</sup> See AEFEQ, FR EFEO AAS/D/C5/"Missions, voyages et activités".

<sup>7</sup> Letter of the Gouverneur Général de l'Indochine to the Director of the EFEO (27 August 1941), *Ibid.* See also Chroniques in BEFEQ 31(1–2): 319 and BEFEQ 37: 676–679.

<sup>8</sup> Chronique in BEFEQ 37: 553.

<sup>9</sup> Chronique in BEFEQ 38: 357 and BEFEQ 39: 274.

<sup>10</sup> Chronique in BEFEQ 42: 139, 215.



**FIGURE 2: Claeys at the main entrance of Temple A1, Mỹ Sơn, Vietnam, ca. 1930s, photo VIE00555 © EFEO**

early retirement in 1953. He was later named Professor of exceptional class and awarded the rank of Officer in the Légion d'honneur (Claeys M. & Claeys H. 2012: 39). Claeys died in Paris on 7 October 1978, aged 82, survived by his wife, Marie Trân Quy, and their four children.<sup>11</sup>

Jean-Yves Claeys was not only an architect and archeologist, but also an artist, producing numerous drawings, photographs, sketches, posters, and documentary films. He also wrote short stories under the pen name Jean des Ponchettes, a nod to the neighborhood in Nice where he was born (Claeys M. & Claeys H. 2012: 37). A specialist in Vietnam, where he led several excavations, Claeys had no prior experience with Siam, and nothing in his background suggested an interest in Siamese archeology. Available sources indicate that he had never been to Siam prior to his 1929 mission<sup>12</sup> and there is no evidence that he ever returned.<sup>13</sup> His bibliography confirms that his fieldwork and publications focused mainly on Vietnam and Campā, with occasional forays into Laos and Cambodia, and

that his 1931 article is his only known published work on Siam. This raises questions about the circumstances and motivations behind his extended mission to the kingdom.

### The EFEO and Siam in 1929

To understand the background of Jean-Yves Claeys's mission to Siam, it is essential to consider the institutional context of the time, particularly the position of the EFEO. Founded at the turn of the 20th century,<sup>14</sup> the EFEO was tasked with studying the civilizations and societies of the territories then under French Indochina's administration. As such, the EFEO was active in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, but not in Siam, which officially remained outside both French and British colonial rule. Nonetheless, a number of EFEO scholars developed a sustained interest in Siamese history, archeology, and culture—notably Louis Finot (1864–1935), Étienne Lunet de Lajonquière (1861–1933), and, above all, George Coédès (1886–1969).

A French historian and epigraphist, Coédès made foundational contributions to the study of Southeast Asian history.<sup>15</sup> Though best known for his work on Cambodian inscriptions, he also specialized in the epigraphy of Siam and other cultural zones of the region. He served as director of the EFEO from 1929 to 1946. Earlier, while based in Cambodia as an EFEO resident, he was invited to Bangkok by HRH Prince

<sup>11</sup> For his complete genealogy and military career, see: <https://gw.geneanet.org/tolivier?lang=fr&n=claeys&p=jean+yves+pierre+alfred>.

<sup>12</sup> This was confirmed in an interview with Coédès and Claeys published in the newspaper *L'Opinion* of January 1930 (AEFEO-ARCH002/2/3/11/4 1930). When the journalist asked Coédès “what he found in Siam”, he replied, “Oh! Ask Mr Claeys. As far as I'm concerned, I already knew [the country]”. Claeys simply responded that he had “visited Siam from south to north—a remarkable country”.

<sup>13</sup> His later contacts with Siam were limited to welcoming the King and Queen at the Khải Định Museum in April 1930 (Chronique in BEFEO 30: 188) and meeting Siamese delegates at a prehistoric congress in Thakhaek, Laos, in January 1932 (Chronique in BEFEO 33(1): 414).

<sup>14</sup> The Mission archéologique d'Indochine was established in 1898 and became the EFEO in 1900 (Clémentin-Ojha & Manguin 2001: 16).

<sup>15</sup> See other articles by Baffie and Manguin, this Special Edition.

Damrong Rajanubhab (1862–1943)—a half-brother of King Rama V (r. 1868–1910) and Minister of Interior—to assume the post of Chief Curator of the Watchirayan (Vajirañāṇa) National Library, over which the prince had presided as council president since 1915.<sup>16</sup>

Cœdès was appointed to succeed the German Indianist Oscar Frankfurter (1852–1922), who had been forced to leave Siam following the country's entry into the war against Germany in October 1917.<sup>17</sup> Prince Damrong had met Cœdès during two earlier visits to Bangkok and had been impressed by the young French scholar. When the position of curator became vacant, Damrong saw in Cœdès a suitable candidate to advance his ambition of transforming the library into an institution of international standing (Damrong 2567: 269).

Prince Damrong had long-standing ties with the EFEO, beginning with the 1904 mission led by Étienne Lunet de Lajonquière and Louis Finot, with whom he established a rapport of mutual trust and respect. He personally devised the itinerary for Lunet de Lajonquière's second mission in 1907. In 1908, under Finot's directorship, the EFEO named Prince Damrong a "corresponding member" of the institution (Clémentin-Ojha & Manguin 2001: 54–55).<sup>18</sup>

George Cœdès took up his post at the Watchirayan National Library on 1 January 1918.<sup>19</sup> To do so, he took leave

from the EFEO and became a civil servant of the Siamese crown. He worked alongside Prince Damrong for 12 years—first at the library, then at the Department of Archeology following its creation in 1924. Their collaboration produced a significant number of writings and scientific works that contributed to historical knowledge about Siam and neighboring regions. As a mark of his esteem and trust, Prince Damrong appointed Cœdès Secretary for Foreign Affairs of the Royal Institute upon its founding in 1926. This position reflected the confidence placed in him and allowed Cœdès to represent the institution on several occasions abroad, including in Batavia (now Jakarta) and Berlin (Cros 2017).

In 1929, Cœdès was appointed Director of the EFEO, bringing his extended stay in Bangkok to an end after more than a decade in the service of Siamese institutions. His appointment came unexpectedly: the sudden death of Léonard Aourousseau (1888–1929) in January—then director of the EFEO since 1926—had left the institution in a state of uncertainty. Aourousseau, who had been on leave for a year due to malaria, was temporarily replaced by Louis Finot, then serving his fourth term as director, two of which had been interim appointments (Genovese 2018: 97–98). Finot soon informed Cœdès of his desire to see him take over the directorship.

Cœdès was officially appointed on 2 September 1929 while on leave in France. He arrived in Saigon on 30 October, but left almost immediately

<sup>16</sup> For a history of the National Library, see Cœdès 1924: 1–10.

<sup>17</sup> On Oscar Frankfurter, see Grabowsky 2024.

<sup>18</sup> The following year, Prince Damrong was received at the Société asiatique in Paris, where Finot delivered a tribute in his honor (Clémentin-Ojha & Manguin 2001: 55).

<sup>19</sup> Agreement for the engagement of George Cœdès

by the Siamese government, represented by Prince Damrong (AEFEO, FR EFEO AAS/D/C6, "Carrière").

for Siam to organize his final departure from the country. The available sources make it clear that, during this time, Claeys's mission to Siam was arranged by Cœdès who prepared the mission itinerary and submitted it to Prince Damrong for approval [FIGURE 3].<sup>20</sup> The decrees entrusting both men with "a mission of archeological study and research in Siam" were signed on the same day—26 October 1929.<sup>21</sup> Archival documents also show that Cœdès facilitated the administrative and financial arrangements for the expedition.<sup>22</sup> Undoubtedly, the mission served, at least in part, to justify Cœdès's final visit to Siam before assuming his post at EFEO headquarters in Hanoi.<sup>23</sup>

As for Claeys, it was clearly established that he was to carry out his mission under the direction of Cœdès. Claeys made no secret of this fact. In the silent documentary film he made during the journey (see below), George Cœdès is praised for the "masterly organization of [the] mission".<sup>24</sup> In an interview given to a newspaper shortly after their return to Saigon from Siam, Claeys stated that he had "accompanied [Cœdès] on a

two-month mission to Siam".<sup>25</sup> In the same interview, he openly acknowledged the role he had been assigned, even referring to Cœdès as his mentor:

I was asked [by the EFEO] to identify the most curious archeological sites that the specialized service [i.e., Department of Archeology] of Siam had just brought to light. Upon my arrival in Bangkok, I had the good fortune to study with Mr Cœdès, who has a marvelous knowledge of everything related to Siamese art, and to spend eight days undergoing a first-rate initiation. Armed with this indispensable baggage, I set off on my journey under conditions made most agreeable thanks to the kindness of HRH Prince Damrong.<sup>26</sup>

Indeed, Prince Damrong—then a Royal Councillor, in addition to his responsibilities in various learned Siamese institutions—facilitated the mission by organizing Claeys's reception in the relevant provinces:

HRH Prince Damrong was kind enough to inform the local authorities in the various cities that Mr Claeys was to visit, so that he would be given the best possible welcome and afforded every facility to carry out his mission. He also arranged

<sup>20</sup> Chronique in BEFEO 29: 465.

<sup>21</sup> Documents administratifs in BEFEO 29: 566; "Arrêté du Gouverneur Général de l'Indochine" to the Director of the EFEO, 26 October 1929 (AEFEO, FR EFEO AAS/D/C5/"Missions, voyages et activités").

<sup>22</sup> Telegram from Cœdès to the EFEO administration, 7 November 1929, Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Notably, in his typed letter to Prince Damrong dated 28 November 1929 (National Archives of Thailand), Cœdès crossed out "visit" and replaced it with "mission", likely to lend the undertaking a more official tone.

<sup>24</sup> The Film Archives of Thailand has made this film available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PCJN-m09Vwo&t=3006s>.

<sup>25</sup> *L'Opinion*, January 1930 (AEFEO, ARCH002/2/3/1 1/4 1930).

<sup>26</sup> All translations from the French in this article are my own.

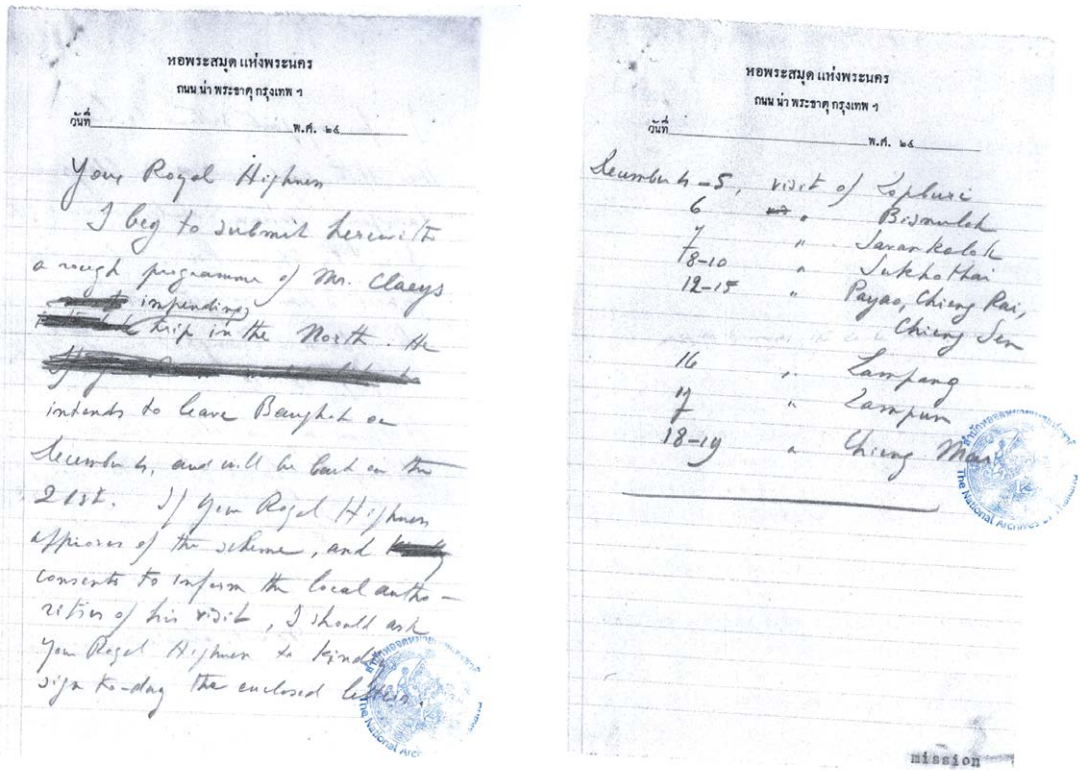


FIGURE 3: Mission itinerary to northern Siam suggested by George Cœdès to Prince Damrong, 1929 © National Archives of Thailand

for Khun Boribal Buribhand, curator of the Royal Museum in Bangkok, to accompany him on all his travels.<sup>27</sup>

In this regard, Claeys pays tribute to the prince in the very first lines of the article he would later publish, describing him as the “soul of Siamese historical studies” (Claeys 1931: 361). Both Prince Damrong and Cœdès feature prominently in Claeys’s documentary film of the mission. As mentioned in the extract above, it is also significant that Luang Boribal Buribhand (1897–1986)—then curator of the National Museum and inspector of the Department of Archeology—accompanied Claeys throughout the

mission. Boribal had been Cœdès’s “principal assistant” in Siam (Cœdès 1933) and later became a leading art historian in the kingdom, following Prince Damrong on his field trips [e.g., FIGURE 4], and the first dean of the Faculty of Archeology at Silpakorn University. He subsequently collaborated with other EFEO researchers on missions to Siam, notably with Pierre Dupont (1908–1955) in his research on Dvāravatī, and continued to correspond with Cœdès over the years.

Clearly, for Cœdès, this mission served as a means to maintain the professional and personal relationships he had forged during his years in Siam—ties he did not wish to see fade with the geographical and institutional distance

<sup>27</sup> Chronique in BEFO 29: 468.



**FIGURE 4: Prince Damrong visiting the former royal palace in Ayutthaya, accompanied by Boribol Buribhand, ca. 1920s, photo COEG00029 © EFEO**

imposed by his new responsibilities. It was undoubtedly in this spirit that Governor-General of Indochina Pierre Pasquier (1877–1934) appointed Prince Damrong an honorary member of the EFEO shortly after the mission in April 1930.<sup>28</sup> For the EFEO, too, the mission offered a way to retain a foothold in the dynamic developments then underway in Siam in the fields of art history and archeology. Several institutions had been established in recent years, such as the Department of Archeology and the National Museum, which were brought together under the Royal Institute in 1926, with Prince Damrong as president and Cœdès among its members.

Cœdès likely selected Claeys to ensure the continuity of these relations, despite the fact that Claeys was not a specialist in Siam. Correspondence

between the EFEO and the colonial authorities leaves little ambiguity regarding these intentions or the role Claeys was to play in fulfilling them:

The purpose of this mission [to Siam] is to enable Mr Cœdès, who will arrive in Indochina around 30 October [to take up his post as Director of the EFEO], to complete the work he had undertaken as head [sic] of the Siamese Department of Archeology and to ensure the continuation of this service's relations with the *École française* [d'Extrême-Orient] in the future.

Mr Claeys, who will accompany Mr Cœdès at the latter's request, will find in this trip the opportunity to study, under experienced guidance,

<sup>28</sup> Chronique in BEFEO 30: 189.

the characteristics of Thai monuments, and to acquire knowledge that will be of the greatest use to him in carrying out the tasks that the [EFEO] has reserved for him.<sup>29</sup>

In light of the above, it would appear that the “Claeys mission” was, in fact, a “Cœdès mission” that dared not speak its name. This statement must be slightly qualified, however. First, because Claeys completed most of the mission without Cœdès, who joined him only at the beginning and in its final phase. Second, because Claeys alone signed the official report of the mission,<sup>30</sup> as well as the subsequent article, “L’archéologie du Siam”, published two years later in the *Bulletin de l’École française d’Extrême-Orient* (BEFEO). Finally, Claeys initiated and filmed the documentary of the journey, which today remains an invaluable archival record. Nevertheless, the shadow of Cœdès looms large over Claeys’s work in Siam.

### Mission to Siam

Jean-Yves Claeys had been on leave in France for several months when he was sent on a two-month mission to Siam in the final quarter of 1929. Recently promoted to permanent member of the EFEO, he was normally based in Hanoi, where he served as “Inspecteur du Service archéologique”. Earlier that year, Claeys had traveled to Cambodia

to train in the clearing and conservation of the monuments at Angkor. He arrived in Bangkok on 27 October and stayed for eight days, during which Cœdès introduced him to Siamese history, art, and archeology while finalizing the details of the mission.<sup>31</sup>

Cœdès accompanied Claeys for the first phase of the journey, which began in Ayutthaya—images filmed by Claeys show that Prince Damrong was also present—before returning briefly to Bangkok [FIGURE 5]. In November, Claeys and his team departed southward to visit key towns along the Thai–Malay Peninsula: Nakhon Si Thammarat, Chaiya, Phetchaburi, and Ratchaburi. On 4 December, they then returned to Bangkok and set off northward, stopping in Lopburi, Phitsanulok, Sawankhalok, and Sukhothai [FIG. 3]. The mission continued into the northern regions of the former Lan Na kingdom—referred to by Claeys as Western Laos (“Laos occidental”).<sup>32</sup> In Lampang, Claeys was joined by Cœdès, who had left Bangkok on 11 December. Together they visited Phayao, Chiang Rai, and Chiang Saen, located on the border between Siam and “French” Laos, marked by the Mekong River. The mission concluded with visits to Lamphun and Chiang Mai.<sup>33</sup>

The route chosen by Cœdès thus followed a south–north axis [FIGURE 6], omitting the western and, notably, the northeastern regions of Siam—

<sup>29</sup> Letter from Acting Director Louis Finot to the Governor General of Indochina, 8 Oct. 1929 (AEFEO, FR EFEO AAS/D/C5/“Missions, voyages et activités”).

<sup>30</sup> See “Compte-rendu de l’activité de M. J.-Y. Claeys, au cours du premier semestre de 1930” (Ibid.), and Chronique in BEFEO 29: 468.

<sup>31</sup> Chronique in BEFEO 29: 468–469; see also *L’Opinion*, January 1930 (AEFEO, ARCH002/2/3/1 1/4 1930), and above.

<sup>32</sup> “Western Laos” then referred to northern regions once part of Lan Na and later absorbed by Siam. Present-day Laos was commonly called “Eastern” or “French Laos”.

<sup>33</sup> Chronique in BEFEO 29: 468–469. See also FIG. 3.



FIGURE 5: Screenshots from Claeys's 1929 documentary film  
© Film Archives of Thailand

particularly the former Khmer territories previously explored by Étienne Aymonier (1844–1929) and Auguste Pavie (1847–1925). It is also worth noting that the northern cities received slightly less attention than those in the south and, especially, in the center of the country. This disparity can be attributed to the state of archeological research in Siam at the time. As Claeys himself observed, the recently established Department of Archeology had limited its activities in the northern region to road clearing—mainly to facilitate the passage of the king and high-ranking officials. The refurbishment of the manuscript library at Wat Phra Singh in Chiang Mai was, at that point, the only significant restoration project undertaken (Claeys 1931: 421).

This context is clearly reflected in the film shot by Claeys, which offers the additional value of capturing the towns of the former Lan Na kingdom before the wave of urbanization that would transform them over the course of the 20th century. In this regard, the

numerous and striking black-and-white photographs included in the article, all taken by Claeys himself, stand as a valuable record of the kingdom's religious monuments prior to the various phases of restoration they later underwent [e.g., FIGURE 7].<sup>34</sup> Finally, it is striking that Claeys makes no mention of Bangkok in his article, despite the city's abundance of noteworthy monuments. Yet both archival documents and his film confirm that he visited several important sites in the capital.

In total, Claeys and his companions visited 85 sites. Leaving Lamphun on 18 December, Claeys and Cœdès eventually returned to Bangkok. They both departed Siam on 26 December, bound for Hanoi via Phnom Penh and Saigon. Cœdès officially assumed his new post as Director of the EFEO headquarters in Hanoi on 13 January 1930 (Cros 2017: 12).

<sup>34</sup> Luang Boribai Buribhand, who accompanied Claeys on his mission, wrote a report on the archeology of the northern provinces, excerpts of which were published in the *Bangkok Times* in February 1930.

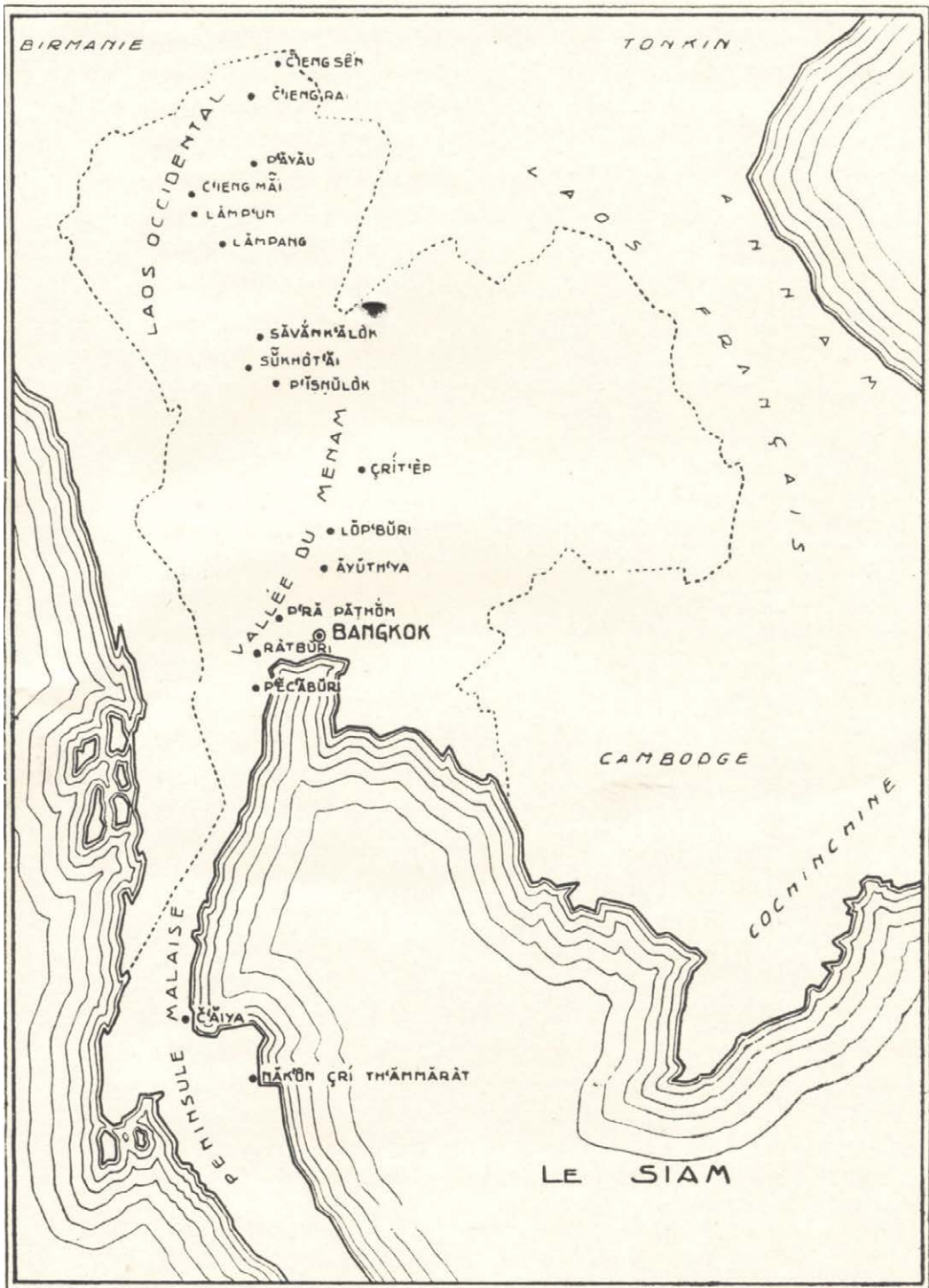


FIGURE 6: Map of the mission itinerary as it appears in  
 “L’archéologie du Siam” (1931) © EFEO



**FIGURE 7: Wat Mahathat, Sukhothai, before restoration, 1929  
photo MARH02176 © EFEO**

Claeys likewise settled in Hanoi, where he began organizing his notes in preparation for both his mission report and subsequent article.<sup>35</sup> He had also produced numerous sketches and archeological surveys, which enriched his publication with detailed plans and drawings of monuments and works of art. In addition, Claeys took some 300 photographs—around 30 of which were reproduced in “L’archéologie du Siam”—and recorded 1,800 meters of film for his documentary.<sup>36</sup>

The first public result of Claeys’s mission to Siam was a lecture delivered

at the Geographical Society in Hanoi, during which he screened his documentary film. According to Coëdès himself, the presentation was enthusiastically received by the audience.<sup>37</sup> The final product of the mission—a nearly monographic 152-page article—was published the following year in the BEFEO.

### **L’archéologie du Siam**

Jean-Yves Claeys’s article “L’archéologie du Siam” (1931) reads much like a mission report [FIGURE 8]. It is primarily descriptive and upon reading it becomes evident that the author pos-

<sup>35</sup> See AEFE0, FR EFEO AAS/D/C5/“Missions, voyages et activités”; also Chronique in BEFEO 30: 188.

<sup>36</sup> Unfortunately, all these documents in their original form have disappeared—a loss particularly regrettable for the photographs, only one of which is preserved in the EFEO collection [FIG. 7].

<sup>37</sup> Report on EFEO activities in Hanoi (AEFE0, FR EFEO AAS/D/C5/“Missions, voyages et activités”).

## L'ARCHÉOLOGIE DU SIAM

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## INTRODUCTION.

Les études archéologiques n'ont été entreprises par le Gouvernement siamois que depuis peu d'années. Le service chargé de ces recherches fut créé par un édit du roi RĀMA VI en date du 17 janvier 1924 et les travaux commencèrent l'année suivante. Le roi actuel, S. M. PRĀC'ATH'IPŌK, porte un très vif intérêt aux questions touchant à l'histoire et à l'art de son pays, mais en fait, c'est son oncle, S. A. R. le Prince DĀMRŌNG, qui fut l'âme des études historiques au Siam. A l'époque où il était encore ministre de l'Intérieur, le Prince collectionnait déjà, avec une érudition passionnée, les vestiges artistiques qu'il lui était donné de rencontrer au cours de ses tournées. Cet éminent homme d'état, savant autant qu'infatigable, fut la force agissante qui se donna sans compter aux recherches archéologiques.

Une organisation homogène groupait, à partir de février 1926, sous la dénomination d'« Institut royal de littérature, d'archéologie et des beaux-arts », la Bibliothèque nationale, le Service archéologique, le Musée et l'ancien Département des Beaux-Arts. La présidence de cette institution fut donnée naturellement à S. A. R. le Prince DĀMRŌNG. Le 14 novembre 1926, S. M. le Roi PRĀC'ATH'IPŌK inaugurait le Musée national. En trois années d'existence ce Musée a conquis une place que l'on peut considérer comme l'une des plus importantes parmi les Musées se rapportant à l'Extrême-Orient. Et c'est grâce à la cohésion des services groupés sous le nom d'Institut royal, que l'étude de l'archéologie au Siam a pu, d'un bond extrêmement rapide, prendre cette place prépondérante.

Le Siam est un pays de mentalité homogène où chacun, dans sa sphère, est conscient de l'effort qu'il doit fournir pour le bien du royaume. C'est ainsi que, souvent, sous l'impulsion d'un gouverneur ou d'un vice-roi, les pièces archéologiques sont réunies dans les musées provinciaux comme il en existe dans tout le royaume, de Ligor (Nāk'ōn Ḑrī Th'āmmārāt) à P'ā Pāthōm, d'Āyūth'ya à P'isñūlōk, de Sāvānk'ālōk à Lāmp'un. La visite d'un représentant du Service archéologique et souvent de S. A. R. le Prince DĀMRŌNG lui-même, décide de l'opportunité d'un envoi au Musée national de Bangkok. On conçoit aisément, maintenant, comment ce Musée a pris une importance considérable en aussi peu de temps.

FIGURE 8: Cover page of Claeys's 1931 article © EFEO

sessed no prior in-depth knowledge of Siamese history, art, or archeology. Claeys was discovering the country as his "mission" progressed. In this regard, it is important to acknowledge the modesty and honesty that permeate his article. He openly admits at the outset that his work does not claim to offer new scholarly insights. Instead, he pays

tribute to the accomplishments of his predecessors, notably George Coëdès and Prince Damrong. As he notes, "the work [insofar] accomplished in Siam is almost exclusively due to French explorers and scholars"—citing figures such as Lucien Fournereau, Auguste Pavie, Étienne Aymonier, Étienne Lunet de Lajonquière, Louis Finot, General

de Beylé, Auguste Barth, and François-Joseph Schmitt. He also acknowledges the contributions of other European scholars and explorers, including Adolf Bastian, Gerolamo Emilio Gerini, Dan Beach Bradley, and Erik Seidenfaden (Claeys 1931: 363).

Claeys also remarks, quite rightly, that the Siamese Department of Archeology had just been established in 1924. Before that, only a handful of exceptionally motivated travelers had managed to visit the ancient cities independently. Fully aware of his role as a latecomer and outsider, Claeys (1931: 364) set for himself the modest but useful goal of offering a general survey of the archeological sites and monuments of Siam—a task that, at the time, had remained largely unattempted.

That said, Claeys demonstrates a keen sense of observation and draws on his training as an architect and art historian to offer interpretations that are often perceptive. From the outset, for instance, he highlights the remarkable variety of cultural influences and civilizational remains visible across Siamese territory—from the Thai-Malay Peninsula in the south to “Western Laos” (Lan Na) in the north. In his view, this diversity distinguishes Siam from its neighbors:

A visit such as ours took us from the art of Śrīvijaya to Khmer-inspired monuments, from purely Siamese *wat* to Burmese-filtered Indian or distinctly Chinese forms (Claeys 1931: 364).

His study extends beyond monuments to include artifacts, especially statuary.

On stylistic grounds, he draws a parallel between the images found at Si Thep—which, he notes in his article, he was unable to visit (Claeys 1931: 402)<sup>38</sup>—and the art of Funan, praising their “freedom of expression” and “truly human” quality, reminiscent of Campā and markedly different, in his view, from Khmer art. He also identifies what he calls an “Indo-Javanese influence” in certain richly adorned statues, characterized by elaborate goldsmithing and the presence of a buddha in the coiffure (Claeys 1931: 365–373). These aesthetic observations are supported by his own drawings and sketches. With a strong sense of synthesis, Claeys delineates regional styles of buddha imagery across Siam, identifying their distinguishing features:

The diversity of influences that we will see again in architecture was also clearly felt in statuary at this time. The Sukhothai school provides us with the classic type of Siamese buddha; the *uṣṇīṣa* quickly takes on its characteristic flame shape, of Sinhalese origin. The scarf on the left shoulder is lengthened, and the position of the legs is in *paryāṅkāśana*, i.e., one simply placed on top of the other. The characteristics of Chiang Saen art are distinctly different. No flame, the *uṣṇīṣa* in the shape of a lotus bud, legs tightly

<sup>38</sup> Claeys’s observations on the art of Si Thep largely draw on the work of Coëdès, whom he cites in his article. He also observed and photographed several images housed in the National Museum in Bangkok (Ibid.: pls. LX–LXII).

crossed, soles of the feet up, in *vajrāsana*, and a short scarf; when seated, the buddha's seat is shaped like a lotus flower. It is undoubtedly the way of similar influences, by land and sea, that explains the singular presence of identical characteristics at the most opposite point of Siam, that is, Ligor [i.e., Nakhon Si Thammarat], for the rare buddha images left to us from this period. Certain facial features, such as the busted nose, high eyebrows and feminine, full body, are common to all these schools (1931: 371–372).

While his study includes many of his own observations, Claeys makes no pretense of originality and consistently acknowledges his debt to Cœdès. He concludes his article with a homage to the latter, quoting his evocative remark to characterize the unique trajectory of Siamese art, which—though shaped by multiple influences—ultimately achieved a distinct identity of its own:

In Siam there was no evolution in the ordinary sense of the word, with which the schools of art of the whole world have familiarized us, but “revolution” (Cœdès 1930: 20; cited in Claeys 1931: 448).

In this regard, readers may be tempted to identify, in these 150 pages, elements that betray a Cœdès influence and others that reflect a more personal touch on the part of Claeys himself. Among the former are depictions of Wheels of the

Law (*dharmacakra*), molded tablets, the so-called art of Śrīvijaya, and the remains of the Mon civilizations of Dvāravatī and Haripuñjaya (Haripunchai). These had been the subject of prior publications by Cœdès, some of which are accurately cited in Claeys's article.

By contrast, the more technical analyses of Buddhist and Hindu imagery and architecture are clearly Claeys's own. For instance, in his description of the main structure at Wat Chet Yot in Chiang Mai, he writes:

The first striking feature of this monument's construction is the use of barrel vaulting, with keystones placed *à la romaine* [...]. The only method used is that of the “successive corbelling” vault, in which the brick, laterite[,] or sandstone courses are placed on their horizontal bed, overhanging the course immediately below. A series of cantilevers [are] held in balance by the upper construction mass. This construction method keeps the resultant thrust in an almost vertical direction (1931: 445).<sup>39</sup>

The same can be said for his discussion of what he describes as “reduced-scale monuments, a kind of commemorative model” (Claeys 1931: 374),<sup>40</sup> which he observed in several

<sup>39</sup> Also noteworthy is Claeys's detailed and technical account of architectural innovations in modern temple restorations in the former kingdom of Lan Na, particularly in Phayao (1931: 422–424).

<sup>40</sup> Claeys, however, distinguishes these “scale models” from the small brick structures commonly found inside large stupas—such as those at Wat Si Sanphet

places in Siam—either embedded in larger structures or placed nearby—and for which he expresses a distinct interest:

A tradition that seems to have some force is that, when modifications have been made to a reliquary or stupa, or when the original monument has been incorporated into a larger construction, it was customary for the builders to erect a scale model, a sort of mock-up of the original form, not far from it. This practice has been observed several times at Phetchaburi, Phra Pathom, etc. We shall see that it was probably also practiced in the North, at Chiang Mai [...]. As far as Wat Phra That in Nakhon Si Thammarat is concerned, there is[,] in fact, close to the central courtyard and toward the eastern gate, a reduced building which we were told represents the model of the ancient stupa now covered by the current construction [...].

As we shall see later, at Phetchaburi, two buildings—two chedi—are said to represent the central monument before restoration. However, these two reduced models are different enough from each other to suggest that they are also, and probably even more so, different from the original

central edifice (Claeys 1931: 374–375).<sup>41</sup>

Claeys developed a discerning eye for the sites he visited. While many of his interpretations are now outdated, they nonetheless attest to his sharp observational skills and offer valuable insight into the state of architectural and archeological knowledge at the time.

### Aftermath of the Mission to Siam

Despite the richness of his 1931 article and the undeniable interest of his documentary film, Jean-Yves Claeys is seldom recognized as a scholar of Siam or Thailand. In his note on France's contribution to Thai archeology and epigraphy, MC Subhadradis Diskul (1923–2003) paid tribute to figures such as George Coédès, Pierre Dupont, Philippe Stern, Jeanne Auboyer, and Madeleine Hallade—some of whom never even visited Thailand—yet omitted Claeys altogether (Subhadradis 1956: 381–383). Art historian Jean Boisselier (1912–1996), in a preliminary report on recent archeological research in Thailand (1965: 138), does mention Claeys, but only to lament that Wat Mahathat in Ratchaburi escaped his attention. In fact, Claeys did refer to the monument, albeit briefly, noting only that it “deserved a maintenance from which it did not seem to benefit” (Claeys 1931: 394).

<sup>41</sup> Claeys also refers to the Mon *cetiya* installed northwest of the Wat Mahathat enclosure in Lamphun. He describes it as a “model monument”, noting its striking resemblance to Wat Kukut, also in Lamphun (pp. 434–435). Finally, he mentions a “small reliquary” at Wat Mung Mueang in Chiang Saen, which he believes to be “the reproduction of a large construction” (p. 427).

in Ayutthaya—correctly identifying them, in line with earlier scholarship (e.g., Sykes 1856), as “veritable reliquaries fitted out inside stupas” (p. 375).

Still, “L’archéologie du Siam” did not go unnoticed. Danish ethnologist Erik Seidenfaden (1910–1990), for example, praised the work in a glowing 1934 review in the *Journal of the Siam Society*, following its reprint as a monograph in Hanoi (1931). Nearly a century after its publication, the work continues to receive mixed assessments. Contemporary specialists have criticized it for offering little new information on many sites beyond what was already known at the time. Yet Claeys is also credited with several original insights and with confirming hypotheses advanced by predecessors—chief among them, Cœdès (e.g., Hennequin 2010: 16; Lorrillard 2018: 139, n. 22). His article has come to be regarded as a classic. As the first systematic survey of ancient religious monuments across Siamese territory, it remains notable not only for its content but also for its visual and aesthetic qualities. Thanks to Claeys’s skill as a draftsman and photographer, few publications of the period rival “L’archéologie du Siam” in iconographic richness and elegance.

As noted above, Cœdès played a central role in organizing Claeys’s 1929 mission to Siam. His sudden and unexpected appointment as Director of the EFEO prompted him to initiate the mission, enabling a swift departure from the kingdom. As the new director, Cœdès likely intended for Claeys to sustain the scientific and diplomatic groundwork he had established in the kingdom over the years, especially with Prince Damrong Rajanubhab. The broader goal was to secure official recognition for the EFEO in Siam—a kingdom that, unlike its neighbors, had not been absorbed into any colonial empire.

In this respect, however, Cœdès’s goal was not immediately realized: Claeys never returned to Siam, nor did he publish further on Thailand. Instead, his scholarly attention returned to Campā and Vietnam, the regions to which he would devote the rest of his career [ONLINE APPENDIX]. Somewhat paradoxically, this redirection appears to have been encouraged by Cœdès himself. After appointing Claeys a permanent member of the EFEO, he repeatedly assigned him to fieldwork in Central Vietnam, where Claeys would rise to positions of increasing responsibility [FIGURE 9].<sup>42</sup> Claeys, for his part, remained deeply loyal to Cœdès throughout his life. Years later, Claeys even put his artistic talent to use by designing the ceremonial sword presented to Cœdès when he was invested into the Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres [FIGURE 10].<sup>43</sup>

A decade after Claeys’s mission, the EFEO renewed its involvement in Siam through Pierre Dupont, whose work on the Mon civilization, in collaboration with Luang Boribal Buribhand, marked a new phase of Franco-Thai scholarly exchange (Clémentin-Ojha & Manguin 2001: 55–56). In the decades that followed, other EFEO researchers took up the baton. Among them are Jean Boisselier (1912–1996) and Pierre Pichard (1936–2024; see obituary, this

<sup>42</sup> In early 1930, Claeys accompanied Cœdès to Saigon, where they visited several archeological sites (AEFEO, FR EFEO AAS/D/C5; also BEFEO 30: 185). The following year, he joined Cœdès on another mission to Cambodia (BEFEO 31, 3–4: 565, 608).

<sup>43</sup> The sword was presented to Cœdès by Albert Sarraut—former Indochina governor and multiple-time minister—at the Musée Guimet on 28 February 1959 (*Cahiers de la Société des Amis de l’EFEO* 3: 6–10).



**FIGURE 9: Group photo at EFEO's headquarter, Hanoi, Cœdès (front right), Parmentier (far right), Claeys (second row left), near Mus, and Batteur (back row), ca. 1930s, photo VIE22946 © EFEO**

issue), who both collaborated with Prince Subhadradis, son of Prince Damrong. Over time, Cœdès's long-term goal was realized; he succeeded in

securing enduring scientific and amicable ties between the EFEO and Thailand's most eminent learned institutions and scholars.

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FIGURE 10: Pommel of Cœdès's academician's sword, designed by Claeys  
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