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Introduction: Approaches to Singapore's Past before 1819

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Singapore commemorated the bicentennial of Thomas Stamford Raffles's establishment of a British station on this island with a year-long series of blockbuster exhibitions and accompanying international conferences and ground-up events involving community and volunteer efforts. In contrast to the centennial of Raffles's arrival in Singapore, which was a celebration of the achievements of the Crown Colony that had grown out of the British station Raffles established, the bicentennial was a commemoration inviting Singaporeans to reflect on the two hundred years of their island's past in the long cycles of the preceding five hundred years of time. For many, this invitation was a challenge, as the prevailing and dominant public narrative of Singapore was that it had only a two-hundred-year history.

This template of Singapore having a two-hundred-year history started by Raffles was laid down by Raffles himself. On 8 January 1819, Raffles reported to Governor-General Hastings that his inquiries at Pinang indicated that Singapore “has been deserted for Centuries and long before the Dutch power existed in these Seas”.¹ British colonial officials from Dr John Crawfurd (1783–1868) have confirmed this. The

template was consolidated by generations of historians, from Raffles Professor of History Kennedy G. Tregonning and his colleagues at the History Department of the old University of Singapore in the 1960s through to the 1990s.

Crawford, as the second Resident of Singapore after William Farquhar, would be in a position to authoritatively state that “for a period of about five centuries and a half, there is no record of Singapore having been occupied, and it was only the occasional resort of pirates. In that year [1811], it was taken possession of by the party from whom we [the British] first received it, an officer of the government of Johore called the Tumângung. This person told me himself that he came there with about 150 followers, a few months before the British expedition which afterwards captured Java passed the island, and this happened in the summer of 1811.”²

L.A. Mills was the first to establish the founding of Singapore as the beginning of a history of British Malaya, 1824–67.³ His work became a basic text for a new generation of historians trained at the History Department of the new University of Malaya established in 1949. They were taught that the history of Malaya was all contained in the records of the Straits Settlement archived in the old Raffles Library and the 273 series of Colonial Office Records.⁴ Raffles Professor of History K.G. Tregonning summed up the underlying assumption of the research of the department in an essay commemorating Singapore’s sesquicentennial: “Modern Singapore began in 1819. Nothing that occurred on the island prior to this has particular relevance to an understanding of the contemporary scene; it is of antiquarian interest only.”⁵

Fifty years on we are looking to well before 1819 for Singapore’s beginnings, and reflect on its relevance for Singapore today. That we can do this is because of three breakthroughs in approaching Singapore history. These are, first, a breakthrough into the archaeology of fourteenth-century Singapore; second, a breakthrough in re-reading of the *Malay Annals*, or *Sulalatus-Salatin*; and third, a breakthrough into the early modern Portuguese, Dutch and other records and archives. Each of these breakthroughs was associated with or led by staff, fellows and affiliates of the old Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre, and now the Temasek History Research Centre. The commemoration of Singapore’s bicentennial was an occasion to convene some of these staff, fellows and affiliates to share their research in enabling these three breakthroughs to approaching Singapore’s pre-1800 past.

The Archaeological Breakthrough

The old National Museum was in 1984 able, with funding support from the Shell companies in Singapore, to invite John N. Miksic, then

lecturing on archaeology at Gadjah Mada University, Jogjakarta, to undertake an archaeological investigation of Fort Canning for any artefacts of the historic remains both Raffles and Crawford saw in 1819–22. Against the odds, a two-week survey and excavation recovered *in situ* fourteenth-century artefacts, indicating that there may be much more to be recovered through further excavations.⁶

Thirty-five years of further excavations by Miksic and his team of volunteers on not only Fort Canning but its environs have recovered several tons of ceramic, stoneware and earthenware sherds⁷ as confirming evidence of the *Sulalatus-Salatin* claim that Singapura was “a great city to which foreigners resorted in great numbers so that the fame of the city and its greatness spread throughout the world.”⁸

The wide range and large volume of artefacts recovered is evidence of Temasek/Singapura's dense and intricate networks of trade in the region, into the Chinese market and also across the Bay of Bengal. Derek Heng has been drawing on the archaeological data to situate Temasek/Singapura as a regional and international trading port in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.⁹ Marine archaeology of shipwrecks and their cargoes¹⁰ provides us today a new understanding of the ships and volume of trade then being shipped around the region,¹¹ as Flecker shows in his essay.¹² Altogether, the archaeological evidence indicates that Temasek/Singapura's survival and prosperity in the fourteenth century was as dependent upon the viability of its trade networks and cycles of trade in China and across the Indian Ocean as is the case today. These excavations were, however, not part of a planned archaeology research programme, but were essentially rescue or salvage archaeology to excavate and recover archaeological materials and data from sites as they were slated for urban redevelopment. It is to the credit of Miksic and his team that they were able to rise to the occasion to undertake these salvage archaeology excavations of a site before its redevelopment and manage the subsequent minimal conservation of the artefacts recovered and documentation of the site excavated. They achieved this without much institutional support from the museums for archaeological research.

Only in 2010 was an Archaeological Unit headed by Miksic set up as a component of the Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre, which was established in the preceding year to pursue research on the historical interactions among Asian societies and civilizations. Archaeology was promoted as one way to investigate these historical interactions between Asian civilizations. Today, the Archaeology Unit is actively coordinating further excavations in Singapore¹³ and promoting greater awareness of archaeology and the challenges it faces¹⁴ via various public outreach programmes.

A Breakthrough in Re-Reading the *Sulalatus-Salatin*

The first six chapters of the *Sulalatus-Salatin* on the genealogy of the Melaka sultans are, in Sir Richard Winstedt's view, a "hotchpotch of Chola and Palembang folklore [out of which] little can be made."¹⁵ For Winstedt, this dismissal of not only the *Sulalatus-Salatin* but much else of classical Malay literature is grounded on a binary distinction rooted in Greek philosophy between *mythos*, referring to fable, folklore and fiction, and *logos*, rational argument founded on evidence. Consequently, the account of Singapura receiving its name from a roving prince from Palembang arriving at Temasek where he espied what he was told was a "singa" and decided it was a good omen to settle on the island has been dismissed as fiction and myth. By now, more than one generation of students of Malay language and literature have struggled to break this Eurocentric framing of classical Malay literature as more romance and *mythos* than *logos* and history.¹⁶

Oliver W. Wolters, a former Malayan Civil Service officer turned academic historian, published in 1970 a rather underappreciated study on *The Fall of Śrīvijaya in Malay History* connecting the deep vertical intertextuality of the *mythos* of the *Sulalatus-Salatin*'s genealogy of the founder of Melaka to the Buddhist symbolism of Sri Tribuana as the Lord of the Three Worlds and his consecration (*abhiṣeka*) as a Bodhisattva to claim the legacy of Śrīvijaya for Melaka.¹⁷ That Śrīvijaya was not only a major emporium but also a major centre of Buddhist learning is well established.

The former Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre, as its name indicated, was established in large part to further explore the historical interactions underpinning the centrality of maritime Southeast Asia and Śrīvijaya in the Buddhist world spanning Xian to Nalanda.¹⁸ The network of Buddhist masters, texts and icons across the Buddhist world of maritime Southeast Asia, as we are now recognizing from research that emanated from the Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre, led in large part by its founding head Sen Tansen¹⁹ and by Andrea Acri, was esoteric Buddhist,²⁰ and not, as in mainstream understanding, Mahayana until the thirteenth-century conversion to the Theravada tradition.

Tun Bambang, the scribe of the 1612 CE copy of the *Sulalatus-Salatin* known to us as Raffles MS 18, was probably unaware of these deep Buddhist tropes to the founder of Melaka. Acri, in his contribution to this volume, unravels yet another Buddhist trope in the *Sulalatus-Salatin* story of Sri Tribuana jettisoning his crown to save his ship sinking in a storm while sailing to Temasek. Iain Sinclair's essay in this volume digs deeper into the lion motif that has become a brand name for Singapore today.²¹ The name Singapura, as these contributions show, is rooted in

deep Esoteric/Tantric Buddhist tropes that not too many of us today are aware of.

Another dimension of the *Sulalatus-Salatin's* narrative of Malay history is the role of the sea nomads. Leonard Andaya in his contribution to this volume examines the *Sulalatus-Salatin* references to the undivided loyalty of these sea nomad communities to the Sultans of Melaka and Johor to conclude that these *orang laut*, marginalized as isolated tribal groups in the nineteenth century, played a central role in the making of the *negara selat* in earlier centuries.²²

An Archival Breakthrough

John Crawfurd was clear that the island of Singapore was “only the occasional resort of pirates” for the five hundred years from the time of the abandonment of the settlement he saw the remains of in 1822 until the arrival of Raffles. According to Raffles Professor of History Tregonning, the Portuguese capture of Melaka in 1511 and the guerrilla war they were engaged in against Sultan Mahmud seeking to recapture Melaka, their expeditions up the Johor River to take out an incipient Johor sultanate, and confronting the Dutch challenge for control of the waters around Singapore did not affect Singapore and the region, if at all. In a 1958 feature article in the *Straits Times*, Tregonning wrote that “Asia, not the European in Asia, must be our theme, and suddenly, if you think of that, it makes the Portuguese and the Dutch most insignificant, and almost extraneous”, that “they were a few heretical fish in a Muslim sea, and ... they did not affect Asia much at all. Rather the contrary, Asia profoundly affected them.”²³ Tregonning's young colleague at the History Department, Ian A. Macgregor, decided to take on the challenge of researching the Portuguese in Malaya, and especially in Johor. The four articles²⁴ he managed to complete before his unexpected death were instrumental in framing the archaeological investigations of Johor Lama lead by C.A. Gibson-Hill and a team from the old Raffles Museum in the mid-1950s.²⁵ Unfortunately, these two early forays by Macgregor and Gibson-Hill into the Portuguese and other early modern records for what can be inferred from them about Singapore were not followed up. Tregonning dismissed Gibson-Hill's work and that of the *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* as being only of antiquarian interest.

There was no further search for and study of early modern Portuguese and Dutch records of Singapore history before 1800 until the mid-1990s, when Peter Borschberg was led to look into the Dutch archives by his studies of the seventeenth-century Dutch jurist Hugo Grotius's engagement by the Dutch East India Company to defend their seizure of the Portuguese carrack off Changi against charges of

freebooting. Borschberg's research into the seizure of the Santa Catarina broadened into studying seventeenth-century Luso-Dutch rivalry in the Straits of Melaka and Singapore, the seascapes on which that rivalry played out,²⁶ and the role of these Chartered Companies as instruments of empires in Asia in the construction of an increasingly connected global history from 1500 CE.²⁷ From Borschberg's searching of the early modern Portuguese, Spanish and Dutch archives and records emerges an earlier alternative understanding of Singapore's strategic location,²⁸ in contrast to the Tregonning framing of Singapore's strategic location within the world of the East India Company and its attempts to secure the China trade. Borschberg's contribution to this volume acknowledges the pioneering work of Macgregor and Gibson-Hill before outlining the challenges of accessing the Portuguese and Dutch records for Singapore before 1800.

Conclusion

"To write a history of the old Singapura", according to C.O. Blagden in 1919,²⁹ "would be something like the task imposed upon the children of Israel by the Pharaoh: for where should one seek the straw to make those bricks with?" A century later there are more bundles of straw to make the bricks for the construction of a history of Singapore. Digital technology is enabling us to more effectively access classical Chinese textual records on Malaya and Singapore,³⁰ and so increasing our "bundles of straw" to make the bricks to construct our pre-1819 history. The contributions to this volume outline the new data from archaeological investigations and investigations of the early modern Portuguese and Dutch archives.

The problem of making sense of these texts, locating the toponyms in these texts, and chronologically sequencing the occupation of that name place that confronted Blagden³¹ continues to challenge us today. Blagden could not locate the landmarks on the Mao Kun map that guided Admiral Zheng He when he sailed past Danmaxi. J.V. Mills spent some forty years studying the Mao Kun map to fix these place names to determine whether the admiral sailed his fleet through the narrow Keppel Harbour passageway or the wider main strait.³² Today, a new generation of scholars,³³ represented by Tai Yew Seng in this volume, is studying anew the Mao Kun map and the other classical Chinese textual references to Singapore.

A major challenge confronting any writing of Singapore's history prior to 1819 is its connection and relevance to Singapore's history after 1819. Blagden did not attempt to make any connection between the section he wrote on "Singapore prior to 1819" in the chapter on the historical background of Singapore in *One Hundred Years of Singapore* to the following section he also wrote on "the foundation of

the settlement” by Raffles. That section continues and merges well into Roland St. J. Braddell’s contribution on “A short history of the Colony”.

The disconnect between the history of Singapore before and after the arrival of Raffles was emphasized by Tregonning and his colleague C.M. Turnbull in her benchmark textbook on *A History of Singapore*. Admittedly, none of the historical evidence from the breakthroughs in approaching Singapore before 1800 was available to Turnbull when she wrote the first edition of her book in 1975. But she was fully aware of these breakthroughs in our understanding of Singapore before Raffles when she revised her book for its final edition in 2009, and was clear in dismissing these breakthroughs: “The findings of careful archaeological work carried out in the late twentieth century at Fort Canning and near the Singapore River, together with a study of pre-colonial records, charts and maps, supplement but basically support the previously known story; namely that Temasek appeared and flourished for a few decades as one of a number of moderately prosperous ports in the region but came to a sudden, violent and mysterious end at the close of the fourteenth century, when its ruler fled to found the more successful Melaka ... the thorough investigations of the late twentieth century confirm that, after the fall of Temasek, nothing of significance took place on the island until Raffles’s party landed in 1819.”³⁴

The Singapore bicentennial, although not labelled as such, was in effect a massive exercise in public history reaching out to engage Singaporeans to review and rethink a foundational event in Singapore’s history. The former Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre, during the ten years of its existence, contributed much to facilitating this review and rethinking of Singapore’s past leading to Raffles’s arrival in Singapore. It leaves a solid foundation of research for the new Temasek History Research Centre to build upon and further our understanding of the Temasek era of Singapore’s history.

Notes

1. Raffles to Hastings quoted in J. Bastin, *Raffles and Hastings: Private Exchanges behind the Founding of Singapore* (Singapore: National Library Board/Marshall Cavendish, 2014), p. 14.
2. J. Crawfurd, *A Descriptive Dictionary of the Indian Islands & Adjacent Countries* (1856; repr., Kuala Lumpur/Singapore: Oxford in Asia Historical Reprints, 1971), *sub voca* “Singapore” at p. 402.
3. Mills, “British Malaya 1824–1867, Edited for Reprinting with a Bibliography of Writings in English on British Malaya, 1786–1867”, *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 33, no. 3 (1960).

4. Kwa Chong Guan and Ho Chi Tim, "Archival Records in the Writing of Singapore History: A Perspective from the Archives", in *The Makers & Keepers of Singapore History*, edited by Loh Kah Seng and Lai Kai Khiun (Singapore: Ethos Books/Singapore Heritage Society, 2010), pp. 48–66.
5. K.G. Tregonning, "Historical Background", in *Modern Singapore*, edited by Ooi Jin-bee and Chiang Hai Ding (Singapore: University of Singapore Press, 1969), p. 14.
6. J.N. Miksic, *Archaeological Research on the "Forbidden Hill" of Singapore: Excavations at Fort Canning 1984* (Singapore: National Museum 1985). See also Miksic's more personal recollections and reflections of that excavation in his "Singapore's Archaeological Heritage: What Has Been Saved?", in *Rethinking Cultural Resource Management in Southeast Asia: Preservation, Development, and Neglect*, edited by J.N. Miksic et al. (London: Anthem, 2011), pp. 217–34.
7. J.N. Miksic, *Singapore and the Silk Road of the Sea, 1300–1800* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2013) is a summation of some twenty years of excavations.
8. Quoted from the C.C. Brown translation, "Sejarah Melayu: A Translation of Raffles MS 18 (in the Library of the R.A.S., London)", *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 35 nos. 2–3 (1952): 31.
9. D. Heng, "Temasik as an International and Regional Trading Port in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries", *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 72, no. 1 (1999) 113–24; also his "Situating Temasik within the Larger Regional Context: Maritime Asia and Malay State Formation in the Pre-Modern era", in *Singapore in Global History*, edited by D. Heng and Syed Muhd. Khairudin Aljunied (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011), pp. 27–50.
10. D. Heng, "Ships, Shipwrecks, and Archaeological Recoveries as Sources of Southeast Asian History", in *Oxford Research Encyclopedias, Asian History*, edited by D. Luddens (Oxford University Press, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277727.013.97>.
11. Kwa Chong Guan, "Locating Singapore on the Maritime Silk Road: Evidence from Maritime Archaeology, Ninth to Early Nineteenth Centuries", Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre Working Paper no. 10 (January 2012).
12. See also Michael Flecker, "Early Voyaging in the South China Sea: Implications on Territorial Claims", Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre Working Paper no. 19 (August 2015).
13. Lim Chen Sian, "Preliminary Report on the Archaeological Investigations at the National Gallery Singapore", Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre Archaeology Report Series no. 5 (January 2017); Lim Chen Sian, "Preliminary Report on the Archaeological Investigations at the Victoria Concert Hall", Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre Archaeology Report Series no. 9 (January 2019).
14. Lim Chen Sian, Duncan H. Brown, D. Heng, Frank M. Meddens, and J.N. Miksic, "Archiving Archaeological Materials", Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre Archaeology Unit Archaeology Report Series no. 7 (December 2017); also

- M. Flecker, *Legislation on Underwater Cultural Heritage in Southeast Asia: Evolution and Outcomes*, Trends in Southeast Asia no. 23/2017 (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2017).
15. R. Winstedt, *A History of Malaya*, rev. ed. (Singapore: Marican & Sons, 1962), p. 41.
 16. For example, Ahmat Adam, *Antara Sejarah dan Mitos: Sejarah Melayu & Hang Tuah dalam Historiografi Malaysia* (Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, 2016).
 17. O.W. Wolters, *The Fall of Śrīvijaya in Malay History* (London: Lund Humphries; Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University, 1970). Kwa Chong Guan, “Singapura as a Central Place in Malay History and Identity”, in *Singapore from Temasek to the 21st Century: Reinventing the Global City*, edited by Karl Hack and Jean-Louis Margolin, with Karine Delaye (Singapore: NUS Press, 2010), pp. 133–54.
 18. The contested heritage of Nalanda Mahavihara, revived in 2010 as Nalanda University, is examined in the essays in *Records, Recoveries, Remnants and Inter-Asian Interconnections: Decoding Cultural Heritage*, edited by Anjana Sharma (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2018).
 19. Tansen Sen, “Buddhism and the Maritime Crossings”, in *China and beyond in the Medieval Period: Cultural Crossings and Inter-regional Connections*, edited by D.C. Wong and G. Heldt (New Delhi: Manohar for Cambria Press and NSC ISEAS, 2014), pp. 39–62; also Tansen Sen, “Maritime Southeast Asia between South Asia and China to the Sixteenth Century”, *TRaNS: Trans-Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia* 2, no. 1 (2014), pp. 31–50.
 20. A. Acri, ed., *Esoteric Buddhism in Medieval Maritime Asia: Networks of Masters, Texts, Icons* (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2016); also A. Acri, “The Place of Nusantara in the Sanskrit Buddhist Cosmopolis”, *TRaNS* 6, no. 2 (2018), 139–65.
 21. Note also his “Sang Sapurba/Maulivarmadeva, First of the Last Indo-Malay Kings”, *NSC Highlights* 12 (May 2019), pp. 6–8.
 22. L. Andaya, *Leaves of the Same Tree: Trade and Ethnicity in the Straits of Melaka* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008), chapter 6 elaborates on the vital role of the *orang laut* in the maritime realm of the Malay sultans.
 23. Tregonning, in “A New Approach to Malayan History”, *Straits Times*, 21 November 1958, was taking to its logical conclusion the argument of the Dutch socio-economic historian Jacob C. van Leur, who had written a series of polemical articles about the writing of Dutch East Indies history as a young Dutch colonial official in the 1930s, before he died in action during World War II. Van Leur argued that it was wrong to write the history of the East Indies as a part of Dutch history. Van Leur argued that there was an “autonomous” Asian world, and he called for the study of Asia's history from within that world. The posthumous publication of a selection of van Leur's writings in English in 1955 as *Indonesian Trade and Society: Essays in Asian Social and Economic History* (The Hague:

- van Hoeve, 1955) started a historiographical controversy that reverberates to this day.
24. Not including a comprehensive survey of “Some Aspects of Portuguese Historical Writing of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries on South East Asia”, in *Historians of South East Asia: Historical Writing on the Peoples of Asia*, edited by D.G.E. Hall (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), pp. 172–99,
 25. I.A. Mcgregor, C.A. Gibson-Hill, and G. de G. Sieveking, “Papers on Johore Lama and the Portuguese in Malaya (1511–1641)”, *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 28, no. 2 (1955).
 26. P. Borschberg, *The Singapore and Melaka Straits: Violence, Security and Diplomacy in the 17th Century* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2010).
 27. P. Borschberg, “Chartered Companies and Empire”, in *Empire in Asia: A New Global History*, vol. 1, *From Chinggisid to Qing*, edited by J. Fairey and B.P. Farrell (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), pp. 269–94. Sanjay Subrahmanyam leads the argument for connected histories of Asia; see for example his *Empires between Islam & Christianity, 1500–1800* (Delhi: Permanent Black; New York: SUNY Press, 2019).
 28. Borschberg’s “Singapore’s Longer History”, *Jahrbuch für Europäische Überseegeschichte* 19 (2019), elaborates on issues of Singapore’s “strategic location” in its longer history.
 29. In his essay “Singapore Prior to 1819” for the volume celebrating the centennial of Singapore’s founding, *One Hundred Years of Singapore*, edited by Walter Makepeace et al. (1921; repr., Singapore: Oxford University Press 1991), pp. 1–5.
 30. See D. Heng, “Premodern Island-Southeast Asian History in the Digital Age: Opportunities and Challenges through Chinese Textual Database Research”, *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 175 (2019): 29–57 on new ways of accessing the Chinese texts today.
 31. C.O. Blagden, “Notes on Malay history”, *Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* no. 53 (1909), pp. 139–62.
 32. J.V. Mills, *Ma Huan*; Ying-yai Sheng-lan, *The Overall Survey of the Ocean’s Shores* [1433], Hakluyt Society Extra Series no. 42 (Cambridge: University Press, 1970), appendix 2, “The Mao K’un Map”, pp. 236–303.
 33. Geoffrey Gobble, “Maritime Southeast Asia: The View from Tang-Song China”, Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre Working Paper Series no. 16 (May 2014).
 34. Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore 1819–2005* (Singapore, NUS Press, 2009), p. 4.