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## **Shipwrecks and the Maritime History of Singapore**

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# Shipwrecks and the Maritime History of Singapore

edited by **Kwa Chong Guan**

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# Foreword

On 18 May 2015, marine salvage master Mr Ramdzan Salim informed our Archaeology Unit (AU) about a possible historic shipwreck he had found during salvage work on a capsized barge in the vicinity of Pedra Branca. In his email were photographs of coral-encrusted green plates that he had recovered from the seabed. Dr Michael Flecker and the staff of the AU had no difficulty identifying the coral-encrusted plates as fourteenth-century celadon plates from the Longquan kilns in Zhejiang Province, China. Our AU colleagues met Mr Salim and one of his divers on 22 May to confirm the finds and its location.

A year-long process of discussions and planning with the National Heritage Board (NHB) followed before an exploratory survey was launched to confirm that the recovered Chinese celadons were part of the cargo of a ship that had sunk in the vicinity of Pedra Branca. Thereafter the NHB commissioned the AU to undertake the excavation of the wreck over the next three years.

Dr Flecker's essay in this volume summarizes the results of this three-year archaeological excavation of the shipwreck, which recovered some four tonnes of Chinese ceramics. A follow-up survey of the vicinity located another shipwreck, which was excavated from 2019 to 2021 and has been identified as an eighteenth-century country trader.

The essays in this book by Temasek History Research Centre (THRC) alumni are the first to provide a historical context of these two shipwrecks since the public announcement of their discovery on 16 June 2021. These essays developed from presentations at a THRC webinar on these two shipwrecks in early April 2022. I would like to thank my colleagues for accepting our invitation to share their preliminary ideas on these two wrecks with a wider audience.

The excavation of these two historic shipwrecks was the most complex and longest archaeological investigation undertaken by the AU

since its establishment in 2010. To be sure, archaeological excavations in Singapore began relatively late, in 1984 on Fort Canning. Thus far, the AU has undertaken excavations at Fort Canning Hill, Empress Place, Adam Park, the National Gallery Singapore and the Victoria Memorial Hall.

The AU has also participated in field schools with archaeological institutions in Cambodia and Indonesia. These field schools have brought together young scholars and archaeologists from Southeast Asia to network, cooperate and learn from each other in investigating archaeological sites in Phnom Kulen at Angkor, Banten Lama in West Java and Trawas in East Java.

The discovery of not one but two historic shipwrecks opens a new chapter in Singapore's archaeology, one that takes it beyond Fort Canning and its environs into the seas around Singapore. These two shipwrecks, as the essays in this volume outline, open new vistas for our understanding of Singapore's pre-modern and modern history. But much more research needs to be done to augment the arguments developed in these essays, which are based on the preliminary reports of the excavation of these two wrecks by Dr Flecker. The bulk of the artefacts recovered from these two wrecks are currently being cleaned and sorted, and they await analysis. The AU is committed to documenting these two wrecks and making the findings available for others to consult.

On behalf of the AU, I would like to thank NHB for supporting and underwriting the excavation of the two wrecks and other government agencies for their support and advice.

I am grateful to Mr Ramdzan Salim and his colleagues, who were sufficiently sharp-eyed to notice the stacks of coral-encrusted plates around the capsized barge they were salvaging as possibly significant historical artefacts and bring them to our attention. Their civic-mindedness has allowed us to conduct these maritime excavations and open up new understanding and framings of Singapore's past.

Finally, my thanks also to Adjunct Associate Professor Kwa Chong Guan, our Associate Fellow, whose energy and drive have made the webinars and this book possible. Adjunct Associate Professor Kwa's intellectual leadership has been vital to this project. I am also grateful to our Research Officers Benjamin Khoo and Fong Sok Eng for their stellar work behind the scenes.

Terence Chong  
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Director, Research, and Deputy Chief Executive, ISEAS

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## **Peter Borschberg**

Peter Borschberg teaches history at NUS. He has authored several studies on pre-1800 Singapore and the Straits region, including *The Singapore and Melaka Straits: Violence, Security and Diplomacy in the 17th Century* (2010), *Singapore in the Cycles of the Longue Durée* (JMBRAS, 2017) and *The Port of Singapore c.1290–1819: Evidence, Frameworks and Challenges* (JMBRAS, 2018).

## **Michael Flecker**

Michael Flecker, Managing Director of Maritime Explorations, has overseen some of the most important shipwreck excavations in Asia over the past thirty years. They include the ninth-century Belitung (Tang), twelfth-century Flying Fish, thirteenth-century Java Sea, fifteenth-century Bakau, c.1608 Binh Thuan and c.1690 Vung Tau wrecks. He earned his PhD from the National University of Singapore based on the excavation of the tenth-century Intan Wreck, and he specializes

in ancient Asian ship construction and maritime trade. He has twice been a Visiting Fellow at the Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre and is presently a Senior Visiting Fellow at the Archaeology Unit, ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute.

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Derek Heng is currently Professor and Department Chair at the Department of History, Northern Arizona University. He was Associate Professor of Humanities and Head of Studies (History) at Yale-NUS College and was previously Head of NSC from January 2014 to July 2015. He specializes in the trans-regional history of Maritime Southeast Asia and the South China Sea during the first and early second millennia AD, and is the author of *Sino-Malay Trade and Diplomacy in the Tenth through the Fourteenth Century* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2009) and co-author of *Seven Hundred Years: A History of Singapore* (Singapore: National Library Board, 2019). He has also authored a number of journal articles and book chapters on the Chinese material remains recovered from archaeological sites in Southeast Asia, as well as having edited three volumes on the history and historiography of Singapore's past. He is currently working on methods in integrating archaeological data from Southeast Asia with Chinese digital textual databases. He maintains a keen interest on the historiography of Singapore, and he has edited *New Perspectives and Sources on the History of Singapore: A Multi-Disciplinary Approach* (Singapore: National Library Board, 2006), *Reframing Singapore: Memory, Identity and Trans-Regionalism*, ICAS Series volume 6 (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009) and *Singapore in Global History* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011).

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