



Shipwrecks and the Maritime History of Singapore

edited by Kwa Chong Guan, Singapore, ISEAS Publishing, 2023, 114pp., 38
figs, most in colour, \$45.00 (hbk), ISBN 9789815104271

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The seven chapters of this book were presented in the April 2022 webinar entitled ‘Situating Two Historical Shipwrecks in Singapore Waters: Findings and Implications’. The first of the two shipwrecks referred to in the title of both the webinar and this book carried 14th-century materials from China and has been dubbed the Temasek Wreck due to its proximity to and the assumption that it was heading for Temasek, a settlement located in present-day Singapore. The second was identified as the China–India trading ship *Shah Muncher* that sank in 1796. Both shipwrecks were found in the rocky outcrops off Singapore’s easternmost island, Pedra Branca, located about 15 km southeast of the Malay Peninsula at the eastern portion of the Singapore Strait. The shipwrecks mark Singapore’s first foray into conducting underwater archaeological surveys and excavations.

The projects came about when, in 2015, a salvor retrieving a capsized barge reported sighting what he believed to be an antiquated shipwreck. This was soon confirmed by the Archaeology Unit (AU) of the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, a government research institution, which was eventually commissioned by the National Heritage Board to excavate the site of the Temasek shipwreck in 2016 and further survey the area in 2019, leading to the detection and eventual excavation of the second shipwreck, *Shah Muncher*.

The first chapter and introduction, entitled ‘Two Historical Shipwrecks and Their Implications for Singapore History’, is by the book’s editor, Kwa Chong Guan, who provides the background of the projects as well as an overview of the still-unanswered questions about the young city-state’s maritime past, and specifically the role it played as a possible port city to regional trade prior to the European presence in Southeast Asia. This chapter would have greatly benefitted from maps illustrating the routes and localities mentioned here, to help guide readers that are not familiar with the history and geography of Singapore. While the book does include 38 figures, none are included in this chapter. A description or definition of what and where Temasek was in the 14th century would have also helped – that does not come until much later in chapter 3, where we begin to understand the sense in naming a shipwreck of that period after it.

Chapter 2, ‘The Temasek Wreck’, is by Michael Flecker, who directed the archaeological shipwreck operations for the AU. The chapter summarizes the full excavation report which can be accessed online on the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute website. Moreover, Flecker compares the Temasek wreck cargo with those of other shipwrecks from the region that date to between the 13th and

15th centuries. Based on the ship’s surviving load reportedly of exclusively Chinese origin (no hull remains were found), including 3.5 tonnes (reported as 4.4 tonnes in chapter 1) of ceramics, the wreckage was dated using stylistic analysis of ceramic designs to between 1340 and 1371 CE, conservatively, with the latter date coinciding with the start of the so-called Ming ban that prohibited private foreign trade, precluding such a large amount of Chinese wares being exported. Flecker cautiously proposes the possibility of using the much tighter range of 1340–1352 CE, when the Yuan Dynasty motif of ducks in a lotus pond on blue and white porcelain were produced in Jingdezhen kilns. This is reported as the predominant motif found among the Temasek shipwreck remains and is also common in Singapore’s terrestrial archaeology; the same goes with other ceramic types and forms from the shipwreck, suggesting that the ship, speculated to be a Chinese junk, was headed there to trade. The proportion of Yuan-period blue and white porcelain found on the Temasek wreck is thus far unmatched in other known shipwrecks. Other observations lead Flecker to hypothesise that the wreck’s cargo was bound for Singapore not as transshipment but as the main market for its rich residents. These are an absence of large blue and white dishes both from the shipwreck and from Singapore terrestrial sites, as well as the absence of Yuan blue and white wares in ‘northern Sumatra, or along the eastern shores of the Melaka Strait and the Bay of Bengal’ (p. 27). Because it isn’t mentioned, the reader would have to imagine that this also applies to sites along the Andaman Sea.

Chapter 3, by Derek Heng, provides much information that should have been introduced at the very beginning of the book, providing the temporal and geographic boundaries for Temasek. Heng describes Temasek as a port-polity on the north bank of the Singapore River that thrived between the late 13th and early 15th centuries. Entitled the ‘International History of Temasek: Possibilities for Research Emerging from the Discovery of the Temasek Wreck’, the chapter discusses how the Temasek shipwreck materials highlight the potential to expand ongoing studies beyond Temasek’s premodern local histories to interrogate more precisely the role of Temasek within the international economy. Heng specifically suggests that shipwrecks can elucidate Temasek’s status as a market for local consumption, rather than as an entrepôt.

Chapter 4, ‘Singapore’s Waterways before the Modern Era’, refers specifically to the Singapore Strait that runs between Singapore off the Malay Peninsula and the Riau Islands of Indonesia, as well as the Old, New, Tebaru, and Governor’s Straits. All these waterways are collectively referred to as the Singapore Straits (plural). Author Benjamin J.Q. Khoo outlines descriptions found on historical texts to introduce how the straits were used (or avoided) in the past to navigate to premodern Singapore. The chapter is supplemented by several

old maps, which unfortunately are uncited in the text, inadequately captioned, and contain writing that is mostly too small to make sense of. A modern map of Singapore with the waterways' locations would have been a welcome addition.

Chapter 5, 'A Seventeenth-Century Port Settlement in the Kallang Estuary', is the second chapter written by editor Kwa Chong Guan and examines material evidence from Singapore's terrestrial sites dating to the 16th and 17th centuries and how these relate to brief historical references prior to its establishment as a British entrepôt. Again, an old map with the brief caption 'Map of Eredia, 1604' is provided, but the writing in it is too small to be of help in deciphering any of the numerous locations discussed. In any case, the chapter argues that by the 16th century Singapore was again rising as a regional centre for trade based on admittedly fragmentary evidence gleaned from maps, texts, and archaeology.

Chapter 6, 'The Shah Muncher' by Michael Flecker, discusses the discovery and excavation of Singapore's second archaeological shipwreck. The AU conducted surveys in the vicinity of the Temasek Wreck as the outcrops off Pedra Branca were an obvious hazard to passing ships. This was confirmed by archival reports listing 16 vessels that were lost there between 1824 and 1851 alone. While sonar and magnetometer surveys were found to be impractical here, diver visual surveys eventually led in 2019 to the remains of a shipwreck carrying 18th- to 19th-century materials that Flecker and the AU concluded was the merchant ship *Shah Muncher*, the only ship from that period documented to have been lost along that route while travelling from Canton to Bombay in January 1796. Seventeen week-long excavations were carried out in 2020 on the 'country ship', a term which refers to a privately-owned vessel licensed by the East India Company to trade within the Indian Ocean, Asia, and Australia. Though uncited here, the full report of the project is also available online on the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute website. Other than regularly sailing though 11 times before sinking in its present-day waters, *Shah Muncher's* records indicate it never stopped in Singapore – it was, after all, 23 years before Sir Stamford Raffles established the British-controlled port city. Regardless, Flecker emphasises that by this period Singapore was actively involved in regional trade.

The seventh chapter, 'Singapore and the Country Trade in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries' by Peter Borschberg, follows up on this idea by describing the economic and political context within which *Shah Muncher* and other country ships and traders were operating. This would eventually lead to the British need to gain strategic control of the region around the Singapore and Melaka Straits.

Overall, the book has some flaws. Regarding the figures included in the book, none are referred to or

cited in the text, nor are they listed in the front matter. Captions of old maps with indecipherable etchings are not descriptive enough to be very helpful. The book also includes two maps showing shipwreck locations in Southeast Asia. The first is found in the front matter and is simply labelled 'Major shipwrecks of Southeast Asia' without further explanation, marking 32 shipwrecks while excluding several notable sites in Thailand and the Philippines. On the other hand, figure 3.1 marks the location of 16 9th- to 15th-century 'shipwrecks in Southeast Asia and South China' but only includes nine out of the 23 9th- to 15th-century sites marked in the first map while adding another seven sites, some of which are arguably not shipwreck sites, but the wooden remnants of discarded old boats in inland sites. These are the Kolam Pinisi and Sambirejo sites, as well as the erroneously labelled 'Butuan Wreck' – there are actually several scattered sites of boat remains in that area of extinct river tributaries. This is also indicative of some unfamiliarity with other Southeast Asian shipwreck sites and publications related to them.

Despite its faults, this book is noteworthy for reporting the recent debut of Singapore in underwater archaeology projects, following the country's purchase of the Belitung or Tang shipwreck cargo from Indonesia in 2005. Maritime and underwater archaeology in Southeast Asia has generally been problematic. It is not uncommon, especially in the previous decades, for several developing countries in the region to have engaged in controversial activities such as commercial salvage or sharing schemes to recover valuable cargoes of ancient trading vessels, even if archaeological methods were adopted. It is also the reason that the statement in chapter 1 that, aside from the Temasek wreck, 'all other shipwrecks excavated ... carried large quantities of mass-produced Chinese ceramics' (p. 11) holds true; the financial backing of commercially minded groups has led to a bias towards only excavating shipwrecks with valuable cargoes while ignoring those without. The excavations and relatively fast publication of the Temasek and *Shah Muncher*, two shipwrecks whose cargoes were mostly smashed in their wrecking, is encouraging. This book is a good contribution to the increasing but still-rare trend in the region of conducting underwater archaeology for the sake of research, and it leads to a more wholistic understanding of the maritime cultures of Southeast Asia.

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