Archaeology and the Singapore River

By John Miksic

The Singapore River has been the island's beating heart for 700 years. More an estuary than a river, it provided a haven for ships in storms and led to the Forbidden Spring on one side of the Forbidden Hill (now called Fort Canning). This was a source of drinking water, a scarce commodity along the swampy coasts of the Johor-Riau area.

The south bank of the river was a swamp when the British arrived in 1819. The island's small population lived on the north bank and on boats in the river. This pattern had existed since the 14th Century.

At the mouth of the river a rocky point of land was marked by a large boulder. The rock had been split in two and a long inscription in ancient Malay script was carved on it. A few Sanskrit words were legible, but most of the text was indecipherable owing to weathering. All that can be said with certainty is that an ancient society set up a long proclamation at the entrance to the river.

FOM volunteer 'archaeologists' on site at Empress Place

A kilometre from the river's mouth, a palace and temple complex was built on the hill now called Fort Canning. This location suited ancient Malay beliefs about the importance of hills. Many stones inscribed with the Sanskrit word *siddhayatra*, signifying a pilgrimage to obtain good fortune, have been found on Seguntang Hill in Palembang, from whence Singapore's first ruler, Sri Tri Buana, is said to have come. The first British visitors found many remains on this hill: brick ruins, pottery, and ancient Chinese coins.

In 1984, archaeological research began on Fort Canning. Excavations along the Singapore River began a decade later. The first site explored was along North Bridge Road, between High Street and the Singapore River, where Singapore's new Parliament House complex was about to rise. The site yielded a rich array of finds. Some types of artefacts, such as Chinese porcelain and stoneware, were similar to those found on Fort Canning, but new finds also emerged. They included a range of copper and bronze objects that proved that the site had been used for making fish hooks and other metal objects.

A 14th-century stoneware sherd with stamp from Fort Canning

In 1998, a second site along the riverbank became available, beside the future Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) at Empress Place. From this a range of artefacts emerged, including Chinese, Thai and Vietnamese ceramics from the 15th and 16th Centuries. The site was probably used for loading and unloading ships; no doubt ancient warehouses stood where the ACM and Old Parliament House were later built.

The third opportunity to excavate close to the river arose in 2002, when the new Parliament House was ready and the Old Parliament House was converted for use by the Singapore Arts Council. Systematic excavations were limited by the renovation work proceeding at the same time, but construction workers were co-opted as informal assistants. They salvaged artefacts which they found and turned them over to the National Museum staff. These yielded the first intact 14th Century items ever found in Singapore: a set of 12 stoneware vessels termed 'small-mouth jars' by Chinese archaeologists. They are the most common type of artefact found in 14th Century sites in Singapore. Utilitarian rather than aesthetic, they have strong, thick bases. These jars were apparently so plentiful that they were treated as disposable objects, discarded while still intact.

Archaeology has shown that the Singapore River was a busy place from 1300 to 1600, with a variety of activities taking place there. Parallels with the modern period are obvious.

Professor John Miksic *is an Associate Professor in the Southeast Asian Studies Programme, National University of Singapore. Over the last 40 years he has been based in Southeast Asia, conducting archaeological and historical investigations in Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, Burma and Cambodia.*

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