

Buried stories

Artefacts unearthed and now displayed at the new Fort Canning Heritage Gallery reveal that Singapore was a bustling city 500 years before Stamford Raffles staked a claim on the island in 1819. **Chantal Sajan** reports. C4&5

Emeritus Professor John Miksic and Associate Professor Goh Geok Yian at the Fort Canning Heritage Gallery with 14th-century artefacts found in Fort Canning Park.





Chantal Sajan
Senior Correspondent

About 500 years before Stamford Raffles is said to have "founded" Singapore in 1819, the island had already been staked out by Malay kings as a globalised, cosmopolitan port city along the maritime Silk Road which linked East and West.



Archaeologist and historian Goh Geok Yan (top), who worked with Emeritus Professor John Miksic (above) on several excavation sites on Fort Canning, says 1299 is the earliest date of ancient Singapore, based on artefacts unearthed and after factoring in the reigns of five Malay kings.

Prof Miksic started excavation work in 1984 on Fort Canning hill and was joined by Prof Goh in 1991 when she was an undergraduate student. There are now more than 30,000 artefacts which have been identified and stored by the National Parks Board (NParks).

A fraction of this trove of local history was showcased last Friday at the opening of the Fort Canning Heritage Gallery. The gallery takes up about two levels in the conserved Fort Canning Centre, which was built in 1926 by the British as army barracks.

Mr Ryan Lee, group director of Fort Canning Park at NParks, says the gallery is a great addition to the museums and heritage galleries of the Civic District in Singapore. "We hope that visitors of all ages will use the gallery as an orientation point when visiting Fort Canning Park," he says.

NParks also launched a 350 sq m Spice Gallery in the park's Spice Garden, which takes visitors down a scented trek through the history of Singapore's earliest spice trade.

Some of the artefacts recently excavated from Fort Canning Hill date back about 700 years and are on display at the Fort Canning Heritage Gallery. ST PHOTO: FELINE LIM



Fragments of the past

Exhibition of artefacts unearthed at Fort Canning sheds light on Singapore's 700-year history

According to the story that the artefacts pieced together, Singapore was originally founded by Malay monarch Sang Nila Utama. He was believed to have been a "god-king" with special powers

because he could trace his ancestry back to the legendary Greek conqueror Alexander the Great.

After becoming king of Palembang, home of an ancient kingdom in south Sumatra, he took the title

Sri Tri Buana or "King of the Three Worlds", alluding to his demi-god ancestry and seeing himself as part of the Buddhist milieu of the 14th century.

In 1299, he moved to Singapore and changed the island's name from Temasek to "Singapura", which in the ancient Sanskrit Indian language means "Lion City", after he chanced on an Asiatic lion that he believed the gods had sent him as an auspicious sign.

After his death in 1347, Singapura was ruled by four kings till around 1390, according to the literary classic *Sejarah Melayu* or Malay Annals. The ruling elite established its royal residences on a lofty perch on Fort Canning Hill, which was later called Bukit Larangan or Forbidden Hill.

When Raffles arrived, he was told that this was because, in ancient times, it was forbidden to ascend the hill without permission from the king. Although there were no more kings in Singapura at the time, the common folk still had to stay away from the hill.

The archaeological work by Prof Miksic and his team showed that Singapore was always a very open society. The inhabitants included indigenous Malay peoples from the archipelago, Chinese traders, Malay merchants, Indian businessmen and European mariners who lived in harmony to get the port humming with efficiency.

"We can see this confluence of cultures in ancient Singapura through the artefacts such as the 14th-century Yuhuchun bottle neck, which is part of a Yuan Dynasty blue-and-white porcelain container found in the most recent excavation in 2019. It is the type of object one would find only in a palace or residence of a high-status person," says Prof Miksic, 75, who was born in Rochester, New York, in the United States, and obtained his PhD from Cornell University.

He has been part of archaeological expeditions in Sumatra from 1976, as well as excavated in prominent sites such as Borobudur and the capital of the Majapahit empire at Trowulan. He is also the author of *Singapore And The Silk Road Of The Sea, 1300-1800*, released in 2013.

Fort Canning Hill is not the only place where he believes relics of ancient Singapore lie buried.

"The area along the Singapore River bank and the ancient shoreline has been explored, but there is still a large area of the ancient city of Temasek which has not been investigated yet, such as the stretch from Hill Street to St Andrew's Cathedral.

"The sites we have found so far were the palace (Fort Canning), a metal-working community (Parliament House Complex, Colombo Court, the Singapore Cricket Club), and possibly a residential area (St Andrew's Cathedral).

"We would like to have more information through future excavations about the north-eastern third of the city. We also hope to find sites in other parts of Singapore."

According to Professor Kwa Chong Guan, a senior fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, the island was not always a thriving port city.

He says archaeological and textual evidence show that Singapore was a thriving port city at only four points in time: in the 13th century when it was known as Temasek; in the 17th century when there was a port settlement in the Kallang estuary; from the late 19th century to 1942 as a British colony, and as a city state after 1965.

"Singapore's future was very uncertain in the intervening centuries when the cycles of trade and political power were shifting," says Prof Kwa, who co-authored *Seven Hundred Years: A History Of Singapore* with Professors Derek Heng, Peter Borschberg and Tan Tai Yong in 2019.

"Like its predecessor port settlements up the Johor River, and in the earlier seventh to 12th centuries, at Srivijaya and Melaka in the 15th century, Singapore's fortunes depended on its trading communities and their leaders to adapt to these shifts of cycles of trade and power.

"Are we today on the cusp of another major shift in the cycles of trade and geopolitical power in the South China Sea and the Bay of Bengal? Will Singapore as a global city be able to ride out the shifting cycles of trade and power now swirling around it?"

AN OPEN AND CONNECTED PORT CITY

While the island saw ebbs and flows in its fortunes, it was a globalised, cosmopolitan society, which might have been plugged into the latest trends and ideas that blew in with the tradewinds.

Prof Goh says other than trade items, the rulers and inhabitants would have engaged in an exchange of ideas and potentially some form of technological know-how, such as in goldsmithing and metalworking, and other activities which might not have been preserved in the archaeological record due to their perishable nature.

"The exchange of ideas can only be hypothesised as we have few records contemporary to 14th-century Singapura," says the history lecturer at the School of Humanities in Nanyang Technological University. "The fact that brick remains have been found on Fort Canning demonstrates that the island's elite, as well as a portion of the population, would have formed part of the Buddhist world and community of the 14th century."

The brick remains provide a link to Singapore's earliest history.

Prof Goh says that when John Crawfurd, the second British Resident of Singapore who worked with Raffles, saw brick ruins on Fort Canning in 1822, he conjectured that some were remains of Buddhist temples.

One was probably a stupa, a major symbol of Buddhism. There are many brick ruins of 14th-century Buddhist structures in Sumatra. Singapore was part of the larger Buddhist world, which stretched from Bali through Java into mainland South-east Asia.

Singapura's local populace might also have had access to a wide range of goods and products, judging by the artefacts unearthed between 1300 and 1600.

"There is tangible evidence that Singapore enjoyed high visitorship, either as a result of trade or diplomatic missions or other reasons, and in some cases, these individuals or groups settled down here," says Prof Goh.

"We cannot be sure of how sizeable the Chinese population was, but if we were to go with the accounts of 14th-century Chinese merchant-writer Wang Dayuan in his book, *Daoyi Zhilue* (Brief Account Of Island Barbarians), it was significant enough to be notable.

"The text used by the earliest inhabitants of Singapura would have likely contained, like other contemporary examples in Sumatra, a mixture of various languages, but rendered largely in Old Malay," she says.

In terms of technology, the dig site Prof Miksic found and began excavating in 1984 has since 2019 been named Artisan's Garden. The name, Prof Goh says, is "an apt description of the crafts workshop on Fort Canning, where craftsmen were not only working with gold but also recycling glass to make glass accessories and ornaments".

She adds: "At archaeological sites such as at Parliament House Complex and Singapore Cricket Club, there was evidence of metalworking such as making fish-hooks and other implements, as well as metal recycling such as re-smelting of coins.

"Singapore from the 14th century was tuned into the ins and outs of the South-east Asian region, which is why it is important to look at individual archaeological sites, as well as compare the range of activities that can be gleaned from analysing the archaeological data from different Singapore sites.

"By expanding our comparison further, we can compare Singapore's artefacts with that of our contemporaries in the South-east Asian region and further afield."

chantal@sph.com.sg

• Admission to the Fort Canning Heritage Gallery is free. Go to nparks.gov.sg

Historical marvels Here are five highlights from the ongoing exhibition of artefacts at the Fort Canning Heritage Gallery

YUHUCHUN BOTTLE NECK

Emeritus Professor John Miksic says this is an example of early 14th-century Yuan Dynasty blue-and-white porcelain, found in the most recent excavation in 2019.

It is the type of object one would find only in a palace or the residence of a person of high status.

ST PHOTOS:
FELINE LIM



COMPASS BOWL

This is, so far, the only example of an ancient Chinese compass made of porcelain. The Chinese are believed to have invented the compass, which they called the “south-pointing needle”, says Prof Miksic. They used a needle magnetised with lodestar, a type of stone. They then pierced a cork with the needle and let it float freely on a bowl of water or mercury. The needle naturally aligns itself with the planet’s magnetic field. This 14th-century artefact is rare because most Chinese compasses were made of bronze.





BRICK

The British found many brick ruins on Bukit Larangan, but it was not mentioned, says Prof Miksic, suggesting that the bricks were reused elsewhere.

The fragment in the display dates to around the 19th century.

The size of the original brick was about 30cm by 15cm, much larger than modern ones, and of a size similar to bricks used in Sumatra and Java at the time.



EARTHENWARE RIM

This is the rim of an earthenware vessel that was likely once used for cooking in the 14th century. The entire rim was pieced together from several shards found during archaeological excavations at Fort Canning Park.



INDIAN GLASS BANGLE

This bangle is made of glass of five colours and dates back to the late 13th century.

Two other fragments of similar bangles have been found at Empress Place and St Andrew’s Cathedral.



The 3,200 sq m Spice Garden, which features more than 180 varieties of plants, is one of nine historical gardens launched in 2019 by the National Parks Board.

ST PHOTOS:
NG SOR LUAN

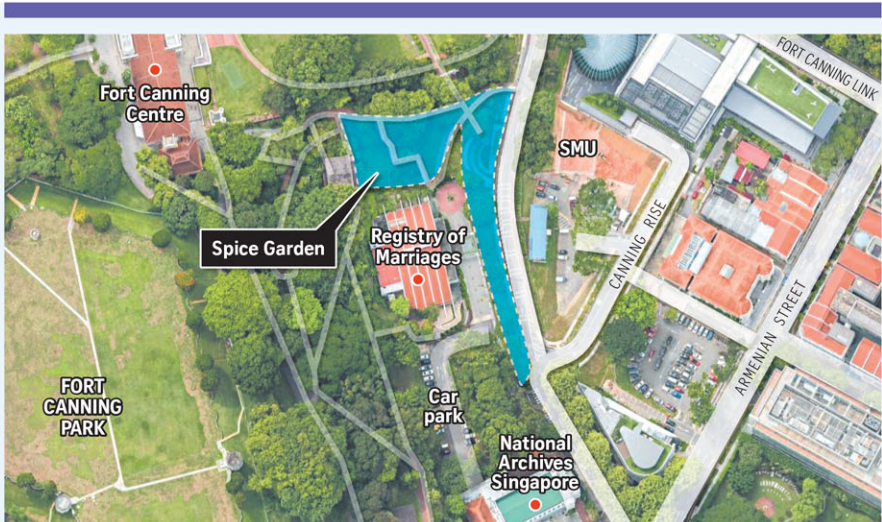


PHOTO: GOOGLE MAPS STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

Diverse delights of the Spice Garden

Sir Walter Raleigh, the well-known 17th-century British explorer and favourite courtier of Queen Elizabeth I, famously said: “Whoever commands the sea, commands the trade; whosoever commands the trade of the world commands the riches of the world, and consequently the world itself.”

The big powers then – such as the Portuguese, Dutch and British – wanted to be masters and commanders of the high seas and spice was one of the most prized commodities.

When the British arrived in 1819, they found gambier and pepper plantations already carved out on the slopes of hills near the source of the Singapore River. They also found a garden at the foot of the Forbidden Hill (today’s Armenian Street) where very old rambutan, durian, duku and pomelo trees grew.

They set up their own experimental spice plantations on the eastern slopes of the hill in 1822, hoping to turn Singapore into a “spice island”. This small plantation still exists in the Spice Garden at Fort Canning Park.

The 3,200 sq m spice garden, which features more than 180 varieties of plants, is one of nine historical gardens launched in 2019 by the National Parks Board. It is now also Singapore’s most diverse spice garden.

There are three zones: the existing Spice Garden area, Canning Rise – which was pedestrianised in 2019 – and the new Spice Gallery.

Important species include gambier (Uncaria gambir) and pepper (Piper nigrum), which were the earliest commercial crops in Singapore, predating the arrival of the British in 1819.

Spice trees such as the nutmeg (*Myristica fragrans*) and clove (*Syzygium aromaticum*) are also featured in the Spice Garden, as they played an important role as the main commercial spice crops in Singapore after the first botanical and experimental garden was set up.

There is also a Spice Gallery at the foot of the Spice Garden. It is located within a pedestrian ramp and underpass with three displays of colonial-era shophouse facades, featuring units that resemble a traditional spice shop, a spice trading office and a coffee shop.

Singapore’s oldest traders of spices, nuts and dried fruit, Nomanbhoy & Sons, founded in 1914, supported the gallery through a donation. The firm started out in Malacca Street, trading in pepper from Sarawak, assorted spices from Indonesia and cloves from Madagascar and Zanzibar.

From the 1950s, the company started selling to a global network that included clients in the United States and Europe.

Chantal Sajan

- The Spice Gallery is open daily from 7am to 7pm and admission is free. Go to nparks.gov.sg



The new Fort Canning Spice Gallery, located at the foot of the Spice Garden, used to be a tunnel.