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**Between Two Mandalas: Singapore, Siam, and Java**  
**(The Benjamin Batson Memorial Lecture 2005)**

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## Between Two Mandalas: Singapore, Siam, and Java

### (The Benjamin Batson Memorial Lecture 2005)

**John Miksic**

In the fourteenth century, a large part of Southeast Asia fell under the sway of two major empires: Majapahit in Java, and, after 1351, Ayudhya in Thailand. Archaeological research over the past 20 years has shown that Singapore experienced its first period of prosperity during this century. In this lecture, I will examine ancient Singapore's relations with these two empires, and with its other neighbours in Southeast Asia

Prof. Lau, your Excellency the ambassador of the kingdom of Thailand; friends, ladies and gentlemen. I would like to thank the Department of History for inviting me to present this year's Ben Batson memorial lecture. It is an honour to join the list of illustrious scholars who have performed this function in the past, but to emulate their eloquence renders my present task rather daunting. My pleasure in being here stems from another source beyond professional recognition. The bonds of affection and loyalty which Americans tend to forge with universities are perhaps unique. Like Ben, I have come to identify in a way which is perhaps peculiarly American with the university at which he taught, and where I have worked for the past 19 years. The invitation to speak tonight gives me a chance to express my gratitude for the opportunity which has been mine to be a part of this institution for so long.

In America, the most vivid outward sign of identification between individuals and their universities comes in the form of often vociferous support for athletic teams. Yet it would be completely wrong to conclude that this is the only or even the principal point at which Americans form emotional ties to universities. The amount of money and other items which graduates donate to their old schools for such academic purposes as libraries and scholarships provides one of the main sources of support for many universities, both famous and not so well known.

I am very happy that I stand here as a result of the fact that NUS is capable of inspiring such affection in an American lecturer, namely Ben. I think I may speak for many other lecturers here, whether Singaporeans or expatriates, when I express my pride in being associated with an institution which a recent study found to rank among the top universities in the world. While a large portion of the credit for this situation is due to the liberal funding provided by the government, for which we lecturers are certainly grateful especially when it comes to support for our research or for needy students, our sentimental attachment to NUS derives not from that largesse, but from the atmosphere of intellectual inquiry which exists between us and our students. This is perhaps not the case in every faculty of the university, but it is definitely true for those of us for whom Singapore and its region, Southeast Asia, forms our chosen field of study, our laboratory. Ben felt this way, and I am not *malu*<sup>1</sup> to say that I do too.

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<sup>1</sup> Malay for "embarrassed" (editor's note).

One might accuse Ben and me of being examples of old-fashioned Orientalists, who use Southeast Asia as a convenient screen on which to project our own fantasies, our imaginary dreams of a life which never existed, romanticising the past.



Both Ben and I possess one good defence against this charge. We both served as Peace Corps volunteers, Ben in Thailand, me in Malaysia, specifically the state of Kedah which of course lies on the Thai border.



Thus we both spent our formative years in Asia not in centres of elaborate court culture, but among people at lower rungs of society: young teachers in Ben's case, rice farmers and agricultural extension workers in mine. We both also had the good fortune to be exposed to the region in the 1960s, before western media and all that they symbolize of globalization, penetrated every corner of the world.



During my attachment in Kedah, I took several opportunities to visit Thailand and Indonesia. Later, as a graduate student, I undertook the translation of a Malay text, the *Sejarah Kerajaan Malayu Patani*, as an exercise in learning Jawi, Malay language written in Arabic script. I also had the chance to study a collection of glazed pottery from Muang Phan, northern Thailand, acquired by Professor Lauriston Sharp; this study resulted in my first published journal article, in 1977 in the *Journal of the Siam Society*.



Figure 22. D 7.7 cm, h 8.9 cm;  
mouth d 5.0 cm

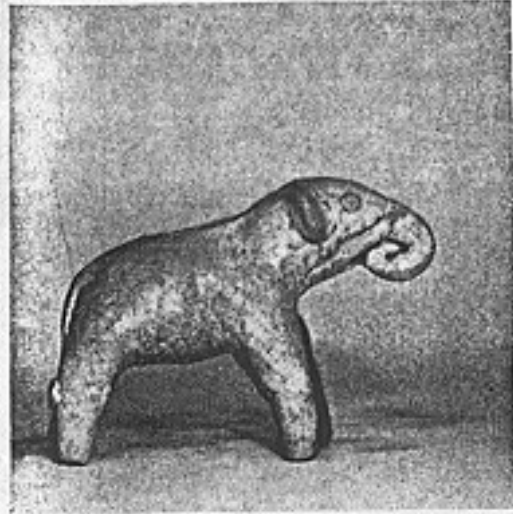


Figure 25. L 11 cm, h 7.8 cm



Figure 24. L 15 cm, h 14.5 cm



Figure 27. D 10 cm, h 12 cm

Had I been assigned to Thailand rather than Malaysia, no doubt I would have become a specialist in that country. As things worked out, I ended up slightly further south. After four years in Malaysia, I spent a further nine years in Indonesia before moving to Singapore in 1987. Nevertheless I continue to follow the work of my Thai colleagues with great interest. Their research on such subjects as early metal-working has excited worldwide interest.



Excavation at Fort Canning, Singapore

[

I first began turning over the soil of Singapore in 1984, at the invitation of the National Museum, and much to my surprise the archaeology of this city-state has kept me, as well as a whole cadre of students and volunteers, busy ever since.

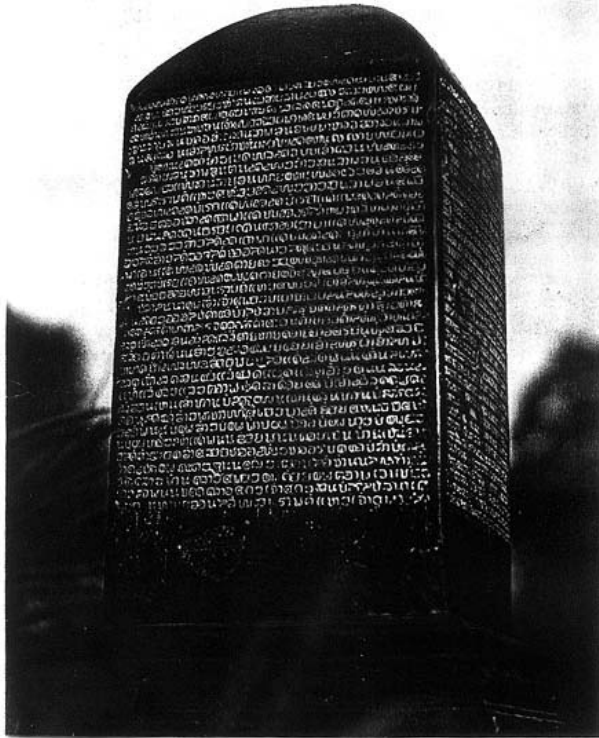




Fig. 4.01 Archaeological sites in 14th-Century Singapore.

We have now excavated over a dozen sites on this island, seven of which lie within the bounds of a busy trading port which in the early 14<sup>th</sup> century went through something of a golden age. We now know that the stereotype of Singapore as never more than a sleepy fishing village detached from the history of ancient Asia is completely wrong. Indeed, almost at the same time as Inscription number 1 was carved in Thailand praising Ram Khamheng and his kingdom of Sukhothai, Raden Wijaya was founding Majapahit in East Java, Marco Polo was sailing back to Italy via the Straits of Melaka, and Singapore experienced the first stirrings of prosperity.

# There once was a King, a stone... and free trade.



King Ramkhamhaeng's proclamation in support of free trade, from the 13th century, in the Kingdom of Sukothai.

In the kingdom of Sukothai\*, the great Thai warrior King Ramkhamhaeng proclaimed free trade with these words "Abundant fish in the rivers and rice in the paddy fields, whosoever wants to trade, trades". That was in AD 1283, almost 500 years before Adam Smith established political economy as a separate science or Vincent de Gournay coined the phrase "Laissez-Faire". Lest his words be forgotten, the great king had them carved in stone as part of his famous proclamation.

Thailand has not forgotten. For a nation's economy derives its strength and vitality from free trade. Thailand today, in moving away from a traditional agricultural economy into industry, is experiencing steady economic growth. Export earnings for 1979, for example, were US\$ 5,341,000,000 an increase of 28.6% over 1978.

Thailand has been able to sustain such growth because of a number of factors; a skilled, relatively low cost, labour force; a dynamic trading policy with nations near and far; and an atmosphere conducive to foreign investment.

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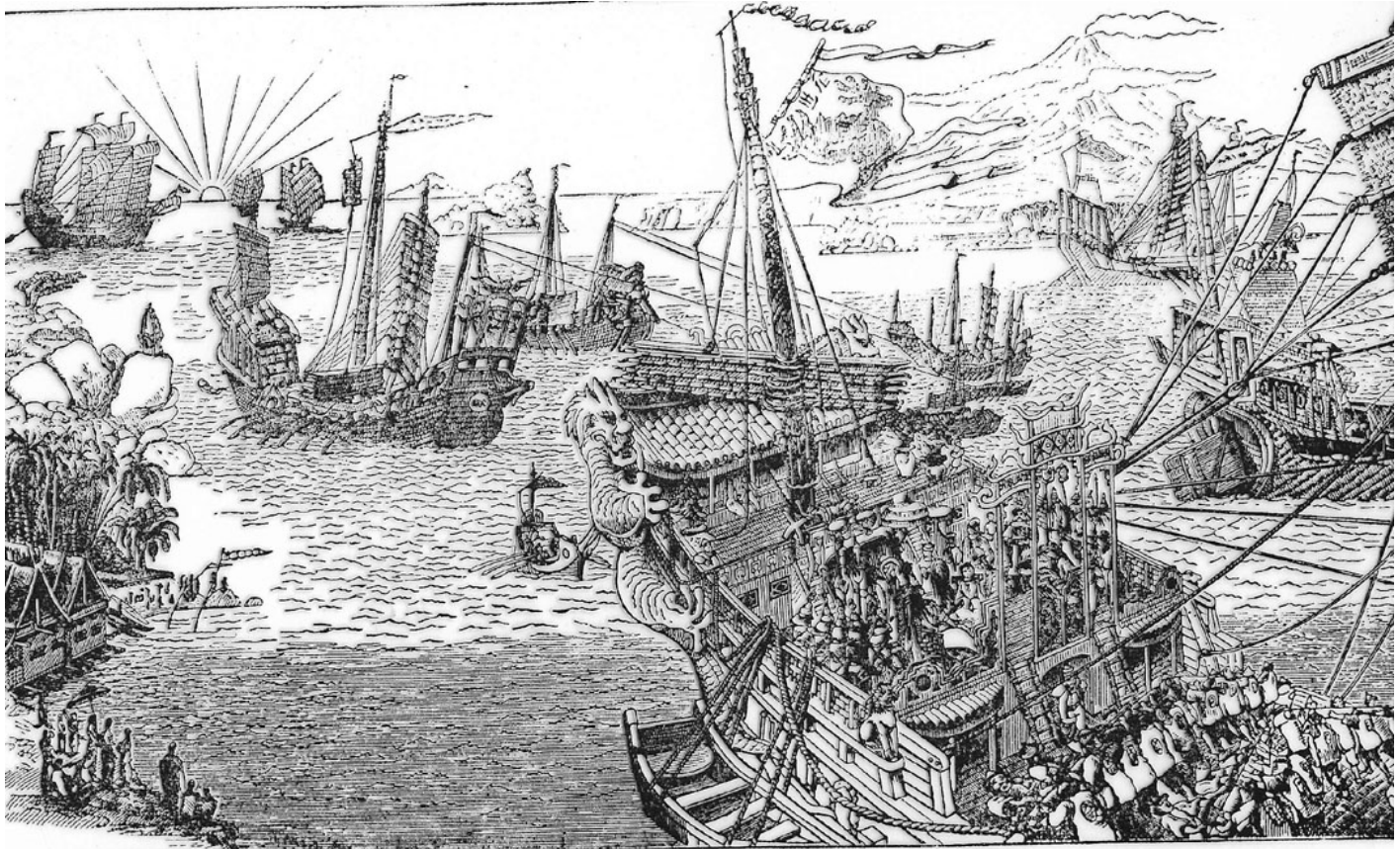
Thailand's progress is our pride.



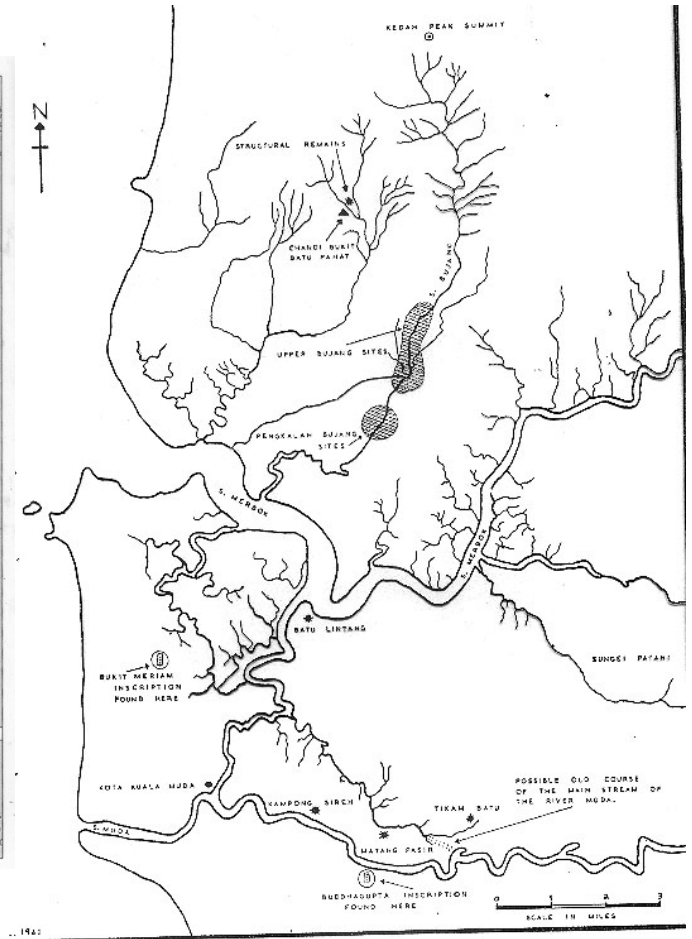
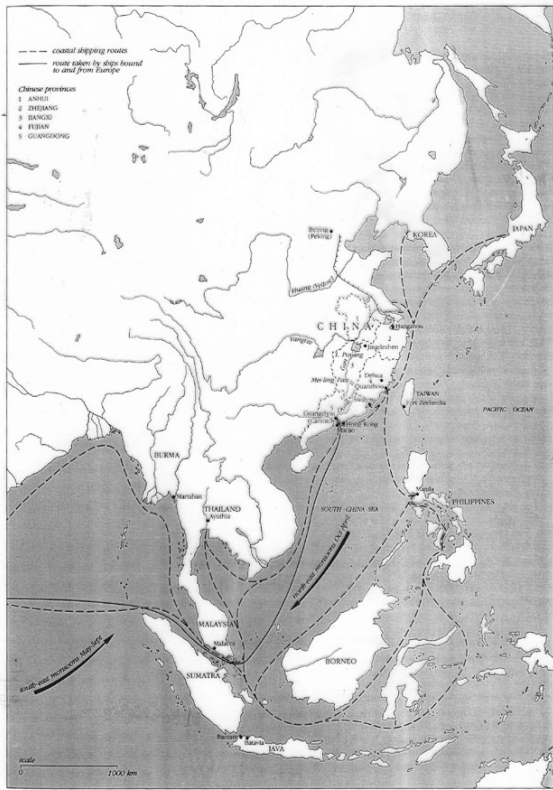
**Siam Cement Group.**

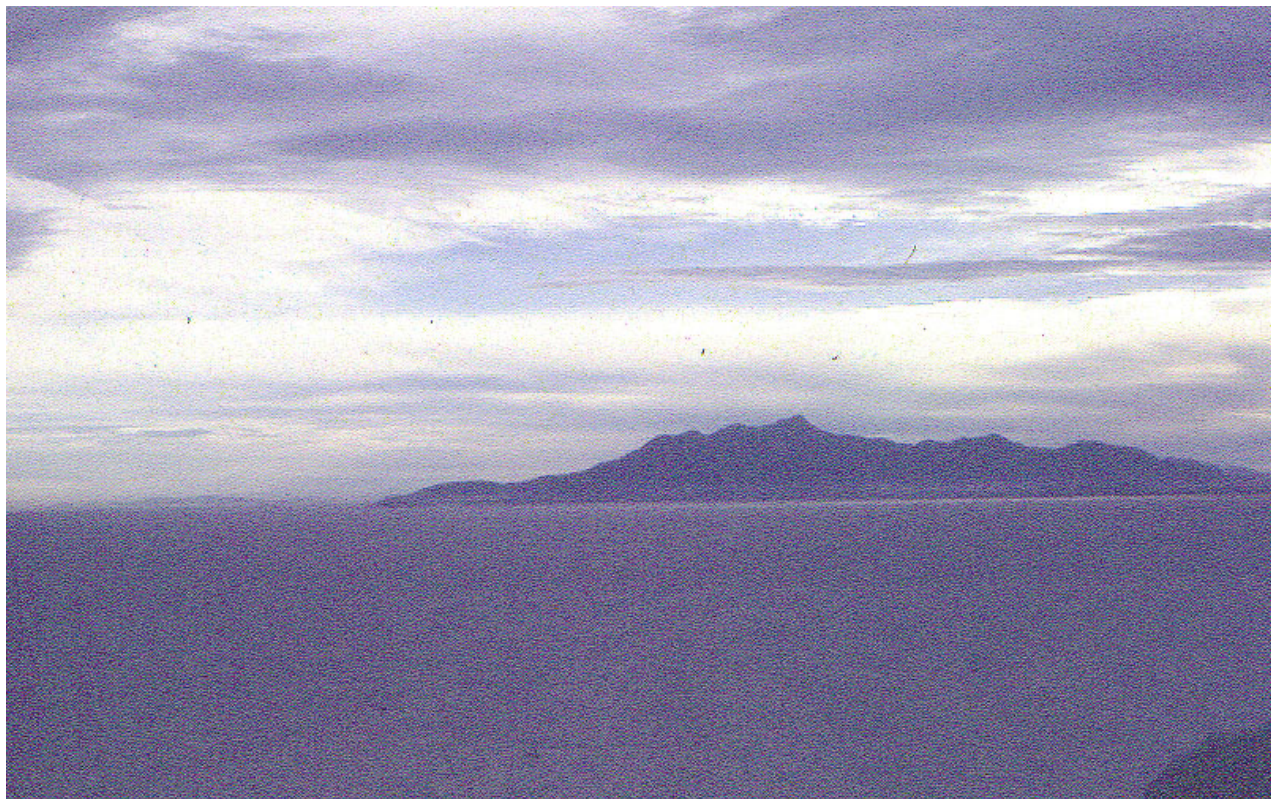
\* The kingdom of Sukothai AD 1238-1350 has rightly been called the Cradle of Thai Civilization.





The *Malay Annals* depict Singapore as the first great Malay trading port. Archaeology has shown this to be untrue. Several ports in Sumatra and Kedah are a thousand years older.





My own professor, Oliver Wolters, based on what scholars knew in 1970 about the Straits of Melaka, came to the conclusion that Singapore had never been historically significant. He believed that the Singapore episodes of the Malay Annals camouflage a period in the 11<sup>th</sup> century when the Malay kingdom of Srivijaya was eclipsed by its rival, Malayu.



He theorized that Singapore's role in the narrative was merely to provide a bridge between the history of Srivijaya and its successor, Melaka.



Fig. 2.01 Kingdoms and Ports in Southeast Asia and China between 11th and 13th centuries.





**Fig. 10.01 Archaeological sites of 14th- and 15th-century Southeast Asia.**

The 14<sup>th</sup> century was an important era in Asian history. The Yuan Dynasty under Mongol rule freed Chinese sailors and traders from the shackles which had kept them bound to Chinese territory. Enclaves of Chinese settlers began to form in Southeast Asia. These are still very poorly known. The earliest which has any kind of historical attestation was at Angkor, Cambodia. This may seem somewhat surprising, since Angkor is known for its monuments, not its commercial achievements.



Zhou Daguan, a Yuan ambassador to Angkor in 1296, refers several times to Chinese merchants in Angkor. The Bayon temple depicts a ship which is normally identified as Chinese, and Chinese-looking individuals appear in other reliefs.



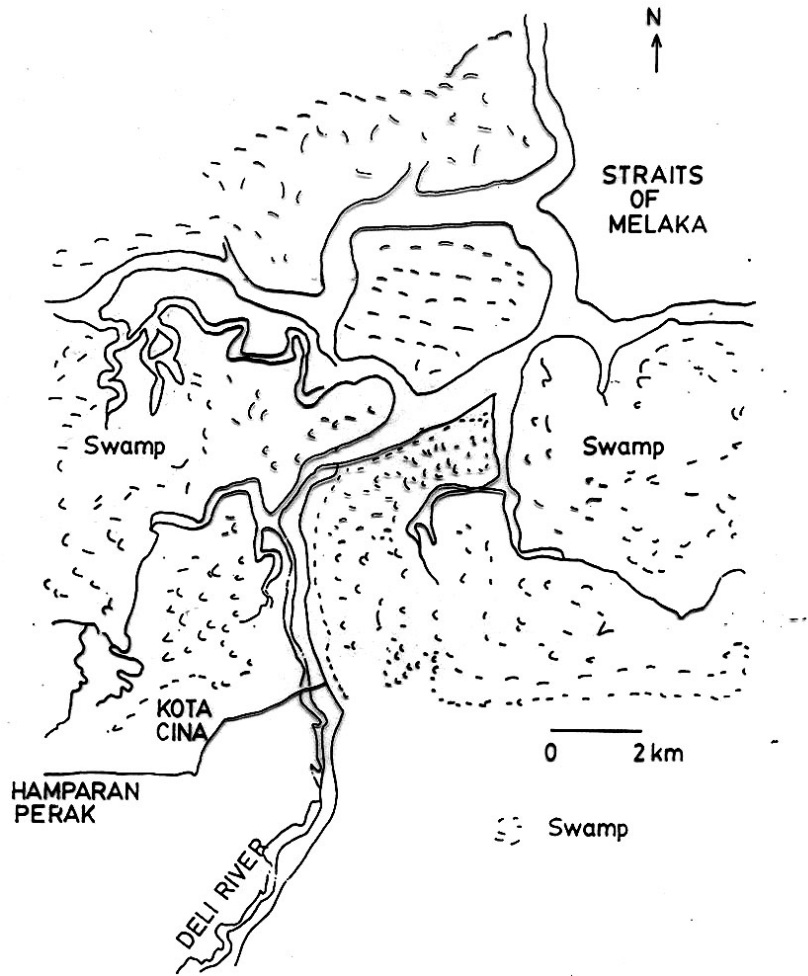
This building is usually attributed to about the year 1200. These reliefs do not show any Chinese settlement in Cambodia, but do indicate good familiarity with Chinese people. Zhou also notes that some people there cremated their dead, and notes that “these are said to be descendants of Chinese”. It is not entirely certain that this is true. Cremation was not to my knowledge a common practice in China at this period. In fact it seems to contradict standard Chinese burial customs, although of course it is not unknown in the case of more orthodox Buddhists. Large quantities of Chinese porcelain of the Song-Yuan periods (11<sup>th</sup> -14<sup>th</sup> centuries) have been excavated in Angkor in recent years. These artifacts do not of course definitively prove that Chinese brought them to Angkor. Thus we cannot be perfectly certain that a permanent overseas Chinese community existed at Angkor. We can only note that the probability is rather high that such a community did exist.



One of my early projects in Southeast Asia concerned the study of a site in northeast Sumatra called Kota Cina.



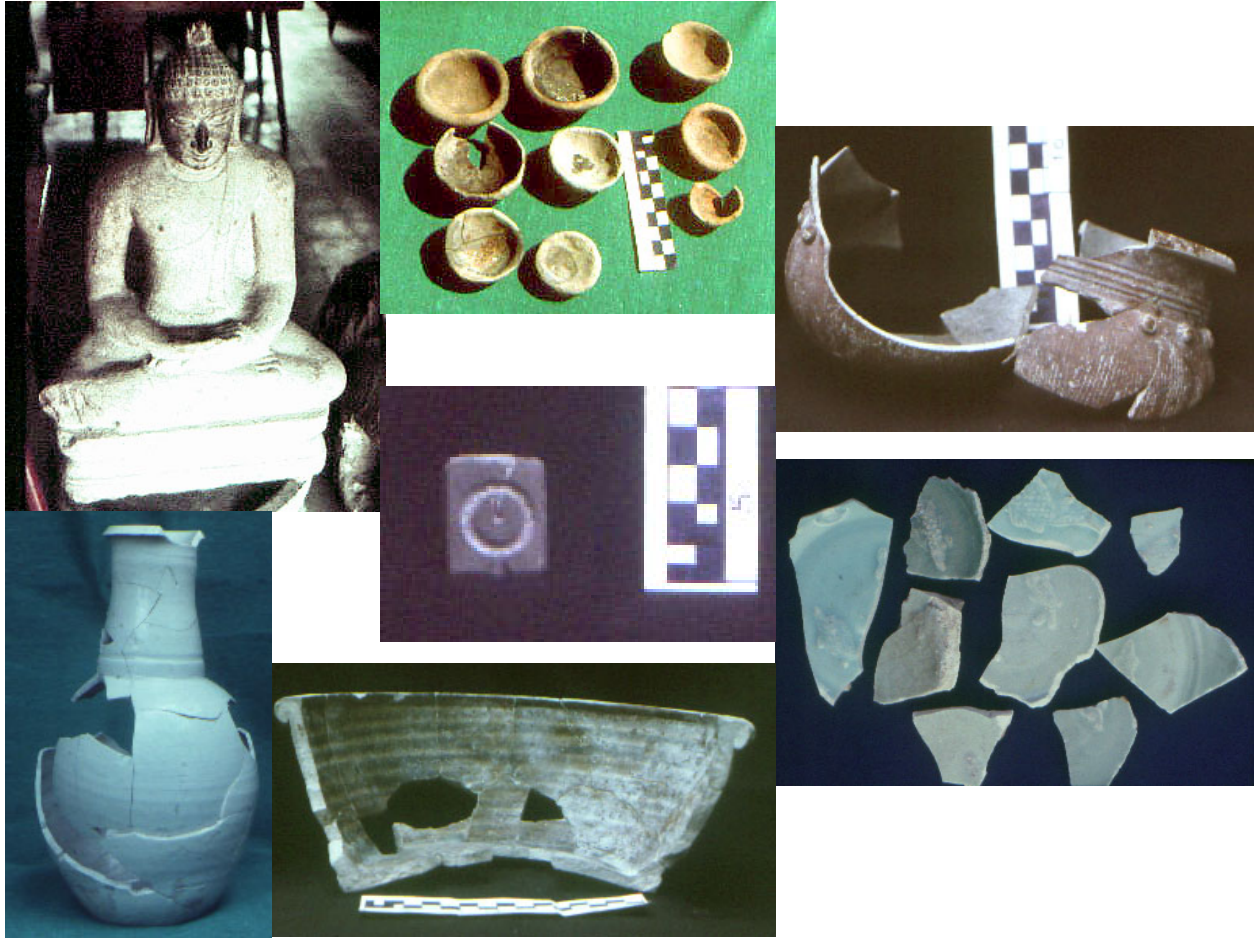
Fig.1.06a Singapore, Riau, and important archaeological sites.



**Kota Cina**



Here we have abundant archaeological evidence for a standard port of trade: imported Buddhist and Hindu statuary from Sri Lanka and southern India, and large quantities of Chinese porcelain, stoneware, and coins. Gold with Chinese characters here and other pieces of evidence strongly suggest that Chinese craftsmen as well as traders may have resided here rather than being only seasonal visitors.



Unfortunately scholars have been unable to identify any site corresponding to Kota Cina in the Chinese records. Archaeological evidence alone can be suggestive but is not conclusive proof of a particular ethnic group at a site. Trade goods can be carried by anyone. Even the name Kota Cina, “Chinese stockade”, cannot be assumed to be factual. A local legend describes the founding of a settlement here by Indians who are later driven away by Chinese. The Chinese in turn are expelled by an invasion of seashells, molluscs which crawl into the Chinese cooking pots, and even into their eyes, mouth, and noses.

China’s increased involvement in Southeast Asian trade resulted in greater prosperity for all. Large centres of pottery production appeared in southeast China to supply the international market. Yet China still experienced a trade deficit, so that huge quantities of Chinese coins were exported despite the efforts of the Chinese government to prevent this drain. In the year 1300, the Javanese empire of Majapahit converted to Chinese copper coins as its official medium of exchange.





China's role in early Southeast Asian trade is relatively well-documented. China's archives contain numerous official documents on foreign trade. China's exports such as porcelain and precious metals are well-preserved in the soil. Thus Chinese materials tend to dominate the historical and archaeological study of this early age of commerce.





### **Chinese Merchant Trowulan 14<sup>th</sup> Century**

An accurate picture of this period is much more complicated. Singapore appeared in the midst of social and economic revolution. The echo of the explosive growth of trade beginning in the Yuan was still audible in 1819 when Stamford Raffles went in search of a place to set up a new port. Raffles was not only concerned with traffic between India and China. One criterion which he considered vital to success was the ability to attract Southeast Asian traders. It was for this reason that he chose Singapore.



The *Malay Annals* must have influenced Raffles' decision to establish a base in Singapore in 1819. We know that he was cheered by the prospect of reviving a port which had an important role in Southeast Asian history. Lady Raffles "later claimed it was the specific account of the founding of Singapore in the third chapter of the *Annals* which first gave her husband the idea for an 'Eastern Settlement' on the same site".<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, historian John Bastin has argued that the influence of the *Malay Annals* on Raffles should not be overstated: "That Raffles knew of Singapura from the *Sejarah Melayu* ... is obvious; but that it was the prime inspiration for the British settlement on the island overlooks the complex factors that actually led to its foundation."

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<sup>2</sup> V.M. Hooker and M.B. Hooker, "Introduction" to *John Leyden's Malay annals*, Kuala Lumpur, MBRAS, 2001. 2001: 43-45.



Fig.1.06b Riau-Lingga archipelago.





### Orang Akit

Geopolitical considerations undoubtedly dictated the grand outline of Raffles' search for a base somewhere at the south end of the Straits of Melaka. His colleague, Colonel William Farquhar, favoured Karimun Island. We will never know how heavily various factors weighed in Raffles' decision: Singapore's location, its port facilities, its water resources, and its romantic image in Malay literature. If Raffles was concerned with generating maximum publicity among the population of the islands for his new free port, however, then between Karimun and Singapore there would have been no contest. Singapore had a storied name, while Karimun had never been more than an outpost with a reputation as a lair of pirates. The name Singapore indeed turned out to be a very effective advertising tool.<sup>3</sup>

The *Malay Annals*, combined with Chinese texts, allow us to calculate a hypothetical date for Singapore's founding: 1299 CE. We cannot consider this date as factual. On the other hand, it corresponds too closely to the archaeological record to be purely a coincidence.

Since 1984, over half a million artifacts of an ancient seaport have been unearthed here, and more have been found in the Riau Archipelago. Many of the latter probably also passed

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<sup>3</sup> cf. C.A. Trocki, *Prince of Pirates: The Temenggongs and the Development of Johor and Singapore, 1784-1885*. Singapore, Singapore University Press (1979), xviii.

through here. These tell the story of a settlement which appeared suddenly and quickly attained a high degree of prosperity, where Chinese exports including coins circulated along with coins from Sri Lanka and glass from India. Among the debris we have also identified rare but significant items from Java.







**Late 13<sup>th</sup> Century Coin from Sri Lanka. Excavated at Parliament House Complex, Singapore**



**Javanese bronze figure of horse and rider excavated in Singapore**





The first age of overseas Chinese trade and settlement came to a sudden end with the restoration of a Chinese imperial line under the Ming dynasty in 1368. Chinese tradition was reasserted, and China cut itself off almost completely from private foreign trade. It was only precisely 200 years later, in 1567, that China began to reopen ports to limited private trade.

This situation is clearly shown in the archaeological record of Singapore. Above a layer dense with Chinese pottery, we find little but local Malay earthenware, with a big gap between 1600 and 1800, until artifacts of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century appear. Similarly, down in Riau most artifacts belong either to the Song-Yuan or Qing periods; from the intermediate Ming, we have little but a few pieces of porcelain from the period of Wan-li (late 16<sup>th</sup> century).

Colonial artifacts:  
Gaudy ware,  
Dutch ware,  
VOC coins,  
opium cups



Sterile layer, 1600-1800

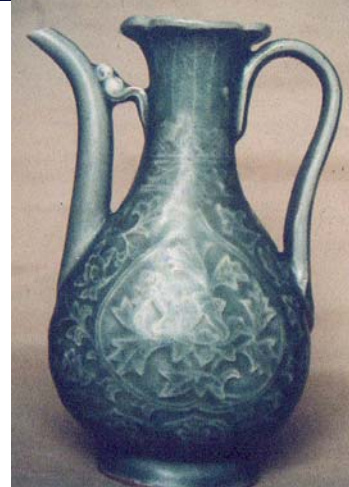
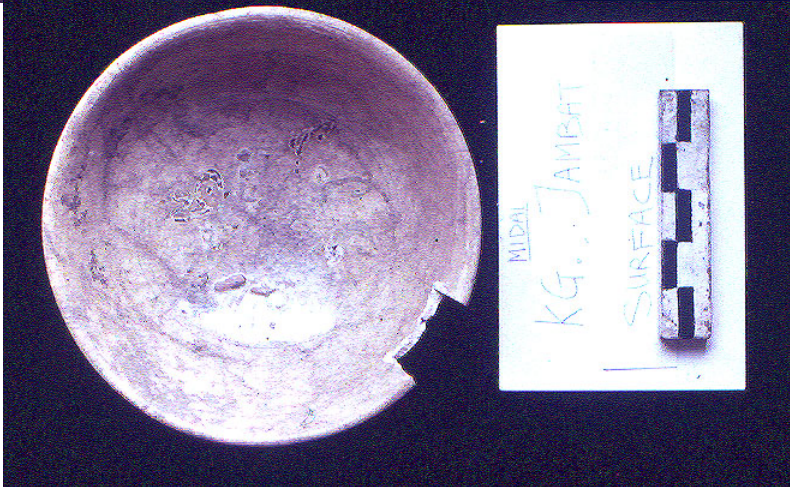
15-16th century:  
Malay earthenware  
Ming porcelain  
Stamped earthenware,  
probably from Thailand

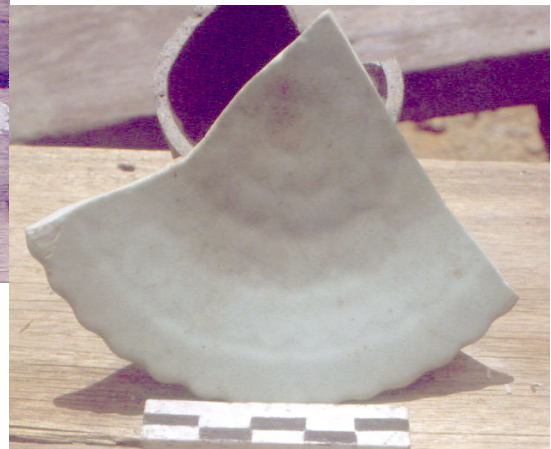
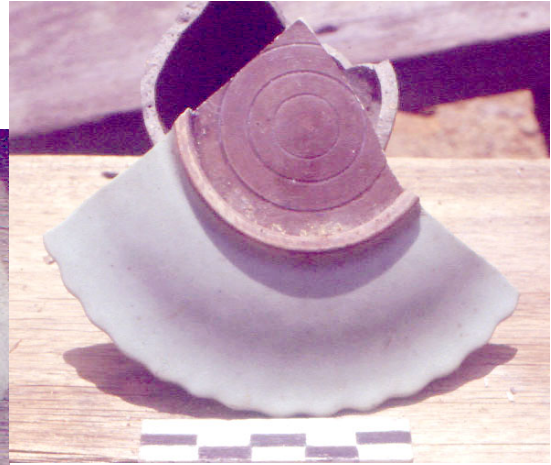


14th century: Chinese porcelain  
Malay earthenware



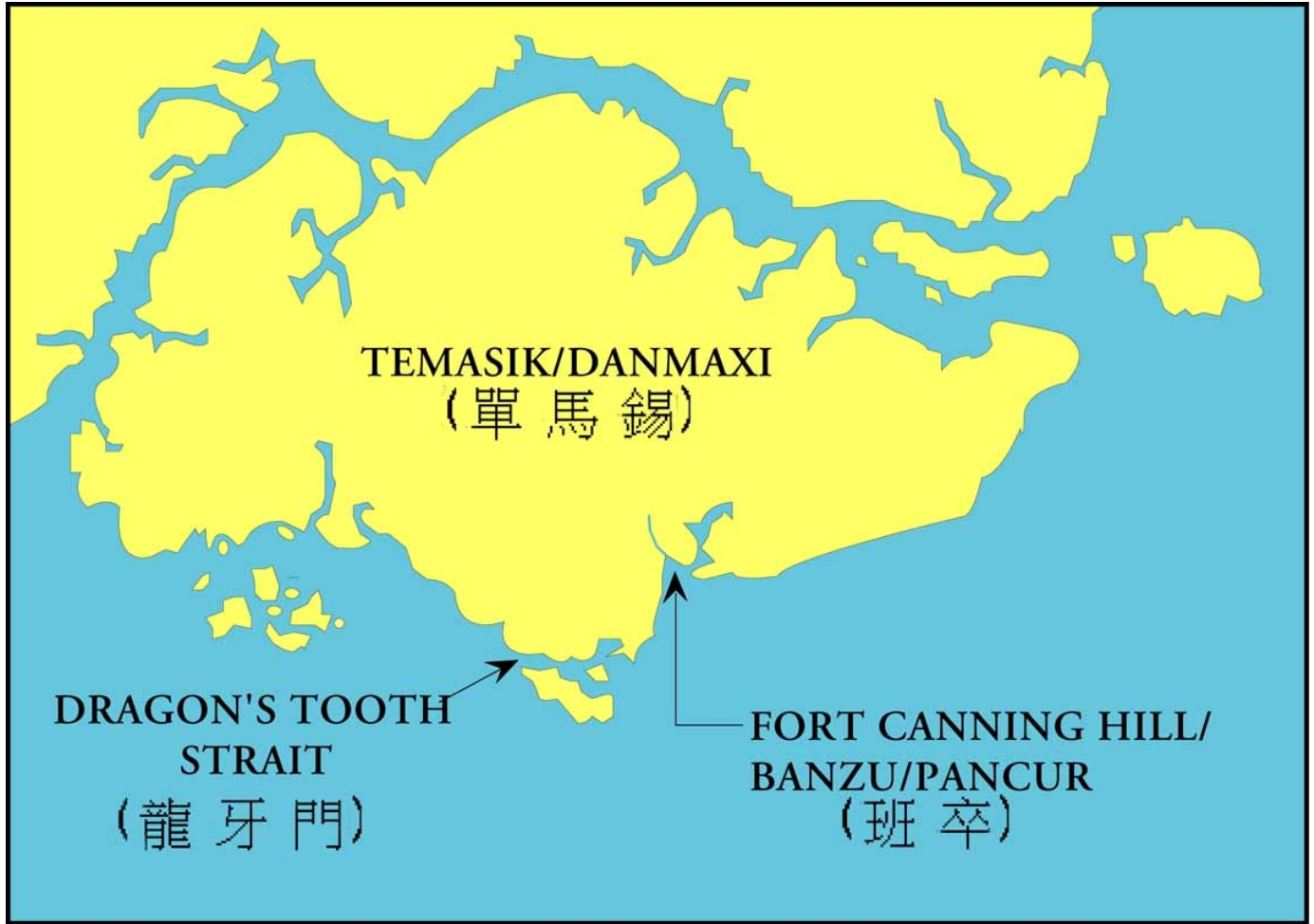






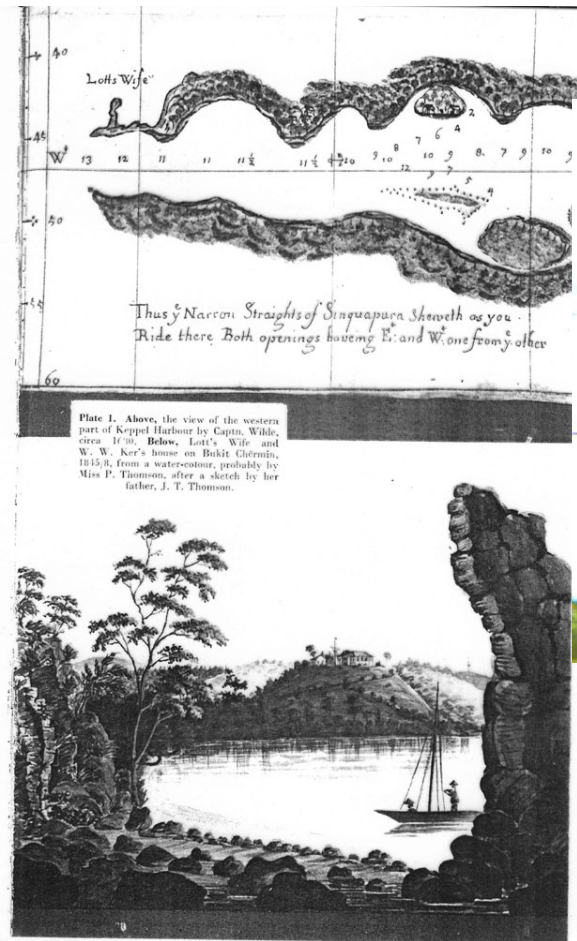
The archaeological record therefore emphasizes the rise and fall of Chinese commerce in 14<sup>th</sup>-century Singapore and its hinterland. Only one ancient Chinese trader ever left an account of his activities. He was Wang Dayuan. He made two voyages to Southeast Asia in the 1330s, and in 1349 set down a description of trading ports.





**Fig. 3.03 Important toponyms of 14th-century Singapore.**

The name Singapore does not appear in his text, but he mentions three places which almost certainly are to be found in Singapore. These were Long-ya-men (Dragon's-Tooth Strait), where pirates lurked; Pancur, a trading settlement on the slopes of a hill; and Temasik, the general area where these places were. Long-ya-men was probably the entrance to Keppel Harbour; while Pancur (Malay for spring of water) was probably Fort Canning Hill, site of many important 14<sup>th</sup>-century finds.



Pancur was not a major port in Wang's account, though it did a modest trade in tin, hornbill casques, lakewood of moderate quality, and cotton. Chinese merchants brought in green cotton, cotton prints, blue satin, iron cauldrons, lengths of iron, red gold, porcelain, and suchlike.<sup>4</sup> Significantly, Wang also mentions that Chinese were living there, mixed up among the natives. This is the only port out of 99 places in the entire text where he makes this statement. Therefore Singapore is the oldest site of overseas Chinese settlers, attested both historically and archaeologically.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Wheatley, *The Golden Khersonese*, Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press. 1961: 83.



### 1825 map of Singapore, depicting the Malay Wall, probably a 14th-century fortification

Wang also mentions a country called Xian, which most scholars believe corresponded to Shan/Siam; in other words, the Tai-speaking region of the mainland. Under his description of Xian he says that “In recent years they [*Xian* “people of Siam”] came with seventy odd junks and raided Dan-ma-xi and attacked the city moat. [The town] resisted for a month, the place having closed the gates and defending itself, and they not daring to assault it.”<sup>5</sup>

It is not surprising to read a report of hostilities between a Malay port and a polity from further north. Chinese and local histories record a Tai advance down the Malay Peninsula at this time. These events can be understood in the context of the general southward movement of several Tai groups in the early 14th<sup>h</sup> century, competing against each other for dominance in the Chao Phraya valley and beyond. A Mon inscription mentions Thais in the Malay Peninsula in 1280.<sup>6</sup> The Thai inscription of 1292 claimed Sritamarat, i.e. Nakhon Si Thammarat in south Thailand.

<sup>5</sup> W.W. Rockhill “Notes of the Relations and Trade of China with the eastern Archipelago and the Coast of the Indian Ocean During the Fourteenth century”, *T’oung Pao*, Vol. XVI (1915): 100.

<sup>6</sup> Wheatley, *Golden Khersonese* (KL: U of Malaya, 1961), 301.



### **Wat in Nakhon Si Thammarat**

The Xian attack was important enough that people were still talking about it a few years later when Wang arrived. It does not however occur in the Malay Annals. Instead there Singapore's mortal enemy is Java. Javanese attack Singapore twice. The first time they are defeated. The second time a treacherous prime minister opens the city gate for them. The ruler however escapes and after a few years in the wilderness founds Melaka, converting adversity into triumph.

The fact that the Malay Annals omits the Tai attack is interesting. Although we have no historical evidence, it is quite likely that the Javanese did attack or at least threaten Singapore in the early 14th century; in 1365 Temasik is found in a list of Majapahit's vassals.



**Terracotta head from Trowulan, of a man whom some have compared to Gajah Mada, who swore to conquer all the Southeast Asian archipelago; among his specific targets he listed Temasik**

The Malay Annals is not interested in Singapore's relations with any other nation except Java. Such matters were not relevant to the compilers of the text; for them, the paramount subject was the continuity of the Malay ruling family of Melaka.

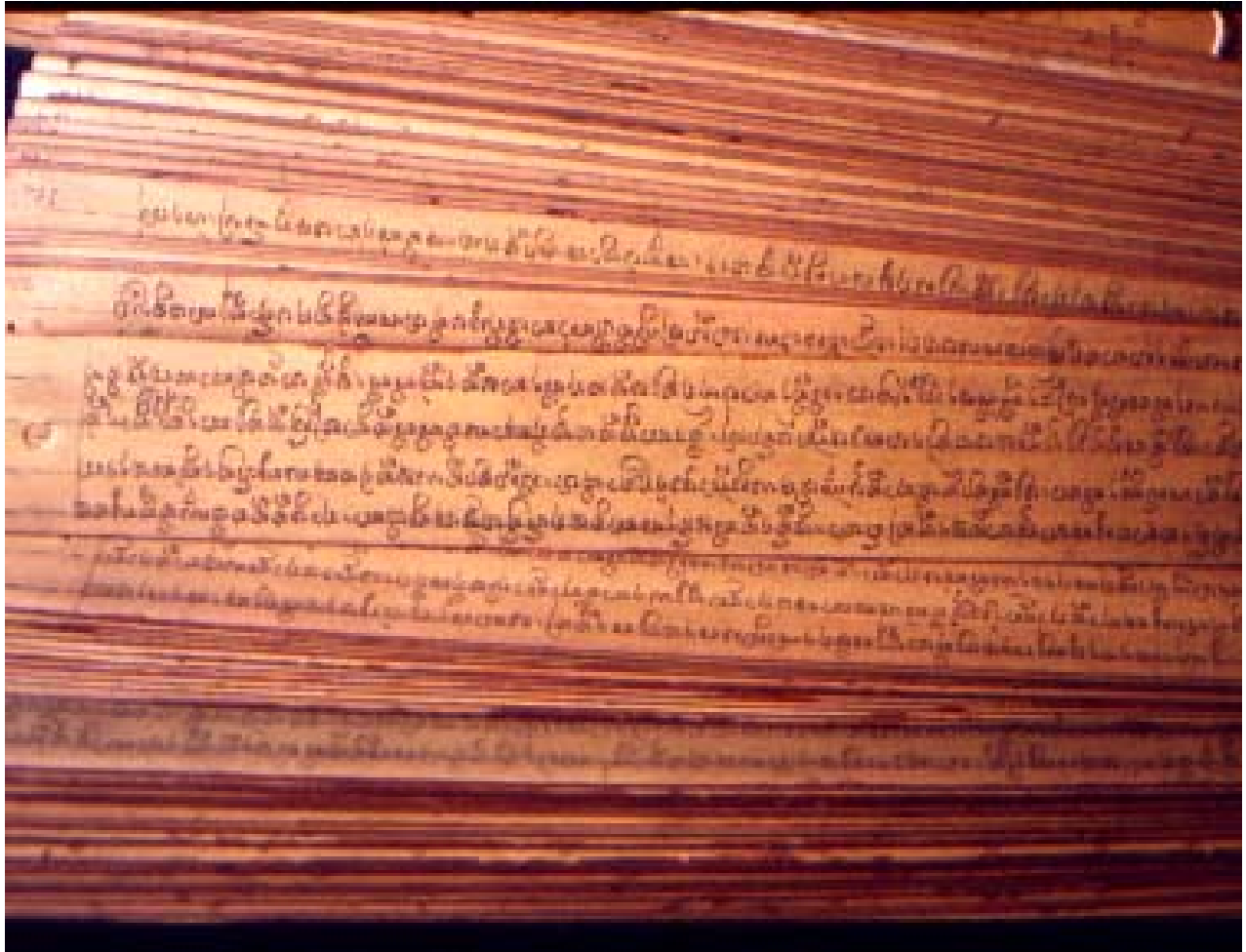
Chinese sources continue to use the name Temasik for Singapore in the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century. Probably this is due in part to Chinese conservatism (they kept on copying old sources), partly to the fact that the name Singapore only came to be applied to this island in the late 14<sup>th</sup> century. Several other countries have been called Singapura. A city of this name appears in the Jatakas about the previous lives of the Buddha. In the 4<sup>th</sup> century, this was the name of the capital of the ancient kingdom of Mathura in India. At about the same time it was the name of a kingdom in the hinterland of modern Hoi An, central Vietnam, which built a famous temple complex of Mi Son. Not long thereafter, in 607 CE, the name Singhapura appeared in the *Sui Shu* as the name of the residence of the king of Red Earth Land, which Wheatley thinks was in Singora/Songkhla.<sup>7</sup> Chinese envoys visited this Singapura in 608.

In the 14<sup>th</sup> century Islam had not yet become widely established in Malay culture. The dominant religion in much of Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula, and probably Singapore too, was Buddhism. The Malay Annals do not describe the religion of the early rulers before the 15<sup>th</sup> century when the maharaja of Melaka converted to Islam. We can however note that there were many important links between the Straits of Melaka and peninsular Thailand going back to the 7<sup>th</sup> century, when the kingdom of Srivijaya had strong connections with that area. One less obvious cultural link between Malays and Tais is the name of the first Malay ruler. According to the Malay Annals, he was Sri Tri Buana, Sanskrit for "Lord of the Three Worlds". This phrase is a reference to the belief found in South and Southeast Asia that the universe is divided into a world of gods, a world of humans, and an underworld. "Lord of the Three Worlds" was sometimes used as a title by early Southeast Asian kings. In Burma, the title Sri Tribhuvanaditya is inscribed on ancient clay votive tablets. Alaungsithu, 11<sup>th</sup>-century ruler of Pagan, used Sri Tribhuvanadityapavara as his royal title.<sup>8</sup> Closer to home, the King of Malayu in 1286 was Srimat Tribuanaraja Mauliwarmadewa (according to an inscription on the plinth of a statue of the Buddhist deity Amoghapasa from Singasari).

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<sup>7</sup> Wheatley, *Nagara and Commandery*, 251-252 note 24, and p. 234. See also K.S. Sandhu, *Early Malaysia*, Singapore: University Editions Press, 1973, p. 13: Singhapura in the Red Earth Kingdom: "all the buildings in the royal palace consisted of multiple pavilions"; cf. Wheatley 1961: 26-36. Cremations held over water, except for the king.

<sup>8</sup> Gordon H. Luce, *Old Burma-Early Pagan*, New York: Augustin, for Artibus Asiae and the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, 1969-1970, II, 12-15.



The phrase Sri Tri Buana is the title of an important a religious doctrine which was explicated in a Thai text written around 1345, and is still influential in Thailand today. The doctrine ranks all living things on the basis of merit, justifying the absolute loyalty due to a ruler)<sup>9</sup>. The name “Lord of the Three Worlds” thus constituted a reference to a cosmological concept formulated early in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, precisely when Singapore was becoming a significant commercial site. Early audiences at readings of the *Malay Annals* I am sure would still have understood the name in this context.

The concept of Lord of the Three Worlds was also popular in 14<sup>th</sup> century Java. A queen of Majapahit, Tribhuanottunggadewi, reigned for 22 years, from 1328 to 1350. She is known to have been a devout Buddhist. It was during her reign that Majapahit supposedly incorporated Temasik as a vassal. Thus both empires which sought to dominate 14<sup>th</sup>-century Singapore, one on the mainland, the other on the islands, espoused the doctrine of the Lord of the Three Worlds. [statue of queen]

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<sup>9</sup> Phraya Lithai 1982.



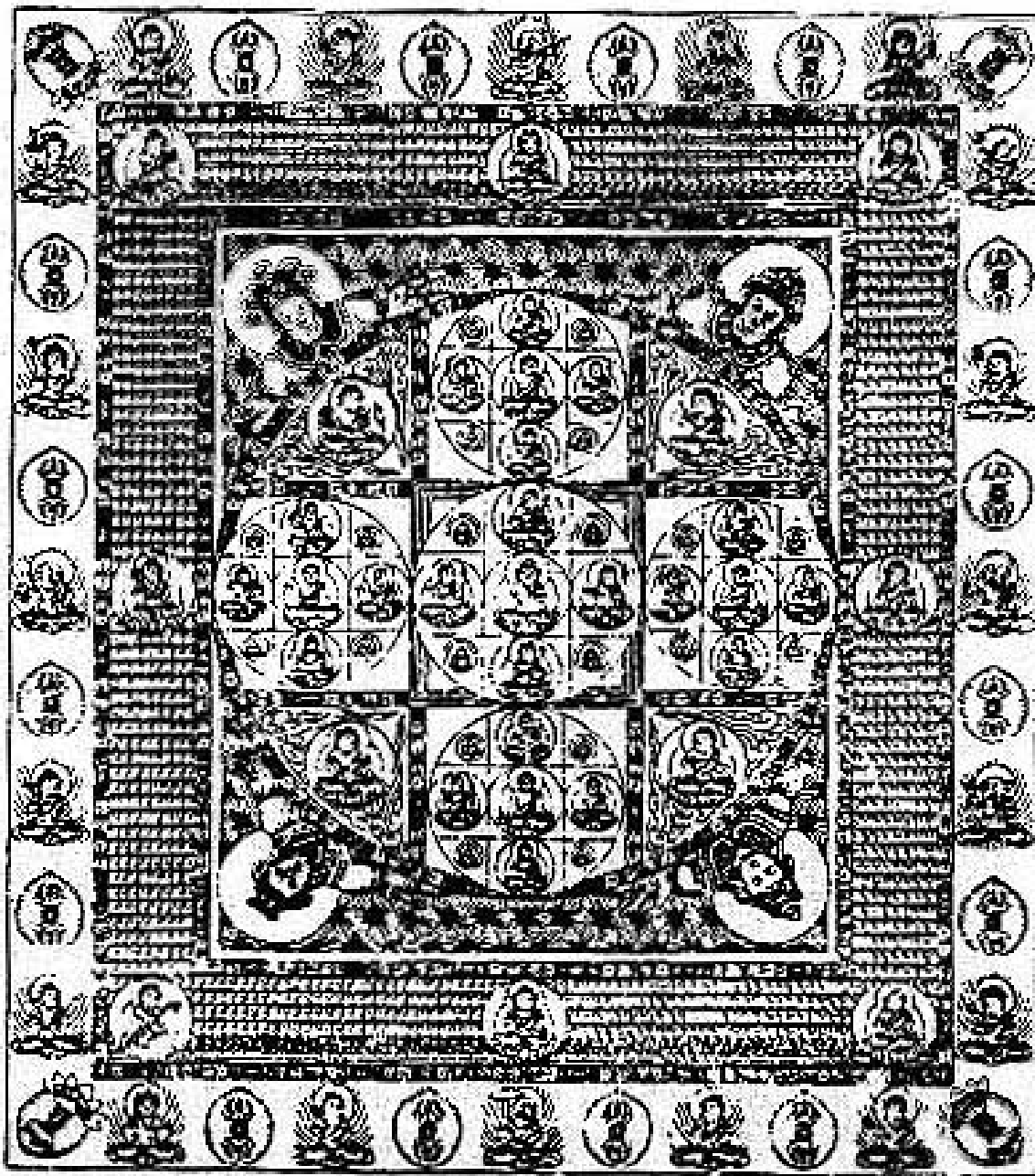
Statue thought to be commemorative image of Queen Tribhuwanottunggadewi,  
East Java, 14th century



In the 14<sup>th</sup> century Singapore lay at the focal point of a contest for regional dominance between two major powers. After 1351, this would have been Ayuthaya in Thailand, and Majapahit.

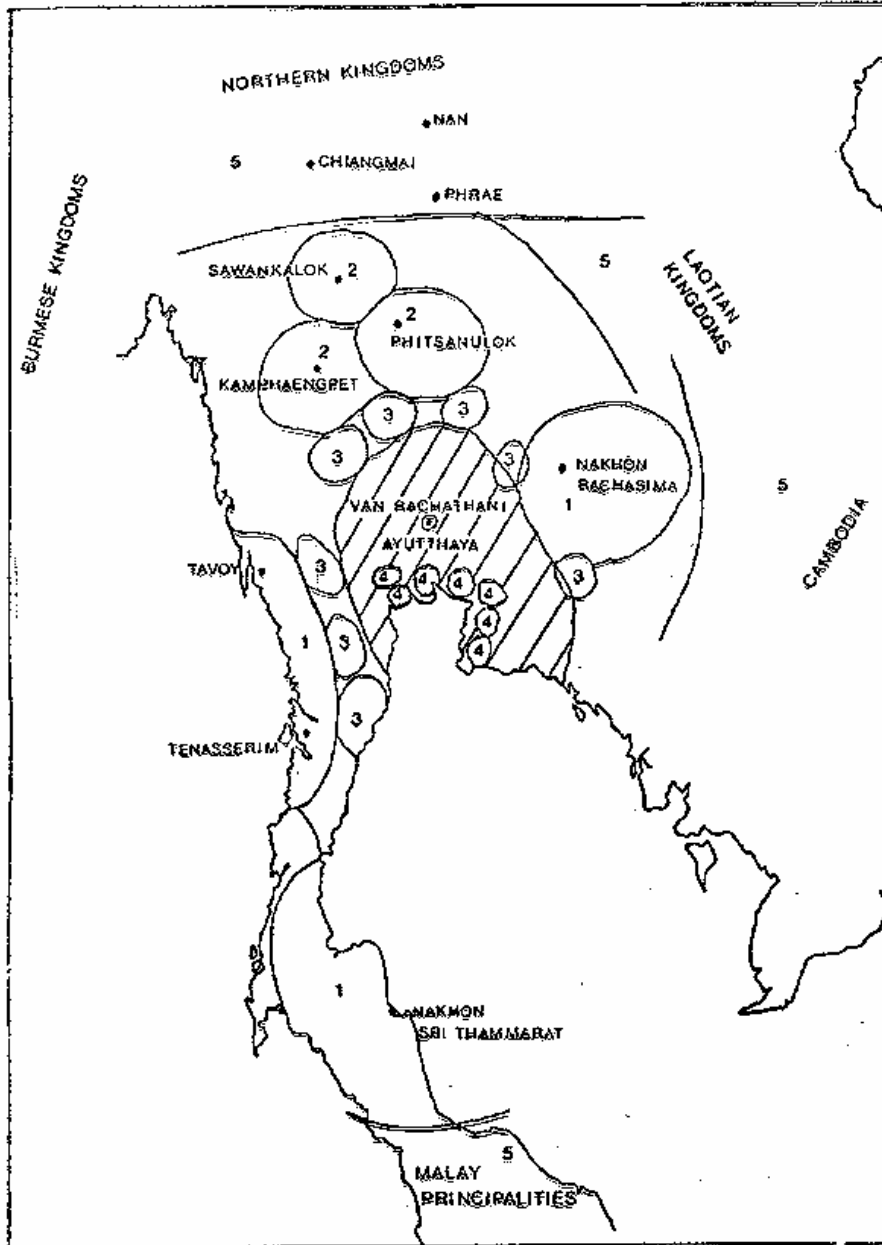
I had numerous conversations with Ben Batson about the subject of the Xian attack. These discussions took the form of semi-serious debates where each of us pretended to take the side of our respective study areas. I would accuse the Tai of being the aggressors; Ben would respond that the Chinese sources were not transparent on this point, and argue that some vaguely non-Tai (perhaps Mon) group in the lower Chao Phraya was responsible for the attack. I always thought that someday we would get serious and try to work out exactly what was happening in the early 14<sup>th</sup>-century relations between Singapore and Tai polities. Regrettably it never had a chance to do this.

To what extent did Majapahit or Ayudhya ever consider attempting to take on its rival and create an empire unifying all Southeast Asia? It is impossible that this thought never occurred to both of these kingdoms, or to use a more appropriate word which both would have understood, mandalas.



The idea of territorial conquest would have been comprehensible to the Vietnamese, with their Chinese tutelage, and to the Khmer, the only Southeast Asians to implement a policy of installing military governors in conquered territory in much of what is now Thailand. The Tais and the Javanese however thought of the world in different terms expressed in such Indian works as the Arthashastra. In this worldview, world conquerors or *cakravartins* radiate power from their palaces. Those in the range of the first ripple of this divine effulgence would have been captivated by it and converted into faithful subjects. At some point this zone of harmony and righteousness corresponding to the mandala ideal would have come up against a zone of

darkness, of evil enemies beyond the circle of light. Yet further away lay another zone, which was neither dark nor light, but who were enemies of the *cakravartin's* enemies. If the lords of those outer zones could be contacted, they could become allies of the *cakravartin*, pinch the dark mandala between them, and enlighten it too.



Ayutthayan polity (ca. 1460-1590)

(Taken from S.J. Tambiah, "The galactic polity: the structure of traditional kingdoms in Southeast Asia," in S.A. Freed (ed.), *Anthropology and the Climate of Opinion*, Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences, Vol. 293, 1977, 69-97)

Singapore perhaps lay somewhere in this realm of enemies of enemies: too far away and too small to have pretensions of its own, but potentially valuable as a point from which light might be turned against darkness from its opposite side. No doubt there were other minor candles such as Singapore in the 14<sup>th</sup> century which would have appeared as potential allies, but it is only in the case of Singapore that we have actual evidence of a contest, of overlapping claims between the Tai and the Javanese.

How would this situation have appeared from Temasik's perspective? A small candle wishing to preserve its own faint glow against the potential glare of these two huge suns would have tried to maintain a balance, to avoid falling under the gravitational pull of either and being drawn in as inevitably as a small star is absorbed by a black hole.

The *Malay Annals* suggests that Temasik feared the glare of the Majapahit sun more than that of Ayuthaya.



**Majapahit sunburst, Banten cannon's muzzle**



Chinese and Portuguese sources<sup>10</sup> tell us that Singapore and Melaka paid tribute to Ayuthaya. Portuguese sources also confirm that the ruler of Singapore in 1390 had some marital connection with the ruler of Ayuthaya. Quite possibly this relationship was indirect. We can try to unravel this connection by looking at Portuguese accounts of the fall of Singapore and the rise of Melaka, which the Malay Annals blame on Java.

One Portuguese author, Diogo do Couto,<sup>11</sup> accepted the Malay Annals' version of events. Others, however, such as Tome Pires, record that the Javanese in Melaka in 1511 denied this claim. Pires said that Singapore was attacked not out of malice or desire for conquest, but to avenge the murder of the king of Siam's son-in-law.<sup>12</sup> The most reliable conclusion seems to be that the last king of Singapore, Parameswara, was a usurper from Sumatra who assassinated the local ruler, who was married to someone related to the Ayuthaya ruler, around 1392. Approximately 4 years later his death was avenged by forces acting in the name of Siam.

<sup>10</sup> Singapore tributary to Thai in 1436: O.W. Wolters, *Fall of Srivijaya in Malay History*, p. 161; Melaka tributary to Siam: Ma Huan, *Ying-yai sheng-lan*. Wheatley, *Golden Khersonese*, p. 321: "Failure to do so would have provoked an attack."

<sup>11</sup> Gibson-Hill, 19; Wheatley, *Golden Khersonese*, p. 203.

<sup>12</sup> Pires II: 230-242. Da Barros; G.P. Rouffaer, "Was Malaka emporium voor 1400 AD genaamd Malajoer?" *BKI* 77, 1921, 58; O.W. Wolters, *Fall of Srivijaya in Malay History*, p. 70. J. Bastin and R.W. Winks, *Malaysia: Selected Historical Readings*, Nendeln: KTO Press, 1979. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. p. 1; Also R.O. Winstedt, *A History of Malaya*, Singapore 1962: 42.

Whether these were Tai or other Malays is a separate question. The son of Alfonso d'Albuquerque, conqueror of Melaka in 1511, claimed the attack was led by the king of Patani.<sup>13</sup> Eredia gave the name Pahang,<sup>14</sup> which of course at this time meant the whole of the Malay Peninsula. Oliver Wolters takes us even further when he shows that in 1397 the emperor of China, Taizu, sent a letter to the ruler of Java requiring him to take some action against Se Sumatra, because they had not come to offer tribute for some time. This was conveyed via the ruler of Ayudhya.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps he ordered his Patani vassal to do the job?

We could speculate *ad infinitum* about the tangled web of late 14<sup>th</sup> century diplomacy which enmeshed Singapore, but the upshot is that the Malay Annals appear to absolve the Ayudhya ruler, who was involved in the expulsion of the murderous usurper of the position of chief in Singapore. Why Java instead became the scapegoat for this disaster is similarly impossible to explain in simple terms.

Archaeology cannot settle these questions. Discoveries in Singapore do however demonstrate that Temasik had commercial connections with both Majapahit and Ayuthaya. In 1984, our first excavation recovered two fragments of ceramics from central Thailand: a white-glazed covered box (shown on the cover of the first site report, 1985).



<sup>13</sup> Rouffaer, "Was Malaka emporium" p. 27-28.

<sup>14</sup> Gibson-Hill, C.A., "Singapore Old Strait and New Harbour 1300-1870." *Memoirs of the Raffles Museum* 3, 1956: 19.

<sup>15</sup> O.W. Wolters, *Fall of Srivijaya in Malay History*, p. 70.

For years, Prof David Wyatt, well-known scholar of Thai history, would hopefully ask me each time we met whether I had recovered any more Thai artifacts. In 1990 I ran some tests in the physics laboratory at NUS which showed that some earthenware found in Singapore was almost certainly made in the Satingphra area, south Thailand. This enabled me to solve a problem which had been bothering me for some time. Similar pottery had been found in east Java, where it was called Majapahit ware. Our test results showed that our samples were definitely from Thailand. Later tests on similar pottery from a 13<sup>th</sup>-century shipwreck off southeast Sumatra confirmed that these ceramics had been a significant portion of the cargoes of ships going to Java.



This white earthenware probably dated to the 14<sup>th</sup> century. In 1999 we uncovered important evidence that Singapore continued to trade with Siam after 1400. This came in the form of glazed pottery found at Empress Place, on the left bank of the Singapore River. These consist of 16 sherds of Thai ware: 14 from at Sisatchanalai, and 2 from Sukhothai.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Low 2003: 138.



**Fifteenth-century Thai sherds excavated at Empress Place, Singapore. Sukhothai sherd from a bowl (above). Fragment of a Sawankhalok covered box (right)**

The stonewares in the ancient Singapore assemblage still require much analysis. It is possible that Thai stoneware jars such as are commonly found on shipwrecks will be detected. These sherds indicate that in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, after Parameswara was expelled, Singapore continued to exist and to trade with Siam.

Many more wares made in northern Thailand during the 15<sup>th</sup> century have been discovered in graves in the Riau archipelago. No doubt these were imported via Singapore. Thus the Singapore-Ayuthaya connection remained strong until the coming of the Portuguese.

Fourteenth-century Singapore also had relations with another important mainland power: Vietnam. According to Wang, in the 14<sup>th</sup> century each harbour in the Malay Peninsula had its own style of clothing. People of Tambralinga (south Thailand) imported cloth from the Near East; Terengganu people imported cotton from Vietnam. We have no evidence of 14<sup>th</sup>-century trade between Singapore and Vietnam, but a written source shows that the two countries had diplomatic relations. This evidence comes from *The Vietnamese Royal Chronicle Dai Viet Su Ky*



*Toan Thu* on Temasek, Record of 1330 (vol.2, p. 118). (The Ha Noi 1998 edition of the chronicle was used for reference.)

“...In the second year of Khai Huu (1330).....  
...the Prince Nhat Duat died, (at the age of 77). The Prince enjoyed spending his time with foreigners... Foreigners arriving at the Capital, usually came to see him at his house...

In the reign of Nhan Tong (1279 – 1293, vol.2, p. 44 and p. 71), an ambassador from Sach Ma Tich (*editor’s note*: probably Tumasik) arrived with presents and no interpreter could be found. Only Nhat Duat was able to translate. When asked why he could understand their language, he said: In the reign of Thai Tong (1226-1258, vol. 2, p. 7) an ambassador of their country arrived and I befriended them, that is why I can understand a little of their tongue.”

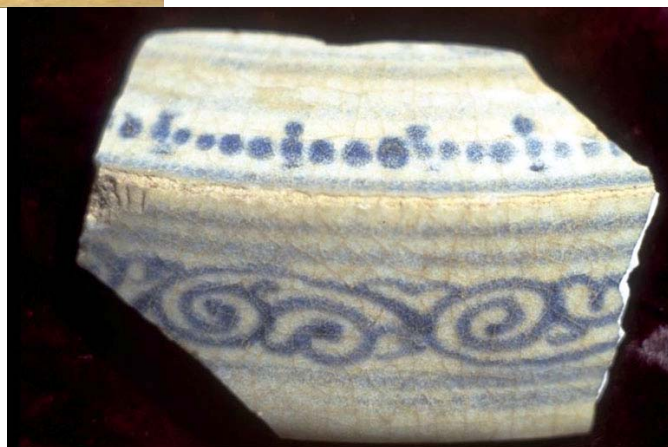
If the prince was 77 in 1330, he must have been born in 1253. This is possible, because he was Thai Tong’s son. However, he would have been five when his father’s reign came to end. Therefore, the above statement “in the reign of Thai Tong” can hardly be correct. If the story about the earlier ambassador is true at all, it could have happened only in the reign of Nhat Duat’s eldest brother, king Thanh Tong (1258- 1278, vol. 2, p. 30 and 44), probably not before 1268, when the prince was fifteen. Because the prince also spoke Cham, he may have learned quickly the Malay of the Tumasek envoys.

So, according to the author of the chronicle, who worked with earlier records, there may have been two ambassadors from Tumasek, one in the period of 1268 – 1278, and another one between 1279 and 1293.<sup>17</sup> This information is suggestive but creates problems. Several scholars have previously noted the existence of this record, and established that *Sach-ma-tich* is the Vietnamese phonetic rendering of Temasik.<sup>18</sup> It proves that Temasik was known to the Vietnamese court. And that Temasik was sufficiently well-organized to send ambassadors to foreign kingdoms. But this would suggest that Temasik existed earlier than other sources suggest. Could Temasik have been founded as early as 1278? There are no other references to Temasik until the 14<sup>th</sup> century. As early as the 7<sup>th</sup> century a monk from north Vietnam was said to have been fluent in Malay.<sup>19</sup> Thus communication between Vietnam and the Malaysia-Sumatra-Singapore area may have been established long before 1300.

<sup>17</sup> Personal communication from Dr. Ivo Vasiljev, December 10, 2000.

<sup>18</sup> O.W. Wolters, *History, culture, and region in Southeast Asian perspectives*, p. 48, note 45.

<sup>19</sup> Paul Wheatley, *Nagara and commandery : origins of the Southeast Asian urban traditions* Chicago, Ill. : University of Chicago, Dept. of Geography, 1983, p. 372.



### **Fifteenth-century Vietnamese porcelain excavated at Empress Place, Singapore**

Vietnam exported glazed ceramics at the same time as Thai kilns were producing for the regional market, during the 15<sup>th</sup> century. A wide variety of Vietnamese ceramics has been discovered at Majapahit's capital, Trowulan, and in Riau, where they probably arrived via Singapore.

Vietnamese 15<sup>th</sup>-century ceramics have been found at EMP. Fewer than a dozen sherds have so far been identified: fragments of small blue and white cups. It is possible that others have not been identified because they were found in small fragments.

**Conclusion:**

Both history and archaeology force us to devote much attention to ancient Singapore's relations with China. This connection was important in many respects, diplomatic, commercial, and in terms of local population. It is quite possible however that for ancient Singaporeans, Ayutthaya, Java, and Vietnam occupied much attention. Singapore was at the margins of the Tai and Javanese mandalas. The most that either of them demanded from Singapore was tribute. No foreign governors ruled this island until Raffles arrived, but politically Singapore may simultaneously have belonged to a mainland and an insular mandala or sphere of influence. This situation required deft diplomatic skills. It is even possible that Singapore acquired its name as the result of an effort by Parameswara to attempt to atone for the sin of murdering a vassal and possibly an in-law of the king of Ayutthaya (in view of the fact that a 7<sup>th</sup>-century kingdom in Patani had this name). 14<sup>th</sup>-century Singapore managed to become relatively prosperous in such conditions; the wide range of artifacts, their quality and quantity, indicate that the inhabitants of this island enjoyed a high standard of living even when compared with remains so far reported from Ayutthaya and Majapahit.

Barring unforeseeable new discoveries, we are not going to understand 14<sup>th</sup>-century Singapore much better than we do today. Of course this does not mean we should stop digging! I wish that I could resume my conversations with Ben about Singapore's early relations with its neighbours. I would sincerely like to know what he would think of the new light which the data we have dug up sheds upon his beloved historical sources.