

BOOK REVIEWS



Singapore and the Silk Road of the Sea, 1300–1800. John N. Miksic. Singapore: National Museum of Singapore and NUS Press, 2013. 491 pp. Paper, US\$58.00. ISBN: 978-9971-69-558-3.

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In this comprehensive volume, John Miksic paints a detailed history of Singapore using archaeological and documentary evidence. Over eleven chapters, Miksic describes the historical trajectory of the city, from the first archaeological traces of human settlement on the island, to its fourteenth-century origins as Temasik, to the founding of colonial Singapore in 1819. Throughout this urban history, Miksic explores the wider contexts of Temasik and Singapore, including the relations of the island to other kingdoms and urban centers in Southeast Asia and beyond; the way Singaporeans have always used history to frame their actions and projects; and the central role identity continues to play in Singaporean politics and the shaping of its urban spaces.

Many general readers will be surprised to learn that Singapore has a history that predates the nineteenth-century colonial center established by Sir Thomas Raffles. Miksic provides a thorough and sensitive reading of the documents that describe the founding of Temasik, particularly the various surviving versions of the *Malay Annals*, first compiled around 1436 and copied and edited many times since then. These documents are compared with others, such as Wang Dayuan's fourteenth-century chronicles and the writings of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century

Portuguese chroniclers Tomè Pires and Godinho de Erédia, among others. Miksic deftly decodes these multiple sources, composed within vastly different literary traditions and for very different audiences. Miksic provides new English translations of some of the original texts, such as Wang's entry on Dan-ma-xi (Temasik) in his *Daoyi Zhilue* [A Brief Account of Island Barbarians].

Insights from these early documents are cast against the archaeological record. Here, Miksic provides access to a wide range of archaeological information about Singapore, much of which has not been widely published before, and none of which has been organized so comprehensively. Raffles has been widely acknowledged for his interest in archaeological remains and many scholars attribute the modern origins of archaeological perspectives on the Malay world to him. Raffles consciously chose to locate Singapore at the reputed site of ancient Temasik. Soon after digging for construction projects began in 1819, the physical remains of Temasik were unearthed. These remains were recorded and analyzed by colonial settlers. Miksic integrates these early finds and interpretations with more recent archaeological excavations, a surprising amount of which have accumulated since the mid-1980s. Projects such as the extensive multiyear excavations at Fort

Canning and work at Parliament House, Empress Place, and Saint Andrew's Cathedral are described in detail, with clear figures and summaries of relevant results.

Singapore has always been a trading center. Its strategic position on the Straits of Malacca (a major section of the "Silk Road of the Sea"), combined with the advantages of flat land near a river port, have made this piece of territory desirable for traders and rulers since at least the fourteenth century. As a result, Singapore today has considerable ethnic diversity. Four languages (English, Mandarin, Tamil, Malay) are officially recognized by the government and many other languages and creoles are widely spoken in Singapore. Documents and archaeology show that Singapore has always been a multiethnic place, visited and inhabited by traders and sojourners from all over the world. These people have used identity strategically, of course, constructing histories that select certain links over others and expressing these situated identities with a wide variety of material objects.

Miksic dedicates a major portion of this book to exploring the many trade goods that have passed through the city, as a way of understanding relationships and networks linking the city's inhabitants to other peoples and places. In some cases, these artifacts suggest networks that are not well recorded in the documents that have survived. One example is Singapore's relationship to Java, probably oversimplified in the documents as largely antagonistic. Findings of Javanese earthenware in Singapore suggest a more complex relationship. These artifacts indicate the existence of a Javanese diasporic community on the banks of the Singapore River. A lead figurine, possibly representing the sun god Surya or mythical figure Panji, both of which are frequently represented on thirteenth-fourteenth-century east Javanese temples, may have been made in Singapore. This suggests a closer and more entangled relationship between the two places than has been hitherto documented.

Ultimately, this volume is far more than a simple history of the city of Singapore.

Miksic's deep understanding of both Island and Mainland Southeast Asian history and archaeology has allowed him to provide an unusually expansive context for Singapore. For example, he provides a very useful summary of all the major shipwreck research in the region. The book also includes perhaps the most comprehensive archaeological overview currently published in English of major trading centers that interacted with Singapore, including Riau, Sumatra, Java, and Bali in Island Southeast Asia and the Malay Peninsula, and Thailand, Cambodia, and Viet Nam on the mainland.

While the book as a whole is a fantastically detailed exploration of urbanism and commerce in Southeast Asia, it is also useful in its individual parts. Chapters and sections are well suited for graduate and undergraduate student course readings. Miksic's clear and accessible writing style will appeal to the nonspecialist general reader. I can imagine taking a series of walking tours of Singapore guided by the book's maps and photographs of historic sites in their contemporary contexts. Specialists will find it to be a useful reference volume, since it is clearly organized and densely cited. The book has over three hundred figures, including photographs of archaeological sites and artifacts, maps, and other historic documents.

I suspect that most archaeologists of Southeast Asia will learn something new from this book. It is my hope that historians also take notice. For far too long, archaeologists and historians of Southeast Asia (as well as other places) have stayed in their disciplinary ghettos, to their mutual disadvantage. Historians have been particularly unwilling or unable to integrate archaeological data into their work. This is not surprising, given the difficulties of interpreting archaeological information and relating it to the very different temporal framing of written documents. In *Singapore and the Silk Road of the Sea, 1300–1800*, Miksic seamlessly integrates these sources of information. I hope it serves as a new model for writing about Southeast Asia's past.