

PRESERVING SINGAPORE'S HERITAGE

Digging up our history

By DEREK HENG and KWA CHONG GUAN
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THE archaeological excavation at Empress Place, which Minister Lawrence Wong visited last week, is the latest in a series of excavations started 30 years ago.

Other places recently excavated include the back of the Victoria Theatre before its renovation, and the space between the old Supreme Court and City Hall before it was built over to connect the two buildings for a National Art Gallery.

The driving force behind these excavations, 30 years ago and today, remains the same. It is to search for and recover any historical artefacts before redevelopment takes place. The limited, albeit detailed, Chinese and South-east Asian historical records suggest that a settlement existed at the mouth of the Singapore River since the end of the 13th century, which grew during the 14th century into a kingdom and port-city called Singapura, last-



Institute of Southeast Asian Studies archaeology unit research officer Aaron Kao (centre) keeping a record as volunteer Natalie Khoo checks for relics at the excavation site in front of Victoria Theatre and Victoria Concert Hall on Feb 13. The excavation at Empress Place continues to provide further testimony to Singapore's deep roots as a regional port. ST PHOTO: MARK CHEONG

ing for a century. Apart from Sir Stamford Raffles and John Crawfurd, the second governor of Singapore, who gave early 19th century eyewitness accounts of the remnants of this settlement, there has been no further confirming evidence.

It was only in 1984 that such evidence was recovered when the old National Museum invited Dr John N. Miksic, an archaeologist then teaching in Indonesia, to conduct a trial excavation on Fort Canning, a site which had been extensively developed and landscaped. Against the odds, an undisturbed layer of soil and earth datable to the 14th century was found around the old Keramat Iskandar Shah. Further excavations over the years have confirmed the conclusions drawn by historians from historical texts on Singapore's 700-year legacy.

From glass fragments and pottery shards to bronze coinage and Buddhist figurines, the current excavation at Empress Place is continuing to provide further testimony to Singapore's deep roots as a regional port.

For too long we have dismissed the stories in the Malay Annals of a wandering prince landing on Singapore, seeing what he was told to be a lion, and deciding to establish a kingdom which grew into a "great city" under his successors. The huge amount of artefacts recovered is testimony to the Annals' claims that Singapura was "...a great city to which foreigners resorted in great numbers so that the fame of the city and its greatness spread throughout the world".

Both archaeological data and textual records have now enabled the National Museum to frame Singapore's history as a nation-state as one epoch of a much longer experience as a settlement, port-city and state that has lasted for much of the last millennium.

The archaeological evidence also corroborates textual information, from the Malay Annals and Portuguese accounts, that this port was eclipsed in the early 15th century, when Singapura was attacked by rival Javanese forces and its last ruler fled to establish another emporium named Malacca.

A large corpus of 16th and 17th century Portuguese and Dutch documents, including maps currently exhibited at the National Library, records a thriving port just west of Tanjong Rhu. Under the administration of a port-master appointed by the Johor sultans up the Johor River, it was linked to the capitals of the Johor sultanate at Kota Tinggi and further downstream to Johor Lama.

Additionally, the Flemish gem trader Jacques de Coultre had provided us a vivid record of the trading world of South-east Asia between 1593 and 1603. His autobiography, found only in the 1960s and recently translated by Associate Professor Peter Borschberg (National University of Singapore), records that Singapore was a port which was "...one of the best that serves the (East) Indies". He advised the Portuguese king to take over the island and build forts on it to control the sea lanes to China. This linkage is confirmed by the very scant but similar body of Chinese porcelain shards recovered from a series of Johor River sites and the Kallang River estuary.

Unfortunately, we missed the opportunity to recover a larger body of archaeological evidence in the 1970s, when the Kallang estuary was being dredged. The dredging work brought up a lot of Chinese porcelain shards, which would have confirmed the existence of a thriving port.

However, the National Museum at that time was not equipped to appreciate the importance of the finds, and they have since been lost to the country.

Since 1984, the 30-year history of archaeological excavations here has been one of scrambling to salvage what can be saved before a site is redeveloped. Singapore is not alone in this. Other cities, from London to Xian, have had to confront the dilemma of redevelopment or preservation of historic sites.

The issue is not only of archaeologically significant sites, but also other historic sites and buildings. How do we decide what to do with the rest of the Bukit Brown cemetery after the expressway is driven through it? How do we plan what to do with Pulau Ubin?

Should a government agency, with the mandate and funding, decide the fate of a potentially historically significant site or building for redevelopment - leaving the growing number of civil societies and non-government organisations (NGOs) passionate about these sites as locations of our social memories defining Singapore, having then to react and challenge the development plans?

There must be a more efficient way of engaging each other to debate such issues other than as in a school debate, with only one side winning.

A number of countries and territories, including Hong Kong, have been grappling with these issues and have been working on various planning frameworks which bring together the diverse stakeholders and interested parties - government agencies, landowners and developers, and NGOs and civil society groups - to discuss and debate how to conduct a heritage impact assessment of a potential historic or memory site.

Perhaps we should move towards some form of a more open and transparent heritage impact assessment to engage and debate these issues of the imperative for urban redevelopment and preservation of historic sites. After all, such sites are the locus of our social memories, anchoring us to this island and defining us as Singaporeans.

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