

Archaeology database offers greater access to region's past

Digital product can be downloaded so it is easier to share info with public, researchers

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Women in 14th-century Singapore used to make their own pottery for activities such as cooking.

Fragments of these low-fired kitchenware, featuring decorative grooves and patterns, were uncovered at an excavation at the Singapore Cricket Club and can now be accessed online in a new database developed by NUS Press Singapore.

The database (<http://e-press.nus.edu.sg/sitereports/scc>) is the first of its kind in the region that features data sets which can be downloaded. It so far lists 2,000 of the more than 38,000 artefacts recovered in the 2003 dig.

Eventually, a total of 4,998 key artefacts will be listed on the site, supplemented by 700 photographs and 200 sketches.

The project, which has been two years in the making, is led by National University of Singapore archaeologist John Miksic, 71, and assistant history professor at Nanyang Technological University Goh Geok Yian, 46. It is under a Creative Commons Licence and received some \$43,000 in funding from the National Heritage Board (NHB).

Dr Miksic said: "The database makes it a lot easier to share information with the general public and scholars who are invested in Singaporean or South-east Asian archaeology during the period of maritime trade."

NUS Press' director Peter Schoppert said the digital product is a "practical" way to present the immense amount of data. He added that the information has been uploaded in a format that allows for statistical analysis, visualisations and detailed comparisons with other

sites in Singapore and beyond. It can aid others to produce their own analysis and research projects.

"It is an important first step in building a regional library of archaeological data that is fully accessible and reusable," said Mr Schoppert.

On the earthenware pottery made here, the archaeologists said its general style is typical of the area from southern Thailand, along both coasts of the Straits of Melaka (as the Straits of Malacca was referred to), to western Borneo in the Temasek period. They added that the Singaporean earthenware used in the kitchen was made from "clay mixed with very fine sand". They also said that clay suitable for pottery-making was found in Bras Basah.

The project comes at a time when NHB prepares to ramp up archaeological research and documentation, as part of the upcoming heritage plan – a comprehensive blueprint for the heritage sector.

NHB's assistant chief executive of policy and community, Mr Alvin Tan, said the database "provides a good model for comparative research across the region; and it offers the public information and insights into our archaeological past".

Dr Miksic said the selection of artefacts on the site was based on each item's potential "to illuminate socio-cultural and economic matter".

Most of the Temasek period artefacts from the Singapore Cricket Club consisted of stoneware – a material used mainly for storing perishable commodities – and porcelain-finer ware used for eating and display.

The archaeologists also noted their discovery of a layer of pristine white sand at the Padang. Its presence correlates to an account in the Malay Annals which describes Singapore's founder, Sang Nila Utama, as having landed on the island be-



From left: NTU assistant history professor Goh Geok Yian, NUS archaeologist John Miksic and NUS Press director Peter Schoppert with some artefacts and a digital tablet showing the new archaeology database. ST PHOTO: GAVIN FOO



Copper alloy coins dating back to the Song Dynasty (960-1279) were found during a dig at the Singapore Cricket Club in 2003. PHOTO: JOHN MIKSIC



Fragments of low-fired kitchenware, featuring decorative grooves and patterns, uncovered at the Singapore Cricket Club excavation. PHOTO: JOHN MIKSIC

cause he was attracted by sand so white, it looked like a sheet of cloth. Later excavations showed that the white sand beach extended all the way to Kampong Glam.

Next up for the team – the addition of artefacts from a 2010 dig at Fort Canning's Spice Garden. They hope to complete this phase of the project in time for Singapore's Bi-

centennial commemoration next year which will be located at Fort Canning.

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