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Singapore's bicentennial: 1819-2019

Raffles did not 'discover' Singapore

Singapore was most certainly not a lost and forgotten place in 1819, says the writer, or indeed in the centuries before that. It was recognised for its locational value, and had been singled out in proposals for both fortification and colonisation.
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At least two centuries before 1819, the island was already appreciated for its fine port and for its commercial potential as a colonial settlement.

Peter Borschberg

For The Straits Times

Can Stamford Raffles really be credited fully for discovering Singapore's potential as a commercial emporium and a natural strategic position in the Straits region?

Can it be that an important location along a busy maritime artery remained undiscovered or forgotten for centuries?

Recent research has found that before 1800, Singapore was not a place forgotten by time.

The name Singapura and its many orthographical variants had featured regularly in the written and cartographical materials since the Europeans arrived in South-east Asia, and even before.

There were other names too: Pulau Panjang (Long Island) was a name that featured sometimes in the original Malay or in translation in Dutch, French, Spanish and British cartography of the 1600s and 1700s. The Flemish trader Jacques de Coutre, who had passed through Singapore waters several times in the late 1500s and early 1600s, called Singapore Isla de la Sabandaria Vieja (Island of the Old Sabandaria) after the presence of the Singapore shahbandar (port master).

Additional names included Insel Gubernador (Governor's Island) after the Governor's Strait, the European name for the main Singapore Strait between 1616 and 1819. This was used by Gottfried von Laimbeckhoven, an Austrian Jesuit who later became the Bishop of Nanjing, when he recorded his sea voyage past the island in 1738.

For most of recorded history, Singapore was certainly appreciated as a strategic location, both militarily and commercially.

Asian and European geographical materials from the period 1500-1800 – and arguably before – saw Singapore as marking an area of transition between the Bay of Bengal and the Strait of Malacca in the west and the South China Sea in the east. Similarly, some Arab and Portuguese authors of the pre-modern period treat Singapore as a gate or gateway.

The local rulers and the early European colonial powers knew that anyone who controlled the waters of the Singapore Strait would gain a grip on passing maritime trade.

Because of Singapore's strategic location, early European powers active in the Straits region sought to gain a grip on the flow of seaborne trade in these waters to disrupt and damage the commercial networks of their European competitors.

The Dutch East India Company, or VOC, routinely deployed vessels in the early 1600s at certain nodal points in the Singapore Strait.

One squadron was assigned to cruise the eastern coast of Singapore and the Johor River estuary, while another patrolled the waters off the northern coast of the Karimun islands. From these two nodal points, it was possible to monitor all traffic sailing through the Singapore and southern Malacca straits as well as their main tributaries: the Kundur, Durian, Sugi, Jombol, Riau and Tebrau straits.

In addition to patrolling nodal points along the Karimun-Singapore-Pedra Branca axis, a number of proposals were also put forward to construct fortifications in and around Singapore, although none came to fruition before 1800. The Dutch were known to have been planning in the early 1600s for a fort at the north-western tip of present-day Sentosa – at the same location where Fort Siloso was built by the British much later. Additional Dutch proposals drawn up around 1614 included a possible fortification along the eastern coast of Singapore.

One of the most detailed and interesting proposals is found in a petition drafted by de Coutre, dating from the mid-1620s. In this document, he advised the King of Spain (concurrently of Portugal) to construct a main fortification at the north-western tip of today's Sentosa. A second structure was suggested for the eastern coast of Singapore, and a third for an unspecified islet located off Pulau Tekong Besar. From the latter, it would have been possible to observe shipping entering and leaving the Johor River as well as the Tebrau Strait.

All these proposals by the Dutch or Spanish were halted either because of high overhead costs, more urgent priorities or opposition from the Johor ruler.

Commercially, at least two centuries before Raffles arrived on the scene, Singapore was already appreciated for its fine port and for its commercial potential as a colonial settlement. De Coutre considered the port of Singapore as "one of the best that serves the Indies", and proceeded to recommend that the Spanish monarch found a colonial emporium here.

Abraham Couperus, who had been the last Dutch governor of Melaka until 1795, had also recommended to his superior, Governor-General Herman Willem Daendels, in 1809 that the Dutch should consider founding a new colony, to be built up from ground zero, after the Anglo-French Wars.

Couperus singled out two locations he thought would prove suitable: the island of Belitung (Billiton) and Singapore, or at least a location at the tip of the peninsula. Interestingly, Raffles shortly thereafter acquired both places, arranging for the acquisition of Bangka and Belitung from Palembang in 1812, and Singapore in 1819.

What does this all amount to? Singapore was most certainly not a lost and forgotten place in 1819, or indeed in the centuries before that. It was recognised for its locational value, and had been singled out in proposals for both fortification and colonisation.

With the perspective of deep time, the story of Raffles' discovery of Singapore should be seen less as a discovery, but as the most recent in a series of visions for the island.

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