

Sea storms that could have cut short Singapore's port history

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Singapore, a renowned ancient port for Asian trade, could have failed numerous times after Sir Stamford Raffles' arrival.

The Dutch could have attacked and wiped out the outpost; pirates could have driven merchants away; and a blight which wiped out nutmeg plantations could have spelt Singapore's end.

Even the advent of steam power

could have changed sea routes, negating Singapore's importance.

In a speech yesterday, Senior Minister of State for Defence and Foreign Affairs, Dr Maliki Osman, who opened a two-day conference on ancient harbours at the National University of Singapore (NUS), said: "At each critical point, Singapore could have taken a wrong turn and been replaced by another port located somewhere between Jakarta and Penang or Aceh."

Dr Maliki said there are lessons that can be learnt from history which can serve as a guide to what

the future might become.

"Old frameworks and networks are now under pressure, and new ideas have to be found to keep them working and become even more efficient. This is one instance where greater understanding of the past may help people of the present to stand by their convictions in the face of negative criticism and figure out how to keep alive the values which have sustained the Silk Road of the sea for 2,000 years."

The conference *Singapura Before Raffles: Archaeology And The Seas, 400BCE-1600CE* has been organ-

ised by the NUS Department of South-east Asian Studies, supported by the National Heritage Board, in support of Singapore's bicentennial.

It is the second conference on ancient harbours to be held in Singapore after the first one in 2004. Selected papers from the event will be compiled into a publication.

The conference, attended by about 180 people, brings together 18 international scholars to present their latest research on the subject of pre-colonial Singapore and its links to the maritime trade network.

The speakers will cover the themes of economy, technology and social context of early South-east Asian maritime trade; the origins and growth of maritime networks in the South China Sea and the Bay of Bengal and shipwrecks in the South China Sea and Java Sea which carried cargo between different parts of the region.

Singapore and nearby sea lanes played a critical role in the formation of a network which, by 400BCE, had already spanned the coasts from north-east Africa to the western Pacific Ocean, noted the conference convenor, archaeologist John Miksic, who also gave the keynote address. He added that archaeological research is one of the few ways to uncover information about this network.

Dr Maliki added: "We now know more about 14th-century Singapore than any other port of the period in South-east Asia... We are only now coming to appreciate the extent to which Singapore and the Strait of Malacca have been a major contributor to the world maritime trading system."

Dr Maliki said he hopes the conference will succeed in stimulating further research and collaboration between scholars working on sea trade. "I also hope Singapore will continue to build on its position as a centre of maritime trade to develop a better understanding of how seaports have evolved over the centuries."

The conference is timely for the island's bicentennial, said Dr Miksic.

"It helps to demonstrate that Singapore's reason for becoming successful again during the colonial era was because people living around it believed it could be. They had faith and confidence, and were really happy it was being re-established outside of the Dutch sphere without being encumbered by monopolies and taxes and so on.

"Singapore went on to encourage freedom of trade and globalisation at that time. It shows that, given the right people and the right policies, Singapore can continue to be stable and play this role despite not being big in terms of geography or population or resources."

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KEEPING VALUES ALIVE

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DR MALIKI OSMAN, Senior Minister of State for Defence and Foreign Affairs.