

1500s S'pore at the heart of economic hub of region

This is the third of six weekly articles covering the Singapore History Series – Seven Centuries In Six Episodes, organised as part of the SkillsFuture Festival in collaboration with the Singapore Bicentennial Office

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It is durian season, and these days, there are many ways to satisfy your craving for the king of fruits – including having it delivered to your doorstep.

Traders plying the waters of early Singapore also enjoyed a similar service, thanks to the orang laut – or “sea people” in Malay – who would paddle up to their vessels, in small, narrow boats, to sell the fruit.

The sea nomads who lived on the coastlines and waterways also had on offer refreshing mangosteens – a popular fruit eaten with the “heaty” durian – as well as fish, live chickens, fresh water and palm leaf parasols, among other things.

The waters of 1500s Singapore and its surrounds were at the centre of historian Peter Borschberg’s lecture last Thursday at Fort Canning Centre.

Speaking to *The Straits Times* in the lead-up to the talk, Associate Professor Borschberg from the National University of Singapore said: “The orang laut frequenting the straits are known to have served as pilots and petty merchants.

“In their role as pilots, they guided passing ships through the dangerous waters around the islands.

“As merchants, they would pull up to trade goods and gossip.”

Flemish gem trader Jacques de Coutre captured some of the life and times of the orang laut in his memoirs.

De Coutre’s work is one of a number of European records Prof Borschberg presented during the lecture to debunk the misconception that Singapore had plunged into silence and become insignificant after the Portuguese invaded Melaka in 1511.

The Portuguese, after all, are on record as having destroyed Singapore – likely around 1511 to the 1530s, during their naval campaigns against Bintan or later against Johor.

The sources Prof Borschberg studied paint a different picture of Singapore – portraying it as an island at the epicentre of active economic activity.

European economic maps mark out gold, copper and tin mining activities, as well as a flourishing timber and shipbuilding industry on the Malay peninsula and the nearby islands, including Sumatra. There was also a food-processing industry



Associate Professor Peter Borschberg giving a talk about the waters of 1500s Singapore and its surrounds, at Fort Canning Centre last Thursday. Prof Borschberg says the curtain never fell on 16th century Singapore, and that sources portray it as an island at the epicentre of active economic activity. ST PHOTO: DESMOND FOO

that included the drying and salting of fish, as well as the pickling of fish eggs, which was a delicacy among the Malay elites of the time.

Some maps also sketched out overland and maritime trade routes in the region. Singapore’s depiction as an island in the greater Johor River estuary reveals that Singapore functioned as a gatekeeper of the Johor River. Singapore and its straits were, thus, well known and well charted by the Europeans, said Prof Borschberg.

Singapore also functioned as a base for the fleets of Melaka and Johor. Prof Borschberg said: “Ships would have called here, declared their goods, and, in the case of larger, ocean-going vessels, would have shifted cargo onto or out of smaller vessels.”

The head of port and storage operations would have been the *shahbandar*, or port master, who was posted to Singapore by the kingdom of Johor. He managed Singapore’s port affairs, including Customs duties, the administration of

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royal monopolies, and was responsible for resolving disputes between foreigners and locals.

A number of Europeans had even met Singapore’s *shahbandar*. Among them were de Coutre, and

Dutch admiral Cornelis Matelieff. De Coutre described Singapore as one of the “best ports that serve the (East) Indies”.

Even after the traumatic events of 1511, one of the four great lords of

Melaka – a sea admiral known as the laksamana – resided in Singapore.

Blue-and-white Chinese porcelain remnants, dating between 1573 and 1620, and which were recovered from Kallang River in the late 1960s and early 1970s, are evidence of Ming trade having taken place here during the 1500s.

Concluding his talk, which was attended by more than 100 people, Dr Borschberg said the curtain never fell on 16th century Singapore. Instead, it underwent cycles of destruction and reconstruction which continued into the 17th century.

“Singapore served different functions at different times and had even been singled out as a place to acquire, fortify and colonise by the early European powers.”

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• Tonight’s talk, helmed by maritime archaeologist Michael Flecker, will cover 17th century Singapore. Registration for the free lecture series is now closed.