A Place on the Strait: Temasek, Singapura and the Maritime Trade of the Malay World

Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland and Germany),
Solicitor (England & Wales and Hong Kong)
Of Counsel, KGP Legal LLC
alexander.ressos@kgplegal.com.sg
www.ressos.com.sg

Every financial centre begins with a place. Before Singapore had banks, a stock exchange or a monetary authority, it had a position: an island at the point where the Strait of Malacca turns into the South China Sea, on the route that every ship sailing between the Indian Ocean and China had to take. This chapter examines that position and the commercial history it produced long before the East India Company arrived. It asks what kind of port stood on the island in the fourteenth century, why it rose and why it fell, and what the rival ports of the Strait – Srivijaya, Malacca, Johor and Riau – reveal about the conditions under which a place of exchange flourishes.

The question is more than antiquarian. The founding narrative of modern Singapore long began in 1819, as if the island had been an empty stage on which Stamford Raffles set up a free port. Archaeology and a closer reading of the written sources have replaced that narrative with a longer one. Singapore was a port of regional importance in the fourteenth century. Eclipsed for four centuries by rivals, it was refounded when the balance of power in the Strait changed once more. The

© 2026 Dr Alexander Ressos. General information only, not legal, tax or investment advice. No client relationship is created. All Singapore law advice is provided by a duly licensed and regulated firm of Singapore advocates and solicitors only on the basis of an express written letter of engagement. More information at SingaporeIQ.com and ressos.com.sg.

pattern of rise, eclipse and refounding recurs throughout this book. It shows that geography offers an opportunity and that institutions decide whether the opportunity is taken.

The chapter also serves the comparative purpose of this volume. The Geneva volume opens with the medieval fairs of Geneva and their loss to Lyon, a reminder that a favourable location is exposed to the decisions of powerful neighbours.[1] The history of the Strait tells the same story on a maritime scale. Competing for the same ships, the same merchants and the same protection, the ports of the Strait rose or fell with the policies of the powers that stood behind them.

Essentials

Singapore's site controls the southern exit of the Strait of Malacca, the shortest sea route between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. A trading settlement existed on the island in the fourteenth century and is documented by Chinese and Javanese texts, by the Malay Annals and by extensive archaeological finds. The settlement declined around 1400 and its trade passed to Malacca, then to Johor and Riau. When the British founded their settlement in 1819, they were reviving a port whose earlier history taught lessons – protection, predictable rules and openness to many communities – that shaped the new foundation.

Notes

1. Ressos, *Genève, place financière internationale*, Frankfurt am Main, Editions Euthenia, 2026, partie A. ↩

Disclaimer

This article is provided for general information only. It is based on publicly available sources as at its date of publication. These sources have not been independently verified against licences, regulatory registers or the records of the entities concerned. It is not legal, tax, financial or investment advice.

© 2026 Dr Alexander Ressos. General information only, not legal, tax or investment advice. No client relationship is created. All Singapore law advice is provided by a duly licensed and regulated firm of Singapore advocates and solicitors only on the basis of an express written letter of engagement. More information at SingaporeIQ.com and ressos.com.sg.

Nor is it a recommendation to invest in, transact with or use the services of any entity mentioned. Law and regulation change frequently, so the content may be incomplete or outdated. To the fullest extent permitted by law, Dr Alexander Ressos and the publisher of SingaporeIQ exclude all liability for loss or damage arising from the use of or reliance on this article. Readers should obtain advice on their specific circumstances before acting or refraining from action.

Names and trademarks of the entities discussed belong to their owners and are used for identification only. Their mention implies no endorsement, affiliation or allegation of wrongdoing. All Singapore law advice is provided by a duly licensed and regulated firm of Singapore advocates and solicitors only on the basis of an express written letter of engagement. Corrections and updates: contact@ressos.com.

© 2026 Dr Alexander Ressos. This article may be quoted with attribution to SingaporeIQ (SingaporeIQ.com). Reproduction in full and any commercial use require prior written consent. The Legal Terms at https://singaporeiq.com/legal-terms apply.

Author contact: Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP · contact@ressos.com

© 2026 Dr Alexander Ressos. General information only, not legal, tax or investment advice. No client relationship is created. All Singapore law advice is provided by a duly licensed and regulated firm of Singapore advocates and solicitors only on the basis of an express written letter of engagement. More information at SingaporeIQ.com and ressos.com.sg.