Temasek and Singapura in the fourteenth century: archaeology and chronicle

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The written sources: Chinese, Javanese and Malay

The history of the island before 1819 rests on three kinds of written evidence: Chinese travel and geographical literature, Javanese court poetry and the Malay historical tradition. Since each has its own perspective and its own limitations, the modern understanding of fourteenth-century Singapore depends on reading them together and checking them against the archaeological record.

The most important Chinese source is the *Daoyi Zhilüe* ("Brief Account of the Island Barbarians") of Wang Dayuan, a merchant-traveller who sailed through the Nanyang around 1330 and completed his account in the middle of the fourteenth century.[1] Wang described a place he called Danmaxi, a Chinese rendering of Temasek, and distinguished two areas within it. The first, Longyamen, the "Dragon's Teeth Gate", was a strait between two hills through which ships passed. The second, Banzu, was a settlement on a hill inhabited by traders.[2]

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Wang's account contrasts the two areas sharply. Of Longyamen he warned that ships returning from the Western Oceans might be met by pirates attacking with two to three hundred boats. Of Banzu he wrote that its inhabitants were honest traders, who wore their hair short with turbans of gold-brocaded satin and red clothing.[3] Banzu is generally identified with the area of Fort Canning Hill, and Longyamen with the western entrance to the harbour, near today's Keppel Harbour.[4] Wang also recorded that local products included lakawood and tin, and that the inhabitants traded with Chinese merchants from Quanzhou.[5]

Wang's text contains a further detail of political importance. He reported that Temasek had been attacked by the Siamese and that the city had resisted the siege for a month.[6] The episode shows that the settlement was of sufficient value to attract the attention of a mainland power and strong enough to defend itself. It also shows the precariousness of its position between larger neighbours.

The Javanese source is the *Nagarakretagama*, a court poem composed in 1365 in praise of the kingdom of Majapahit in eastern Java. It lists Tumasik among the territories that the poet regarded as vassals of Majapahit.[7] Court poetry records claims. The list therefore reflects Majapahit's ambitions more than its effective control. It confirms, however, that the settlement was known by name in the capital of the most powerful state of the archipelago and was considered worth claiming.

The third source is the Malay historical tradition, above all the *Sejarah Melayu*, the "Malay Annals", a court chronicle of the Malacca dynasty composed in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and revised in the early seventeenth century.[8] The Annals tell the story of Singapura as the first seat of the dynasty that later ruled Malacca. Written to legitimise the rulers of Malacca and Johor, they are a dynastic chronicle with an uncertain chronology. Their account of Singapura nonetheless agrees in its outlines with the Chinese and archaeological evidence.

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The Malay Annals and the founding legend

According to the *Sejarah Melayu*, a prince from Palembang named Sang Nila Utama, who claimed descent from Alexander the Great, landed on the island of Temasek, saw a strange and powerful animal and was told that it was a lion. He took the sighting as an auspicious sign, founded a city on the island and named it Singapura, the "Lion City".[9] Five rulers are said to have reigned in Singapura before the city fell. A later tradition dates the foundation to around 1299, a date that has become part of the official narrative of Singapore's long history.[10]

The legend expresses several claims at once. The descent from Palembang connects Singapura with the prestige of Srivijaya. The descent from Alexander connects the dynasty with the wider Islamic world, in which the chronicle was written. The lion, an animal that never lived on the island, turns an ordinary settlement into a place chosen by providence. For the historian of the financial centre, the most interesting feature of the legend is its insistence on legitimacy. A port in the Strait needed a ruler whose authority was recognised by merchants and neighbours alike. The founding legend served as an instrument of that recognition.

The Annals also contain episodes that reflect the dangers facing the city. They tell of an attack by swordfish that was repelled by a boy's idea of building a barrier of banana stems, and of the strongman Badang, whose feats of strength were remembered in connection with a great stone at the mouth of the river.[11] Historians read the swordfish episode as an allegory of a seaborne attack. Whatever its origin, it confirms a theme that runs through the sources: the city's prosperity was constantly threatened from the sea.

Archaeology: the evidence from the ground

For a long time the fourteenth-century city was known only from these texts, which left many historians doubting whether a settlement of any importance had existed. Archaeology changed that assessment. Early finds came by chance. In 1819, labourers clearing the jungle at the mouth of the Singapore River found a large sandstone boulder bearing an inscription of about fifty lines. The Singapore Stone rose to

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about 3 metres in height and 3 metres in width. In 1843 it was blown up on the orders of the acting Settlement Engineer to clear and widen the passage at the mouth of the river.[12] Of the fragments that were saved, some went to Calcutta and one is exhibited in Singapore today. The inscription has never been deciphered, although the Dutch scholar Hendrik Kern suggested a date around 1230.[13]

In 1928, workers on Fort Canning Hill found several pieces of gold ornaments dating to the mid-fourteenth century.[14] The ornaments, in a style associated with eastern Java, pointed to a wealthy elite with links to Majapahit. They confirmed that the hill, called Bukit Larangan, the "Forbidden Hill", by the Malays of 1819, had once been the site of a court.

Systematic excavation began in 1984. The American archaeologist John Miksic conducted his first excavation at Fort Canning from 18 to 28 January 1984 and recovered 1,346 pottery sherds, weighing 14.31 kg, dating from the fourteenth century.[15] Further excavations followed at the Parliament House complex in 1994, at Empress Place in 1998, and at the Padang of the Singapore Cricket Club and the grounds of St Andrew's Cathedral in 2003.[16] The combined results show that fourteenth-century Temasek is the best archaeologically documented port settlement in the Straits of Melaka.[17]

The finds allow a picture of the settlement to be drawn. There was a court on the hill, with workshops, and a commercial district along the north bank of the river, where goods were landed, stored and processed. Chinese ceramics dominate the finds: stoneware storage jars, porcelain of the Yuan period, including blue-and-white and celadon wares, and everyday pottery. Coins, glass, beads and metalwork testify to trade with China, India and the archipelago. Evidence of metalworking suggests that the settlement also processed raw materials.[18]

For the purposes of this book, three conclusions matter. First, Temasek was a real port with a real market, connected to the major trading networks of its time. Second, its prosperity rested on the transit and re-export trade, the same function that the British settlement would perform after 1819. Third, its trade was oriented towards China, whose goods and probably whose merchants were present in the

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settlement. The fourteenth-century port was an entrepôt. The modern city, which describes itself with the same word, therefore has a longer genealogy than the story of 1819 suggests.

Common misconception

It is often said that Singapore was a sleepy fishing village when Raffles arrived and that its history began in 1819. The first half of the statement describes the island in 1819 with some accuracy: the settlement of the Temenggong numbered about 150 people, most of them Malays, with around 30 Chinese, within a total population of around a thousand on the island, most of them members of local sea peoples.[19] The second half is incorrect. The island had been a port of regional importance five centuries earlier, as the British founders knew: Raffles was aware of the Malay tradition of Singapura and chose the site partly for its historical associations.

A port between Siam and Majapahit

The fourteenth-century port lived between two larger powers. To the north, the Thai kingdoms, which extended their influence down the Malay Peninsula, claimed overlordship over the ports of the peninsula. To the south-east, Majapahit claimed the ports of the archipelago. Temasek resisted a Siamese siege, as Wang Dayuan recorded, and appears as a vassal in Majapahit's court poetry. Its rulers probably maintained relations with both powers and with China, seeking the recognition that secured their trade without surrendering the autonomy that made it profitable.

This position between powers is a recurring feature of Singapore's history. The modern republic has pursued a foreign policy of balancing between larger states and of cultivating relations with all of them, a policy examined in Part F of this book. It would be anachronistic to attribute a foreign policy in the modern sense to the rulers of Temasek. The structural situation, however, was comparable: a small port with valuable trade, dependent on the tolerance of its neighbours and on its usefulness to all of them.

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The fall of Singapura

The end of the fourteenth-century city is recorded differently in the different traditions. The *Sejarah Melayu* tells of a ruler who executed a woman of the court on a false accusation, and of her father, a high official, who in revenge opened the gates of the city to an invading Javanese fleet. The Portuguese sources of the sixteenth century, including the account of Tomé Pires, tell of a prince from Palembang, Parameswara, who took refuge in Singapura, killed its local ruler and governed the island for some years before being driven out.[20] Whichever version is closer to the events, the outcome was the same. Around 1398, the ruler of Singapura fled north and founded a new settlement at Malacca, where he established the dynasty whose history the Annals record.[21]

The archaeological record suggests that the settlement on the island did not disappear at once. Finds from the fifteenth century are less abundant than those from the fourteenth, which suggests that the commercial district declined gradually. The court, however, moved to Malacca and took with it the political authority that had attracted and protected trade. Without a ruler who could offer protection and recognition, the island lost its function as a market. It remained a place on the route, known to sailors and occasionally used by local chiefs, but it ceased to be a centre.

The fall of Singapura contains the first lesson of this book. A port's prosperity rested on institutions – a recognised authority, a secure market, predictable dues – and those institutions could move. When the court left, the trade followed it. Geography remained constant, while the institutions that turned geography into wealth moved with the court.

Notes

1. The *Daoyi Zhilüe* is usually dated to 1349; Wang Dayuan's voyages took place in the 1330s. See Wikipedia, "Daoyi Zhilüe" and "Wang Dayuan" (accessed September 2026), and the discussion in *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 169 (2019), "Deconstructing Banzu and

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Longyamen: The Daoyi zhilüe (1349) in the New Early History of Singapore". ↩

2. Wikipedia, "Temasek" (accessed September 2026), quoting Wang Dayuan: "Longyamen is intersected with two mountains belonging to the Temasek natives, akin to a dragon teeth-like formation, with a water channel running through the middle." ↩
3. Wikipedia, "Temasek" (accessed September 2026), quoting Wang Dayuan on the pirates of Longyamen, who attacked "with two to three hundred perahus", and on the inhabitants of Banzu, who "wear their hair short, with turban of gold-brocaded satin, and red-coloured clothing". ↩
4. The identification of Banzu with Fort Canning Hill and of Longyamen with the passage at Keppel Harbour is widely accepted but not undisputed; see the article in *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 169 (2019) cited above, and Wikipedia, "Long Ya Men" and "Ban Zu" (accessed September 2026). ↩
5. Wikipedia, "Temasek" (accessed September 2026), summarising Wang Dayuan: lakawood and tin were produced locally, and the natives traded with Chinese from Quanzhou. ↩
6. Wikipedia, "Temasek" (accessed September 2026): Wang reported that "the city successfully resisted the attack for a month". ↩
7. Wikipedia, "Temasek" (accessed September 2026): the *Nagarakretagama*, written in 1365, "listed Tumasik as a vassal of the Majapahit". ↩
8. On the dating and recensions of the *Sejarah Melayu*, see C.C. Brown (trans.), *Sejarah Melayu or Malay Annals*, Kuala Lumpur, Oxford University Press, 1970 (reprint of the 1952 edition), introduction; the recension of 1612 is usually taken as the basis of the surviving text. ↩
9. C.C. Brown (trans.), *Sejarah Melayu or Malay Annals*, chapter 3, on the arrival of Sang Nila Utama and the naming of Singapura; the Annals present the ruler as a descendant of Iskandar Zulkarnain (Alexander the Great). ↩

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10. Kwa Chong Guan, "Remembering John Norman Miksic", *BiblioAsia*, vol. 21, issue 4, January 2026, on the seat of government of the legendary prince who established Singapura around 1299. ↩
11. C.C. Brown (trans.), *Sejarah Melayu or Malay Annals*, on the swordfish attack and on Badang; the connection between Badang and the Singapore Stone is a later popular association. ↩
12. National Library Board Singapore, Infopedia, "Singapore Stone" (discovery in June 1819 at Rocky Point, dimensions of about 3 m by 3 m, about 50 lines of inscription, destruction in 1843 on the orders of the acting Settlement Engineer, Captain Stevenson). ↩
13. National Library Board Singapore, Infopedia, "Singapore Stone": fragments salvaged by Lt-Colonel James Low, two sent to the Royal Asiatic Society's museum in Calcutta, the surviving relic exhibited in Singapore, and Kern's suggested date of around 1230. ↩
14. Wikipedia, "Temasek" (accessed September 2026): at Fort Canning Hill in 1928 "several pieces of gold ornaments dating to the mid-14th century were discovered". ↩
15. Kwa Chong Guan, "Remembering John Norman Miksic", *BiblioAsia*, vol. 21, issue 4, January 2026 (first Fort Canning dig from 18 to 28 January 1984, 1,346 pottery sherds weighing 14.31 kg dating back to the fourteenth century). ↩
16. Kwa Chong Guan, "Remembering John Norman Miksic", *BiblioAsia*, vol. 21, issue 4, January 2026 (Parliament House complex 1994, Empress Place 1998, Singapore Cricket Club's Padang 2003, St Andrew's Cathedral 2003). ↩
17. Kwa Chong Guan, "Remembering John Norman Miksic", *BiblioAsia*, vol. 21, issue 4, January 2026; the results are set out in John N. Miksic, *Singapore and the Silk Road of the Sea, 1300–1800*, Singapore, NUS Press, 2013, which won the inaugural Singapore History Prize in 2018. ↩
18. Summary of the archaeological picture drawn from John N. Miksic, *Singapore and the Silk Road of the Sea, 1300–1800*, Singapore, NUS Press, 2013. ↩

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19. Wikipedia, “Founding years of modern Singapore” (accessed September 2026), on the Temenggong’s settlement of about 150 people, “most of them Malays, with around 30 Chinese”, and a total population of “around a thousand”. ↩
20. Wikipedia, “Temasek” (accessed September 2026): Portuguese sources indicate that Parameswara “ruled Singapura for five years” before being forced to relocate to Melaka. ↩
21. Wikipedia, “Malacca Sultanate” (accessed September 2026): Parameswara established Malacca around 1400 after the fall of Singapore in 1398. ↩

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