

The Story of Temasek to Singapura

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Introduction

The story of Singapore did not begin in 1819. It began almost five hundred years earlier when Singapore was known as Temasek. It was a key political centre in the genealogy of Malay rulers linking the major empires of Palembang, Sri Vijaya from the seventh century to Melaka in the sixteenth and to Johor thereafter. However, just like Singapore of today, ancient Singapura was a cosmopolitan society and a key trading hub in the regional and global networks.

About the historical sources on Singapura

The story of the founding of ancient Singapura has remained little known to her people and has been shrouded in myth and mystery unlike the well-known history of the founding of modern Singapore by Sir Stamford Raffles in 1819. Yet, Singapore has a much longer history and has played a key role in the political and economic developments of the region and beyond. Recent scholarly researches have examined a variety of sources that have enabled them to reconstruct a clearer picture of what ancient Singapura was like. However, one must recognize that the task of examining, corroborating and synthesizing these sources is a challenging one since there could be many interpretations and versions to the ancient Singapura story as there are sources.

Who founded ancient Singapura? Was it Sri Tri Buana, a ruler from Palembang, who decided to seek a fortune elsewhere that landed in Temasek and established a new settlement after re-naming it Singapura? Or was it Paramesawara, a renegade prince, who fled from Palembang to Temasek after a failed rebellion against Majapahit? The Malay classical text *Sulalat al-Salatin – Perteturan Segala Raja-Raja*, better known as the *Sejarah Melayu* recounts the former version whilst the Portuguese sources, the latter.

Nevertheless, these sources are invaluable in providing data to enable us to understand the past better. Contemporary Asian sources that provide glimpses of ancient Singapura include those written by the Chinese, Vietnamese and Javanese, respectively: the *Yuan Shih* ("History of the Yuan Dynasty", 1320) and a more detailed description by Wang Dayuan in his book *Daoyi Zhilue* ("Description of the Barbarians of the Isles", 1349); *The Vietnamese Royal Chronicle Dai Viet Su Ky Toan Thu* ("The Complete Annals of Dai Viet", 1330) mentioned Temasek briefly and lastly, the *Nagarakratagama* ("Eulogy to Hayam Wuruk", 1365) and the *Pararaton* ("Book of Kings"). The indigenous Malay classic, the *Sulalat al-Salatin*, ("Genealogy of Kings", 1612) has details of ancient Singapura over a few chapters. Besides Asian sources, European records of the sixteenth century about ancient Singapura consist of Portuguese sources written by Tome Pires, Joao de Barros, Bras d'Albuquerque, Diogo de Couto and a map by Godinho de Eredia. Nineteenth century European companies and colonial sources include an 1819 account by a British hydrographer Daniel Ross, letters of correspondence of Stamford Raffles, travelogue entries of John Crawfurd, maps and town planning records of the East India Company. Besides textual and cartographic data, there is material

evidence found in 1926 at Fort Canning consisting of a cache of gold jewellery believed to be of Majapahit origin. In 1984, John Miksic and his archaeological team unearthed new evidences which point to a fourteenth century settlement and a royal compound at Fort Canning. All these textual sources, from different periods written by different people with their own agendas, perspectives and contextual knowledge reveal differing accounts which are at times even contesting in nature. However, examined judiciously and with some imagination, they could provide a reconstruction of ancient Singapura in the fourteenth century and its links with other powers at that time.

Geo-political contexts

The rise and fall of Singapura could be viewed within the geo-political context of the cycles of rise and fall of local polities or emporiums along the Straits of Melaka. Sri Vijaya (c.7-13th C), Samudra-Pasai (c.14th C), Temasek/Singapura (c.14th C), Melaka (c.15-16th C), Aceh (c.16-20th C) and Johor (c.16-20th C) were the major trading emporiums along the Melaka Straits which roughly were either contemporaneous or indirectly succeeding one another. In the larger regional and global geo-political contexts, more powerful overlords such as the Siamese, Javanese and indirectly China, competed in order to gain as many vassals to extend their area of influence in this region. The polities along the Melaka Straits were in different states and degrees of vassalship to these expanding overlords. However, given a chance, these vassals when powerful enough, would not only overthrow their overlord but would try to gain new vassals of their own in a regional power balance that was transient, fluid and highly contested.

The sacred ruler

In this fluid context where polities rise and fall and where new kingdoms could be founded (Malay trans. *buka negeri*) the ruler or raja was central and a key institution in itself to the establishment and legitimacy of that kingdom. Where there was no ruler, there would be no kingdom nor subjects. Alternatively, a kingdom could actually be found where there exists a ruler with a legitimate lineage and his entourage of loyal followers. In the pre-Islamic period, a legitimate ruler was one imbued with sacral (Malay trans. *sakti*), or semi-divine powers, seen as incarnations of Buddhist deities. The rise and fall of Singapura was a part of this regional cycle. The rise of Singapura was dependent on the existence of an illustrious lineage of royalty from Palembang who after having established Singapura, then went on to found Melaka. Whether this royalty was Sri Tri Buana as depicted in the *Sulalat al-Salatin* or Parameswara as revealed in the Portuguese sources, both emphasized that he was of royal blood from Palembang who would be a legitimate sovereign of Temasek/ancient Singapura. Similarly, when the last ruler fled Singapura, it brought about the eventual decline of this emporium. This royal lineage enabled the last ruler of Singapura whether he was depicted as Iskandar Syah of the *Sulalat al-Salatin* or Parameswara of the Portuguese sources, to open a new kingdom called Melaka which henceforth would develop into a successful empire and overlord of the Straits of Melaka until the Portuguese conquest of 1511.

Founding of Singapura and its growth

According to the *Sulalat al-Salatin*, Sri Tri Buana, the ruler from Palembang, decided to seek a fortune elsewhere and with his entourage, had gone to Bentan where he spotted an island (Temasek) and wished to go there. Upon arriving on the shores of Temasek, he spotted a strange animal and according to his right hand man, Demang Lebar Daun, in ancient times it was a lion that

had that appearance. Seeing this as auspicious, Sri Tri Buana decided to establish a kingdom here and asked the ruler of Bentan, queen Wan Seri Beni or Permaisuri Sakidar Syah, to furnish him with men, elephants and horses. She sent a huge number of these and with her help Sri Tri Buana established a kingdom which he named Singa-pura.

In the context of the semi-divine rulers during the Hindu-Buddhist period of Southeast Asia, the sighting of the strange animal, depicted to be a lion (Malay trans. *singa*), the name Singa-pura signifies a more important symbol – the “lion-throne”, the seat of the bodhisattva *Avalokitesvara*, perceived to be an earthly variation of what Sri Tri Buana sat on for his consecration rituals in Palembang. An important element of Buddhist kingship is the divinity embedded in the ruler seen as incarnations of Buddhist deities. Sri Tri Buana is depicted as such and thus having the right to sit on the earthly throne of Avalokitesvara. Bukit Larangan or Forbidden Hill as Fort Canning was formerly known would be the symbolic representation of Mount Patola of Avalokitesvara, the seat of power.

The *Sulalat al-Salatin* reveals that Sri Tri Buana died 48 years later and was succeeded by his son, Paduka Sri Pikrama Wira who ruled for fifteen years. His reign saw Singapura becoming a great emporium visited by many foreigners so much so that Majapahit wanted to make Singapura its vassal. This conquest by Majapahit however, failed. Pikrama Wira was succeeded by his son, Sri Rana Wikrama who ruled for thirteen years and was succeeded by his son Paduka Sri Maharaja. He ruled for twelve years and was succeeded by his son, Sri Sultan Iskandar Syah, the last of Singapura’s five kings. He committed a sin by violating the sacred contract first made between Sri Tri Buana and Demang Lebar Daun that no ruler should shame his subject in public in exchange for loyalty. Iskandar Syah unjustly shamed one of his wives in public, the daughter of a high official Sang Rajuna Tapa. Sang Rajuna Tapa took revenge by opening the city gates allowing the Majapahit forces to conquer the city. This forced Iskandar Syah to flee the city to Seletar, then Muar before reaching Melaka.

Portuguese sources based on oral tales from the people of Melaka describe the founder of Singapura as Parameswara, a renegade prince from Palembang. He fled from his kingdom as a result of a Majapahit invasion sent to crush a rebellion which he had staged. He arrived in Temasek and was welcomed by its ruler, Sangesinga. Parameswara, however, murdered him and usurped the kingdom. He ruled for five years but had to flee the kingdom because the murdered ruler was married to a princess of Patani, then a vassal of Siamese Ayutthaya. As a result, Siam sent an expeditionary force to punish Parameswara. Parameswara fled to Muar and then Melaka.

Despite these varying versions, both sources are based on social and collective memories and are written almost a hundred years after the event. They have a similar narrative of a prince from Palembang arriving in Temasek and tragically departed to found Melaka. This reflects the act of abandoning and opening a kingdom by a legitimate ruler and the cycles of rise and decline of emporiums along the Straits of Melaka. Thus, Singapura would have been an important link between the fall of Sri Vijaya and the founding of Melaka and was critical in the continuation of the founding myth of divine genealogy and historic ancestry from Sri Vijaya to Melaka and subsequently to Johor. Tengku Husain’s – the subsequent first Sultan of Singapura recognised by the British - travel from Bentan to Singapore in 1819 is a return to a cycle reminiscent of Sri Tri Buana’s earlier journey to Temasek.

Recent research based on a corroboration of material and textual data from Asian and European sources, enabled a reconstruction of what ancient Singapura was like in the fourteenth century. Singapura was an important political centre and a thriving trading hub for almost a century that attracted the attention of both the Siamese and Javanese. From an estimated calculation of the regnal periods of five kings, Sri Tri Buana would have arrived in Temasek c.1299. The tragic departure of the last ruler of Singapura would be c.1396. Both textual and archaeological evidences show that this emporium was a collection centre for products and as an export gateway of the South Johor-Riau Archipelago economic area and had trade links with major Asian economies such as Java, the Indian Ocean littoral and China. Some of the products offered for trade were hornbill casques, lakawood and cotton. According to the *Yuan Shih* (“History of the Yuan Dynasty”) records, the Yuan court had despatched envoys to Temasek to request for elephants. Chinese ceramic and glassware were imported by Temasek. Since similar wares were also found in Riau Archipelago, this shows that Temasek was linked to these areas through an exchange of foreign goods and also indigenous maritime produce.

According to the sources, Singapura was a cosmopolitan society like most other Southeast Asian polities. There were many foreigners living side by side with natives, but we could glean little else about the composition of the inhabitants and the nature of their interactions. Wang Dayuan did describe the Chinese community of Temasek in slightly greater detail when he mentioned the Chinese living near *Pancur*, in the vicinity of Bukit Larangan. He described the Chinese who appeared to be from the upper class judging by their stylish clothing that covered their bodies and their short hair. He also noted the clothing of the inhabitants which included head-cloths decorated with gold thread. This was quite distinct from the people in other areas such as in Pahang where they wore long shirts tied with strings made of cotton imported from Java; in Kelantan where the people wore short upper garments with black sarong and in Terengganu where they wore short green shirts fastened with cloth from Cambay.

Singapura to Singapore

Singapura was abandoned by its last ruler to found Melaka in c.1402 and whilst it lost its central position in the Straits, it was no mere fishing village, contrary to popular belief. According to the *Sulalat al-Salatin*, Singapura was a fiefdom of Sri Bija Diraja, one of the four great officials who together with the sultan ruled Melaka. Indeed, the post of the *bendahara* (treasurer or the highest rank after the sultan) in Melaka, was filled by two officials from Singapura. Till the arrival of Raffles, Singapura still had important officials such as a *shahbandar* (port master) and a *temenggong* (police/security chief) testifying to the fact that it was no mere backwater. Singapura became a military and naval outpost for Melaka and later Johor sultans since it was the home base of the trusted and loyal warriors/servants of the sultans – the *orang laut* or sea nomads. Although by 1819, these *orang laut* who inhabited Singapura became fishermen, no longer the warriors of the past, it is significant that when Tengku Husain travelled to Singapore, he was escorted by Batin Sapi, an *orang laut*.

Ancient Singapura may have survived only for a century but it is significant as a link in the line of sacred lineage of past Malay rulers from Sri Vijaya to Johor. Although this link may not be important to modern Singapore, its place as an important trading emporium attracting many foreigners and serving regional and global networks remains true till today.

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