

## Rescuing the Unknown Past: Digging Empress Place

By Lim Chen Sian

A pair of dirt-covered youngsters patiently peels back a layer of sediment with their trowels. Overhead, a 60 ton long-arm mechanical excavator hoists a pile of steel re-bars into a trench. Metres away welders in overalls slice through 10m iron sheet piles with their acetate blowtorches. The two volunteer archaeological field assistants paid no mind to the high pitch screech of a compressor behind them and quietly and skillfully removed a ceramic vessel from the Yuan Dynasty (c. 1271-1368) from the sand.

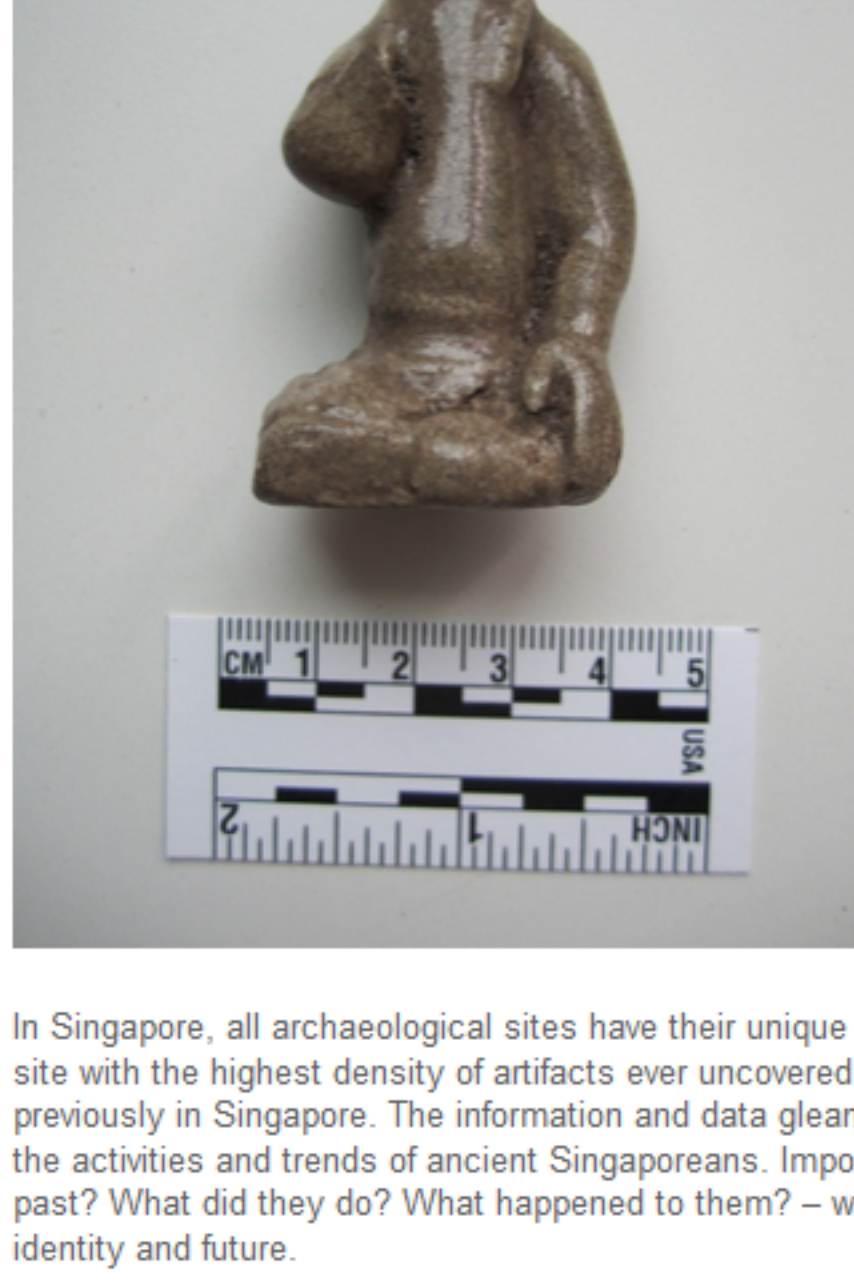


Standing in shin-deep mud another member of the archaeology team patiently sieved through the foul-smelling riverine silt accumulated over the last 800 years. Elsewhere on the site, a dusty and weathered archaeologist monitors a mechanical backhoe at work, guiding the machine's massive creaking steel treads through the no-go zones. Everywhere around the sunburnt individual were little red vinyl flags demarcating archaeological deposits.

Since mid January 2015, a small crew of volunteers and archaeologists from the Archaeology Unit, Nalanda Sriwijaya Centre, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies have been monitoring and excavating the site. Ostensibly, as part of the SG50 celebrations, dramatic redevelopment and landscaping for the Singapore Riverfront area is presently underway. Within the redevelopment zone, the Empress Place lawn fronting the Victoria Concert Hall and Theatre, will undergo extensive remodeling involving the massive engineering feat of transplanting 8 existing mature rain trees. Beneath these lawns lies the ancient settlement of *Temasek* or *Singapura* dating between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Mr. Zheng Hu, a visitor to the site quips 'it is both remarkable and ironic that so much resources are being employed to preserve and transplant the so-called heritage trees lining Empress Place which are perhaps 40-50 years old, but an 700 year old cultural heritage gets uprooted in its process – had it not been the archaeologists and their few volunteers, all these would have been destroyed and lost forever.'

Staffed entirely with a Singaporean crew, the archaeology team works 12 hours days and 7 days a week. This is the largest development driven rescue archaeological excavation ever undertaken in Singapore. In just one day alone, they recovered some 100 kilograms of artifacts from the pre-modern and pre-colonial Singapore. The excavations had but commenced for barely a few weeks and the team's storage shed are busting with finds. The team estimates several tons of artifacts will likely be recovered at the end of the rescue excavation.



"The variety of artifacts uncovered is phenomenal", says the project's Finds Manager and veteran archaeological volunteer, Ms. Margaret Wong, "the diversity of finds presents new light into the activities of ancient Singaporeans. We are finding hundreds of objects from this site that were never before seen in the past 30 years of archaeological excavations!" Some highlights include religious iconography in the likes of a Buddhist figurine; objects of ornamental nature such as carnelian and crystal beads, glass bangles and worked sandstone; utilitarian items like copper cash; and large quantities of ceramics encompassing blue-green celadon porcelain.

Albeit the excavations are still underway, and detailed post-excavation analysis has yet to be undertaken, some preliminary observations may be made from the findings. The archaeology team believes that they have identified the ancient riverfront and shoreline of ancient Temasek, which has over the last 5 centuries, possibly due to natural silting shifted further south to its present estuary. The site was also likely densely populated or an area of high traffic, with evidence for commercial activities, as well as industries like metalworking.

In Singapore, all archaeological sites have their unique characteristics, Empress Place would likely stand out as the site with the highest density of artifacts ever uncovered, amongst which innumerable are never before recovered previously in Singapore. The information and data gleaned from the archaeology would enable the understanding of the activities and trends of ancient Singaporeans. Important questions such as - who were the Singaporeans of the past? What did they do? What happened to them? – will serve as a solemn guide in our present search for our own identity and future.

"This is one of the most meaningful projects ever undertaken in Singapore. I am proud to have played a small part in saving ancient Singapore." declares volunteer Ms. Christabel Khoo who helps out after-hours and during the weekends.

The National Heritage Board generously provisioned \$70,000 to fund the rescue excavation and negotiated with the developer, the Urban Redevelopment Authority for permission to excavate the site. The archaeology team is grateful to the Urban Redevelopment Authority for permitting the necessary rescue excavations.

For more information on Singapore archaeology, do visit the exhibition *Archaeology in Singapore: 30 Years of Uncovering the Past 1984-2014* currently showing at the National Museum of Singapore.

Lim Chen Sian is the Project Archaeologist for the rescue excavations at Empress Place. He is a Visiting Research Fellow with the Archaeology Unit, Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

## Digging Up the Past in the Future

By Kevin Tan

Anniversaries are for celebrating and reflecting, and in this SG50 year, there is, I think too much celebration and not enough reflection.

Last year, an important anniversary slipped by unnoticed by most Singaporeans — the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Archaeology in Singapore. Even among the heritage cognoscenti, few knew about the small but significant exhibition — *Archaeology in Singapore: 30 Years of Uncovering the Past 1984-2014*\* — that commemorates this event. The exhibition was a modest effort by the indefatigable Lim Chen Sian and his merry band of volunteers to remind us how important this field of historical enquiry is.

Archaeology in Singapore started in 1860 when George Wexford Earl (1813-1865) explored a shell heap in Province Wellesley and Lieutenant-Colonel James Low explored Bujang Valley in South Kedah in 1864. Both Earl and Low were amateurs and might be called antiquarians, rather than archaeologists. The first 'professional' archaeologist was Ivor Hugh Norman Evans (1886-1957) who joined the Perak Museum in 1917 where he worked as ethnographer and archaeologist. By the early 1930s, the staff of the Raffles Museum in Singapore became actively involved in archaeological excavations in Peninsula Malaya, with Herbert Dennis Collings (1905-2002) concentrating on the west coast and Michael Wilmer Forbes Tweedie (1907-1993) on the east coast. Later, Carl Alexander Gibson-Hill and his staff from the Raffles Museum continued to excavate in various parts of the Malay peninsula.

But no one excavated in Singapore, till 1984 when the National Museum's Kwa Chong Guan invited John Miksic of Gajah Mada University in Yogyakarta to excavate at Fort Canning. In the next three decades, Miksic and other archaeologists have excavated several sites around Singapore, securing excellent finds, in all instances. This is all well and good save for the fact that almost without exception, archaeological excavations have been conducted at the sufferance of the state, rather than by the state itself. Singapore has been too slow in recognising and supporting archaeology.

Consider our laws. We have a Preservation of Sites and Monuments Board established under the Preservation of Monuments Act. One of its functions is to identify monuments of archaeological importance that are worthy of preservation. The Board has the duty to submit or make recommendations to the Government for the preservation of 'any monument and land of historic, traditional, archaeological, architectural or aesthetic interest'. Most significantly, the National Heritage Board Act empowers the Board to enter upon lands to conduct archaeological investigation. Yet, we have but no archaeological department within any of these organisations. Indeed, we don't have a single state archaeologist but Brunei, with a tenth of our population has a one.

We really need to take archaeology a lot more seriously. Singapore's known history is a short one, stretching back some 700 years. Even so, what life was like all those years ago remains a mystery. In a region where history was often transmitted orally rather than in written form, we need corroborative evidence of what the past looked like. Uncovering the remains of the material culture of our past is one way to do it.

But to take archaeology seriously, the state needs to take the lead for digging around involves issues of land use, development and redevelopment, matters over which the state has hegemonic dominance. Moreover, archaeological sites are precious and fragile. Once violated or compromised, all archaeological and historical evidence is lost for all time. The state must play a much more active role in coordinating developmental initiatives and factor in time for proper archaeological excavations to be carried out. More importantly, the state needs to invest in the training or archaeologists and provide adequate funding for proper digs and documentation to be carried out. The future of our digging up our pasts depends on it.

\* The exhibition, *Archaeology in Singapore: 30 Years of Uncovering the Past 1984-2014*, is at the basement of the National Museum, Singapore, and runs till 10 August 2015.

Kevin Tan was SHS President from 2001-2011



## Capitals of Burma: Heritage Tour to Myanmar with SHS

By Iris Belle

Thirty Singapore Heritage Society (SHS) members explored the south of Myanmar from 6<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> December 2014. In seven sunny days we visited sites in Mandalay, Amarapura, Inwa, Mingun, Sagaing, Bagan, Nay Pyi Taw, and Yangon moving by plane, by coach, by lorry, by boat, by train, by horse cart and on foot between 19 temples and pagodas, three palaces, a bridge, two markets, four monasteries, six artisan workshops and a museum, and witnessed three scenic sunsets.

Fellow SHS member, architect and architecture historian Lai Chee Kien and Mdm Myo Myo That, a licensed Burmese tour guide, took turns educating us about personalities, events and beliefs that shaped the sites we visited.

Chee Kien's explanation of the architectural principles of cultural sites helped us understand what we were seeing when we explored – barefoot - pagodas, forts and temples built over the period of a millennia. Myo Myo's anecdotes about the quality of school education or about tying the traditional Longyi (a type of sarong) brought us closer to the everyday life of our host nation.

Most stunning was the coexistence of tradition and modern technology, the vernacular and the corporate global. In areas without mobile connection blue billboards set up by Norwegian communications provider Telenor foreshadowed a new era of connectedness.

Despite rapid transformation, living traditions continue. En route from Mandalay to Bagan our path crossed with that of a Novitiation Ceremony comprising a long procession of dancers, decorated horses, music bands, and a full-grown elephant. The colorful parade was to send children off to monasteries as they prepared to live as monks and nuns for some time at this stage of their lives.

Each and every item on our agenda passed so smoothly, making it all the more impressive to realize that Myanmar's tourism and hotel industry, overseen by its own ministry, was a young one.

Monuments were in pristine conditions, and at a renovation sites at the 12th century Ananda Temple a sign informed visitors of the collaboration with the Indian government. Dying trades survived in artisan workshops that offered photogenic demonstrations and shopping opportunities. There was the making of umbrellas, the laborious production of gold into leaves for plating, the weaving of silk fabrics with old looms, woodcarving, puppet making and the production of lacquer ware from plant materials.

The only time our local guide was worried was when our bus headed for Nay Pyi Taw, the country's new capital, because it was not a typical tourist destination. Chiefly for that reason the visit was a rare treat.

From Nay Pyi Taw we departed in the spacious compartment of a seemingly ancient night train. Dust and rust covered the luxury of a by-gone era. The noise and rattle of a journey over ill maintained rails cradled us to sleep and put the comforts of the previous days in perspective.

In Yangon, representatives of the Yangon Heritage Trust received us in their exhibition gallery and walked us around Yangon's historic district. The Trust is in the midst of surveying and compiling an inventory of the districts' buildings as a basis for formulating conservation strategies in order to preserve their monumental colonial edifices and largely intact historic streetscapes.

Aboard flight MI 517 bound for Singapore our guide's softly aspirated "Mingela ba?", the local greeting, still resounded and so did the inspiring conversations with fellow travelers from Singapore. I hope that Myanmar will find a way to truly profit from international exchange and resist the temptation of selling-off its cultural and natural resources, allowing its people to retain their beliefs and customs. Not for the sake of authentic travel experience, of course, but for being a comfortable home of a most hospitable, kind and cultured people.

## SHS Tour 2015: "Prehistoric Rock Art And Khmer Ruins: The Archaeology of Northeast Thailand"

The Singapore Heritage Society is pleased to present the SHS tour of the year, "Prehistoric Rock Art And Khmer Ruins: The Archaeology of Northeast Thailand", which will take place on 18th-25th July 2015.

Led by Dr Noel Hidalgo Tan, whose discovery of the Angkor paintings last year was widely reported in the international press, the tour to this little-visited region of Thailand will include, inter alia, enigmatic prehistoric rock paintings carved on spectacular cliff face along the Mekong River, a dinosaur museum as well as monumental Khmer temple complexes in Thai territory, including one located on the rim of an extinct volcano.

The tour will also takes us to Udon Thani, where we will visit the Ban Chiang World Heritage Site, one of the first sites to put Southeast Asian archaeology on the world map, and the Phu Phra Bat Historical Park, a sacred landscape featuring a long period of use from prehistoric times to the Lan Xang period. The Thai Government has recently announced their intention to nominate Phu Phra Bat as a Unesco World Heritage Site. On the final day, we will have some time for free and easy shopping and dining before flying home.

Shs are limited vacancy on the tour. Sign up fast by emailing Ms Wendy Chua (Email: shs.secretary@gmail.com). Note that a non-refundable deposit of \$200/pax (cheque only) must be paid by 3pm, 28 March 2015, after which there is no guarantee on flight availability and price.

## What's Up

**17 Apr, Fri** | *Our Modern Past* – launch of SHS book & exhibition at the National Museum of Singapore (Guest of Honour: Dr Kwok Kian Woon), part of HeritageFest 2015

**25 Apr, Sat** | *Cakap Heritage: My Queenstown, My Queenstown Library* – marking 45th Anniversary of Queenstown Library's

**8-10 May, Fri-Sun** | *Chinatown Bullockcart* – moving interactive installation, part of HeritageFest 2015

**29 May, Fri** | *Cakap Heritage: My St Anthony School Days* – marking 130th Anniversary of St Anthony's School

**13-14 Jun, Sat-Sun** | *Ubin Day*

