

Towards a Shared History: The Hill and the Malay Archipelago

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Ninety years ago on Fort Canning Hill in 1928, a group of Chinese workers was reported to have discovered gold jewellery while digging out the roots of a tree during excavation works for the construction of a service reservoir. Described in the press as one of the most interesting archaeological remains in British Malaya, this set of gold jewellery is believed to be from the era of the Majapahit Kingdom 13th to 15th centuries AD. At its peak in the 14th century, the Hindu-Javanese kingdom based in East Java was one of the most powerful empires in the region, encompassing much of Southeast Asia.

The set of gold jewellery (Figure 1) includes a bejewelled pair of earrings, and an armlet which bears a plaque of repoussé work depicting the Javanese *kala*. The *kala* head motif is a protective symbol found at the entrance of Javanese temples dating from the 8th to 14th centuries. The armlet also has flexible chains, some of which were

already broken when it was discovered. A statue from West Sumatra made in the mid-14th century shows a king wearing the same kind of jewellery at his waist.

Deposits of gold were customary in prehistoric Javanese burial rituals. They could also be found in the foundations and roofs of Javanese temples. Such practices were likely to be connected with Javanese beliefs in the links between the earthly world and the world of the after-life. At the same time, it was noted that there were no signs of bones or graves buried in the vicinity of the gold jewellery, which was found in a shallow pit at the depth of three metres. This suggests that the jewellery might have been hastily buried to keep them from falling into foreign hands during battle.

It could well have been the case that these pieces were worn by the elite class or rulers of Singapura.



Figure 1. Majapahit-era gold jewellery. Image courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.



Figure 2. Fort Canning Hill seen from the sea, XXXX-01285. Image courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

Another possible entry point to contextualise the pieces would be the *Sejarah Melayu*, a chronicle of the Malay courts of Singapore and Melaka from the 14th to 16th centuries. According to the *Sejarah Melayu*, the hill was the seat of a kingdom of the Malay kings of Singapore who were descendants of a prince from Palembang in Sumatra. This prince, Sang Nila Utama, established a kingdom in Singapore in 1299, which was inhabited by several different communities and became prosperous through external trade. In addition, archaeologists have found evidence of gold working near the keramat (shrine) Iskandar Shah on the hill. This included small slakes of gold and clay cups for smelting gold, which suggests that the gold jewellery was locally made.

While there has been no definitive evidence to date which could uncover the particular history of why these gold jewellery were buried on the hill, this particular site is an integral part of Singapore's history and its links with the Malay Archipelago.

The hill or Bukit Larangan (Forbidden Hill), as it was known locally, was explored in 1822 by John Crawfurd (1783 – 1868), the second British Resident of Singapore. He found the ruins, such as the foundations of buildings, on the northern and eastern slopes of the hill. In particular, Crawfurd noted a 40-foot-square terrace with a pit and the edges of the terrace had large blocks of sandstone containing a hole in each of them. He surmised that the latter could be the pedestal supports of a former building on the site. Crawfurd's description is significant, especially when the hill was levelled in 1858 with the ruins giving way to the building of an artillery fort, which became known as Fort Canning.

Archaeological excavations of the Fort Canning Hill undertaken in the 1980s and subsequent digs in the vicinity of the Singapore River revealed, with certainty, the extent of the Kingdom of Singapura as an established trading node in the 14th century regional network of ports. In the face

of these discoveries, the terrace that Crawfurd saw in 1822 and the gold jewellery that was uncovered in 1928 still remain as unresolved matters. It may well be that the terrace was the foundation of “a sacral sanctuary” and the structure of the building, a symbol of Mount Meru, the cosmic mountain of Hindu-Buddhist cosmology (Ke 1984, 4). Contextually, the gold jewellery could be used as a reference point to potentially date the terrace, with both relics functioning in the Majapahit realm of influence during the 13th to 14th century.

In retrospect and from a cultural history perspective, these archaeological fragments suggest the possibility of scoping an emergent shared history between Singapore and our neighbours in the Malay Archipelago. While territorial borders serve as distinct markers, cultural interactions can remain fluid encounters as seen in this case of the flow of jewellery styles and ways of building the sacred across the seas. □

The Majapahit-era gold jewellery is currently on display in the “Singapura” section of the National Museum of Singapore’s Singapore History Gallery, A-1570A.

Bibliography

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