

Kallang Estuary: A 17th Century Port City

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The late Professor Wong Lin Ken (d.1983), a former Raffles Professor of History at the old University of Singapore, once asked his colleagues why none of them had been able to explain the absence of any port in Singapore before Raffles arrived to establish one. Should there not have been a settlement or port in Singapore as a strategic location on the sailing and trading routes connecting the South China Sea and the Bay of Bengal?

This essay attempts to connect the fragmented and disparate evidence which was not available to Prof Wong and his contemporaries then, and reconstruct the story of a thriving port city in the Kallang estuary from the late 16th century to the 17th century.

De Eredia's 1604 Map

One of the earliest maps of the Straits of Singapore (Figure 1) was drawn by the Portuguese-Malayan explorer or *descobridor*, as he is described in the contemporary account, cartographer and mathematician Manoel Godinho de Eredia. This map appeared in his report entitled, *Declaram de Malaca e India Meridional com o Cathay or Description of Melaka, Meridonal India and Cathay*, which chronicles his travels in the region at the beginning of the 17th century. It is however unlikely de Eredia visited Singapore, and his map was probably drawn on the basis of information available to him.



Figure 1. Manoel Godinho de Eredia's early map of the Straits of Singapore, 1604. Image courtesy of National Library Board.

The map, entitled, “Chorographic description of the Straits of Sincapura and Sabban, 1604 A.D.” is oriented with Johor at the bottom of the map and Sumatra at the top. The map identifies a number of features on the east coast of “Sincapura” with Tanjong Rusa as the northern-most feature identified, south of which are Tanah Merah, Sungei Bedok, Tanjong Rhu and a “Xabandaria.”

Tanjong Rusa refers to Changi Point today, and may have taken its name from the shoals off its coast that were once known as Běting Kusah or Tanion Rusa, as Eredia marked it in his map.

Tanah Merah refers to the red-orange weathered lateritic cliffs along the coast (which have since been levelled). They were a prominent landmark for navigators and pilots up to the 19th century and are marked as “Red Cliffs” in James Horsburg’s 1806 chart of “Singapore and Malacca.” Later sea charts distinguish between the “Red Cliffs” of Tanah Merah and Bedok. Other early maps of Singapore transcribed this old Malay place name as “Badok” in the vicinity of the “small red cliff.”

On the other hand, Tanjong Rhu takes its name from the Malay *ru* or *ěru* or *aru* for the casuarina trees (*C. equisetifolia*, Linn) that grew on its sandy shores. The area was known as “Sandy Point” to the early 19th century British settlers.

The significance of Eredia’s map however is in its location of a “xabandaria” in the vicinity of Tanjong Rhu. The former Puisne Judge of the Straits Settlements, Mr. J. V. Mills, who was one of those colonial officials who were also scholars, translated and edited part of de Eredia’s report in 1930. But he failed to note or comment on this reference to “xabandaria” in his extensive comments on de Eredia’s report. The last British Director of the old Raffles Museum, the polymath Dr. C. A. Gibson-Hill, in his detailed, but

underappreciated study of the charts and maps of the waters around Singapore, also verified de Eredia’s four place-names on the east coast of “Sincapura” but also failed to comment on the reference or significance to “xabandaria.”

A reference to “xabandaria” is also located on a c.1654 map of the Singapore and Melaka Straits and the Riau Archipelago by Andé Perera dos Reis.

“Xabandaria”

“Xabandaria” is the Portuguese transcription of the Persian “Shabandar,” literally, the “Lord of the Haven.” In today’s more prosaic language, the *shabandar* is a Harbour-Master. The maritime laws of 15th century Melaka, the premier emporium in the Straits of Melaka, states in its opening paragraph that:

“every king, must, in the first place, appoint a Chief Minister (Bendahara), second, a Police-Chief (Temenggung), third, a Treasurer (Penghulu Bendahari) and fourthly, a Harbour-master (Shabandar), so both the ruler and his subjects can live in peace and security.”

The Melaka sultans were continuing a centuries-old institution in appointing a *shabandar* to administer trade in their harbour. It is an institution that not only the Melaka sultans, but most other rulers of port cities in Island Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean had also inherited from the Persian traders trading in the Southeast Asian region, as well as China and India from the middle of the first millennium of the current era into the 18th century, and when Persian was a commonly used language of trade and governance.

The Dutch archives records their East India Company traders having to negotiate with these *shabandars* for permission to trade at ports along the coast of Kalimantan, the north coast of Java and in the eastern Indonesian islands.

The early 17th century journals of the Dutch East India Company's Admiral Cornelis Matelieff de Jonge, edited by National University of Singapore historian A/Prof Peter Borschberg, refer to the Admiral meeting the *shabandar* of Singapore, a Seri Raja Negara in the waters of Singapore on 6 May 1606. The *shabandar* claimed to represent the Sultan of Johor who was residing up the Johor River at Batu Sawar.

The memoirs of the Flemish trader Jacques de Coutre, who travelled and traded in the region between 1593 and 1603, also edited by Borschberg, records the trader anchoring in front of this “shabandaria” of Singapore on his travels around the region in 1594. In his memorials to King Philip II of Spain, de Coutre recommends that his Majesty considers building forts on Singapore or *Isla de la Sabandaria Vieja* and “become the lord of this port, which is one of the best that serves the Indies.”

As the two maps and textual descriptions we have are imprecise on this issue, the question remains as to whether this *shabandaria* was more likely to have been located along the Singapore River or the Kallang estuary? However, recovery of some fragmentary archaeological evidence in the early 1970s suggests that this thriving “haven” was more likely to be in the Kallang estuary.

Blue and White Porcelains from the Kallang Estuary

In 2008, historian Marcus Langdon discovered ‘Sketch of the Land round Singapore’ dated 7 February 1819 while researching the history of Pinang. It was drawn by hydrographers who had accompanied Stamford Raffles on his expedition to establish an East India Company settlement at the southern end of the Straits of Melaka. This sketch had been archived in a British Admiralty file, ADM344 and was only discovered after it was finally transferred to the National Archives, Kew, by the Admiralty.

This sketch would be the earliest documentation of Singapore’s waterfront, and its significance is that besides the “Village of Singapore” in the Singapore River where Raffles met the Temenggong, there is also marked a “Ryat Village” around what would have been the entrance to the Kallang estuary.

“Ryat” or *ra’yat* as transcribed today, would refer to an aboriginal village, in this instance, a village of sea nomads, possibly the *Orang Biduanda Kallang*, from whom the estuary takes its name. This reference to a “Ryat Village” indicates another centre of activity besides the Singapore River, and may explain why Tengku Hussein, after his recognition as Sultan by Raffles, located his istana near to the mouth of the estuary to control trade into and out of the estuary.

Dredging of the Kallang estuary in the late 1960s for construction of the Benjamin Sheares Bridge brought up, entirely by chance, evidence for 17th century trading in the estuary. The dredge

operator, British Geoffrey Ovens, was sufficiently sharp-eyed to notice unusual objects being dredged up from the river bed. He stopped the dredge and picked up a sack of blue and white porcelain shards from the mud and called the old National Museum to come and check the significance of what he was dredging up. As Ovens recounted to his Singaporean friends, including me, the museum curators he spoke to expressed disinterest in checking what he was finding.

That bag of sherds was distributed among Ovens' Singaporean friends or thrown away. Only nine sherds were kept by one of Ovens' friends, Lee Geok Boi, and I persuaded her to loan them to the Oral History Department and National Archives for an exhibition on "Singapore Before Raffles" in early 1986.

The exhibition was about the deep social memories of the Malay community captured in the oral history interviews conducted by the Oral History Department. I was then heading the Oral History Department and borrowed these nine sherds from Lee to display in the exhibition as supporting evidence for what the Oral History Department interviewees were recollecting of life in the Kallang estuary. These nine sherds (Figure 2), I had argued, could on the basis of the style of their motifs be fairly precisely dated to the era of the Ming dynasty emperor Wanli (1573-1620). Lee has since donated these sherds to the National Museum, where they are exhibited in its gallery on Singapore history.



Figure 2. A sherd discovered at the Kallang estuary. Image courtesy of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.



Figure 3. Vase dredged up from the Kallang estuary. Image courtesy of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.



Figure 4. Dish dredged up from the Kallang estuary. Image courtesy of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

Geoffrey Ovens took with him on leaving Singapore, a fairly intact pear shaped vase and a large dish he had dredged up, and prized. However, he willed that on his death, these two artefacts be donated to the National Museum (Figures 3 and 4).

These eleven artefacts are now our only evidence that there was trade being conducted in the Kallang estuary in the 17th century. These fragments we have were likely parts of porcelains which cracked or broke during the journey from China and were thrown overboard while the vessel they came in was anchored in the Kallang estuary to take on fresh water and other supplies. The recovery of these Wanli export ware sherds suggests that the 17th century *shabandar*'s office was more likely to be in the vicinity of the Kallang estuary than at the mouth of the Singapore River.

Trading Networks of the Shabandaria of Singapore

Sherds similar to the eleven recovered from the Kallang estuary have been found in large quantities around Johor Lama and other sites occupied by the descendants of the Melaka sultans who moved up the Johor River to establish a new sultanate. The Heritage Conservation Centre (Singapore) has within its collections several trays and boxes of underglazed blue porcelain sherds and earthenware fragments collected by staff of the old Raffles Museum from their field surveys of Johor Lama and Kota Tinggi conducted

between 1948 to 1954. Some of these sherds have been dated to the late 15th century, suggesting the existence of a riverine economy on the Johor River which would have attracted the descendants of the Melaka sultans to establish their new base there.

Marine archaeology excavations off the Vietnamese coast and the east coast of Malaysia from the late 1990s onwards have recovered a series of shipwrecks with large cargoes of Chinese and some Vietnamese or Thai porcelains. The documentation by Singapore-based marine archaeologist, Dr Michael Flecker, states that a shipwreck he had excavated in 2001 was that of a Chinese junk dated to 1608 which sank 40 nautical miles east of the fishing port of Phan Thiet in Binh Thuan province, Vietnam. It was destined for Johor with a cargo of “silks and other Chinese goods.” Flecker recovered up to 100,000 pieces of Zhangzhou porcelains from the wreck.

The routes, which the junk wrecked off Binh Thuan province and other vessels tracked from the southern Chinese ports to their Southeast Asian destinations, are recorded in rutters such as the *Shunfeng Xiangsong* (Favourable Winds in Escort) and on a remarkable Chinese map found in 2008 in Oxford University’s Bodelian Library. The map was acquired by the English jurist and “Orientalist” John Selden, who willed it to the Bodelian Library in 1659.

The 1.5m by 0.96m map is centred on South China Sea and drawn according to early modern European cartographic standards, but uses Chinese landscape painting techniques to outline mountain ranges, rivers and ocean waves, making the map a landscape painting of sorts. But the key feature and significance of the map are the 60 ports it locates and connects by sailing routes from the major Chinese port of Quanzhou, with one principal route going northeast toward

Nagasaki and another going southwest towards the Vietnamese port of Hoi An and on to the Malay peninsula.

What is significant about that southwards route is that Johor is its node, where it then further branches out into sub-routes up the Melaka Straits, southwards, along the Sumatran coast to the Sunda Straits and westwards along the north Java coast.

Another sub-route leads northeast towards Kalimantan and on to Manila, while another sub-route reaches out to the eastern Indonesia islands. Historians are still in the early stages of making sense of the map as a depiction of the Fujian or Hokkien maritime trading world during the late Ming period.

Conclusion

The fragmentary cartographic, textual and archaeological evidence colligated in this essay suggests that Singapore in the 16th century was re-emerging from the shadow of Melaka which it was a fiefdom of in the 15th century, to again become a regional emporium.

As in the 14th century, when it was a collection centre for local products from both its peninsula hinterland and island foreland for export to other regional markets, and distribution centre for Chinese and other Asian products to its hinter and forelands, so too in the 16th and 17th centuries, Singapore was emerging again as a regional emporium.

The Johor sultans appointed a *shabandar* on “the long island” or *Pulou Panjang* as the island we know as Singapore was then better known. This

shabandar would administer trade entering the riverine economy they sought to control from their *istana* at Batu Sawar, some 45 kilometres upstream from the mouth of the Johor River. The Dutch had a factory at Batu Sawar as they found it the best location to load pepper and distribute their Indian textiles. The gem trader De Coutre found Batu Sawar a centre of the diamond trade in the region. The *shabandaria* in Singapore would have therefore been the gateway to the Johor River. □

This essay is dedicated to the memory of Geoffrey Ovens (c. 1943-2017) who has bequeathed to us the scant evidence of trade in the Kallang estuary in the early 17th century.

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