

Newly Unearthing Ancients

1928 11 pieces of gold ornaments, including two armlets with the motif of a mid-14th century Hindu deity head, were discovered during the construction of the service reservoir²⁷

1950s A visitor to Fort Canning Hill chanced upon partially-buried fragments of antique Chinese porcelain²⁸

1984 First archaeological excavation in Singapore took place on Fort Canning Hill. Phase A excavations in January unearthed archaeological evidence of 14th century settlers on the hill²⁹

Phase B excavations in June yielded an assemblage that is exclusively ceramic. Unusual artifacts were discovered - a small unfinished shouldered axe and pellet ball

1985 Part two of Phase B of excavation on Fort Canning Hill made pursuant to the axe and pellet finds

1987 First archaeological lab in Singapore set up at the National Archives and Oral History Department, at the foot of Fort Canning Hill

1987 159 glass beads were recovered from undisturbed 14th century stratum

1988 Glass artifacts - irregularly-shaped globules, shards of thin-walled containers, beads and fragments of bangles - were discovered³⁰

1990-1995 Yearly excavation projects on the hill were conducted during this period

1991 Archaeological lab moved to Fort Canning Centre which is located at the upper slope of the hill

1999 Excavation done under a shelter

2000 Sieving, or passing the soil through a screen/ wire mesh with holes 2mm in diameter, to find small artifacts such as tiny glass beads

2009 Archaeological lab moved from Fort Canning Centre to the National University of Singapore

2010 Excavation in the vicinity of the Spice Garden on the hill

Since the 19th century, and perhaps the 14th, the hill has been much spaded. It was the site of several invasive and expensive construction projects. As for digging to uncover relics, the first time it took place on Fort Canning Hill was as recent as 1984. That milestone project, led by Professor John Miksic, was believed to be the first archaeological dig in the entire country. Other newly-minted archaeological highlights in Singapore include: 1987, first archaeological lab set up at the foot of Fort Canning Hill; 1988, underground bunker on the hill re-opened after it was abandoned and closed in the 1940s; 2011, first formal archaeological unit inaugurated.

We were surprised to discover that Singapore's archaeological endeavors were so young. The reaction betrayed an ease in which history is forgotten. The Republic of Singapore was reluctantly birthed as an independent nation only in 1965, and its survival a question mark; yet in less than one generation, it unexpectedly went from Third World to First.

If the 1980s were when archaeological excavations first started in Singapore, then perhaps that decade marked the island's first brushes with socio-political stability?

Bedrock of the City

In the tunneling process, the hill's geological features were revealed.

The hill, like the surrounding vicinity that is Singapore's city centre, lies on a bedrock called the Fort Canning Boulder Beds ("the Bed"). The Bed is a Pleistocene colluvial deposit made up very strong sandstone and quartzite boulders in a matrix of hard sandy silt or sandy clay with silt. Its matrix is deep-red, red and white or mottled red, yellow and white color.³¹ The boulders have a diameter up to 7m.

Above the residual soils of the Bed is a man-made fill layer of varying thickness (1m - 5m). Below the Bed is the Jurong Formation which consists of sedimentary rocks of various types, such as sandstones, mudstone, shale, phyllite, limestone, slate and conglomerate.³² Ground water level at the hill is established at approximately 1m below surface level. Ratio between matrix versus boulders vary between 70% boulders versus 30% matrix and 30% boulders versus 70% matrix.

The first 1984 excavation was scheduled over a mere ten days, and yielded success. Conclusive archaeological evidence was found to support the stories of Malay royalty residing on Fort Canning Hill in the 14th century. Since then, at least 11 more digs were made on Fort Canning Hill itself, and more in other parts of the island that were bounded by the ancient town walls as described by English Resident John Crawfurd. The majority of the excavations were conducted by volunteers.

A total of 40,000 artifacts recorded from the 14th century context have been discovered on Fort Canning Hill as of the year 2000.²⁵

True to the nature of memories, every piece found was a fragment. Some of the shards were joined to form objects, albeit incomplete, that offered a fuller story. Similarly, Miksic and his team are stepping up research efforts not only within Singapore, but also on coastal settlements and historical sites in neighbouring countries, gathering knowledge to construct a more complete understanding of the 'Silk Road of the sea' and this region's past. Plans are underway to share research findings through an electronic journal devoted to the archaeology of Southeast Asia.²⁶ The narrative of archaeology in Singapore, though in its first act, is one that portends hope.