Singapore’s bicentennial: 1819-2019

Raffles did not ‘discover’ Singapore

At least two centuries before 1819, the island was already appreciated for its fine port and for its commercial potential as a colonial settlement.

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For The Straits Times

Can Stamford Raffles really be credited fully for discovering Singapore’s potential as a commercial emporium and a natural strategic position in the Straits region? Could it have been an important location along a busy maritime artery that remained overlooked or forgotten for centuries?

Recent research has found that before 1819, Singapore was a place forgotten by time.

The name Singapore and its many orthographical variants had featured regularly in the written and cartographical materials since the Europeans arrived in South East Asia, and even before.

There were other names too. Pulau Pinang (Long Island) was a name that featured sometimes in the original Malay or in translation in Dutch, French, Spanish and Portuguese cartographies of the 1600s and 1700s. The Flemish trader Jacques de Caste, who had passed through Singapore waters several times in the late 1600s and early 1700s, called Singapore ‘Isola deli Sanahtana Vieja’ (Island of the Old Sultana) after the presence of the Singapore shafts/wooden palisades (port mace).

Additional names included Insel Gubernador (Governor’s Island) after the Governor’s Strait, the European name for the main Singapore Strait between 1606 and 1839. This was used by Gottfried von Laineckhoven, an Austrian Jesuit who later became the Bishop of Nagapattinam, when he recorded his journey past the island in 1738.

For most of recorded history, Singapore was certainly appreciated as a strategic location, both militarily and commercially. Asian and European geographical materials from the period 1500-1800 – and arguably before – saw Singapore as marking an area of transition between the Bay of Bengal and the Strait of Malacca at the west and the South China Sea in the east. Similarly, some Arab and Portuguese authors of the pre-modern period treat Singapore as a gate or gateway.

The local rulers and the early European colonial powers knew that anyone who controlled the waters of the Singapore Strait would gain a grip over maritime trade.

Because of Singapore’s strategic location, early European powers active in the Straits region sought to gain a grip on the flow of seafarers’ trade in these waters to disrupt and damage the commercial networks of their European competitors.

The Dutch East India Company, at VOC, routinely deployed vessels in the 1600s at certain nodal points in the Singapore Strait.

One squadron was assigned to cruise the eastern coast of Singapore and the Johor River estuary, while another patrolled the waters off the northern coast of the Karimun Islands. From these two nodal points, it was possible to monitor all traffic sailing through the Singapore and southern Malacca straits as well as their main tributaries: the Rendater, Dorian, Sip, Jambol, Riau and Tebrau straits.

In addition to patrolling nodal points along the Karimun-Singapore-Peta Brana axis, a number of proposals were also put forward to construct fortifications in and around Singapore, although none came to fruition before 1819. The Dutch were known to have been planning the early 1800s for a slot in the north-western tip of present-day Sentosa – at the same location where Fort Siloso was built by the British much later. Additional Dutch proposals drawn up around 1814 included a possible fortification on the eastern coast of Singapore.

One of the most detailed and interesting proposals is found in a petition drawn up by de Coutre, dating from the mid-1820s. In this document, he advised the King of Spain (concurrently of Portugal) to construct a main fortification at the north-western tip of today’s Sentosa. A second structure was suggested for the eastern coast of Singapore, and a third for an unspecified island located off Pulau Tebing Betong. From the latter, it would have been possible to observe shipping entering and leaving the Johor River as well as the Tebrau Strait.

All these proposals by the Dutch or Spanish were halted either because of high overhead costs, more urgent priorities or opposition from the local rulers. Commercially, at least two centuries before Raffles arrived on the scene, Singapore was already appreciated for its fine port and for its commercial potential as a colonial settlement.

De Coutre considered the port of Singapore as “one of the best that serves the Indies”, and proceeded to recommend that the Spanish monarch found a colonial emperorship here.

Abraham Cooper, who had been the last Dutch governor of Melaka until 1799, had also recommended to his superior, Governor-General Herman Willem Daendels, in 1809 that the Dutch should consider founding a new colony, to be built up from ground zero, after the Anglo-French Wars. Cooper singled out two locations he thought would prove suitable: the island of Belitung (Billion) and Singapore, or at least a location at the tip of the peninsula. Interestingly, Raffles shortly thereafter acquired both places, arranging for the acquisition of Belitung and Belitung from Palembang in 1812, and Singapore in 1819.

What does this all amount to? Singapore was most certainly not a lost and forgotten place in 1819, or indeed in the centuries before that. It was recognised for its locational value, and had been singled out in proposals for both fortification and colonisation.

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