

# Indiana Jones who pieces together S'pore's past

Archaeologist has dug into island's pre-colonial history for three decades

By MELODY ZACCHEUS

TEXTBOOKS here recount the legend of how Singapore's founder, Sang Nila Utama, first landed on the island in 1299 because he was attracted by sand so white that it looked like a sheet of cloth.

This pristine white sand is no romantic embellishment. It has been found some 90cm underneath the grassy expanse of today's Padang - part of what was once an ancient city's shoreline.

The man who unearthed this discovery was born and raised on a farm in New York, grew up being interested in Native Americans, then helped farmers in Malaysia, where he was fascinated by temple ruins in Kedah. In the last three decades, he has been on a mission to piece together Singapore's pre-colonial history.

Meet 67-year-old Assistant Professor John N. Miksic, Singapore's answer to Indiana Jones.

Not that his life is anything as exciting as that of the cinematic hero, said the grizzled archaeologist.

"Digging is the first step in a process of about 10 steps. Real scientific work is done in the laboratory, which takes up 90 per cent of an archaeologist's time."

Yet his work has been drumming up excitement about Singapore's pre-colonial past.

Since being first invited to exca-

vate Fort Canning in 1984, when Singapore lacked a local archaeologist, he has led digs at 11 other sites, such as Empress Place and the Old Parliament House.

He has since amassed eight tonnes of ceramic fragments and other local artefacts, including shells and small statues. They help paint a picture of Singapore as a sizeable and prosperous Asian trading port with a population of 10,000 in the 14th century, more than 500 years before the landing of Sir Stamford Raffles in 1819.

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"It gives me a real feeling of happiness when people accept that there is a lot more to Singapore history than the textbooks used to tell us."

His latest effort is a 491-page tome titled *Singapore And The Silk Road Of The Sea, 1300-1800*. Launched last week, it showcases some of his findings up till 2004, including how he uncovered a layer of fine, unspoilt white sand at the bottom of a pit at the Singapore Cricket Club.

The book details how this layer of sand used to extend from the

Singapore River to Kampong Glam. From a passing vessel, it would have looked "blindingly white in the sun in contrast to the green hills and blue water which dominated the view".

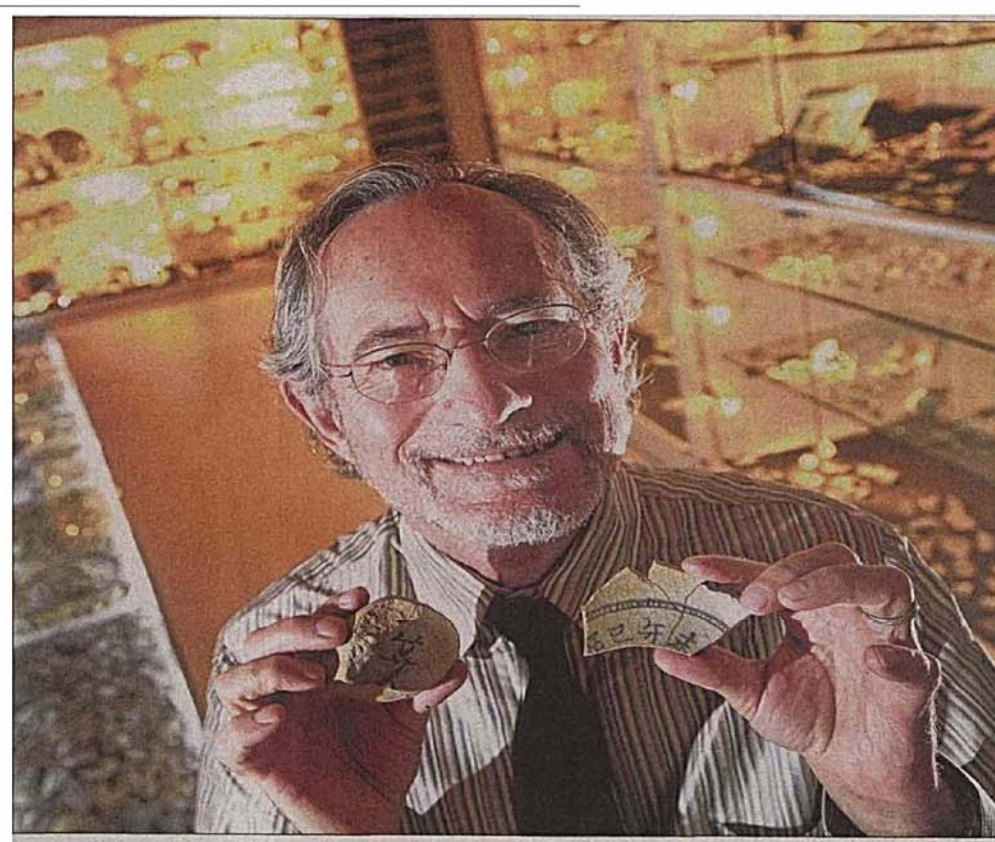
Dr Miksic said putting the book together took 12 years. "It was important for me to provide a clear narrative for both archaeologists and the general public on Singapore's roots," explained the soft-spoken man, who has been with the National University of Singapore since 1987.

Dr Miksic, who holds a Singaporean employment pass, is married to a Chinese Malaysian. His wife, 69, a retired teacher, stays with their 33-year-old daughter in Pittsburgh to help raise their two granddaughters. His son, 35, lives in San Diego.

Dr Miksic, who can speak Malay, said he has grown attached to Singapore, which serves as a base for his work in South-east Asia as well.

"After 26 years, most of my old friends are here. It's kind of nice to be recognised in a taxi or at a chance meeting as Singapore's archaeologist," said the widely-published author, whose four or five public talks he gives every year helped build his local reputation.

Dr Miksic's love for the past



Assistant Professor John N. Miksic, dubbed Singapore's answer to Indiana Jones, holding up fragments of a rare 14th century Chinese ceramic compass he unearthed at Fort Canning Hill. PHOTO: JOSEPH NAIR FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

started when he was six. Growing up on a 150-year-old farm in western New York, he spent his childhood unearthing Native American arrowheads, then piecing together stories of how "harsh" life was before, with his grandfather.

Dr Miksic, who studied archaeology at Dartmouth College, embarked on his first research project in northern Canada in 1967. A year later, he volunteered for the Peace Corps and was sent to Malaysia, where his farm skills came in handy in setting up farmer cooperatives. It was while in Kedah that he developed an interest in the ruins of temples and the treasure trove of ceramics there.

Since then, his focus in South-east Asia has been on early overseas Chinese settlements and the ceramic trade, which is the perfect source material to learn about a civilisation - better even than carbon dating, he said.

One of the most interesting pieces of ceramics he has found is a rare 14th century Chinese compass that he dug up at Fort Canning Hill.

Dr Miksic is not afraid to get his hands dirty because of the

"sense of suspense" and thrill of unearthing the unexpected.

Most of Singapore's ancient artefacts lie under high-rise buildings and expressways today, he said, pointing to downtown Singapore, Pulau Ubin, Bedok and the East Coast as sites of archaeological worth. East Coast, for instance, was an area filled with settlements in the 1600s, according to maps by the Portuguese.

But he is not in a hurry to start digging at all of these sites. "We go in when the site is at risk. Otherwise, we're leaving them for future archaeologists with better tools and technologies, who can build upon the knowledge and legacy we've left behind."

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## BEYOND TEXTBOOKS

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