

# REMEMBERING JOHN NORMAN MIKSIC

The “Indiana Jones” of Singapore archaeology died on 25 October 2025, aged 79.

By Kwa Chong Guan



**T**he pioneering archaeologist John Miksic never thought of archaeologically investigating Fort Canning Hill until the invitation to do so came from the old National Museum (later Singapore History Museum and now National Museum of Singapore) in 1983. He was focused on Indonesian archaeology, having excavated port settlements along the Deli River valley in northeast Sumatra. His doctoral thesis to Cornell University’s Department of Anthropology was about his excavations, which won the Lauriston Sharp Prize for best doctoral thesis in 1979.

Miksic accepted the invitation to archaeologically investigate Fort Canning and, against the odds, in a 10-day investigation of the top of Fort Canning from 18 to 28 January 1984, recovered *in situ* 1,346 pottery shards weighing a total of 14.31 kg dating back to the 14th century. The report he produced of his investigations set the standard on the conduct and reporting of future archaeological excavations in Singapore.

Both Stamford Raffles and John Crawford, the second Resident of Singapore, had reported remains of an ancient settlement on Fort Canning. But the summit of Fort Canning had been levelled and excavated three times in the intervening 165 years since. The archaeological team was hoping against hope that there might still be some intact artefacts buried on the hill, confirming the stories in the *Sulalat al-Salat* (Genealogy of Kings), or *Sejarah Melayu* (Malay Annals), that Fort Canning was the seat of government of Sang Nila Utama (Sri Tribuana), the mythical prince of Palembang who founded the city of Singapura on the island of Temasik (Temasek) around 1299.

Miksic’s successful finds stimulated public interest in the potential for archaeology to recover more about Singapore’s deep past. The National Parks Board offered him a consultancy on further archaeological investigations and the History Department at the National University of Singapore (NUS) recruited him to its staff in 1987. In 1991, Miksic joined the newly formed Southeast Asian Studies Programme at NUS, which became the Department of Southeast Asian Studies where he remained until he retired as emeritus professor in 2019.

Miksic’s interest in archaeology dates back to his undergraduate student days at Dartmouth College (Hanover, New Hampshire) where he graduated with a BA in anthropology in 1968. He then served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Malaysia from 1968 to 1972, helping to set up a farmers’ cooperative and developing an irrigation system in the Bujang Valley in Kedah, before returning to the United States to earn an MA from the Department of International Affairs, Ohio University (Athens, Ohio), in 1974.

It was at Bujang Valley that Miksic became aware of and developed an interest in the early history of Southeast Asia. This led him to work for another MA and PhD in Cornell University’s Department of Anthropology. Upon obtaining his PhD in 1979, Miksic accepted a job as a Rural Development Planning and Management Adviser in Bengkulu, Sumatra, under a project for the United States Agency for International Development. As said, he had two career lines: one as a rural development adviser and the other an archaeologist.

It was the archaeologist which won when, in 1981, Miksic moved to Gadjah Mada University (Yogyakarta, Indonesia), joining the Department

Kwa Chong Guan is a former member of the National Library Board and chair of its National Library Acquisition Committee. For his services to the National Library, he was awarded a Public Service Medal at the National Day Awards 2020. He was earlier a member of the National Heritage Board and chair of the National Archives Advisory Committee. He was the last director of the old National Museum which he led through a strategic planning process that expanded the museum into the Singapore History Museum (now the National Museum of Singapore), the Asian Civilisations Museum and the Singapore Art Museum.

of Archaeology with support from the Ford Foundation and Asian Cultural Council. The invitation to relocate to Singapore in 1987 came at a fortuitous time when his programme to teach at Gadjah Mada University was ending.

From 1988 onwards, Miksic participated in every major archaeological excavation on Fort Canning and its environs to check if there were any 14th century artefacts before the area was redeveloped. He was also asked to check the site of the new Parliament House Complex before its construction in late 1994 and at Empress Place in 1998 before its restoration as the Asian Civilisations Museum.

In early 2003, the Singapore Cricket Club allowed Miksic to excavate a corner of its cricket pitch. The artefacts recovered confirmed the Padang as a potentially large archaeological site. St Andrew’s Cathedral also allowed him to excavate its grounds in late 2003 before the construction of an extension to the cathedral.

All these excavations were done with volunteers comprising not only university undergraduates, junior college students and friends of the museum, but also a widening circle of Singaporeans interested in recovering Singapore’s deep past.

Somehow, Miksic managed to persuade these volunteers that slowly brushing away the soil on Fort Canning to reveal the fragment of a Ming dynasty jar can be therapeutic and exhilarating. He mentored his volunteers to collect everything they unearthed, whether it was the fragment of a Ming vase or local earthenware pot, and record exactly where they excavated it. He got the volunteers to then sift the soil they had brushed and check if there were other artefacts that they had missed.

The volunteers recovered tiny, minute glass beads and fragments of glass bangles from this sifting of soil, which provided us a detailed view of life on 14th century Fort Canning that would have been otherwise lost. In 1997, these artefacts were displayed at an exhibition at the Singapore History Museum, which he co-curated and audaciously titled *Singapore’s 700th Anniversary*.

Miksic carefully stored the accumulating tons of artefacts excavated in storerooms in the old British military building on Fort Canning which he had persuaded the National Parks Board, supporting his work, to open up for him. He also enlisted more volunteers to slowly wash and sort out tons of recovered artefacts.

When the storage space on Fort Canning ran out, Miksic got the Department of Southeast Asian Studies to take over an old staff bungalow from NUS that he proudly converted into the NUS Kent Ridge-Fort Canning Archaeology Laboratory. Here, he continued to persuade students and others to volunteer to clean and sort the artefacts. Upon his retirement as emeritus professor from NUS, he transported the artefacts to Nanyang Technological University (NTU) where he was offered a fellowship.

Miksic was also the founding Head of the Archaeological Unit, which supports the work of the old Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre at the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute on Southeast Asia’s historical interactions between South and East Asia. He summed up his 40 years of archaeological research on Singapore – which established 14th-century Temasek as the best archaeologically documented port-settlement in the Straits of Melaka – in his book, *Singapore & the Silk Road of the Sea, 1300–1800* (NUS Press, 2013). The book won the inaugural Singapore History Prize in 2018 and is the standard reference on archaeology in Singapore.

For his stellar services to furthering archaeology in Singapore, Miksic was awarded the Public Service Medal (Pingat Bakti Masyarakat) at the National Day Awards 2023 for not only his academic contributions but also his role in fostering public appreciation for Singapore’s deep historical roots. The citation reads in part: “His work has helped integrate archaeology into national narratives and museum exhibitions, influencing both scholarship and heritage policy.”

It was not only in Singapore that Miksic’s yeoman service to archaeology and heritage had been recognised. The Indonesian National Archaeology Research Centre acknowledged his contributions to the development of Indonesian archaeology, as did the National Museum of Indonesia for the catalogues he had edited of their collections. From the Sultan of Solo, Miksic received a royal title for his work in cataloguing the collections of the palace.

Miksic also served on the board of the Center for Khmer Studies in Cambodia from 2000 until 2016, advising them on their research projects at Angkor. Additionally, he worked with Assoc Prof Goh Geok Yian, Associate Chair (Faculty), School of Humanities at NTU, running a series of workshops in Bagan on archaeology and cultural resource management during the years when Myanmar was opened to foreign scholars.

Miksic was committed to archaeology to the end, and continued to read and write until the last weeks of his life. His legacy is not just in what he unearthed, but in how he transformed Singapore’s historical consciousness, proving that archaeology could speak powerfully in forging a national identity. ♦

(Top) John Miksic at the Fort Canning archaeological dig, June 1997. Source: Berita Harian © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.