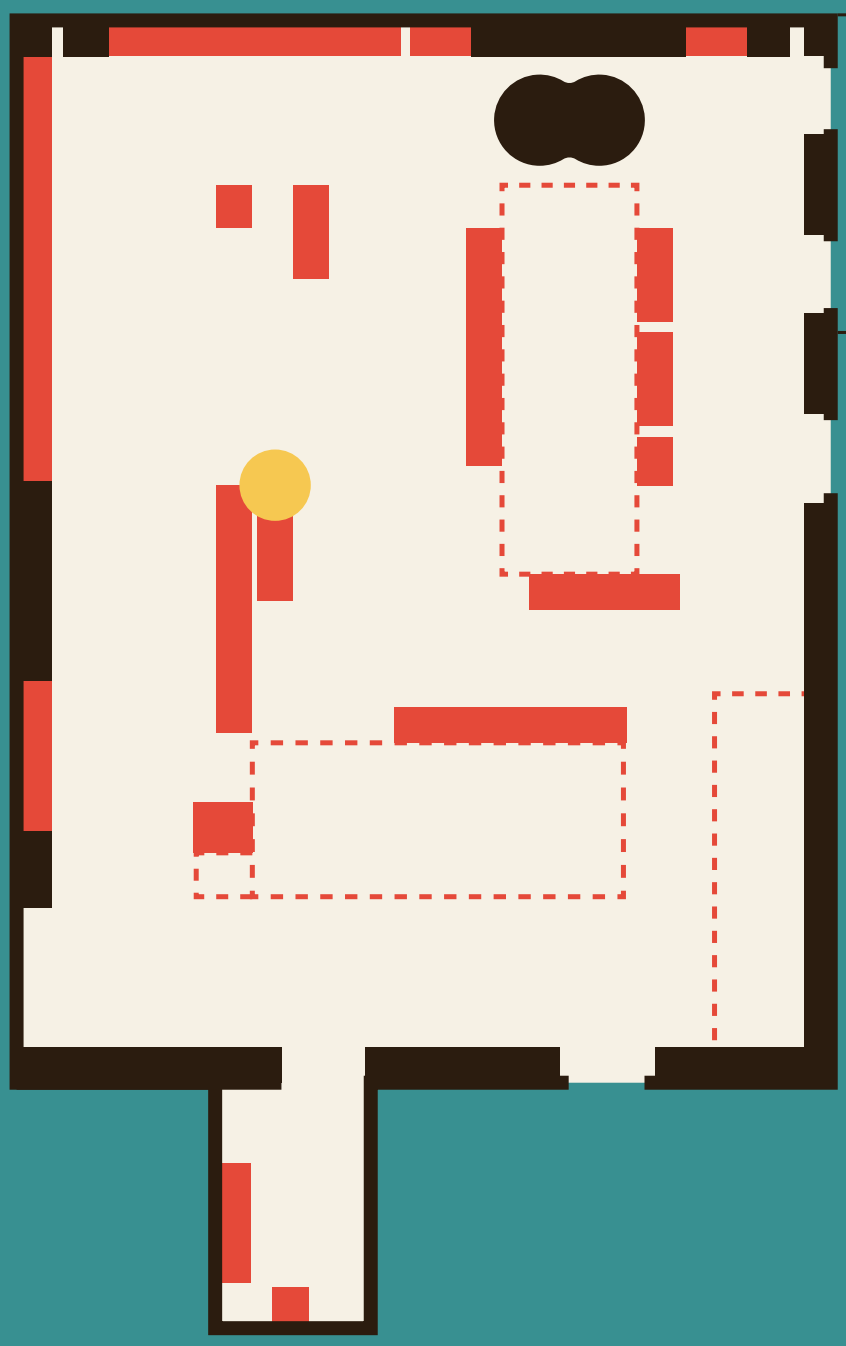
CROSSING CULTURES AT ACM

SELF-GUIDED TRAIL

ACM

TANG SHIPWRECK



*Enter the Tang Shipwreck Gallery and find the tripod incense burner in the **right side** of the rectangular display case in the **centre of the gallery.***

TRIPOD INCENSE BURNER

China, Changsha kilns, around 830s
Stoneware
2005.1.43026, 2005.1.43037

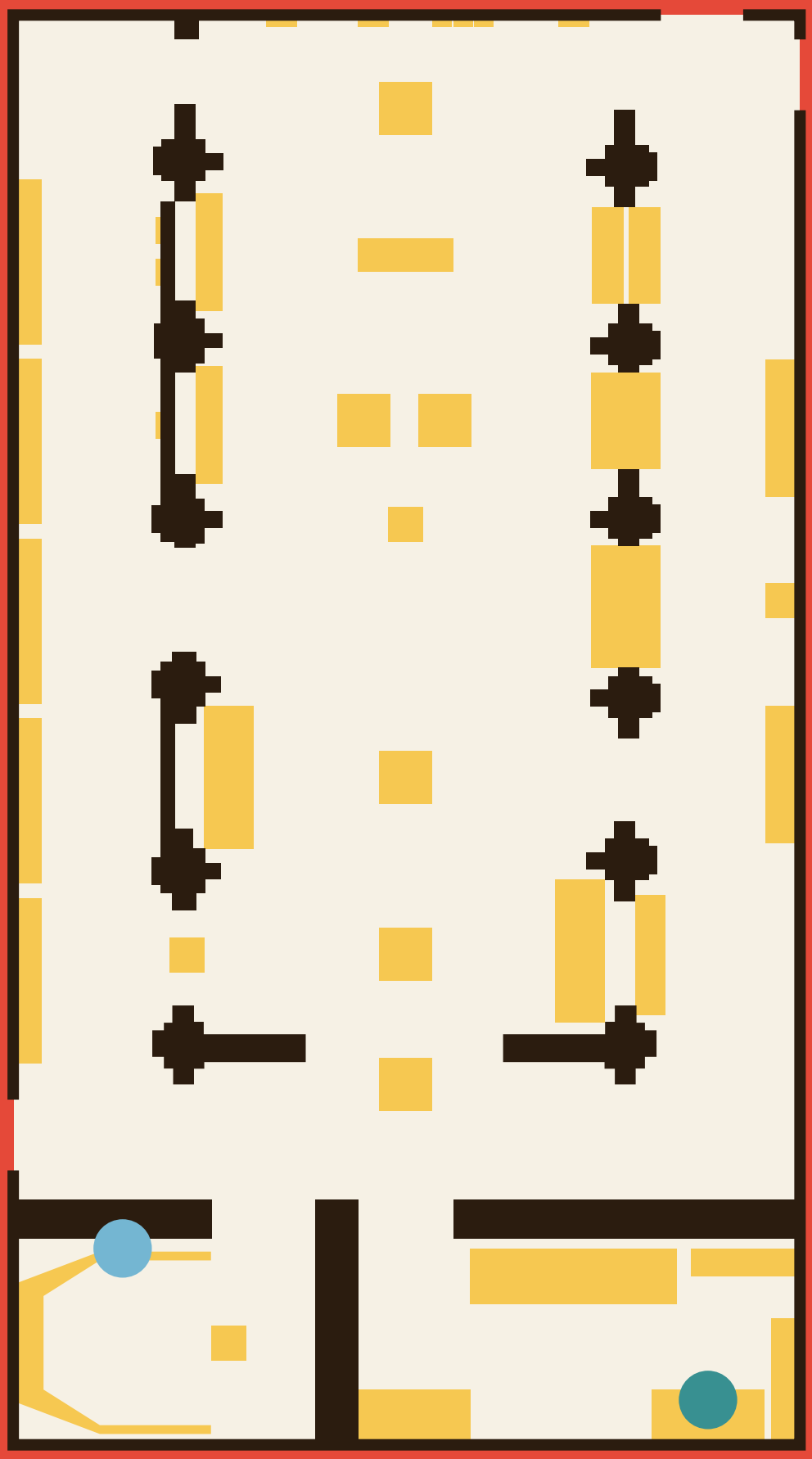
This incense burner was fired in the Changsha kilns in China around the 830s. Later in life, it found its way on board an Arab vessel that sank off the coast of Sumatra. It survived the shipwreck and found a new home at the Asian Civilisations Museum in Singapore.

Incense burners like this are usually part of tea sets. Tea and incense were, as they are today, essential items that aided meditation, helping to relax both mind and body.

*Now walk through the door that leads you into the **Maritime Trade Gallery**. Take the first right into a **room painted dark blue.** You'll find a dish in the display case*

against the wall on the right.

MARITIME TRADE



DISH

China, early 17th century
Porcelain
C-0091

The dish is lined with alternating rows of Quranic verses written in black cursive script and red floral scrolls. At its centre lies a square. In these squares, the numbers in each column, row, and diagonal add up to the same sum. Objects decorated with these squares were thought to ward off diseases and be imbued with medicinal powers.

Chinese porcelain was prized at the Islamic courts of the Middle East, and trade between the two regions flourished during the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties. This dish made in China for Islamic buyers reflects the cross-cultural exchanges that linked China to the Middle East from as early as the 9th century (as proven by the Tang Shipwreck!).

MEDICINE JAR

Porcelain: China, 19th century
Wood and rattan: northern Sumatra, 19th century
Gift of Mandala Foundation
2013-00960-62

*As you leave this room, **turn right and then right again.** There is a glass display cabinet diagonally across the small room. As you walk towards it, keep an eye out for **the collection of medicine bottles on its upper shelf.***

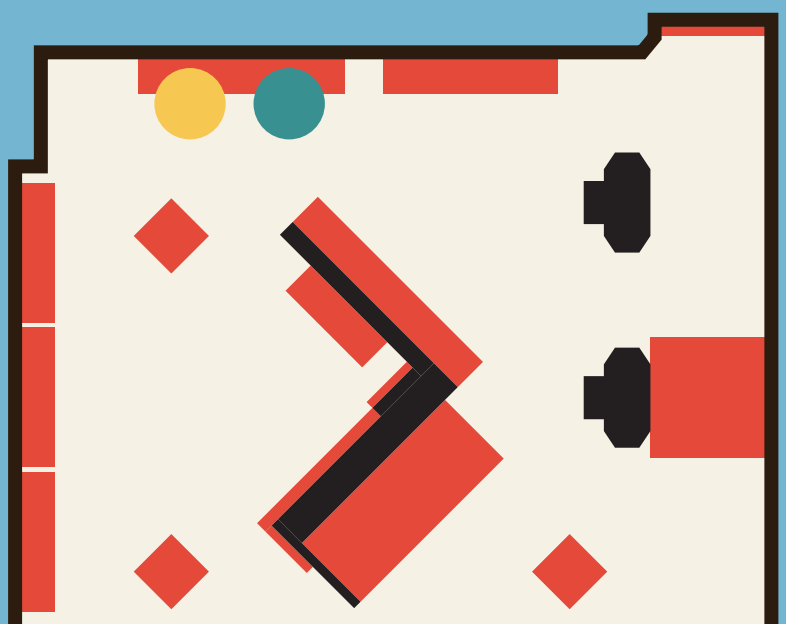
Batak priests, called *datu,* used jars like this to store their medicinal concoctions. Like the dish with the square, the porcelain part of this container was imported from China. Interior Southeast Asian island communities like the Batak traded for these ceramics with coastal merchants. Some became cherished heirlooms.

The Batak fitted them with rattan covers to protect them and add spiritual powers. Many of these covers include carved figures of mythical creatures or ancestors. This bottle featured in our trail is topped with a figure riding a singa, a creature that is part horse, elephant, dragon, and lion.

*Next, head back out **the way you came**, and walk all the way to the **end of the large gallery**. Find the **central staircase** and head upstairs.*

*At the top, head out the **door on your right.** Turn right and find the **Islamic Art Gallery.** Walk in an L-shape towards the **top right corner of the gallery** and look for **open manuscripts** in a showcase along the wall to the right.*

ISLAMIC ART



MANSUR'S ANATOMY

Tashrih-i Mansuri by Mansur Ibn Muhammad Ibn al-Faquh Ilyas
Iran, 17th century
Paper, inks
1994-00001

This book, *Mansur's Anatomy,* is a study of various systems of the body. This is a copy of the original text written by 14th-century physician Mansur Ibn Ilyas for the governor of Fars, in Iran. For medieval Islamic scholars, the study of anatomy was a way of demonstrating God's wisdom.

It is opened to the page showing the skeletal system. Like the other chapters in this manuscript, the text here is accompanied by an extensively labelled diagram of the system under study.

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*The next item in our trail is the **plant-adorned folio** beside this manuscript.*

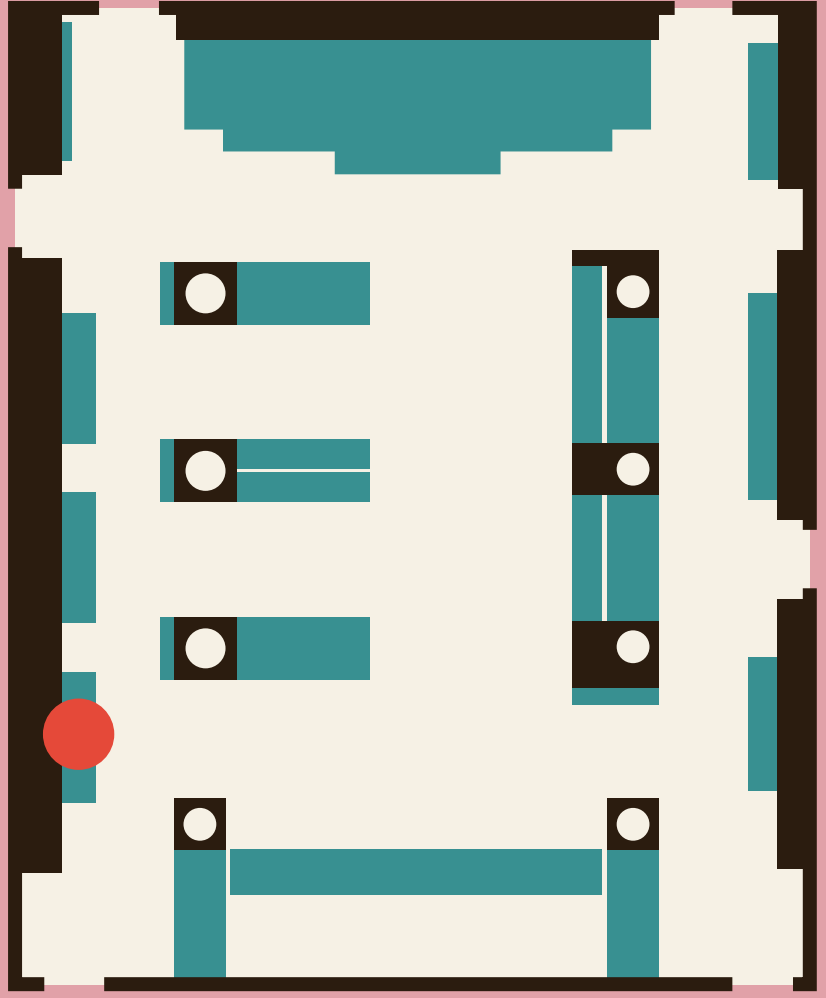
This page comes from a 16th-century Persian translation made in India of the famous 1st-century AD encyclopedia on herbal medicine by the Greek physician Dioscorides. After the 9th-century translation into Arabic, this work spread throughout the Islamic World and proved immensely influential. It laid the foundations for the study of botany and pharmacology among Muslim scientists. Arabic versions provided the basis for later translations into Latin, Persian (like this one), and Armenian.

FOLIO FROM *DE MATERIA MEDICA*

*As you leave the Islamic Art Gallery, **turn to your left** and enter the **Ancestors and Rituals Gallery**. In the first glass cabinet along the left wall, you will find **a bark book,** the last item in our trail.*

India, perhaps Golconda, dated Muharram AH 1004 (September 1595)
Paper, ink, pigments
2009-01437

ANCESTORS AND RITUALS



BOOK *(PUSTAHA)*

Toba Batak
Northern Sumatra, late 19th century
Wood, bast (inner bark), rattan, ink
Presented by Rev. W. Murray to the Raffles Library & Museum around 1905
XXXX-03509

This bark book – called *pustaha* by the Batak – contains magic spells, oracles, instructions for driving away evil spirits, and medicines. These texts were written by a *datu* (ritual specialist) in an archaic script that is no longer in use. The *datu* was the only member of the Batak community who would write this script, and the knowledge recorded in books like this was carefully guarded to keep it from being misused.

Traditional Batak religion is a mix of animism and ancestor veneration. Each clan is led by respected elders and *datu*. These *datu* and their *pustaha* traditions have helped to create a shared language and lore connecting the various Batak communities.