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National Museum
of Singapore



SINGAPORE ODYSSEY

A Journey Through Time

Gallery Guide

Advisory

Some parts of the gallery are dimly lit and feature video projections and moving images. Please exercise caution when moving through the gallery.

Museum Etiquette

**No food and
drinks**



**No flash
photography**



**Do not touch
artefacts**



**No bulky
items**



**Please speak
softly**



**Please attend
To children**



Singapore Odyssey : A Journey Through Time

Welcome to *Singapore Odyssey: A Journey Through Time*. This immersive and interactive multimedia production presents an engaging and dramatic depiction of Singapore's history with a focus on the sea, highlighting Singapore's maritime connections with the region and the world that have shaped our identity over the years. Beginning in the present, this journey offers a glimpse into Singapore's future before taking you back in time to discover key moments and folklore of our past.

Accompanying you on this time-travel voyage is your digital magical companion. Inspired by local fauna, these land, marine and sky creatures will join you on a deep dive into 700 years of Singapore's history, revealing iconic scenes from modern-day landmarks to renowned myths that date back to the 14th century. You will also encounter the beauty of our biodiversity and learn how Singapore's natural environment has evolved over the centuries and continues to shape our future.

Singapore Odyssey brings our past to life through a compelling storytelling experience that is enhanced by digital animations,

an original soundtrack and the use of creative technology and artistic licence to evoke imagination, wonder and excitement. Join us on this immersive journey to experience Singapore's rich history from a new perspective.

About the Shaw Foundation Glass Rotunda

Singapore Odyssey is presented in the National Museum of Singapore's Shaw Foundation Glass Rotunda. Set up in 1957 by the Shaw brothers, the Shaw Foundation is one of the largest philanthropic organisations in Singapore. It actively supports causes in education, welfare, medicine, arts and heritage, including a generous contribution to the Glass Rotunda.

Introduction

On entering the Glass Rotunda, visitors will experience a dramatic light show depicting the evolution of trade routes through Singapore from the pre-colonial period up to the present, reflecting Singapore's global influence and connectivity through the ages.

This is followed by a visualisation of Singapore in the near future – a sustainable and liveable city that is futuristic, connected and green. The outlines of recognisable urban structures and potential developments are juxtaposed with lush greenery, reflecting the Singapore Green Plan 2030. This sets the stage for the journey back in time from Singapore's present to its past, showcased in four episodes down the spiral ramp.

Episode 1 : Setting Sail

The first episode covers Singapore from the present day to independence, highlighting the importance of the sea to Singapore's economic growth and reputation as a global city. The sea surrounding Singapore and its more than 60 islands provides refuge for marine life. Furthermore, as one of the greenest cities in the world, Singapore's homes are surrounded by nature and green spaces, in line with its image as a City in Nature. This episode features internationally renowned sites such as Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve, a stopover for thousands of migratory birds, and Changi Airport, one of the busiest airports in the world.

Episode 2 : Riding Out the Storm

Next, we encounter the momentous events of post-war to wartime Singapore. Highlights include Singapore's attaining of self-government in 1959 and independence on 9 August 1965, and early nation-building efforts in the urgent construction of homes, factories and infrastructure. The theme of water is present throughout this episode, from the memorably rainy first National Day Parade in 1966, to severe flooding causing damage and disruption in the city in the post-war period. The sea was also a witness to battles and naval engagements during World War Two, such as the sinking of the battleships HMS *Prince of Wales* and HMS *Repulse*. The Japanese attacks that culminated in the fall of Singapore in 1942 are depicted here as well.

Audio used in episode

A re-recording by Mr Lee Kuan Yew on "Proclamation of Singapore, 9th day Of August 1965" (Extract)

Source: Mediacorp Pte Ltd, courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore

Episode 3 : Age of Exploration

The third episode presents colonial Singapore, with the sea as a gateway to the thriving port city, welcoming traders, travellers and immigrants to its shores set against its tropical landscape. The waterfront was also the scene of many boat races, including an annual regatta that was held to celebrate New Year's Day. Rows of shophouses lined the banks of the Singapore River, housing businesses and living quarters. At the same time, rapid development during the 19th century had an environmental impact, as most primary forests were cleared to plant cash crops such as pepper and gambier.

Episode 4 : Shores of Singapura

We come to pre-colonial Singapore in this final episode, which highlights the sea world that was inhabited by the seafaring communities, as well as the myths and legends of Singapore. The Palembang prince Sang Nila Utama thought that he saw a lion upon arriving on the island, thus naming the place Singapura, or “Lion City” in Sanskrit. Singapura was home to the Orang Laut, or “sea people” in Malay, who were skilled fishermen and expert maritime pilots. The episode also presents the legend of a boy who built a wall of banana tree trunks to counter a swordfish attack, and the legend of the strongman Badang who threw a boulder that landed at the mouth of the Singapore River. That boulder is thought to be the Singapore Stone, which bears Sanskrit inscriptions that have never been fully deciphered.

A Day in Singapore's History

The journey reaches its climax in the base of the rotunda, where an immersive waterfall parts to reveal glimpses of four moments in Singapore's history. It shows the Orang Laut guiding ships by the Dragon's Tooth Strait in Singapura at night, while an evening scene depicts life along the Singapore River waterfront during the early 20th century. This is followed by a mid-day scene of civilians attempting to leave before the fall of Singapore, and finally, the exploration of an intertidal zone in the morning in present-day Singapore.

Welcome to the Bottom of the Sea

Myths often help us understand our place in the world. An old Malay folklore tells of a vast whirlpool known as Pusat Tasek (“Navel of the Ocean” in Malay) that spins at the centre of the sea. Within this vortex is Pauh Janggi, a magical tree of life whose roots provide refuge for a crab so large that its daily forays in and out of Pusat Tasek are said to cause the rise and fall of the tides.

Here in the heart of Pusat Tasek, release your magical companions and join them in exploring the ancient waters and folktales of Singapore – from the story of the Palembang prince Sang Nila Utama’s arrival on the island and his discovery of a creature thought to be a lion, to the fabled swordfish attack that gave Bukit Merah, or Redhill, its name. You will also encounter the tale of Raja Chulan, a mighty king of Chola descent who commanded his men to build a chamber to explore the underwater kingdom when he reached the shores of Singapore.

As your Singapore Odyssey comes to a close, we invite you to reflect on your voyage across myth and memory, time and tide, and the pivotal role of the sea in shaping Singapore both in the past and today, and well into tomorrow. This journey is also a call to action to nurture a green and sustainable home for all where the real-life counterparts of your magical companions, along with the people of Singapore, can thrive.

For more information about the myths, scan the QR code for the Gallery Guide.

Myths in *Singapore Odyssey*

The myths featured here place Singapore within the wider regional context of the early modern Malay world during the late 13th and 14th centuries. Temasek or Singapura, as the island of Singapore was named in the *Sejarah Melayu* (Malay Annals), was a thriving trading settlement in the Malay world, located at the crossroads of trade with China, South Asia, and the rest of the region referred to as Southeast Asia today.

The myth of Pauh Janggi describing the giant crab under the magical tree is based on an old Malay belief, while the legends of Sang Nila Utama, the swordfish attack and Raja Chulan have helped to shape our understanding of the origins of early Singapore. Other than Pauh Janggi, the myths have been recorded in the *Sejarah Melayu*, a literary work that narrates the lineage of the sultans of Melaka. As the *Sejarah Melayu* has been translated by different scholars and writers through the ages, there are multiple versions with varying accounts of each story. Even so, the *Sejarah Melayu* remains an important source of Malay history that has helped to link early Singapore to the history of the region.

The Giant Crab Under the Magical Tree

Based on ancient Malay folklore, the massive whirlpool Pusat Tasek lies in the middle of the ocean. Growing within the vortex is Pauh Janggi, a magical tree whose fruits are said to have healing properties. The roots of Pauh Janggi are also home to a giant crab, whose movements are believed to control the ebb and flow of the sea – the tide falls as it leaves its shelter to forage, and its return displaces water that results in a rising tide. Other versions of the myth tell of dragons and garudas that inhabit Pauh Janggi, making it a connection between the human and spiritual realms. This further highlights its role in ancient Malay cosmology as the tree of life.

Sang Nila Utama, First Ruler of Singapura

According to the *Sejarah Melayu*, the Palembang prince Sang Nila Utama (also known as Sri Tri Buana) left his city to explore new lands when he noticed the island of Temasek and its white sands from afar. Caught in a storm while sailing towards the island, the prince threw his crown overboard to prevent the ship from capsizing. The waters calmed and Sang

Nila Utama arrived on the shores of Temasek safely. On the island, he caught sight of a majestic creature and was told it was a lion. Inspired by the encounter, Sang Nila Utama decided to name the island “Singapura” (or “City of the Lion” in Sanskrit) and became its first ruler.

A few hundred years may have passed since then, and Singapura is now known as Singapore, but the popular legend of Sang Nila Utama continues to be associated with the country’s origins.

Attack of the Swordfish

The *Sejarah Melayu* records the legend of the swordfish attack on 14th-century Singapore, where swordfish leapt out of the waters and, with their long and sharp snouts, struck down villagers and fishermen along the coast. Paduka Sri Maharaja, who was the king and ruler at the time, deployed his men to defend the shoreline but to no avail. A young boy’s clever suggestion of building a wall of banana tree trunks eventually thwarted the attack – the swordfish were trapped when their snouts were stuck in the tree trunks.

Although the boy was hailed a hero by the villagers for saving their lives, he was feared by the jealous king, who ordered the boy to be killed to protect his throne. While the story ends here in the *Sejarah Melayu*, it continued to evolve in popular folklore. It was believed that the boy's blood flowed down the hill where he was killed and stained the earth red, which led to its name "Bukit Merah", meaning "red hill" in Malay.

Today, "Bukit Merah" and "Redhill" are the names of a residential estate located in the southern part of the central region of Singapore.

The Story of Raja Chulan

In the *Sejarah Melayu*, Raja Chulan, a character inspired by a ruler of the Chola Kingdom in South India, set forth on a military campaign to conquer China. Upon learning of this, the Chinese Emperor and his ministers devised a plan to stop Raja Chulan. This involved deploying an aged ship steered by old men to intercept Raja Chulan and his entourage at Temasek. When the elderly Chinese sailors met Raja Chulan, they told him that their voyage from China had taken so long that they and their ship had since grown old. Convinced that

China was too far away, Raja Chulan gave up on his campaign. Instead, he ordered his men to build him a chamber to descend into the sea and explore the waters beneath, where he subsequently married the princess of the underwater kingdom.

According to legend, Sang Nila Utama – the first ruler of Singapura – was a descendent of Raja Chulan. In certain versions of the *Sejarah Melayu*, Raja Chulan is said to be the grandfather of Sang Nila Utama, while he is purported to be the latter's father in others. In some accounts, the Chola King is also referred to as Raja Suran.

Myths and our History

The world of myth and magic offers a unique glimpse into our past. These stories, from the tales of powerful rulers to everyday folklore depicting how early societies understood the world, have existed long before history was recorded. Centuries later, they continue to shape how we remember, preserve and imagine our past, and play a key role in defining our sense of identity.

Continue your journey to the Singapore History Gallery, which brings to life 700 years of Singapore's history through the ancient myths surrounding our origins, alongside the rich artefacts, records and stories that chart our transformation to the present day.