



OBITUARIES

In Memoriam: John Norman Miksic (1946–2025)

Published online: 27 February 2026

To cite this article: Ooi, K. G. 2026. Obituaries: In memoriam: John Norman Miksic (1946–2025). *International Journal of Asia Pacific Studies* 22 (1): 221–222. <https://doi.org/10.21315/ijaps2026.22.1.13>

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.21315/ijaps2026.22.1.13>

John N[orman] Miksic passed away on 25 October 2025, having succumbed to pneumonia. He was just four days shy of his 79th year.

An emeritus professor of the Department of Southeast Asian Studies, a programme he established at the National University of Singapore, he was one of the foremost archaeologists of his generation with special focus on Southeast Asia. In Singapore where he resided since 1987, Miksic was definitely the archaeologist who changed the city-state's view of itself to the extent of a curriculum change in the history textbooks.

Born on 29 October 1946 in Rochester, New York, Miksic was drawn to archaeology since boyhood. But when he embarked on studies at Dartmouth College, New Hampshire, he decided on anthropology whence he graduated in 1968. As with his generation then inspired by the charismatic President John F. Kennedy (1917–1963), who through an executive order on 1 March 1961 introduced the Peace Corps, Miksic too volunteered to contribute whatever skills to newly-formed Malaysia. While serving (1968–1972), he was involved in establishing a farmers' cooperative in the rice-bowl state of Kedah. Besides, he contributed in configuring an irrigation system in an area near Merbok, Kedah, known as the Bujang Valley, where three rivers flow, namely Sungai Bujang, Sungai Muda, and Sungai Merbok. Whether of coincidence or perchance, the Bujang Valley is one of the earliest archaeologically documented crossroads circa 788 BCE for trade goods and religious ideas in Southeast Asia, predating both Angkor Wat (constructed c. 1116–1150 CE) and Borobudur (built 780 and 840 CE). Miksic was there helping farmers bring water to their rice fields.

Following his Peace Corp stint, he returned to embark on postgraduate studies in the Department of International Affairs, Ohio University in Athens, Ohio, graduating with a Master of Art (MA) in 1974. It appeared that he was unsettled, and journeyed to Ithaca to pursue a second MA from the Department of Anthropology, Cornell University. Miksic came face-to-face with the likes of George McT. Kahin (1918–2000), Lauriston Sharp (1907–1993), but quite likely missed D. G. E. Hall (1891–1979) who was there between 1959 and 1973. Having obtained his second MA in 1976, he continued with a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) which was awarded in 1979. His doctorate in Anthropological Archaeology with a dissertation title “Archaeology, Trade, and Society in Northeast Sumatra” earned him the Lauriston Sharp Award for Best PhD Dissertation in the Southeast Asian Studies Programme in 1978; this award is annually conferred to finishing doctoral student(s) who has demonstrated in research and community engagement to represent an outstanding contribution to the study of Southeast Asia.

True as a Lauriston Sharp Award recipient, Miksic served United States Agency for International Development as a Rural Development Advisor (1979–1981) in Bengkulu on the southwest coast of Sumatra, Indonesia. Having been out in the field, he decided to return to the classroom, and it was at Yogyakarta's Gadjah Mada University that he lectured archaeological theory from 1981 to 1986. A career move the following year brought him to the Department of History, National University of Singapore (NUS). It was there that he established the Southeast Asian Studies Programme in 1991. From 2010 to 2013, he headed the Archaeology Unit, Nalanda-Sriwijaya Unit, at ISEAS-Yusoff Ishak Institute, responsible for excavations in Singapore as well as conducting outreach programmes for schools and government agencies. He was also affiliated as a Senior Research Fellow under the School of Humanities, Nanyang Technological University (NTU). He was active on numerous committees and advisory boards, inter alia the National Museum of Singapore Development Committee (1990–1992), the Lee Kong Chian Art Museum (1991–1993), and the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies Yusuf Ishak Institute (2010–2013).

Beyond Singapore, he served as a founding-member of the Center for Khmer Studies, Siem Reap (1998–2013), Cambodia; the Asian Cultural Council, New York (1981–1987); the Field School of Indonesian Archaeology (1989–1993); and the Council of the Southeast Asian Ceramic Society (since 1989; as its President from 2021).

As an archaeologist of Southeast Asia, Miksic had undertaken fieldwork and excavations in numerous sites across the region, viz. in Sumatra, Banten, Surakarta, and Bali. He was involved in excavations at Dieng Plateau, near Banjarnegara, Central Java, of a group of 7th and/or 8th-century Hindu *candi* or temple compounds located in Dieng Plateau, believed to be the earliest Hindu temples in Indonesia, and related to Kalingga, the earliest Hindu-Buddhist kingdom in Central Java. His contributions to Southeast Asian archaeology are invaluable in enriching our understanding of the past drawn from numerous artefacts that complemented the existing documented records.

In Singapore itself, excavations were made at Fort Canning Hill, Colombo Court, and Cricket Club. Recovered archaeological artefacts furnished evidence of the pre-Rafflesian period stretching back to the 14th century when the island was known as Temasek. Complementing and corroborating the archaeological artefacts of ceramics are contemporary writings of travellers as well as commercial and mercantile records (from Portuguese, Dutch, Chinese and British) that pointed to a trading centre with royal palace located at Fort Canning Hill. Temasek's significance was shown in that this port-city faced threats from Ayutthaya (1351–1767) and Majapahit (1292–1527). Miksic's archaeological finds were a revelation to the extent that Singapore's history textbooks had to be re-written to incorporate a new perspective of the island hitherto thought its beginnings begun with the arrival of the English East India Company. Aptly he became the recipient of the inaugural Singapore History Prize (2018) for his 520-page *Singapore and the Silk Road of the Sea, 1300–1800* (NUS Press and the National Museum of Singapore, 2013).

Miksic is survived by his wife and fellow historian-archaeologist Associate Professor Dr. Goh Geok Yian of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, NTU. From his first marriage, he has a son, Ezra Miksic and a daughter, Vonya Miksic Eisinger, and four grandchildren.

Ooi Keat Gin

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