The ethics, politics, and realities of maritime archaeology in Southeast Asia

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There is a constant battle between maritime archaeologists and commercial salvors throughout the world. In many developed countries, the arguments of archaeologists are valid, and their actions fully justify their stance. This is not so in Southeast Asia. In this region, archaeological information is being lost on a massive scale. Co-operation between the two groups, and with regional governments, is essential to prevent more irreparable damage.

Key words: Southeast Asia, ethics, policy, looting.

Introduction

It is reasonable to state that maritime archaeology in Southeast Asia remains in its infancy. This is despite the fact that the region has shipwreck concentrations that rival those of the Mediterranean Sea, and a colourful maritime past that dates back thousands of years. Indonesia, East Malaysia, and the Philippines form a vast archipelago off the convoluted coasts of Vietnam, Thailand, and West Malaysia (Fig. 1). Through necessity, the development of these countries from ancient times has been closely linked with maritime trade and conquest. Indeed, many cities and states owe their very existence to their proximity to maritime trade routes. It is unfortunate that even in these times of increasing cultural awareness, there is little public recognition of the historical role played by ships, their makers, their sailors, and the sea.

Unlike most terrestrial archaeology, maritime archaeology is enmeshed in politics and in ethics, two seemingly contrary fields. This is because shipwrecks can contain artefacts of considerable commercial value. They can contain treasure. This article seeks to summarize past efforts at salvage and maritime archaeology in Southeast Asia, and the politics involved. It also highlights the archaeological losses that occur on a far too regular basis.

Newspaper reports world-wide seem incapable of quoting figures lower than hundreds of millions of dollars whenever new shipwreck finds are announced. Regional legislators read newspapers. Shipwreck policy is often formulated with money in mind. The archaeology is sidelined, and sometimes dismissed altogether.

In reality, only a handful of shipwrecks in Southeast Asian waters have yielded an appreciable financial return to their salvors. The Chinese blue-and-white porcelain and a small quantity of gold from the Geldermalsen, otherwise known as the Nanking Cargo, sold at a Christie's auction for a little over US$15 million. The controversy over whether or not the wreck lay within Indonesian territorial waters led the Indonesian Government to set up a shipwreck committee to oversee all wreck-related work. The Vung Tau Cargo, Chinese blue-and-white porcelain of the Kangxi period found in Vietnam, fetched over US$7 million at auction. The porcelain from the 1817 wreck of the Diana, a Country ship lost in Malaysian waters, sold for about US$3 million at another Christie's auction. An extremely large cargo of Dehua blue-and-white porcelain found on the 1822 wreck of the Chinese junk, Tek Sing, sold through a German auction house for nearly US$10 million. However, considering the capital outlay, the profit to investors seems to have been minimal. The tin cargoes from a number of 19th-century shipwrecks have been recovered and sold.
but the quantities are usually small, and the profits are soon consumed in searching for the next wreck.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) convention for the protection of the underwater cultural heritage aims primarily to exclude commercial salvage operators from working on historic wreck-sites. The underlying reason for this is that, regardless of how well they may document the site and regardless of efforts made to put aside representative samples for museum display, commercial salvors must inevitably sell at least part of the cargo to cover their costs and, if they are fortunate, to make a profit. The cargo is therefore dispersed and is no longer available, in its entirety, for scholarly study.

This is a perfectionist policy for shipwrecks full of unique artefacts lost in the waters of developed countries that are willing to commit public funds to carry out archaeological excavations, inclusive of the time-consuming and costly tasks of conservation and long-term storage of large numbers of artefacts, documentation, dissemination, and display. However, as will become apparent in this article, the participation of responsible
commercial salvors may actually be the best means of saving archaeological information in Southeast Asia, at least in the near term. There is also the question of what happens when there are many thousands of identical artefacts, as in the case of the large ceramic cargoes mentioned above. [2] To the author’s knowledge, no archaeological institution has ever excavated such a cargo, and thereby been faced with the question of what to do with a warehouse full of material. The Western Australian Maritime Museum has cleverly utilized thousands of ballast bricks, excavated from Dutch shipwrecks, as paving around a stone portico recovered from the *Batavia* and around the hull remains of the same ship. Ceramics could hardly be used as paving, but a fascinating display could incorporate thousands of pieces, either stacked in boxes or strewn about a mock seabed to give the interested public some idea of the immense scale of the maritime ceramics trade. Even so, with the constant battle being waged to obtain sufficient funds from even the most generous governments, there is an argument to sell part of the collection, as long as all artefacts have been thoroughly documented, and a fully representative sample has been kept for long-term study.

In order to protect terrestrial sites one of the leading terrestrial archaeologists carrying out work in the less-developed countries of Southeast Asia, Professor John Miksic (1995) suggests, as a last resort, that the sale of artefacts be legalized. The likelihood of archaeological intervention would thereby be increased, particularly if finders realized that proper documentation could enhance the value of their finds. Registration of artefacts should remain a requisite, and efforts should be made to keep artefacts in the country of origin. This may be achieved if the government bids for such artefacts on the open market. There are certainly problems with this solution, such as cash-strapped or disinterested governments. [3] However, it is a pragmatic suggestion that could be considerably more beneficial than increased regulation and policing.

Dispersal of artefact assemblages is only part of the conundrum. There are frequent calls from archaeologists from developed nations for shipwrecks to be left untouched for study by future generations who will be better equipped to garner the maximum amount of information, bearing in mind that once a site has been excavated, information not collected has been lost forever. Again, this is all well and good in countries where the wreck-site can be constantly protected from deliberate or accidental interference, or where civic awareness is sufficiently high to render policing unnecessary. In developing countries, where finding the next meal takes priority over cultural sensibilities, this line of thinking is not only naïve but potentially destructive. Three examples make this abundantly clear, and others discussed in the following sections reinforce the point.

The author directed the excavation of the Vung Tau Wreck in Vietnam for a commercial salvage company in 1991 (Flecker, 1992a; Jörg & Flecker, 2001). The hull was unique, the first *loot* ever to be discovered. Towards the end of the excavation, a few intact ceramics were glimpsed well beneath the hull, but to remove them would have resulted in damage to the structure. Consequently, they were left in place and reburied. Some months after the salvors left the site, local divers returned and ripped the hull apart to gain access to the ceramics.

In a more recent case, a company excavating ceramics from a Tang Dynasty shipwreck in Indonesian waters closed down their operation owing to adverse weather during the months of the north-west monsoon. Local divers immediately moved in, sometimes at night, and removed many artefacts. Furthermore, as large jars containing hundreds of Changsha bowls were too heavy for them to lift, they smashed holes in the sides of the jars in order to gain easy access (Fig. 2).

In another incident, Sten Sjøstrand located a 15th-century wreck loaded with a large cargo of Chinese Longquan, and Thai Sawankhalok and Sukhothai ceramics in deep water well off the east coast of the Malay peninsula. He called it the Longquan Wreck. Apart from some minor surface disturbance, the bulk of the cargo was still stacked in its original configuration. As there was little chance of others finding the wreck, and owing to commitments on other wreck-sites, Sjøstrand left the area after collecting samples for analysis. He later returned for further investigations, only to find the 1-8-m-high wreck mound flattened and widely dispersed by Thai trawlnets. [4] Recently, Thai trawlers severely damaged another of Sjøstrand’s finds, a hitherto untouched 16th-century site referred to as the Singtai Wreck (Sjøstrand, pers. comm.).

Shipwreck excavations must take place on a more pragmatic level in Southeast Asia, at least in the short term. Governments cannot afford to excavate shipwrecks and display the recovered
artefacts themselves. They generally do not have enough qualified people. A compromise is called for. Commercial companies are necessary to provide finance. Sale of some artefacts is necessary to attract that finance. It is up to governments to formulate policy that ensures that commercial groups carry out excavation work to acceptable archaeological standards, that they disseminate their results, and that fully representative samples are kept for public display. Governments certainly can benefit financially from the sale of artefacts, but their standing and credibility would be enhanced considerably if such funds were channelled back into museums and training, so that, eventually, they would be in a position to undertake maritime archaeological projects themselves, independent of commercial companies.

With these comments in mind, salvage and maritime archaeology, as practised in various Southeast Asian countries, is examined. In some countries, there may have been recent policy changes, and in others, it is hard to ascertain exactly what their shipwreck policy is. What follows is based on the best information available to the author at the present time.

Thailand

Thailand, or at least the Gulf of Thailand, tended to be outside the sea-routes used by ships carrying large quantities of Chinese ceramics and precious metal cargoes. There is indeed an abundance of shipwrecks in the Gulf, but the majority of those that have been discovered were carrying Thai ceramics.56 Thai ceramics tend to be less valuable than Chinese ceramics, so the wrecks were not considered to be commercial bonanzas. Furthermore, most of the wrecks were discovered by Thai fishermen, and most had already been looted to a greater or lesser degree. These factors may well have played a role in selecting Thailand as the Asian country in which to inaugurate maritime archaeological training in conjunction with shipwreck excavation. The politics tend to be less convoluted when the financial stakes are low.

A joint Thai-Danish expedition in the late 1970s was a prelude to a Thai-Australian venture that lasted for many years. This commenced in 1979 with a training course that formed part of the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMO) project in Archaeology and Fine Arts (SPAFA). The course was conducted largely by Jeremy Green of the Western Australian Maritime Museum and eventually led to the joint excavation of three shipwrecks, with the Thai contingent under the auspices of the Thai Fine Arts Department. The Fine Arts Department went on to excavate several more wrecks independently.
The Thai-Australian joint venture excavated the Ko Kradaat Wreck, the Pattaya Wreck, and the Ko Si Chang III Wreck. All of these sites were excavated to high archaeological standards, and the findings were published in Australian Institute of Maritime Archaeology Special Publications (Green & Harper, 1983, 1987; Green et al., 1984). Unfortunately, none of these wrecks were found in an untouched state. All had been looted to some extent, and the Ko Kradaat site had only fragmentary traces of hull remaining.

Since then, the Thai Government has published a booklet on ceramics recovered from the Gulf of Thailand (Charoenwongsa & Prishanchit, 1990), and Prishanchit (1996) has published an article summarizing the wrecks in the Gulf. However, it seems that maritime archaeology in Thailand has faltered in recent years. This is lamentable, particularly as Thailand led the way, so to speak, in the non-commercial archaeological excavation of shipwrecks in its territorial waters.

As an aside, in 1992, a commercial group excavated a 16th-century Thai wreck in 58-m-deep water in the central Gulf of Thailand (Fig. 3). The Thai navy arrested the salvage vessel while the excavation was in progress and confiscated some 8000 pieces of Thai ceramics before releasing the vessel and crew. The Thai Government claimed that as the wreck lay within their Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), it was owned by Thailand. The commercial company argued that only oil, minerals, and fish are covered by the EEZ. All ships have free rights of passage in an EEZ, but the salvage vessel was clearly not underway. The legality here remains a grey area. The author accompanied that expedition in order to record as much as possible of the cargo and hull structure (Flecker, 1992b). The ethics debate led to several archaeological journals, including the IJNA, rejecting a paper on the findings, an unfortunate occurrence given that the shipwreck was in a pristine state, and the hull remains were more intact than any other wreck of its type. By not publishing, the information is effectively as lost as if no data had been recorded at all. To the author's knowledge, no further archaeological work has been done on this site by the Thai Government.

**Philippines**

The Philippines is well endowed with shipwrecks, many of them being of substantial commercial value. Manila was the western terminus of the Manila galleon trade, which lasted for 250 years,
from 1565 to 1815. Galleons sailed from Acapulco loaded with South American silver, which was highly sought after by the Chinese. In Manila, the Spanish merchants traded mostly with the Chinese, but also with Japanese, Indian, and Southeast Asian traders, returning to Acapulco in ships heavily laden with silks, spices, porcelain, and gold. Most sailed by way of San Bernardino Strait, where they were plagued by reefs, strong currents, and typhoons. Not all dangers were natural. The Dutch were constantly trying to dislodge the Spanish. Local pirates abounded, and later, English privateers joined the fray.

Maritime trade flourished in the Philippines well before the arrival of Europeans. Ships travelling to Brunei and other ports on the western shores of Borneo also had to run the gauntlet of storms and reefs along Palawan Passage. Surviving cargoes of Chinese and Vietnamese ceramics are far from rare.

Shipwreck policy in the Philippines was established in the early 1980s, with little variation since then. The National Museum is fully responsible for overseeing shipwreck excavation projects. These are almost always carried out by foreign companies that have set up office in the Philippines, but trained Museum personnel play an active role, which includes diving, documentation, conservation of artefacts, and reporting. The recovered artefacts are divided 50/50 between the salvor and the Museum. This is done by selecting artefacts one by one, rather than splitting the proceeds of sale, as occurs in several other Southeast Asian countries.

One company has predominated to date in the Philippines. World Wide First (WWF) was founded by the Frenchman, Frank Goddio, and operates ostensibly as a non-profit organization. Over the years, WWF has excavated the Manila Galleon, San Jose, the English ship, Griffin, the Spanish warship, San Diego, and a number of Chinese junks. The San Diego was actually excavated under the umbrella of the European Institute of Underwater Archaeology, with Goddio as President and Elf Petroleum as principal financier. All of these projects have been carried out to acceptable archaeological standards, and the resultant publications have been exceptional in some cases (Carré et al., 1994).

Of course, there have been other companies working with the National Museum, and although there may be genuine archaeological interest, their primary aim is profit. Strangely enough, to the author’s knowledge, none of the shipwrecks excavated to date have yielded any appreciable profit for the salvors. No doubt, most of the wrecks are heavily looted by capable local divers before salvage companies get word of them.

One such site is a recently discovered 15th-century shipwreck off Santa Cruz, Zamboals, which contained a cargo of Chinese and Vietnamese ceramics. Fishermen discovered the wreck, and considerable looting took place before the National Museum, under Dr Bong Dizon, took over.

**Vietnam**

Although Vietnam is relatively new to maritime archaeology, and is certainly lacking finance for such projects, the country has made reasonable progress. This is due largely to the influence of the Ministry of Culture and the Prime Minister’s Office.

In the past, Vietnam has administered shipwreck excavations through the state-owned Vietnam Salvage Corporation (Visal). The first historic shipwreck excavation took place in 1991, through a joint venture with a Swedish company, Hallstrom Holdings. The wreck had been accidentally discovered by fishermen, who then started to loot the site. The Government put a stop to these activities and brought in Visal to salvage the cargo of Kangxi blue-and-white porcelain (Fig. 4). Visal recovered several thousand pieces, but since they lacked suitable experience or adequate excavation equipment, a joint venture was formed to complete the project. The author was fortunate enough to be engaged as director of the follow-on excavation (Flecker, 1992a; Jörg & Flecker, 2001). Although most of the ceramics were sold through a Christie’s auction as the Vung Tau Cargo, a large representative sample and most of the artefacts were retained by the Government for museum display. Considering the limited funds available, the permanent exhibition in the Vung Tau Museum is very well done.

Immediately following this, the author was invited by Visal to assess a Thai shipwreck that was lost off the island of Phu Quoc on the west coast of Vietnam (Blake & Flecker, 1994). The wreck was partly looted by fishermen, but still had considerable archaeological potential. There was insufficient financial potential for a commercial company to become involved, so Visal completed
the excavation themselves. Many of the recovered ceramics went on display in the History Museum in Ho Chi Minh City, but little was done by way of maritime archaeology.

Later Visal excavated an early 18th-century Chinese wreck in relatively deep water off the southern tip of the country. It, too, had been discovered and heavily looted by fishermen. Many thousands of pieces of Chinese blue-and-white porcelain were recovered by Visal at Government expense and under the close supervision of archaeological representatives from the Ministry of Culture. Underwater video was used to help supervise the divers, but it was unfortunate that a qualified maritime archaeologist was not consulted. Although considerable effort went into recording the recovered ceramics, nothing was learned of the hull. The presence of cast-iron vessels, and the absence of European cannon, is the only evidence that has led the author to conclude that the ship was indeed of Chinese origin and, therefore, relatively rare.

Within the past 3 years, a large wreck loaded with literally hundreds of thousands of pieces of 15th-century Vietnamese blue-and-white porcelain was excavated off Hoi An in 75 m of water. This is too deep for conventional diving systems. A joint venture was, therefore, formed between Visal and a Malaysian group headed by Ong Soo Hin, which used expensive saturation diving to carry out the excavation. Ong brought in Mensun Bound of Oxford University MARE to oversee the maritime archaeology in conjunction with the Ministry of Culture, and committed substantial funds to ensure that the site was properly gridded and documented, to the extent that every piece of porcelain was logged individually in a computer database. The Government retained all unique artefacts and a fully representative 10% of the ceramic cargo for display in museums throughout Vietnam. The remainder of the cargo was offered for sale through direct and email auction in the USA by Butterfields. As the wreck was initially found by Vietnamese fishermen and then offered to Ong's group, a large proportion of the financial return went to the Government. According to Dr Pham Quoc Quan (2000), Director of the National Museum of Vietnamese History, the auction also served to highlight the sophistication of Vietnamese art and culture, a sophistication that, until now, has been overshadowed by that of China in international perception. Unfortunately, to the author's knowledge, no archaeological report has been produced to date.

With the increasingly capitalist-oriented system in Vietnam, the encouragement of private enterprise, it is feared that future wreck excavations will be put out to open tender, rather than being automatically handed over to the state-owned
company, Visal. If the selection process is based on price alone, there would be dire consequences for maritime archaeology in Vietnam, for only Visal has had experience excavating ancient wrecks under archaeological supervision. Furthermore, being a state-owned company, profit need not be its overriding objective.

The detrimental effects of this change in policy are already being felt. In 2001, the author had the opportunity to officially dive on a very recently discovered c. 1600 shipwreck that had an intact cargo of Chinese ceramics. As usual, fishermen found the wreck and started looting, but were caught at a very early stage. The navy was sent out to guard the site, but despite this, looting continued. When first inspected, the cargo appeared virtually intact. Two months later, large holes had been dug at various locations, and all intact surface ceramics had been removed. These pieces could still be viewed—on the internet websites of Bangkok antique dealers. This looting took place while various ministries decided whether to excavate the wreck in-house, go out for tender, or invite foreign participation. At the time of writing, some 12 months after the wreck became known to the authorities, there is still no confirmation of how and when archaeological excavation will take place.

Malaysia

Malaysia is a relative newcomer to maritime archaeology. The first site to receive official attention was the Dutch East India Company (VOC) ship, Risdam, which had been discovered by unlicensed salvors. The Government contracted Jeremy Green to carry out a site assessment, but to the author’s knowledge, a full excavation was never undertaken.

The author was a member of the first group to be awarded a survey licence by the Malaysian Government, in 1991. The target was the Country ship, Diana, which was lost with a cargo of Chinese porcelain in 1817. The group was unsuccessful in the initial survey, although several other interesting sites were discovered. All rights were passed to one member, Dorian Ball. He continued to search, and three years later, his efforts paid off.

Ball found the Diana in December 1993, and excavation was completed in 1994. The Government had representatives on board the salvage barge. However, none were experienced in maritime archaeology, and none dived as an integral part of the excavation team. Ball published a book on the excavation, which gives a good account of the history of the wreck and of the trade (Ball, 1995). Unfortunately, and this is partly due to atrocious underwater conditions, very little was done by way of field archaeology, the actual documentation of artefacts, and in-situ hull remains.

Under the terms of the licence, artefacts directly related to Malaysian history and culture could be retained by the government. The remainder could be sold, with a percentage of the proceeds of the sale going to the government. This policy was to allow commercial companies to salvage shipwrecks, following acceptable archaeological standards, and sell artefacts not directly relevant to Malaysia. The funds thus obtained by the government could then be spent excavating wrecks that were directly relevant (Taha, 1989).

This policy was indeed put into practice. At least part of the funds that the Government obtained from the sale of the Diana porcelain were spent on the archaeological excavation of a Dutch ship, Nassau, lost in a battle off Port Dickson in 1606. This wreck is relevant to Malaysian history, as it was involved in a pivotal battle with the Portuguese over the ruling of the key entrepot of Malacca. The government contracted the same group that later worked in Vietnam, Ong Soo Hin together with Mensun Bound. The wreck was painstakingly excavated over many months, but to the author’s knowledge, the only published report appears as an article in a compendium on ships of war (Bound et al., 1997). With this good start on the part of the Malaysian Government, it is sad that three other known ships lost in the same battle still await excavation.

Other groups have obtained licences in Malaysia, but none seem to have been successful. One enterprising Swede, Sten Sjostrand, has discovered several interesting wrecks off the east coast of Malaysia, but outside territorial waters and deep (Brown & Sjostrand, 2000). Four wrecks are believed to be Thai, one Chinese, and one unusual site without any hull remains yielded blue-and-white porcelain with Xuande (1426–1435) reign marks (Sjostrand, 1997). The Government has come to a separate arrangement with Sjostrand, involving the payment of import taxes on his excavated cargoes. Both parties benefit. The excavations can go ahead openly, which means that the findings can be published.
Largely through his own interest, Sjostrand has shed much light on the origin and dating of 14th- to 16th-century Thai ceramics. Recently, Sjostrand commenced excavation on an early 19th-century Chinese ship with a cargo of blue-and-white porcelain. This wreck was found relatively close to the shore, and is covered under a separate agreement with the Malaysian Government.

**Indonesia**

There may well be more historic shipwrecks in the seas of Indonesia’s extensive archipelago than in any other country in the world. Indonesian lashed-lug craft plied home waters throughout the 1st millennium AD. They ventured further afield in the following centuries, trading spices and jungle products to China, and returning with silks, ceramics, and ironwork. There is archaeological evidence of Arab or Indian ships passing through Indonesian waters from at least as early as the 9th century (Flecker, 2000; 2001a). From the 14th century, Chinese seafaring vessels became increasingly active in shipping their own products, although local distribution was most likely still in the hands of Indonesians. Europeans encroached on the waters of the archipelago early in the 16th century in their search for spices. First came the Portuguese, then the Dutch, and then the English, all enticed by the great profits to be had in the spice trade. The Dutch gained the upper hand, establishing their headquarters at Batavia, now Jakarta, in 1619. This became a base for trade throughout Asia. Western ships and fleets of Chinese junks voyaged from China to Batavia with cargoes for the European market. Later, ships of all nations, trading between the Middle East and India and the countries of eastern Asia, had to navigate through the Malacca Straits, with its myriad sandbanks, eddy currents, storms, and fickle winds. Ships rounding the Cape of Good Hope traversed the Indian Ocean heading for Sunda Strait, between Sumatra and Java. All ships continuing north, and returning to Batavia, had to negotiate Bangka, Gelasa, or Karimata Straits, all of which abound in hidden reefs.

Reefs were perhaps the principal danger, but many ships were lost through other causes. Localized storms, rotten planking, lightning strikes, pirate attacks, and sea battles all claimed their fair share of victims. By way of example, six shipwrecks were discovered in a 100 square-nautical-mile area when the author carried out a side-scan-sonar survey in the western reaches of the Java Sea, well out of sight of land, and well away from any navigational hazards. Most of the wrecks were post-World War II, although some were lost in the 18th century. If so many modern vessels could be wrecked in open water, the peril faced by earlier navigators must have been extreme.

As mentioned earlier, the Indonesian Government established a shipwreck committee in 1985 in response to the salvage of a Dutch East India Company ship that was lost on a reef claimed by Indonesia. The *Geldermalsen* was wrecked on Heluputan Reef, some 35 nautical miles south-east of the island of Bintan. She was salvaged by Michael Hatcher, and the cargo of blue-and-white porcelain was sold by auction at Christie’s. No part of the proceeds was paid to the Indonesian Government, but definitive legal action was never taken. No efforts were made at maritime archaeology on the wreck-site.

Shortly after its formation, the shipwreck committee formulated a policy by which local or foreign groups could salvage historical shipwrecks in Indonesian waters. Such groups had to operate through an Indonesian-registered company. They had to pay a substantial deposit before they could start work, which was not necessarily refundable. They also had to pay fees and obtain permission from 22 different government departments for survey and for salvage. Survey licences were issued for areas with a radius of up to 10 nautical miles, whereas salvage licence areas had a radius of two nautical miles. Different groups could not work within 10 nautical miles of each other. The principal requirement was that 50% of the salvaged cargo belonged to the Government, usually based on proceeds of sale.

The regulations do state that maritime archaeology must be carried out to acceptable international standards. Unfortunately, this rule tends not to be enforced, and the few salvage groups that do document their sites do so at their own volition. Indonesia lacks trained personnel. To the author’s knowledge, there are only two museum personnel with basic training in maritime archaeology, and they are both based in Makasar, Sulawesi. They do some shipwreck assessment work, but lack the funds to do any excavation.

Shipwrecks in Indonesia are almost always discovered inadvertently by fishermen. Trawlers or line fishermen tend to find wrecks in open water,
whereas sea cucumber divers, aquarium fish divers, and divers collecting fish from illegal dynamite-fishing find wrecks close to reefs. More often than not, local divers salvage these wrecks themselves, many of which have cargoes of ceramics. They do this without a licence, and of course without any archaeology, selling directly to antique dealers. Sometimes, they are caught by the navy before the wreck is emptied, and the site becomes available to licensed salvage groups. Sometimes, they sell the wreck position to a licensed group, usually after they have salvaged as much as their limited technology will allow.

The Geldermalsen was found by archival research and electronic survey. The Tek Sing was found by electronic survey, but this seems to have been a very fortunate accident that occurred during the unsuccessful search for a researched wreck. Huge amounts of money were spent in the search for the fabled Flor do Mar, but despite many newspaper and magazine reports to the contrary, it seems that she has never actually been found (Marx, 1992: 41). Apart from the few successful electronic survey discoveries, all of the salvaged historic shipwrecks in Indonesian waters have been found by fishermen, and at least partially looted. Archaeological information has been lost before the licensed salvor could even start work.

One of the first wrecks to be officially salvaged was the Pulau Buaya Wreck, a 12th- or 13th-century vessel with a cargo of Chinese ceramics. No archaeology was undertaken, but the Ceramic Society of Indonesia did commission a book on the ceramics and artefacts many years after the recovery (Ridho & Edwards McKinnon, 1997). The ceramics are much degraded and are yet to be disposed of, despite having been salvaged in 1989. Another wreck that has been salvaged by a local group is a 14th-century ship with a huge cargo of Chinese ceramics. It lies at a depth of 55 m off Jepara in north-central Java. Again, no archaeology was attempted. Large quantities of ceramics have been recovered from the bay off the old port of Tuban, but these are thought to have been the result of hundreds of years of stevedoring mishaps, rather than deriving from a shipwreck. A 15th- or 16th-century ceramic cargo has recently been salvaged off Krawang, just east of Jakarta. This was done by a local licensee, and again, no archaeology was undertaken. It is even rumoured that a group of disgruntled fishermen dynamited the wreck when they received no compensation for its discovery.

The author first became involved in shipwreck work in Indonesia in 1996, when a licence was obtained in conjunction with Pacific Sea Resources to excavate a 13th-century Chinese ceramic cargo. This had been largely salvaged by another licensed group, and before then, it had been looted by fishermen, but it was still thought to have been a worthwhile project. Some 12,000 pieces of celadon were recovered from what became known as the Java Sea Wreck. A comprehensive archaeological report was published (Mathers & Flecker, 1997). Half of the cargo was handed over to the Indonesian Government as per the licence, and the other half was donated to the Chicago Field Museum of Natural History. The disposition of the Government's share is unknown. There was clear evidence of dynamiting on the site. Whether this was intentional destruction or for fishing is uncertain.

The author then directed the excavation of the 10th-century Intan Wreck (Flecker, 2001b), for the German group, Seabed Explorations (Fig. 5). Seabed Explorations went on to excavate a 9th-century Arab or Indian wreck with a cargo of Chinese Chaochha ceramics. Limited archaeology was carried out in the first season; the author was engaged to direct the second season of excavation and was able to document the site (Flecker, 2000; 2001a). Several eminent scholars have been commissioned to report on the finds. It is hoped that a book will result, as this wreck is one of the most significant ever found in Asian waters. It is the oldest wreck found with both the cargo and a large portion of the hull intact, and it is the first archaeological evidence of Arab or Indian shipping in Southeast Asian waters during the 1st millennium. All evidence points to direct trade with China.

New wrecks are being discovered and looted all the time. Commercial companies based in Bangka and Belitung, two large islands straddling the major shipping routes, are constantly shown wreck-sites by fishermen who are paid for the information. The industry has become sufficiently profitable for some fishermen to spend most of their time looking for new sites, and in some cases creating them by transporting sherds from one reef to another.

The author is frequently approached by companies, amateur treasure hunters, and fishermen to assess finds from sites throughout the archipelago. In many cases, the sites are of significant archaeological importance but certainly not commercially viable, particularly with the high
licensing costs involved. For example, there are two fascinating and readily accessible wrecks in Jakarta Bay. One is probably English and has a cargo of opium. It has been declared off limits, but over time, plundering is inevitable. The other is thought to be the VOC yacht, *Den Haan*, which sank in 1626. Both would have made magnificent sites for archaeological excavation, but neither has any great commercial potential (opium sold officially to pharmaceutical companies is not expensive). This is where maritime museums from better-funded countries should be helping out, much as they did in Thailand in the 1980s. However, there must be assistance from the Indonesian authorities. There are no procedures for this kind of co-operation. Foreign museums cannot be asked to pay licence fees for purely archaeological work.

With the recent change of Government in Indonesia, a new Ministry has been established, the Ministry of Sea Exploration. This was established ostensibly for fisheries and oil, but shipwrecks now seem to come under its umbrella. With a shift to regional autonomy, the provinces have been empowered with overseeing shipwreck survey and excavation in their waters, which are tentatively defined as extending three nautical miles offshore from the low water mark. The disposition of artefacts or proceeds of sale between the central Government and the provinces has yet to be clearly defined. The role of Indonesian museums and archaeologists is also unclear.

The shift to provincial control may be a good thing. In recent meetings with high-level provincial officials, the author was encouraged
when local history and the establishment of museums were discussed, rather than finance.

Conclusion

The all-too-apparent conclusion is that a great deal of maritime archaeological information is being lost on a daily basis throughout Asia. To be sure, good work is being done, but it is nowhere near enough.

It is very difficult to determine an ideal shipwreck policy. Australia seems to have led the way with so-called pure archaeology. There is no commercial involvement whatsoever, and all artefacts remain in the public domain. Museums are well staffed and well stocked, and attract large numbers of interested people. Funding can still be a problem, particularly when several institutions are vying for a cut. But with the commitment of the Government, the archaeologists, and the population as a whole, there is no need to even consider funding through the sale of artefacts.

Southeast Asia is very different. In an environment where most wreck-sites are threatened with looting or outright destruction, the priority must be to document those sites and the artefacts recovered from them before too much information is lost. The disposition of the artefacts after thorough documentation, while of great importance, should not dictate policy, for if commercial transactions are banned outright, the finders will be driven underground, and there will be no hope of archaeological intervention.

Archaeologists, governments and salvors must co-operate. Archaeologists must be more tolerant, more flexible, for there is so much to lose. Governments and salvors must be made aware of the importance of good archaeological documentation. From a purely pragmatic viewpoint, the cargo from a properly documented wreck-site is worth more financially than the cargo from a looted site. Until cultural awareness gains the upper hand over profits and politics, this may be the best argument to ensure that irreparable damage is not done to the non-renewable resource of historic shipwrecks in Southeast Asia.

Notes

[1] A Country ship is one that was built in India and operated by Indians, or Europeans resident in India, and engaged in trade with the Far East.
[2] Some 160,000 pieces were recovered from the Geldermalsen, over 60,000 pieces from the Vung Tau Cargo, over 350,000 pieces from the Tek Sing, and over 350,000 pieces from the Hoi An wreck.
[3] Undeveloped countries are not alone in being cash-strapped where maritime archaeology is concerned, as the situation in the UK makes clear.
[4] A lorchca is a wooden ship incorporating design elements of both Eastern and Western shipbuilding technology.
[5] According to Sjostrand (pers. comm.), Malaysian trawlers do not usually operate where there is a muddy seabed. Thai trawlers do, and they have recently been licensed to operate in Malaysian waters. This is potentially disastrous for the many, as yet undiscovered, shipwrecks lying off the coast of Malaysia.
[6] The vast majority of historic wrecks in the Gulf of Thailand are dated to the 15th and 16th centuries, attesting to the surge in local shipping during those centuries when barns were placed on the export of Chinese ceramics.

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