

*Lost at Sea: The Strange Route of the Lena Shoal Junk*

Franck Goddio, Monique Crick, Peter Lam, Stacey Pierson, and Rosemary Scott  
2002

London: Periplus

Reviewed by Andrea Malaya Ragragio

Shipwrecks, like the discipline of archaeology itself, suffer from the romanticized image endowed it by folklore, classic literature, and pop culture. One immediately thinks of buried treasure, burly sailors, and parrots named Polly asking for a cracker—the whole package. Though this might make for a blockbuster Hollywood flick, the archaeological community naturally aspires for more, especially in studying these most important of sites. Unless, of course, we just want to end up with a superficially attractive auction catalogue.

A certain *non-example* of the above would be *Lost at Sea: The Strange Route of the Lena Shoal Junk*. While the IEASM-FEFNA and National Museum's publication on the 1996 rediscovery and excavation of a 15<sup>th</sup> century Chinese junk off the northeastern coast of Palawan *may* look like a superficially attractive auction catalogue (hard binding, glossy pages of full color pictures, the works), the content proves once again that one shouldn't judge a book by its cover.

The many contributors provide plenty of contexts for the beleaguered junk and the era in which it existed. Franck Goddio begins by narrating the history of Chinese trade and navigation and then recounting the discovery and subsequent excavation of the Lena Shoal junk. Peter Lam explores Chinese maritime trade during the Ming Period, providing historical context for the junk's final voyage. Stacey Pierson presents an overview of ceramics manufacture from Jingdezhen, the premier ceramics industrial complex from the 10<sup>th</sup> to the 16<sup>th</sup> centuries and where most of the ceramic cargo of the sunken junk came from. Monique Crick describes the artistic and stylistic traditions of Chinese ceramics common during the time the junk sank. Rosemary Scott draws parallelisms with the aesthetic development of ceramics with the political and economic conditions prevailing at that time. The *Typology* section provides more information on the ceramic cargo and other artifacts recovered from the ship, such as metal objects, laquerware, beads, and plant and animal remains. Through this, we again recognize that the knowledge gained from shipwrecks is not confined to tracing trade routes or ship construction, but also of "technology, art and history" (Bass 1966) and others that may have clear repercussions in spheres outside this one.

The book is a great example of how history and archaeology complement each other. Without written manuscripts to help in the analysis, an interpretation

of the archaeological data would have been more difficult. At the same time, the archaeological data reflected the historical conditions of that period, as well as other things that never made it into the written record, like social behavior.

There are, however, a few minor criticisms we can point out. For example, even just a sketchy knowledge of Chinese history is required in reading some portions, but the large volume of information on the particular and general contexts of this junk can overwhelm the lay reader (it certainly did me, at first). But then again, too much context is the safer, and the better way to go—especially for a book that strives to be as archaeological as possible.

And since we are talking about the quibbles of the lay reader, frequent references to sample pictures should have been added especially when it came to describing style and design and in using the technical terms associated with such a discussion. After all, verbal descriptions can only go so far when it comes to such visual topics and may leave the average reader confused.

Emphasis is placed again and again at the uniqueness of the Lena Shoal junk's cargo. Some of the rare artifacts have comparable pieces only in collections like the Topkapi Saray in Istanbul and the Ardebil Shrine in the National Museum of Tehran in Iran. But, while there was much ado about the tradeware discovered (arguably justified), there was no mention at all about the material evidence reflecting ordinary life on board the junk. There were plenty of accounts on the political, economic and cultural state of affairs at that time, but the book did not touch on accounts about a typical day of the seafarers. Such an additional essay could have helped create a more holistic narrative of the life and times of the Lena Shoal junk. As Secuya (1993) states: "Archaeological evidences concerning the way of life of those on board ship has not figured prominently in a number of reports on shipwrecks that have been systematically excavated and studied," though such reports would contribute greatly to our understanding of maritime culture in general.

But in spite of this, the book is still an educational and exciting read. It succeeds in providing background, explaining methodology, and building context which, if the book were without, would simply transform this entire exercise into "mere antiquarianism" (Muckelroy 1978) of little contribution, if at all, to the growing discipline of underwater archaeology.

All these lead up to the central question of the book, which remains just as engaging and thought provoking. The junk's location, the Palawan Strait, wasn't in any known navigational routes at that time. What in the world was that wreck, with such awesome treasures on board, doing there? To answer this, the cargo—the kinds, the number of pieces, and the position and manner in which they were stored—served as the primary basis for all the inferences made regarding the possible

route and destination of the junk. For example, the presence of porcelain writing boxes, popular in Muslim countries, point to an Islamic sultanate as a possible target. The size and designs of the porcelain ware like wide plates suggest a receiving market like the communities of pre-Hispanic Philippines. Also, written records and comparisons with collections from other parts of the world supplemented the analysis. But still, the conclusion leaves this question wide open, thus ending a book with an intriguing title with an even more mysterious ending.

So, is it a coffee table book aspiring to be an archaeological treatise? Or an archaeological treatise packaged as a coffee table book? I think those questions are irrelevant, because as a whole, it all works out. The full color pictures and overall format provides more than enough for the amateur enthusiast and sofa denizen, while the text can satisfy the serious scholar. This book achieves its aim to balance things out by infusing a bit of mystery and adventure into the narrative without compromising the scientific integrity of the whole endeavor.

## References

- Bass, George F. 1996. *Archaeology under water*. UK: Thames and Hudson.
- Muckelroy, Keith. 1978. *Maritime archaeology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Secuya, Vicente III. 1993. "Life at Sea," in *Saga of the San Diego*. Edited by J. Peralta and R. Villegas, pp. 27– 28. Manila: Concerned Citizens for the National Museum.