Review
By Filipe Castro

Sealed by Time, The Loss and Recovery of the Mary Rose
Peter Marsden

ISBN: 0-9544029-0-1, 194 pp, 140 illustrations (including b&w photos, maps and drawings, 22 color plates, appendix, index.

This long-awaited book is the first of a series of five volumes on the history and archaeology of Mary Rose, an English warship built between 1510 and 1512, and lost on July 19, 1545, off Portsmouth, during an engagement with the French fleet of Admiral D’Annebault.

Built in the early years and lost in the last years of King Henry VIII’s reign (1509–1547) Mary Rose was a large warship with three decks, large fore and stern castles, gun ports on the main and upper decks, and four masts. There is a drawing of Mary Rose, dating from 1546, in the Anthony Roll. Formulas to calculate tonnage may have changed in England through its lifetime; its capacity was estimated at 500 tons in 1512, and increased gradually to eight hundred tons in 1545.

Refitted in 1527 and 1528, Mary Rose was an old but probably very able ship by the time of its loss, which seems to have resulted more from misfortune than mishandling by its captain or crew. Caught by a sudden strong gale, the ship listed dangerously to starboard, letting water in through the orlop deck gun ports, which caused its rapid sinking and the loss of most of its crew. Only a handful of men survived. As a possible human error, several sources mention too heavy a load of artillery on its decks as the main cause for the rapid listing that led to Mary Rose’s sinking.

Salvage attempts followed almost immediately, but little was recovered from the shipwreck site until 1836 and 1840, when the Dean brothers salvaged four bronze guns, nineteen parts of iron guns, and a section of the mast. The ship remains were found in 1836 when a group of five fishermen hired a diver named Henry Habbnett to disentangle their net from a seabed obstruction. Soon after, John Dean was called to the site and raised a bronze gun with an inscription referring to King Henry VIII. That same year and again four years later, John Dean and his brother Charles raised the remaining artifacts.

It was not until 1966, when Alexander McKee found the site, that Mary Rose would become the center of a major archaeology project that changed the way the British looked at their submerged cultural heritage and eventually led to the enactment of the Shipwreck Protection Act of 1973. Mr. McKee’s team found the first hull timbers in 1971 and six years later a trench was dug into the sediment revealing the ship’s hull, which, we know now, was preserved along thirty percent of its extension.

From 1972 to 1982 the archaeological excavation was carried out to the highest standards. In 1982 the hull was raised and moved into the Historic Dockyard at Portsmouth, where the Mary Rose museum was to be built.

The excavation of Mary Rose uncovered close to twenty-six thousand artifacts, including a notable collection of guns, human remains of at least 179 individuals, and above all a significant portion of the ship’s hull. Mary Rose’s hull remains are the archive of an incredible amount of precious information about the ship’s design and construction, and their study will undoubtedly yield great discoveries about English shipbuilding in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

There is incredibly little information on how English ships were built in the period, with almost no clues in the written sources about the way they were designed and assembled. The few other shipwreck sites from this period—such as the Hamble River shipwreck thought to be the 1420 Grace Dieu, and the Woolwich ship thought to be the Sovereign from 1487—are far from being fully studied and published.
As an introduction to the archaeology of Mary Rose, this volume is excellent. Along its 194 pages of very organized, well illustrated, and clearly written text, the reader is guided through the incredible story of this ship, from its construction, possibly at Portsmouth, to its final arrival at the Mary Rose Museum in the Historic Dockyard of Portsmouth. Following the description of the 493 years of life of the ship, this pleasant book is also a repository of all the known names associated to it, and their roles in Mary Rose's fate.

The first of fifteen short chapters describes the story of the ship, its construction, sailing abilities, refitting operations, and life at sea or on ordinary, ending with the circumstances of its loss, illustrated by transcriptions of the known accounts of the events surrounding its sinking. The following two chapters describe the discovery of Mary Rose in the nineteenth century, and salvage of a small collection of artifacts, and the re-discovery of the site and hull remains in the twentieth century, as well as the actions that led to its eventual archaeological excavation.

Chapter four explains clearly and concisely the strategies adopted in the excavation and recording of the archaeological context, and is followed by the epic of Mary Rose's raising, an extraordinary story that was followed on television by millions of people worldwide. Chapter six tells the story of the creation of the Mary Rose Trust and the struggle to raise funds to carry on such a project without state support. Chapters seven and eight cover the monitoring of the site after the raising of the hull, and are followed by a post-extraction study of the stratigraphy of the site and interpretation of the site formation process.

Chapters ten, eleven and twelve deal with the identification of the ship and a preliminary description of its hull remains and contents. Special sections on the human remains and artillery give us a first taste of the contents of volumes four and five of this publication. Chapter thirteen re-evaluates the circumstances of the loss of Mary Rose and challenges the traditional version blaming mishandling of the ship by its crew during the turning to fire its port guns at the French opponents. In fact, most of the starboard guns found on Mary Rose were still loaded, making it implausible that the ship was attempting to turn without having closed the orlop deck gun ports. It is more likely that the ship was just caught by a sudden and very strong gust of wind, heeled, made water through the starboard side gun ports, and sunk.

Chapters fourteen and fifteen deal with the historical significance of this shipwreck, the impact of this project for nautical archaeology as a discipline in the United Kingdom, and the way in which it was perceived by the public and the government. Avoiding strong statements and criticism of governments and politics, the author explains how important the Mary Rose project was in showing the public that the objectives of nautical archaeology are not different from those of other branches of archaeology. Since shipwrecks are an important part of any country's cultural heritage, they deserved to be protected, studied, and enjoyed by both scholars and the general public.

It is known how the Mary Rose project led to the enactment of the first legislation protecting shipwrecks as part of the British cultural heritage. But as the author points out, the importance of this project is much wider: by making the archaeology of Mary Rose its first priority, the Mary Rose Trust—a fully private organization—has sent a clear statement about the importance of nautical archaeology over treasure hunting.

There are other famous shipwreck projects whose stories endure in the public memory, in which artifacts whose conservation is not worth their value at auction were discarded, hulls were not properly recorded, and artifact collections scattered at auction. The Mary Rose project aimed at understanding the past rather than making a profit. In our time, when projects formerly announced as treasure-hunting ventures are now referred to under euphemistic designations such as "commercial archaeology," these five books make an eloquent distinction between archaeology and treasure hunting.

We can hardly wait for the next four volumes of this series. The second volume is expected in 2006, will be edited again by Peter Marsden, and is dedicated to the study of the ship's hull. The third volume will be edited by Alexzandra Hildred and will treat the weapon collection. Its publication is scheduled for 2004. Also expected in 2004 is volume four of this series, edited by Julie Gardiner, dealing with the matters of life and death aboard Mary Rose. The fifth and last volume will be edited by Mark Jones and is expected soon. Its subject is the conservation of the ship's hull and its almost twenty-six thousand artifacts.

A must in any nautical library, these five volumes are among a series of long awaited publications on the most important shipwrecks excavated by archaeologists in the twentieth century. This first decade of the twenty-first century looks very exciting for nautical archaeologists: following the wonderful publications of the Danish Viking Museum, this series on the archaeology of the Mary Rose is expected to be soon joined by the full publications of the fourth century BCE Kyrenia ship, the eleventh century CE Serçe Limani ship, the sixteenth century Basque galleon excavated in Newfoundland by Parcs Canada, the ten excavations of the sunken city of Port Royal in Jamaica, and the archaeology of the Swedish ship Vasa.

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