ANTH318
Nautical Archaeology of the Americas

Class 3

Most of the wrecks from the Age of Discovery have been destroyed by treasure hunters. When treasure hunters destroy wrecks, no information is recorded about the context in which artifacts were found (where in the wreck, how, in what association with what other artifacts, etc.). Perhaps more important, the hull remains are never considered important, and much information is lost on how these ships were designed, built, and sailed.

More than 50 years after the first Spanish wrecks were found in the Caribbean, many ships have been salvaged, many artifacts auctioned, and many fortunes spent in search of mythical treasure ships. Yet, nobody seems to be able to state with a reasonable degree of certainty how big these vessels were, how many decks they had, how flat their bottoms were, how high their sides were, what the shape of their hulls was, where their masts were stepped over the keel, how many tons they could displace, how fast they could sail, etc. And the unanswered questions never end: for instance, the question how large the trees were from which their timbers were cut is a pretty important one.

The fact is that we know more about the Roman craft that sailed the Mediterranean around the time of Christ than we know about the vessels of the discoveries.

Why is this? Mostly because it is believed that these vessels carried treasures, and up to now it has been considered more important to salvage and sell their cargoes than to understand the people that built and sailed them.

The questions are therefore: What is treasure hunting? Who are these treasure hunters? Why is treasure hunting not forbidden around the world?

It is generally assumed that treasure hunting is the activity of salvaging archaeological sites with the intent of selling the artifacts retrieved. We speak of treasure hunting when the aim is to sell the artifacts. This is independent of the eventual presence of archaeologists in treasure hunting ventures.

Treasure hunters have been in existence for much longer than archaeologists. In fact, nautical archaeology evolved from treasure hunting in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Many times, the early land archaeologists that explored the Egyptian tombs, the lost ruins of Troy, the earliest Mycenaean cities, or the secret cities of the Inca were more interested in artifacts than in contexts. In a sense, they were not much different from today’s treasure hunters.

Modern archaeology is a scientific discipline that studies the remains of ancient human activity. This approach places a great emphasis on the careful study of contexts, rather than on the collection (and much less the sale) of exotic or valuable artifacts.
As to the second question, that of identifying today's treasure hunters, one must divide them into two major groups: those searching for actual treasures, and those seeking investors for their ventures.

Those who look for sunken treasure have existed for many centuries. There have been salvage ventures for a long time—perhaps since the time of the first shipwreck in shallow water. Also, to dive and see the bottom of the sea with all its mysteries and treasures has been an old aspiration of human kind.

The Romans had divers to rescue sunken cargo. They were called *urinato*ri and their work was regulated by-law, the *Lex Rhodia*.

In the Renaissance there were many attempts to rescue treasure at greater depths, and machines were developed to help in the rescue. In 1464 Leon Battista Alberti recovered artifacts from the Lake Nemi wrecks (the remains of emperor Caligula's floating palaces). In 1535 Francesco de Marchi also recovered artifacts from the same site.

During the period of the European expansion overseas, salvaging sunken cargoes became almost routine as maritime traffic grew and the value of the cargoes transported increased. Many adventurers tried their own luck in the Caribbean.

William Phipps (to whom we will refer later in the semester for much different reasons) was lucky to find and rescue a part of the cargo of the *Nuestra Señora de la Concepción* (1641) in the 1680s.

Other, more pro-active adventurers gave destiny a little hand by provoking the wrecks in particular spots, so that the salvage would be easier. There are many well-known communities of wreckers, perhaps the most well known being the fiction one created by Daphne du Maurier in her novel *Jamaica Inn*.

The development of SCUBA in the 1950s brought old stories of sunken Spanish treasure to many summer treasure hunters and the first few discoveries gathered a great deal of press coverage and excitement.

In the late 1940s Art McKee had found some large silver ingots off the coast of Florida, on what is thought to be the wreck of the *Genovesa* from 1730. His appearance on TV came to the attention of many divers and adventurers and started a race for sunken treasure in Florida. But it was not until a decade later, in the early 1960s, that important treasure was indeed found under water.

After finding silver coins on the beach, north of Cape Canaveral, a small contractor named Kip Wagner decided to found a treasure hunting company with some friends and go look for the wrecks where these coins were supposed to come from. He found the remains of the 1715 Spanish fleet, destroyed by a hurricane on the coast of Florida.

A chicken farmer joined Wagner’s project for one summer, and became so excited that he decided to dedicate his life to find the largest of the mythical treasures: the wreck of the *Nuestra Señora de Atocha*, lost in 1622 in a hurricane.
The second type of treasure hunters, those who focus more on a good story and a nice set of sponsors, their motto has been for centuries P. T. Barnum’s famous quote: "A sucker is born every minute!"

They make money from them even if they only operate in the US and in 3rd World nations.

But to understand why treasure-hunting companies are still operating we must take a closer look at the story and the logics of the treasure hunting business.

As to the third question, why is treasure hunting not forbidden around the world, we must realize that treasure hunting is already forbidden throughout Europe, in many countries around the Mediterranean sea, in many US states, in almost all Caribbean countries, and in several Asian countries.

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In this course we will analyze two case studies: the Geldermalsen and the Nuestra Señora de Atocha.

**Geldermalsen, 1752**

Found in 1985 by Michael Hatcher and his Swiss partner Max de Rham. Since 1975 Michael Hatcher had run a salvage company, United Sub Sea Services, and had already salvaged several wrecks in Asia. A large quantity of porcelain was salvaged and sold at auction (by Christie’s in Amsterdam under the designation “The Nanking Cargo”).

*Read Peter Throckmorton’s article for this class.*

**Atocha, 1622**

Sunk by a hurricane together with another seven ships of a fleet of 28 vessels that had left Havana bound for Spain on September 4, 1622. The Nuestra Señora de Atocha, was the fleet’s vice-flagship (almiranta). The Atocha was found by Melvin Fisher in the 1980s, salvaged and part of the collection auctioned.

*Read your notes from the video shown in class.*