

MARITIME ARCHAEOLOGY

In Bidong Island, Terengganu Waters

by:

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Archaeology refers to a scientific field that examines the culture and the past environment of persons based on remaining material culture and ecofact. The term 'archaeology' is derived from the Greek word 'archailogia' which means 'discourse about ancient things' and was first introduced by Jacques Spon in the 17th century. Due to the long history of human development, various material culture and physical environment evolved, and therefore led to the emergence of various archaeological studies.

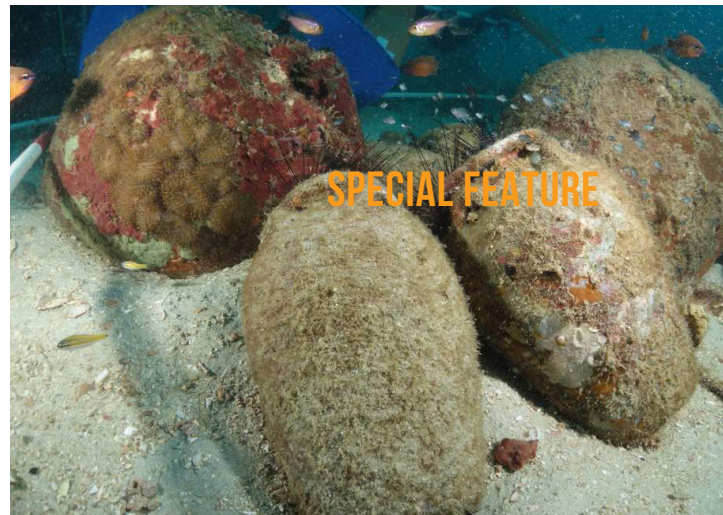
Archaeological excavation work of the Bidong Island shipwreck site by UMT staff.



Although archaeology was born from a study on land sites, especially prehistoric times, it did not preclude the emergence of other forms of archaeological studies. For example, underwater archaeology or maritime archaeological studies differ in terms of work, location and cultural remains. However, its basic meaning and purpose remain as the science of studying and reconstructing the past. Underwater archaeology is just a labelling for all archaeological studies conducted at underwater sites or the term for archaeological disciplines with aquatic environments as sites.

In line with some of the maritime archaeological research developments in Malaysia from the early 1990s to 2000s, there is a good reason to plan a maritime archaeological research in Terengganu holistically. An accidental discovery of a shipwreck located in the waters of Pulau Bidong, Terengganu became the catalyst for the idea. The location of the shipwreck is approximately two nautical miles from Pulau Bidong and 30 nautical miles from Kuala Terengganu, at a depth of 18 metres below sea level. The ship's size is approximately 25 metres long and 10 metres wide.

The discovery of this shipwreck known as 'The Bidong Shipwreck' has opened new pages in the history of shipwreck investigation in Malaysia. These include the information on the number of shipwrecks in the South China Sea, the cause of ships sinking, shipbuilding technology and the direction of the ships. The study work on the premises that the shipwreck



most likely originated from central Thailand, from Sukhothai, Chonburi or other parts of Thailand based on the artefacts found. It was likely due to weather or technical problems.

A preliminary survey was conducted for almost a week on 'The Bidong Shipwreck', and has resulted in an incredible discovery. The result of this initial analysis found that most artefacts found were made of porcelain and stoneware ceramics originating from Thailand which were known from the 15th to 17th century AD. Specifically, the ceramics are the Sawankhalok type and are believed to have originated from the central and northern regions of Thailand around Sukhothai, Pethaburi and Chonburi.

In addition, other artefacts were also found such as metal tools, ship nails, human and elephant statues and the remains of ship wood. Most of these ceramics were found in large numbers, assumed to be from a merchant ship sailing in the waters of the South China Sea from the Gulf of Siam to Southeast Asia. All the artefacts found on this cargo ship are believed to be traded in the region.

The overall expectation is that there is still an abundance of ceramics and artefacts at the bottom of the ocean and archaeological excavation is urgently needed to avoid loss or damage. However, further study is needed to determine the type, size, shape and name of ship and its sailing whereabouts.

In addition to field studies, a series of site and museum visits, particularly at The National

Museum of Maritime Archeology in Chantaburi, Thailand, the University of Bangkok, Ayuthiya and Sukhothai were also made. The purpose of these visits was to carry out some comparative studies especially on aspects related to the discovery of ceramics and the various artefacts which were found to have similarities with those found in the specified area.

In fact, to this day, no Malaysian has conducted a comprehensive programme or research on maritime archaeology in Malaysia especially on the excavation of shipwrecks. This has only been done by researchers from the west and assisted by some local museum staff. Hence, how long do we need to depend on the external experts to uncover the secrets of the shipwreck's history and heritage in our waters? Names like Sten Sjostrand, Michael Hatcher and Michael Flecker are often referred to as shipwreck's field-experts not only in Malaysia but also in the region.

Sten, for example, has managed to uncover nearly 10 ships in Malaysian waters including Sabah and Sarawak. The shipwreck sites like Turiang wreck, Nanyang wreck, Longquan wreck, Royal Nanhai wreck, Xuande wreck, Singtai

wreck, Nassau wreck, Risdam wreck, Diana wreck and Desaru wreck which have been successfully excavated by the researcher. Shipwrecks that were uncovered had valuable artefacts such as ceramics from China, Thailand, Europe and Vietnam, metal products, weapons and others which are priceless. Although there is a 30% concession agreement for the Government of Malaysia and 70% to the companies that operate the project, these are all regarded as still incompatible with what we have been thinking about.

Hence, a drastic move should be taken especially by UMT to highlight its own local experts who can handle maritime archaeological research work in line with the latest holistic archaeological developments. UMT will take the initiative to conduct further research on the artefacts found at the Bidong Island shipwreck site to uncover the history of early trading activities in Malaysian waters. Working together with UZMA Bhd., UMT will establish a Marine Archaeological Research Laboratory at the university and a Marine Archaeological Research Centre and excavation on Bidong Island.

Artefacts and ceramics found during archaeological excavation work on the Bidong Island shipwreck site.

