

# UNDERWATER ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS OF THE FINE ARTS DEPARTMENT 1977-1980

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An underwater archaeological investigation was launched by the Fine Arts Department of the Ministry of Education, Thailand, in cooperation with the Royal Thai Navy in July-August of 1977. The shipwreck is located off Cholburi Province at a site called Rang Kwien.

The ship lies between Pattaya and Sattahip under 65 feet of water. On the basis of preliminary surveys of the partly exposed portion it is calculated that this ship originally measured approximately 30 meters in length. As most of the sunken ships investigated off the Gulf have been so identified, this particular ship appears to also have been a cargo ship. Recovered artifacts include ivory tusks, metal ingots, some pottery, betel nuts and quantities of Chinese coins with date marks of late T'ang and early Sung periods.

A preliminary analysis of the pottery most of which appears indigenous shows that these were not of the category primarily cuiled for export. However, some indication of direct or indirect contact with China is evidenced by the recovery also from the shipwreck of brown four-eared globular jars with small bases usually characteristic of the Sung period of China. It has been hypothesized that these jars functioned as containers of water as well as food for long voyages.

The absence of the "Kalong" type jars of black to dark brown glazes in the assemblage plus the dates on the coins seem to reinforce the initial thesis that this shipwreck antedated the development of the overseas trade of ceramics from the Sukhothai and Sawankalok kilns of ancient Siam and, therefore, ascribed a date earlier than most shipwrecks so far discovered.

As mentioned earlier a significant number of betel nuts were recovered as well as a bronze lime container demonstrating habits peculiar to Southeast Asia and, thereby, the origins of the ancient sailors that manned the ship. Betel nut chewing is not only indigenous to the region but its origins go back at least 5000

years ago in the prehistoric past. From one of the important cave sites in the Iwaig area of west-central Palawan island in the Philippines was excavated one of the earliest dated Neolithic burials and among the assemblage of artifacts recovered was a shell lime container.

On the basis of the nature of the cargo it appears that the primary items of export were ivory and metal ingots.

The SPAFA Training programmes on Underwater Archaeology which conducted first in December 1978 and repeated in December of 1979 and the SPAFA Training Programmes in Conservation of Underwater Archaeological Objects were attached to this national underwater archaeological programmes of the Fine Arts Department of Thailand.

*A Chinese storage jar showing heavy marine encrustations was one of many items retrieved. Native woven baskets like the one shown here are utilized as one of the equipments used to lift retrieved objects.*



*A bronze lime container and one of a quantity of betel nuts recovered from the Rang Kwein wreck. Small items like these give an indication on the provenance of the users of these items. In other words, there is strong indication that Southeast Asians manned the cargo ship prior to its sinking ca. 11th century, A.D.*