

THE HISTORY OF UNDERWATER ARCHAEOLOGY IN THAILAND IN REFERENCE THE THAI SPAFA SUB-CENTRE FOR UNDERWATER ARCHAEOLOGY

The development of underwater archaeology in Thailand goes back six years when in 1974 the Director-General of the Fine Arts Department of the Ministry of Education and the Thai Ambassador to Denmark brought the matter up with the Danish government with regards the possibilities of obtaining assistance in salvage underwater archaeology on the Gulf of Thailand. Over a period of decades an alarming number of ancient shipwrecks which were subsequently looted of their cultural contents had been discovered in the normal course of commercial marine activities in the region. That request resulted in the formulation of a project proposal which brought together personnel from the Fine Arts Department, officers from the Royal Thai Navy and a Danish underwater archaeology team in exploratory excavations along the Gulf in April of 1975¹

This project named the "Joint Danish-Thai Project on Nautical Archaeology", in turn, developed into a more substantial programme made possible through a further agreement between the governments of Thailand and Denmark to the effect that assistance would be continued until June of 1976 for the purpose of developing further techniques in nautical explorations in Asian waters; establishing better methods of preserving and conserving retrieved objects; eventual



restoration of representative shipwrecks and, finally, of developing courses leading to the training of underwater archaeologists. This agreement also included provisions for scholarships to Denmark for the training of some of the Thai personnel who were involved in the initial 1975 investigations. This core of personnel was expected to help formulate and conduct a training programme for underwater archaeology in Thailand.³

The Director of the 1975 expedition was Mr. Ole Curmlin-Pedersen assisted by his Danish colleagues Lars Kann-Rasmussen and Ole Schmidt in collaboration with officers from the Royal Thai Navy and archaeologists from the Department of Fine Arts. When Pedersen's Danish team left in 1976 Dr. Pensak took over as Project Director of the Underwater Archaeology Survey of the Department of Fine Arts until this responsibility was turned over to Mr. Vidya Intakosai of the Fine Arts Department when the SEAMEO Project in Archaeology and Fine Arts (SPAFA) became operative.

At about the time the above activities were developing the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) decided to continue its cultural project that was initiated by the Khmer Republic of Cambodia and approved in principle in 1972 as a Centre to be located in Phnom Penh and to be called ARCAFA or the Applied Research Centre for Archaeology and Fine Arts. Subsequent political developments in the

1. At the time the project for salvage marine archaeology was brought to the attention of the Danish Government in 1974 Dr. Pensak Chagsu-Chinda, who was attached to the University of Copenhagen, became a member of the organizing team of investigators headed by Mr. O. Curmlin-Pedersen. Dr. Pensak helped to draw up the project proposal that led to the 1975 explorations. Cf. Pensak C. Howitz, "Two Ancient Shipwrecks in the Gulf of Thailand: A Report on Archaeological Investigations", *Journal of the Siam Society* ⁶⁵ (2), 1977.

2. H.E. Mr. Frantz Howitz, the Danish Ambassador to Thailand signed the agreement for the government of Denmark while H.E. Mr. Charoon Vongsayanha, Under-Secretary of State of the Ministry of Education, represented the government of Thailand in this agreement signed in Bangkok on July 18, 1975. P.C. Howitz, "Analysis of Ancient Shipwrecks in the Gulf of Siam", *Journal of the Faculty of Archaeology (Special Issue)* (3), 1978.

Mr. Vidya Intakosai of the Fine Arts Department holds up for the investigation of the IT-la trainees in underwater archaeology one of the elephant ivory tusks that constituted one of the important cargoes of the Rang Kwien shipwreck.

A broken section of one of the brown four-eared jars recovered from the Rang Kwien shipwreck which has been initially identified a Chinese origin and attributed a Sung dynasty date.

Indochina region prevented the realization of ARCAFA's long-range development plan resulting in the launching by SEAMEO in March of 1978 of a new structure under the project title SPAFA or SEAMEO Project in Archaeology and Fine Arts to be temporarily based in Bangkok. This new structure provides for a Co-ordinating Unit to be based in Bangkok and a network of Sub-Centres which would be located in the presently three actively participating member countries of Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand. Each Sub-Centre was to offer training programmes along their respective chosen fields of specialization and, because of the on-going project in underwater archaeology, the designated SPAFA Thai Sub-Centre which is the Fine Arts Department consequently chose this area of archaeological investigation as the main focus of its training and conservation programmes under the initial SPAFA Development Plan.⁴



3. About six scholarships were offered to students of Silpakorn University, officers of the Royal Thai Navy and personnel of the Fine Arts Department.

4. Additional information on the historical background of the development of underwater archaeology and conservation programmes of the SPAFA Thai Sub-Centre can be found in the SEAMEO Report of the SPAFA Task force and the SPAFA Development Plan published in July 1976 and September 1977, respectively.