Rang-Kwian and Samed Ngam Shipwrecks

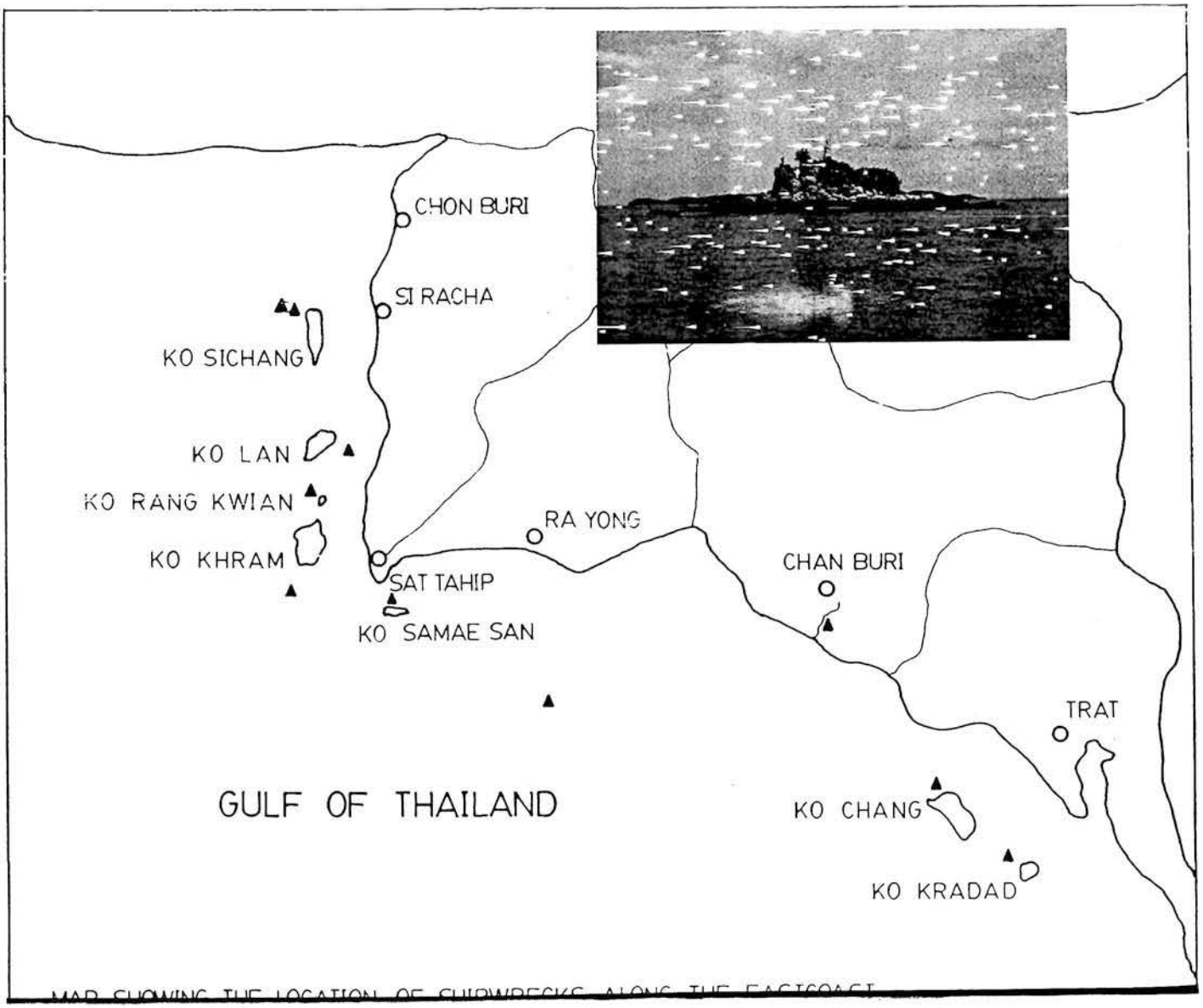
by Vidya Intakosai

Late in 1977, the Underwater Archaeological Project was established to emphasize research on the broader aspects of Thai maritime history. However, underwater archaeological work started in 1974. Although the Fine Arts Department was not yet equipped with certain apparatus for underwater operation, the salvage of Ko Kram wreck in the Gulf of Thailand was undertaken with the cooperation of the Royal Thai Navy UDT and expert from Denmark. Many hundreds of Sankalok ware were recovered from this wreck which lies at depth of about 40 meters.

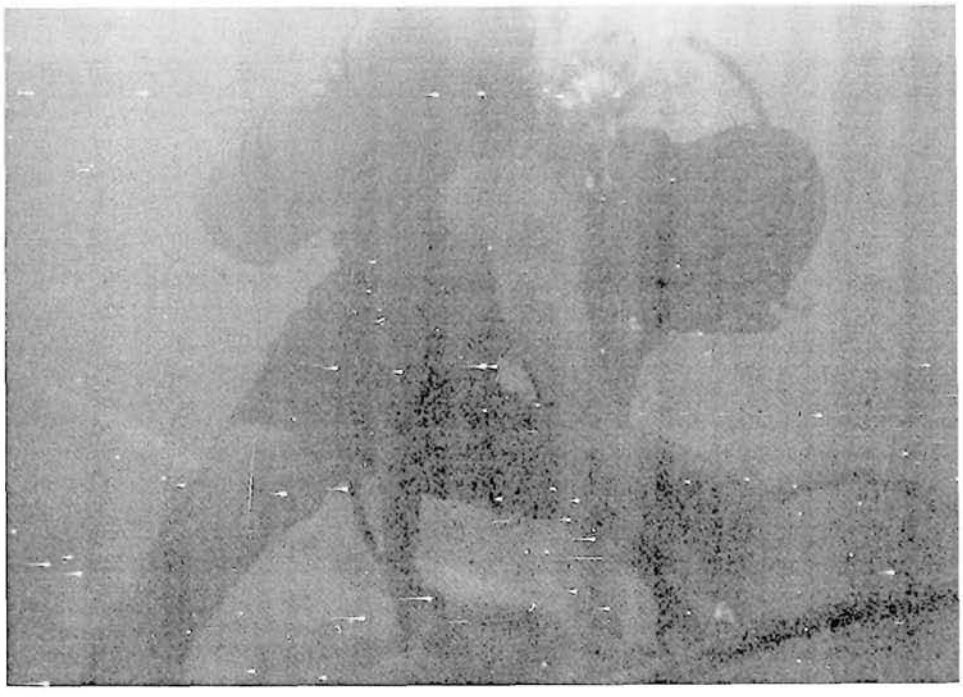
After the acquisition of needed equipment in 1978, the underwater archaeological research team composed of two archaeologist-divers and five technician-divers started a systematic excavation of the Rang-Kwian wreck which was located in shallower water. A 17-meter fishing boat was hired as excavation base. The excavations were conducted from March through July, the most suitable periods based on the monsoon; the remainder of the year was devoted to exploration of ancient shipwrecks, treatment of finds and final anaysis. This excavation ended in 1981.

Rang-Kwian Wreck

The wrecksite is located about 10 kilometers off-shore at Bang Saray, one of the most popular fishing village of Chonburi Province, on the coastline of eastern



MAP SHOWING THE LOCATION OF SHIPWRECKS ALONG THE EASTCOAST



Left (opposite page): Map showing the location of shipwrecks along the coast of Eastern Thailand. Inset: Ko Rang-Kwian, view from the wrecksite. Top : A diver at work. Left above : a preliminary treatment of finds is carried out on board. Right above : A hired fishing boat served as excavation base.

This article sums up the findings of the underwater excavation conducted in Thailand in the past year. Initial reports were printed in the SPAFA Digest Vol. II, No. 2 and Vol. III, No. 2.

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Thailand. About 700 meters to the east of the site protrudes a rocky islet called Ko Rang-Kwian. It is believed to have caused the disaster of the grounded ship. The wreck lies about 1.50 meters under sand-shell seabed at a depth of about 22 meters with currents up to 3 knots.

Underwater visibility in the area was rather limited, up to 5 meters. Air-lift and water-dredge were employed to remove sand and shells. A metal grid was used to record each find. Although considered dangerous, the operations were carried out by one diver at a time to save bottom-time and manpower. Each diver spent one-hour bottom-time a day and took turns maintaining the diving equipment and doing other chores on board.

Rang-Kwian wreck had been well-known to divers long before the excavation. In fact, many ancient wrecks, now available for archaeological investigation, were accidentally discovered by fishermen and treasure-hunters. Consequently, they have been destroyed by looting, hence, urgently require excavation.

The Rang-Kwian wreck was no exception. It was blasted by looters. Explosives were employed, according to information, to break up the concretion of Chinese coins and a large number of copper ingots for easier transport from the site. Among 200 kilogrammes of Chinese coins discovered during the excavation, some were dated as early as the 7th century A.D.; the latest ones, the 15th century A.D.

The keel of the Rang-Kwian wreck measured approximately 20 meters; it lay in the North-South direction, its bow pointing to the South. A 7-centimeters in dimension bronze mirror with human and floral mofifs on one side was secured on the keel near its joint and the stem-post. The keel measured about 60 centimeters across with a water passage dug along its entire length. Only 8 pieces of hull planking survived intact.

The Finds

The ship's earthenwares were mainly different varieties of cooking-pots with concave-lids and cooking-stoves. A quantity of very large and smaller jars was recovered; unfortunately, only four large jars were whole. A large majority of smaller jars with traces of brown glaze was identifiable as Chinese in origin. The earthenwares were undoubtedly of Thai origin. Additional quantities of ceramics were identifiable as Vietnamese and Chinese in origin.

The assemblage of ceremonial objects were also found to be concentrated at the stern portion of

the wreck. These were a bronze-gong, a bronze bell with three-prong handle, a metal burner and a three-footed circular stone quern used for grinding herbs.

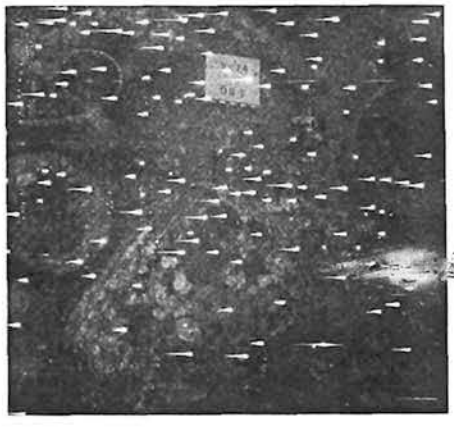
Most organic materials were found inside some smaller jars. These were duck's egg-shells, mangrove-crabs (a kind of semi-saltwater crabs which at present are popularly used in Thai cooking in lieu of salted ones) and pig bones. In addition to betel-nuts, bronze lime-containers were recovered, indicating the practice of betel-nut chewing among the crew. Elephant tusks were also found in disintegrated condition.

A pair of intricately made gold bangles studded with coloured glass, each weighing about 60 grammes, was recovered from the stern portion. The sophisticated craftmanship of these gold bangles was identical to that of the royal jewelry, dated Early Ayudhya Period, 15th century A.D. Other personal effects found included a bronze hair-pin, bronze tweezers, an ivory ring, a small bronze mirror, a carved wooden tuner of a stringed-musical instrument, an ivory ruler and bronze harpoon and fish-hooks. Fragments of glass-vessel and lacquerware with unidentifiable red-painted animal figure were also recovered from the stern portion.

It showed evidence that ancient Southeast Asian seagoing ships were built to carry cargoes below the main deck. The living quarter of the crew was located in the main deck; this included an area for keeping domestic animals used as food supply during the long voyage. High ranking officials and paid passengers were probably accommodated in the aft-castle.

The Rang-Kwian wreck revealed that, on the bases of quality and quantity, the more sophisticated assemblage of utensil and equipment was found on the stern portion of the wreck. Four carved-wood panels with faunal and floral designs indicated the presence of decorative pieces in the castle.

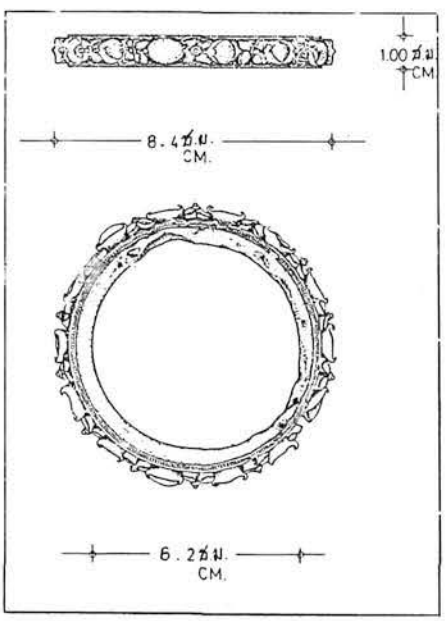
Many questions still have to be answered concerning the wreck, such as the origin of this ship and the nature of its voyage. Unfortunately, the looting had done a lot of damage to most important evidences which are needed for the study of its maritime history.

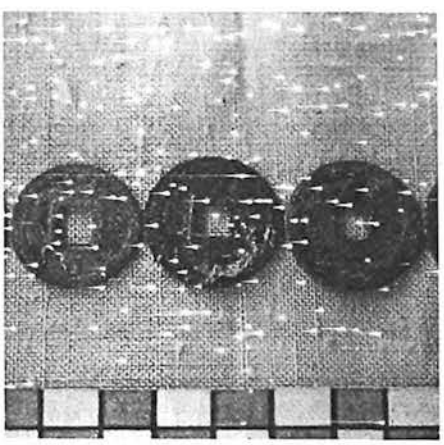


Top : Smaller jars and some cooking vessels. Left above : A bronze gong found in site at the stern portion. Right above: Large storage jars.

Samed-Ngam Wreck

Chantaburi is one of the ancient sea-port on the eastcoast. It has a river which flows through the town to meet the sea at Lam-singh (Lion Point), a place named after a





Top : Decorative carved wood panels. Left above: Drawing of a gold bangle studded with coloured glass. Right above : Chinese coins

big boulder in the shape of a crouching animal. The wreck is located on the muddy bank about 3 kilometers from the estuary of the Chantaburi River.

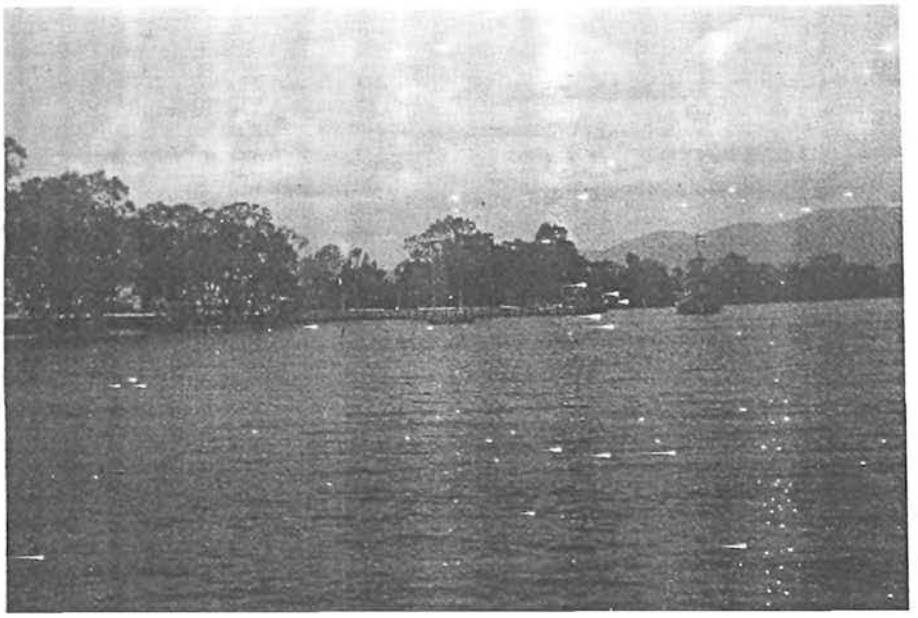
The excavation had started in early 1982 and lasted about four months. An earth-dam was built surrounding the site to keep water out as long as possible during the excavation; but at high tide, the site got flooded by seepage through the earth-dam. Water-dredge was employed to cast mud out and a large quantity of charcoal was collected from a sieve placed at the end of the pipe.

The wreck lay under one meter of mud, at right angle to the river-bank, with its bow pointing to the north. It measured approximately 21 meters in length and 7 meters in width. This wreck was in a better condition than the Rang-Kwian's. The structure itself gave a lot more to study regarding the ancient shipbuilding techniques. The hull planking was of some kind of pine-wood, each of which measured about 10 centimeters in thickness. The construction of the hull was later described as a carvel-built technique. Large square iron nails tapering at one end were used to reinforce the edges of the planks. The keel and crossbeams were of hard wood.

Few artifacts were discovered during the excavation; they were blue and white porcelains and fragments of earthenware. Eight Chinese coins with square perforations, similar to those found at Rang-Kwian wreck, were discovered. One of these was dated early 18th century A.D., and the other, early 19th century A.D.

The wreck is believed to be a Chinese junk which was put in dry-dock after the unloading of its cargoes at a nearby sea-port. Traces of damage along the hull suggested that the scaffolding might have collapsed during the reparation; and the ship had probably been abandoned where it was found.

To preserve this shipwreck as well as to promote tourism, a plan is being considered to construct a concrete dam surrounding the site in the near future. Further excavation of Samed-Ngam wreck is needed to gather more information and to clean the entire site.



Above: View of Chantaburi River from the Samed-Ngam wrecksite. Left below: Hull is cleaned for photographing and drawing. Right below: Cross-beams are carefully measured before being placed in original position.

The Reliability.
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when it sank off Sinan County. Almost all the commodities but coins aboard the 28.4 m. long ship were made in the early part of the 14th century. This means that except for a few items, all the products loaded had the same age.

The ceramics total 15,451 pieces including celadon, white ware, chin-pai ware, black glazed ware, opaque blue glazed ware, underglaze painted ware etc., Three pieces of Korean celadon and one Japanese *Koseto* were also included. Almost all of these Chinese ceramics were trading goods and considered to have been made in the early part of the 14th century. The three Korean celadons were attributed to the 12th-13th century. These and the koseto were not trading goods.

If all these Chinese ceramics were made in one period, the following may be considered: majority of the celadons and white wares correspond to what we have dated as made in the first half of the 14th century. Although few, some celadons and white wares were dated as belonging to the 13th century and some to the 15th century. Since the ship sunk in the 20s of the 14th century, we probably have to change our concept of the dating of the celadons and white wares belonging to the categories mentioned. Certain types of celadons belonging to the 13th century might have been continued to be made in the next century just as it was; in the same manner, certain type of ceramics which had been considered to be a 15th century product could have been already started to be made in the early part of the 14th century. A ceramic assemblage found in the wrecked ship serves to date certain types of ceramics just as the above example suggests.

In order to utilize burial implements and ceramic assemblages in dating ceramics, I think it most important that the archaelogists do as many excavations as possible and exchange information.