



- Focus
- Health
- Living
- Arts & Fashion
- Bookshelf
- Food
- Parenting
- Travel & Adventure
- Mind Our English

Wednesday June 30, 2004

**Bounty from the deep**  
By TAN CHENG LI

**A ship set sail from China some 1,000 years ago, laden with a cargo of ceramics. But it never reached its destined port. Off the coast of Sabah, the ship struck a reef and went down. There, it lay submerged until last year, when excavation work retrieved some of its buried artefacts. TAN CHENG LI reports.**

CERAMIC collector and salvor Sten Sjostrand was browsing around an antique shop in Kota Kinabalu, early last year when something unusual caught his eye – Sung dynasty ceramics. Dating back some 800 to 1,000 years, such ware is hard to come by and yet a wide variety of it was displayed at the shop.

Instincts honed from over 20 years of studying ceramics and 15 years excavating shipwrecks told Sjostrand that something was up. The Swede could hardly contain his excitement when he learnt that the pieces were plucked from waters off Sabah.

It did not take Sjostrand long to contact the Department of Sabah Museum and in April last year, armed with a search permit, divers from his salvage firm Nanhai Marine Archaeology started scouring the sea off north-west Sabah.



Sten Sjostrand and ceramics salvaged from the wreckage dubbed *Royal Nanhai*, believed to have sunk in the waters off Rompin, Sabah, in the 1460s.

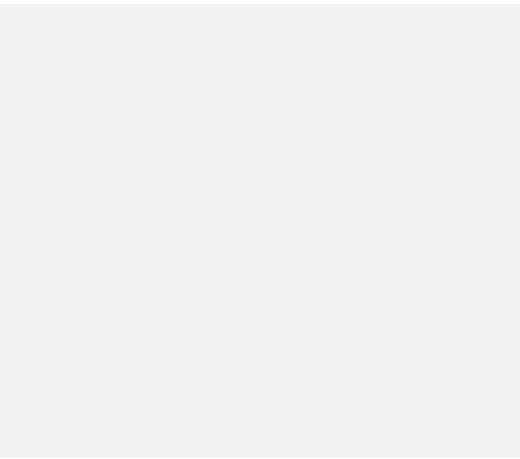
Thanks to helpful local fishermen who directed him to an area off the coast, Sjostrand discovered the wreck site after a week's search. Amazingly, the area was in just 12m of water and 400m from shore.

Sjostrand dates the wreck to the Northern Sung dynasty (960 to 1127AD) – which makes it the oldest loaded wreck

discovered in Malaysian waters.

“Finding such a wreck is interesting as it widens the chronology of wrecks already discovered in (Peninsular) Malaysia. A Sung wreck would be the earliest in Malaysia and therefore extremely interesting. It shows the type of wares the Chinese shipped at that time to South-East Asia.”

This is the ninth wreck to be unearthed by Sjostrand over the past 12 years in the South China Sea and Straits of Malacca. After retiring as a naval architect in 1991, he began searching for shipwrecks to satisfy his thirst for knowledge of ceramics and ships. He is credited with discovering these ancient wrecks: the *Turiang* (1370), *Nanyang* (1380), *Longquan* (1400), *Royal Nanhai* (1460), *Xuande* (1540), *Singtai* (1550), *Anantes* (1795) and *Desaru* (1845). (These are project names and not actual names of the vessels. The years are



**Self-Serve Advertiser Links** Find out more>>

**Most Viewed** **Most E-mailed**

- Loving many = loving more?
- Leave him, fast
- Foolish sister
- A wholesome affair?
- Sexual freedom has a price
- A practical solution?
- Mineral magic
- Thankful for eBooks
- Uptown chic
- No longer a lazy reader

**Latest Jobs from Star-Jobs**

- Sales Representatives
- Marketing Executive
- Maintenance Assistant
- Security Guard
- Human Resource Executive
- Production Planning & Operation Executive
- Process Engineer
- Logistics Executive
- Kindergarten Teachers
- Telemarketers

**Latest from StarProperty**

- Poorly planned township results in traffic congestion
- Does Sime Darby need Sunrise?
- Latvia auctions off Soviet military ghost town
- Hot Property Deals of the week
- Buyers' agent vs Sellers' agent

[More](#)

approximates.)

When Sjostrand first found the site, the only indication that a wreck sat there were the rims of bronze gongs that peek above the silty seabed. It was obvious that looters had gotten there first.

“Numerous deep craters marked the seabed. These are evidence of attempts to reach buried pottery. The looting was extensive. Most of the ceramics had been removed. In the first metre we dug, we found only sand and shards,” says Sjostrand.

Nanhai divers used a suction pump to remove silt and sand to reach the historical cargo. They eventually recovered 303 ceramic pieces. Brown-glazed and celadon ware made up most of the haul. (Blue and white porcelain was produced only in later years.) The ceramics were mostly household ware such as kendis, teapots, jars, bowls and covered boxes. Divers also brought up 157 non-ceramic items; among them were 76 copper discs and 61 bronze gongs.

The gongs have diameters of between 41cm and 43cm and each weighs between 3kg and 4kg. Sjostrand believes these may have been some of the first Chinese gongs exported to South-East Asia. The round and oval-shaped copper discs appear to have been cast in simple sand moulds. They range from 10cm to 20cm in diameter and weigh as much as 1kg.

Nanhai will keep 70% of the recovered cargo, which it is considering selling, and the Sabah Museum 30%. The deal is similar to that for the *Desaru* junk off Johor, which Sjostrand excavated in 2001. (The *Desaru* wreck was initially estimated to date from the 1830s but has now been dated to 1845.) Nanhai gets a bigger share as it funds and conducts the whole search and excavation. But all unique and rare artefacts are retained by the museum, the authorities of which declined to comment on this find.

As  
for  
the  
ship,  
little  
of it  
remain



No

outlineAfter hundreds of years in the deep sea, oxidised metal and pottery shards stick of together to form an odd-shaped conglomerate.

the

vessel is discernible. The few pieces of timber found were small and scattered, thus of no help in pinpointing the shape and size of the vessel. The pinewood, however, suggests the ship's Chinese origins. Sjostrand believes the ship had landed on coral rocks. Pounded by waves generated by the northeast monsoon winds, it broke up almost immediately and spewed its cargo all over. What he found could also be merely the spillover cargo.

Nanhai divers hauled up over 250kg of ceramic shards. Sjostrand says these will serve as a reference collection of Sung ceramic designs, much like the intact pieces plucked from the seabed.

Without a doubt, the ceramic assemblage retrieved from the seabed is of immense value to art history as it sheds light on the development of ceramic ware in the region. Sjostrand says several brown-glazed kendis and teapots recovered from the wreck have never been reported before. Other shapes like the Ching Pai ewers, covered boxes and brown-glazed ware have been recovered from wreck sites in Indonesia.

Another rarity is a piece of extremely well decorated Tang dynasty

ware, which Sjostrand has given to the Sabah Museum. "This white monochrome ware is the first type of real porcelain," enthuses Sjostrand.

A piece of Cizhou underglaze shard also caught his attention since such ware was not known to have been exported at the time. This is the type of ware from northern China that later spread to Vietnam and Sukhothai (in Thailand). Each recovered piece was photographed and painstakingly described. Sjostrand, however, did not record the precise location of each artefact as required in marine archaeology since the pieces had been scattered by waves and disturbed by looters. The priority, he decided, was to recover the artefacts ahead of looters to prevent heritage items from dispersing without knowledge of their origins.

Even as recovery work was going on, looters were eyeing the site. "When we stopped the initial site inspection because of the onset of spring tide, we left two intact storage jars partly buried as markers. When we returned to the site five days later, the jars had been smashed to pieces," recounts Sjostrand. "One morning, we found a fishing boat anchored at the site, its crew ready to dive. When we left in the evening, we saw two fishing boats with hose diving gear onboard travelling towards the site."

Fear of pirates also hastened salvage work. "We were very close to terrorist camps in the Philippines. There were several thefts along the coast where we worked and at one time, we had army personnel onboard, armed with M-16 and grenade launchers. It was not a pleasant place to work," says Sjostrand.

The Nanhai team spent six days recovering the precious cargo. Representatives from the Sabah Museum and the maritime archaeology team from the Department of Museums and Antiquities in Kuala Lumpur joined the search for another six days.

Sjostrand decided against a thorough archaeological excavation of the site when it became clear that it had been damaged by looters, there was little ship remains and no useful order of its cargo. "I prefer to excavate shipwrecks that are intact and will add to existing knowledge of excavated sites. It is more beneficial for maritime archaeology in Sabah if we look for new sites rather than excavate one that is already damaged.

"We recovered whatever could be found. This way, we would at least safeguard some pieces for the museum and, more importantly, be able to record one assemblage of trade wares from one time in history."

Sjostrand has excavated only two of the eight shipwrecks that he had previously discovered, the *Desaru* and the *Royal Nanhai*. The *Desaru*, excavated between 2001 and 2002, yielded 63,341 ceramic pieces of which over 50,350 were blue and white porcelain spoons. The *Royal Nanhai* was found in 1995 and carried some 21,000 pieces of Thai celadon.



Email This



Printer Friendly

**More News**

Lifefocus Headlines



Go



