

# What Lies Beneath

The story of an expedition to recover a ship that sank off Vietnam 500 years ago.

## DRAGON SEA

A True Tale of Treasure, Archeology, and Greed Off the Coast of Vietnam.

By Frank Pope.

Illustrated. 341 pp. Harcourt. \$25.

By HOLLY MORRIS

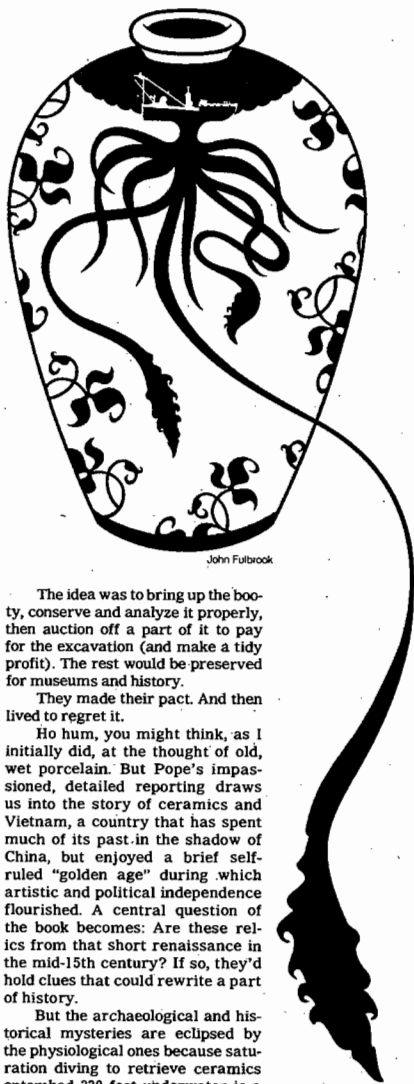
SOMEWHERE off the coast of Vietnam in the mid-15th century, in a stretch of cantankerous ocean where typhoons raged and pirates plied their trade, the Dragon Sea claimed a kitchen girl who cowered in the galley of a junk. The ship groaned and buckled, and as it sank the icy seawater thundered through the galley. Eventually "the girl's struggles stopped. ... Life faded from her eyes as around her the water grew dark with depth."

Surely this girl, probably a domestic or a slave, had no claim to the porcelain that plummeted along with her to the floor of the sea. But she was the lost cargo's lone sentry until, nearly 500 years later, the treasure was salvaged by a marine archaeologist, Mensun Bound; a Malaysian businessman, Ong Soo Hin; and a multinational crew of 160 seamen, archaeological draftsmen, cooks and saturation divers.

Frank Pope, a protégé of Bound's and the expedition's archaeological manager, has written an engaging account that delves into the ethical conundrums of marine salvage, the deadly physics of the deep ocean and the roiling waters of professional subterfuge.

"Dragon Sea" is laced with drama largely because of the conflicting motives of the expedition's leading figures. Bound, the headstrong, sometimes prickly director of Oxford University's Maritime Archaeological Research and Excavation unit, advocates the purest methodology in the recovery and insists on adding to the historical record. Ong, whom Pope describes as a corner-cutting financier with a smash-and-grab track record in marine salvage, wants pay dirt. As Pope tells the story, Ong needed Bound's credibility to cut international red tape. Bound needed the funding Ong could bring and got in bed with market forces (a racy move for an academic). After all, Pope writes, "wrecks were fast disappearing at the hands of dredgers and cable-layers as well as treasure-hunters, while archaeologists stood by helplessly, lacking the funds to work."

Holly Morris's "Adventure Divas: Searching the Globe for Women Who Are Changing the World" has recently been published in paperback.



The idea was to bring up the booty, conserve and analyze it properly, then auction off a part of it to pay for the excavation (and make a tidy profit). The rest would be preserved for museums and history.

They made their pact. And then lived to regret it.

Ho hum, you might think, as I initially did, at the thought of old, wet porcelain. But Pope's impassioned, detailed reporting draws us into the story of ceramics and Vietnam, a country that has spent much of its past in the shadow of China, but enjoyed a brief self-ruled "golden age" during which artistic and political independence flourished. A central question of the book becomes: Are these relics from that short renaissance in the mid-15th century? If so, they'd hold clues that could rewrite a part of history.

But the archaeological and historical mysteries are eclipsed by the physiological ones because saturation diving to retrieve ceramics entombed 230 feet underwater is a complex, expensive — and somewhat wacky — endeavor.

This high-stakes, high-risk job requires a breed that makes North Sea fishermen look like wussies. Talk about pressure. They work on the seabed in wet suits, tethered to the ship above by a life-sustaining umbilical cord. At the end of an exhausting 12-hour shift of moving debris through giant vacuums, and digging out and packing porcelain, as well as negotiating dark waters, site grates and instructions from

above by those who are video-monitoring, they enter a cramped pressurized bell and are hauled shipboard. That bell is affixed to another small bell, where they stay until going underwater again 12 hours later. They never leave the bells, and thus never depressurize. For two months.

The hazards are many. An infinitesimal leak caused by a faulty seal or loose screw in a pressurized bell and they're instantly, and dramatically, dead. Gas "explodes from the chest, rupturing the lungs if it is unable to escape the throat. Gas bursts from the sinuses, ripping open the eardrums. Vapors trapped inside the bowels expand. ... Explosive decompression is not a pleasant way to die."

Toward the end, the book begins to fizzle. Pope's crack job of blending storms and tension, regional history, the gruff cast of characters — and even the occasional cliffhanger and red herring — creates expectations. We're half-waiting for M.C.D., Massive Catastrophic Decompression, either literally or metaphorically. So when the climax is merely ill will, a dashed romance of treasure hunting and trust — not, thankfully, "Perfect Storm"-like tragedy — we're both relieved, and slightly guilty for wanting more.

More than 250,000 intact pots were successfully excavated from the seabed before an encroaching typhoon season brought the expedition to an undramatic close.

The book's final message is an elegiac plea that the estimated three million wrecks still lying untouched in the world's oceans be addressed with integrity. But we're not left with any real hope that that will be the case.

THE Internet frenzy of 2000 figures into the porcelain's final chapter. Brushing aside traditional auctioneers' like Sotheby's and Christie's, Ong tries to cash out via the sexy new player: eBay. A saturated market and botched auction saddled with fuzzy historical information (which enrages Bound) all contribute to a huge financial loss. Ong spent \$14 million to recover the cargo and bring it to auction, and in the end the porcelain cleared just under \$3 million.

Five years later, to complete the circle, and see the final act of consumerism colliding with historical significance, I logged on. Now it's a fire sale. For \$55, plus \$9 shipping and handling, I purchased a blue-and-white round ceramic box. It's gorgeous, but I only want to slide it back into the ocean, and return it to the kitchen girl. □

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Don't miss Bell's historical fiction, THE HAITIAN TRILOGY: All Souls' Rising, Master of the Crossroads, and The Stone That the Builder Refused, available in paperback from Vintage.

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