

## BURIED TREASURE BY ROBERT MARX



*While we fuss about petty interference with wreck sites, the world's underwater heritage is being run down on a massive scale - and with official sanction. That's what infuriates famed treasure-hunter Bob Marx.*

THE VAST, STILL UNFATHOMED STOREHOUSE of sunken ships and cities throughout the world offers a unique opportunity to the archaeologist.

Underwater sites are generally less disturbed than those on land. With the exception of Pompeii and Herculaneum, which were entombed in a fiery flood of lava, land sites typically present stratum after stratum of occupation. They may span thousands of years, with artifacts from one period mixed in with others, making the work of the archaeologist very difficult.

This is generally not the difficulty with underwater sites, which are time-capsules that cover a particular moment in history.

The problem that confronts archaeologists is the accelerating pace at which sites are now being destroyed. As bulldozers scar millions of hectares each year, and whole valleys are inundated for reservoirs and lakes, irreplaceable opportunities to unravel the past are lost.

Man is indeed Earth's most destructive force, but until recently most of his depredations were confined to land.

Today, however, he dredges and fills and destroys vast areas of the sea floor.

Although a few sport divers and commercial divers are responsible for destroying a small number of underwater sites of archaeological significance, this is a drop in a bucket compared to the number of sites destroyed by dredging, or covered over by landfill operations.

The irony is that every time someone finds and salvages an old shipwreck, archaeologists scream their heads off and accuse the divers and salvors of looting and obliterating an underwater site.

Yet about the hundreds of shipwrecks lost each year through dredging and landfill, there has been no such outcry.

Cadiz, on the south coast of Spain, was an important seaport in continual use for at least 3000 years. Beneath its waters lie hundreds of shipwrecks of various nationalities and historical periods.

Under the auspices of the Archaeological Museum of Cadiz, I conducted a visual survey with the help of local divers for two years from 1960. Within a 2 mile radius of the main port we located 54 classical period (Phoenician, Greek and Roman) shipwrecks and 97 of later periods.

Backed by UNESCO, I returned in 1985 to find that, because of intense dredging and landfill operations, more than two-thirds of these sites had been obliterated. I doubt whether even 5% of those wrecks still exist.

Despite an intensive campaign which I launched in 1991, nothing was ever done by the Spanish government to protect what little remains in Cadiz Bay.

In neighboring Portugal, the situation is equally grave. During the construction of a deepwater port at Sines, a port first used by the Carthaginians and later by the Romans, dredging operations destroyed dozens of ancient shipwrecks.

Just three years ago, the Portuguese government permitted the construction of a marina at Angra on Terceira Island in the Azores. Five 16th and 17th century wrecks were known to be there, yet they decided that the new marina was more important than saving these important shipwrecks.

Half a world away in Japan, I recently faced the same problem. I was hired by the Osaka Maritime Museum to locate and excavate three Portuguese East Indiaman known to be lost at Nagasaki, the main trading port between the Japanese and the outside world during the Colonial Period.

On arriving, I nearly had a heart attack when I found the old port covered over by landfill and a huge parking lot.

Instead of allowing recovery operations on shipwrecks all over the world, most bureaucrats and archaeologists say: "The ships have been down there for centuries, so why worry about them now?"

The answer for these idiots is that we should save what we can before there is nothing left.

Spain can now claim all Spanish wrecks worldwide over 50 years of age. Soon after this decision was made by the International Court in the Hague, Chile, Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, Guatemala and Mexico joined forces and demanded that the decision be changed.

They agreed that Spain might have a valid claim on the ships, but not on the cargoes, as all the gold, silver, pearls and precious stones were seized from their nations by the Spaniards using local slave labor. But the International Court ruled in favour of Spain once again, and the original law stands.

Last year a group of salvors found a 17th century Spanish galleon off the Florida Keys, and soon afterwards the Spanish government contacted the US State Department for assistance. They stopped the salvage and the US Coast Guard is guarding the site to prevent the salvors and others recovering the contents of the shipwrecks.

The result of all this? Forcing salvors to go underground, plunder shipwrecks and sell their finds in secret.

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