By Land and by Sea

A PROJECT
AWASH IN MEDIA ATTENTION

D uring the summer of 2000, in Sinop, Turkey, a hot noontime sun beat down on a small field crew consisting of Drs. Fredrik Hiebert and Owen Doonan, Black Sea Trade Project director and field director, respectively, and me. The three of us clung, by various means, to the sides of the small scarp we were excavating, located at the base of the ancient city walls of Sinop overlooking the Black Sea. Breezes from the nearby sea were warm and carried the dirt loosed by our excavations, stinging our eyes and caking our skin and hair.

A bit uncomfortable? Perhaps. But any archaeologist with an ounce of experience knows that these conditions are nothing to complain about. Sinop is the perfect spot for investigating ancient trade. Its harbor has been important since Greek times, its ancient city walls of Sinop the most scenic spots in the neighboring countryside. Still, no one was complaining.

Just after midnight three weeks later, I was nearly being tossed across the slippery deck of a ship in the darkness of the Black Sea. I hadn't slept more than four continuous hours in over a week, and in front of the film crew that recorded everything I was doing 24/7, I was struggling to carry a large plastic container full of seawater across the rolling, wet deck — and to look graceful while doing it.

How did I get from my beachside excavation to the middle of another season, taking newly designed ROVs on their first underwater work? A single, cryptic email sent from the States and had no plans to take part in the 2000 field season at sea, no one was complaining.

Two years later, in 2002, we proved that our masted wooden ship was not an isolated find: we found an even older well-preserved ship. And as this article goes to press, we are in the midst of another season, taking newly designed ROVs on their maiden voyage as we begin to excavate our deepwater sites.

So keep an eye on the news. I’m sure the press will be keeping an eye on the Black Sea.

Jennifer Shadel Smith is a Ph.D. candidate in anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania. In addition to participating in the Black Sea Trade Project, she is currently working on her dissertation research on the Royal Cemetery at Ur. She was also co-organizer and assistant curator of the exhibition Treasures of Uzbekistan: The Great Silk Road and guest lecturer for the 2000 Museum Women’s Committee tour to Uzbekistan.

AUTHOR’S NOTE

Under the directorship of Dr. Fredrik Hiebert of the University of Pennsylvania Museum, and in collaboration with Dr. Robert Ballard and the Institute for Exploration, the Black Sea Trade Project integrates land and underwater exploration in its efforts to search for evidence of ancient trade. Participating in this new archaeological synthesis has given me the opportunity to apply my skills as a land-based archaeologist to the developing field of deepwater archaeology. It has also provided some unusual lessons on the trials and triumphs of working with the media.

Jennifer Shadel Smith (left) and Black Sea Trade Project Director Dr. Fredrik Hiebert (middle) are filmed by Foster Wiley for National Geographic Television.

The city walls of Sinop, Turkey, date to the fourth century A.D. The Black Sea Trade Project excavations are located under the tower on the right.

Finally, in the cold and damp early hours of the morning, after Dr. Ballard had boarded a plane for the States, we found it: a nearly intact ship sunk into the seafloor with its mast still rising majestically from the hull. Radiocarbon dating told us that our discovery was approximately 1,500 years old. After a hectic, stormy, stressful, and high-profile season at sea, no one was complaining.

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