LOOKING BACK AT FIFTY YEARS OF NAUTICAL ARCHAEOLOGY

A Review Article of Archaeologist Beneath the Sea

BY JAMES D. MUHLY

In recent decades nautical archaeology and George Bass have tended to be almost synonymous. To consider one was to engage with the other. The reasons for this are obvious, for Bass practically created the field of nautical archaeology himself, at least in its modern manifestation. Over the past 50 years Bass has been a tireless proponent and proselytizer for what is still something of a new field of archaeological research. The remarkable thing is that this is true for all periods: Bronze Age, Iron Age, Greek and Roman, Byzantine, and Islamic. For every period there is an INA project directed by George Bass.

MY FIRST FIFTY YEARS
ARCHAEOLOGIST BENEATH THE SEA: ANCIENT SHIPS IN BODRUM

By George F. Bass

The four-handled copper ingots pictured here were a major discovery for Bass’ team at Cape Gelidonya (1980).
This book is basically an updated version of *Archaeology Beneath the Sea* (Walker & Co. 1975). The major difference is Chap. IX: “A.D. 626,” dealing with the excavation of a Byzantine shipwreck, and also the account of the “Return to Gelidonya.” The main feature of this new book is that it is profusely illustrated, with superb color photographs. This is a very personal book, in which George Bass recounts all aspects of his career as a nautical archaeologist, personal and professional, and also pays tribute to all the scholars and supporters with whom he has worked for more than 50 years of intense archaeological research, beneath the sea and on dry land. Prof. Bass is obviously a scholar who keeps meticulous, very detailed records. He can name everyone involved in any activity and can identify everyone in large group photographs, often taken many years ago. Anyone who has tried to identify the individuals in a group photo, taken just a few years ago, will appreciate the work of someone who knows how to keep records. That is, of course, one of the prime attributes of a first-class archaeologist.

This book recreates the thrills and excitement of working “beneath the sea,” and the challenges involved in developing the new excavation techniques and the new technology necessary to carry out scientific excavation on shipwrecks resting on the seabed. It is important to remember that, prior to the excavation of the Cape Gelidonya shipwreck in 1960, underwater archaeology was largely a summer pastime involving amateurs diving down to ancient shipwrecks in order to bring up Greek and Roman wine jars, except for some scientific work already underway in France. All of that changed with Cape Gelidonya, and progress has gone on from there far beyond the wildest dreams of those who brought this new field of archaeological research to where it is today.

I feel that, at this stage of the game, it is time to say a few things about what Bass was up against in his determination to establish underwater archaeology as a legitimate field of archaeological research that maintained the same standards of excavation technique and recording as any other modern excavation. Classical archaeology, until very recent times, has not been a field known for its love of innovation. Bass began his archaeological career in very traditional ways, working with Jack Caskey at the Early Bronze Age site of Lerna, in the eastern Argolid. A distinctive shape of pot from this period is still known as a “Bass Bowl.” I know of no other archaeologist working today who has managed to give his name to a style of pottery.
When Bass went from land to water his reputation at the Archaeological Institute of America (AIA) took something of a nosedive. Those in charge of this national organization were perfectly happy to deal with Bass on land, but an underwater Bass was another matter. Was this really serious scholarship? The AIA thought otherwise. They were willing, however, to have Bass write articles for *Archaeology*, the popular magazine published by the Institute, and to go on a lecture tour for the Institute, speaking to enthusiastic local audiences across the country, but publication in the *American Journal of Archaeology* (*AJA*), the scholarly journal of the Institute, was another matter.

This explains why many of the early reports on this new method of archaeological research were published in *Expedition*, the magazine of the Penn Museum, one of Bass’ most important scholarly supporters, and in *National Geographic*, one of the most important early financial supporters of this new discipline that became known as Nautical Archaeology. It soon became obvious to everyone that this approach to archaeology was so important that it could no longer be ignored. The “Prologue” plus chapters I and II of the new book are devoted to Cape Gelidonya, the project that could well be described as the “transforming excavation” of this fledging discipline.

What Bass does, most of all in these chapters, is to...
correct the record regarding his relationship with Peter Throckmorton, the initial discoverer of the Gelidonya wreck. Bass has often been accused of pushing aside these early pioneers of underwater archaeology, including Peter Throckmorton and Honor Frost. This is simply not true. Bass did his best to work with them and learn from them. The basic problem was that all these early pioneers were intense individualists. Bass realized that, if this new discipline was going to gain international credibility, it would require an institutional base together with institutional and private financial support and a dedicated research team that could maintain the necessary element of continuity. This is what led to the establishment of the Institute of Nautical Archaeology (INA) at Bodrum, Turkey, and why INA has continued to thrive and grow. With the publication of this superb, beautifully illustrated book, we should all try to put aside petty sniping, and our determinations to present our own points of view, in order to recognize what George Bass has accomplished and why INA is one of the major achievements of archaeology in the 20th (and 21st) century.

Has nautical archaeology achieved the status of a serious academic discipline? You bet it has. Just consider the following: the discovery of the Uluburun shipwreck (in 1982; chapter XXI in the present book) inaugurated the most spectacular chapter in the history of underwater archaeology. Never before had a shipwreck been discovered containing such a rich cargo, a bonanza of just about every type of material that was being transported across the eastern Mediterranean in the Late Bronze Age, including ten tons of copper ingots and one ton of tin ingots, exactly the two materials necessary to make bronze, and in the proper proportions. The point I wish to make here is that the long and arduous excavation of this wreck, involving hundreds of dives, finally finished in 1994. This has been followed by seasons of study, restoration, and conservation that are still in progress, and will be for some years to come. For every hour spent diving on such a wreck, countless hours follow, in the lab and in the library, all directed towards the goal of final publication. In this regard nautical archaeology is no different from archaeology on land: without final publication there can be no real progress. One of the reasons why INA has been so successful is that it has a superb record of final publication.

By 1985, George Bass had come to realize that, because he was involved in so many different projects, he simply could not continue to direct all the research going on around Uluburun. Fortunately, by that time he had already trained a remarkably gifted Turkish student, Cemal Pulak, who gave every indication of being capable of taking on the burden of Uluburun. Indeed he was, and to this day he continues to be in charge of all the work involving the final publication of this shipwreck. For the reader who might
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want to learn more about Uluburun, I recommend the catalogue of the exhibition held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, edited by Joan Aruz and called Beyond Babylon (New York 2008). There the interested reader will find an outstanding chapter on Uluburun, by Cemal Pulak (pp. 289-305), which is then followed by another 80 pages listing the cargo. There is also an excellent report by Pulak on “The Uluburun Shipwreck: an Overview,” International Journal of Nautical Archaeology 27:3 (1998) 188-224.

Of all the projects with which he has been involved over the past 50 years, I have a feeling that George Bass still looks back, with the greatest fondness, on the days spent at Cape Gelidonya in 1960. And why not? This was the project that set him off on his remarkable career as a nautical archaeologist, but also the period in which he formed many of the friendships that have stayed with him to the present. Under these circumstances it was almost inevitable that Bass would, at some point, return to Cape Gelidonya. This took place in 1987 and is recounted in chapter XXIV of the present book. The finds made in the brief dives undertaken during that visit were remarkable. How could such things have been overlooked in 1960? Because, in 1960, Bass and his colleagues were amateurs, involved in the heady experience of creating a new archaeological discipline. In 1987, they were seasoned professionals, with years of diving experience together with all the accumulated knowledge from years of working on shipwrecks from all periods, in all parts of the world. This 1987 season was followed by weeks of activity in 1988, 1989, 1990, and 1994. It is not surprising, therefore, that chapter XXXII of Archaeologist Beneath the Sea, entitled “Golden Anniversary” recounts a final visit to Cape Gelidonya (in 2010), and a final dive for Bass, which was also a major season of excavation for Pulak. George Bass has had a remarkable career and he has put it all together in a wonderful book. It brings to life some 50 years of extraordinary archaeological research that is going to remain as a “standard of excellence” for many years to come.

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