

Many not willing to go to such depths

With a single cast of a net, a fisherman in Malacca landed an ancient bowl last month. Such good fortune keeps the romance associated with sunken treasure very much alive, but **SYED UMAR ARIFF** finds out that treasure-hunting is no walk in the park

THE bespectacled man with a songkok was trying his best to answer questions from journalists at his office in Malacca recently.

Perhaps, he felt sorry for the reporters who had to walk uphill to get to his office in the scorching sun. After all, it was not a familiar route to many.

Malacca Museum Corporation (Perzim) general manager Khamis Abas was speaking about shipwrecks in Malacca that have once again made headlines in the dailies.

The Malacca government recently reiterated its billion-ringgit offer, made in 2000, to salvage companies to retrieve treasures from sunken ships along the Malacca coastline. There have been no takers for more

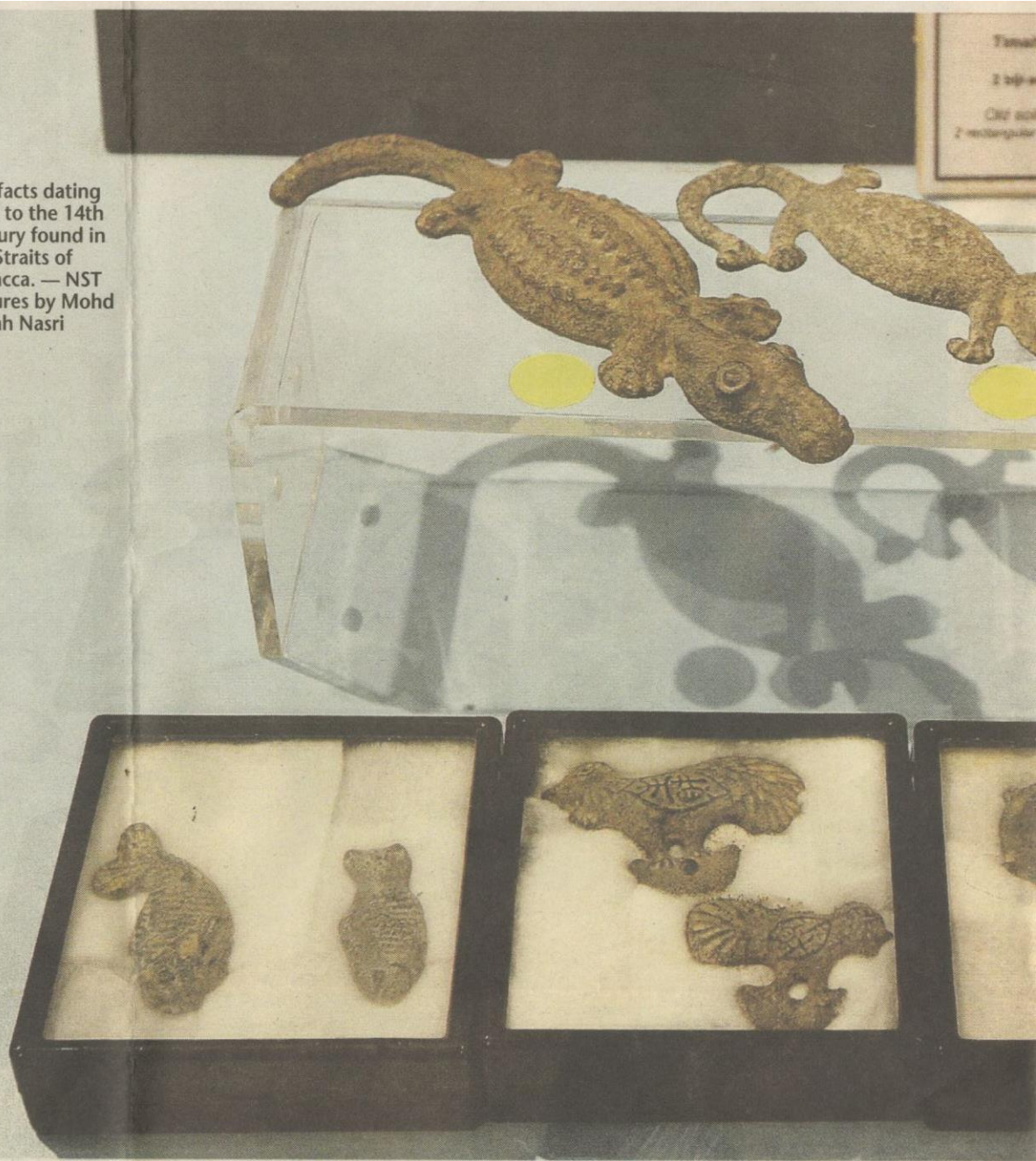
salvage operation in the last 10 years. Who knows what they may find there... I mean, will it be worth it?" said a maritime industry player who wanted to be identified only as Thong.

He said normally, 25 per cent of the find would be allotted to the salvager and the rest would be split between the state and federal governments. But Thong said even if 80 per cent were to be offered to the salvagers, the risk remained high.

"This is not just about being adventurous and bringing home glittering treasure.

"There are costs involved, equipment, manpower and experts, among others. And do not forget the overheads. It will cost not around RM2 million, but between RM5 mil-

Artefacts dating back to the 14th century found in the Straits of Malacca. — NST pictures by Mohd Jamah Nasri



ships along the Malacca coast. There have been no takers for more than 10 years.

At least 13 merchant and war vessels are known to have sunk in the Malacca sea on the Spice Route more than 500 years ago.

The cost of salvaging the treasure from a single vessel is said to be about RM3 million, and the profits, up to billions of ringgit.

Khamis said the RM3 million should be enough to also recondition the artefacts found. But it is not something anyone could just salvage, as stipulated under the National Heritage Act 2005.

"Well, it is not that easy since it involves national interests. First, you need to get permission from the department to carry out the surveying. After completing a report on the survey, you have to get permission to salvage the items.

"That is the procedure. And each application for surveying and salvaging could take up to a month to approve."

That means more money and time. It's a high-risk investment and many would think twice before committing themselves.

In the meantime, the treasure, such as Chinese blue and white porcelain, brassware and coins, may be destroyed, looted or become worthless.

"This is why there has been no

RM3 million, but between RM5 million and RM6 million.

"Most likely, there will be no takers for another decade," said Thong, who has been in the industry for 30 years.

He said about 10 years ago, looting of shipwrecks was prevalent. But now, that did not happen.

"Most probably, there are not many artefacts left to be found. The looters have turned to other seas. This, I think, may serve as a signal to salvaging companies that the venture is not worth it."

The only operation carried out previously was in 2004 off the coast of Limbungan. Shards of vases of Chinese and Vietnamese origin were salvaged by Royal Malaysian Navy divers.

Among the wrecks are those near Tanjung Tuan (*Middleburg*, sank on Aug 16, 1606), Permatang Rumpit (*Overduin*, June 27, 1784), Tanjung Pinang (*Franeker*, Jan 18, 1642), Tanjung Kling (*Wieringen*, June 2, 1636) and Pulau Undan (*Bambeek*, Jan 12, 1702).

"I can't say much since it is under the purview of the National Heritage Department. All the documents pertaining to the findings, for example the shipwreck off the coast of Tanjung Tuan, are being held by the department.

"More than a month ago, Perzim

had applied to survey the areas off Tanjung Tuan. But after we were informed that the National Heritage Department was also interested in doing the same, we pulled out," said Khamis.

A tourism officer, who declined to be named, said over the years, the artefacts had been the targets of foreign looters posing as tourists.

He said the state government should engage these professional "treasure hunters" in salvaging works.

"These people are experts. We should ease the regulations, cut the red tape and make it easy for people who have the means to do so. It seems that they are the only ones who are really interested in this."

At the same time, he said the state government should think out of the box instead of just salvaging the artefacts. He said shipwrecks could generate long-term revenue for the state as underwater tourist spots for the well-heeled.

"Turn the shipwrecks into monuments so that tourists whose forefathers had died on the vessels would want to visit them.

"Yes, we can salvage some of the artefacts and make use of them to generate more revenue for the state. Also, have underwater tourism for divers. That is the way to go."

Thong believed that there were



The sea off Tanjung Tuan in Malacca is believed to contain centuries-old sunken treasure from shipwrecks.

hundreds of shipwrecks, and not just 13, in the seabed off Malacca.

He said other than hundreds of warships brought by the Dutch and the Portuguese invaders, Admiral Cheng Ho had a fleet of 300 ships during his exploration of the Malay Archipelago.

"The Malacca sea is just 100m deep. But the seabed is rocky from beyond Pulau Upeh and Tanjung Tu-

an. Many of the ships sank because of severe damage to the hull."

Khamis said there had been no reports of gold bars or ingots found in the shipwrecks so far. This may have deterred treasure hunters from taking up the billion-ringgit offer.

"Despite the stories that were told, we have yet to receive reports that there is gold in the wrecks, other than the usual plates, cups and teapots."

Ancient clay bowl 'good for ikan bakar chilli gravy'

IT was only a month ago that Baharudin Maasar found something in his net other than the usual catch, off the beach of Kampung Lereh in Tanjung Puteri, Malacca.

The 45-year-old fisherman was stunned to discover an ancient clay bowl covered in mud, coral and seaweed. Such a find is rare nowadays.

"Compared with between seven and eight years ago, you can count yourself lucky should you find one in your net today. It is something worth keeping," he said at a fish market just a stone's throw away from the beach.

Baharudin, who has been casting nets since he was 16, said most fishermen would chance upon brass vases, hooks and Chinese pottery of different colours, shapes and sizes.

"Contrary to popular belief, we never dived into the waters. We just 'caught' the artefacts with our nets by chance."

And what do the fishermen usually do with the trinkets and bowls they find?

"We sell them to antique dealers. Somehow, they will be around whenever a fisherman makes a discovery. Some make money out of the artefacts while others aren't so lucky.

"Sometimes, we just keep them at home. This bowl I found is good for the sour chilli gravy of *ikan bakar*."

The value of the items found is determined by the antique dealer. The most expensive item ever sold by a fisherman was a Chinese vase with handles worth about RM1,500.

But isn't what Baharudin is doing an offence under the National Her-

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— Baharudin Maasar
fisherman

itage Act?

Under Section 62, he would have committed an offence since he did not declare the item he found and hand it to the relevant authority.

"What? I did not know about that. I did not steal the artefacts. I just found them," he said.

The locations of sunken vessels since the 16th century, stretching

from Tanjung Tuan to Pulau Undan, have not been gazetted as a protected zone under the act.

Baharudin's friends also had similar finds. Weather-beaten and seasoned fisherman Abdul Latiff Yaakob, 55, showed a small, brown cup he believed to be of Vietnamese origin.

"Whatever you do, do not peel off the coral. It is the only way to determine the age of the item. The were those who shaved the corals and the antique dealers had a hard time calculating the years it had been underwater."

Latiff said some five years ago, he found an S-shaped brass hook and a green Chinese vase near the Tanjung Puteri Petronas refinery.

Unfortunately, he lost the artefacts to a thief.

"I suspect both items were stolen by another fisherman when I was not looking. I am more guarded now if I find an artefact."

Baharudin said he heard that some fishermen had made huge hauls of Chinese plates and pots during a single trip to sea.

"But I do not think it is possible for anyone to have discovered a treasure trove in the past five years."

Other than the fishermen, looters are also responsible for the dwindling treasure.

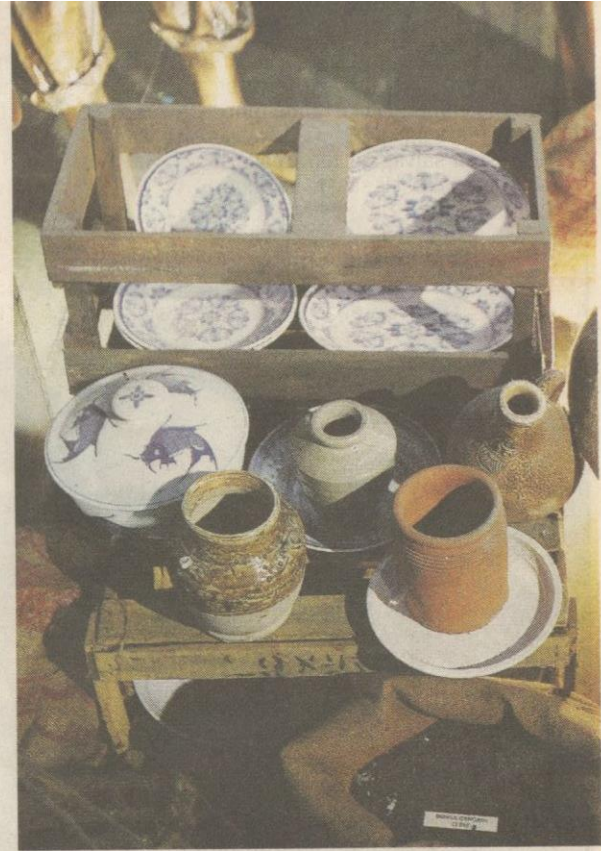
Another fisherman, Tan Sin Huat, 47, said previously, looters who posed as tourists took a dive to retrieve the items.

"It was common then. Today, fishermen can find only one or two items every couple of months."





Fishermen (from left) Baharudin Maasar, Abdul Latiff Yaakob and Tan Sin Huat with the artefacts they found while fishing off Tanjung Puteri, Malacca



Porcelain from sunken ships found in the Straits of Malacca.