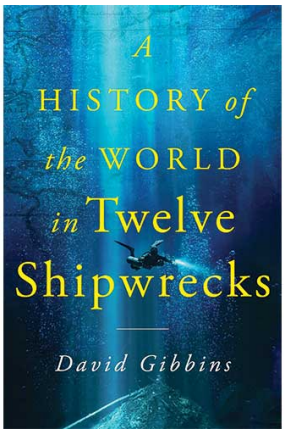
New American

Written by **William P. Hoar** on July 23, 2024

Published in the issue of the New American magazine. Vol. 40, No. 15

Portholes Into the Past



Are you ready to explore times gone by? If so, it certainly helps to have a top marine archaeologist as a guide. The expression about doing a "deep dive" has become a common one when referring to an in-depth examination, but here we literally get to dive deeply into oceans around the globe and cover thousands of years of history.

A History of the World in Twelve Shipwrecks is, as author David Gibbins explains, much more than an account of a dozen ships or 12 wrecks: It is a history of the world in which these shipwrecks "provide a springboard for looking into the wider historical context." Your pilot has gotten more than a little wet behind the ears during his career — that started when he qualified as a diver in Canada at age 15. He has excavated or dived on more than half of the sites cited.

Landlubbers need not worry that this volume leans on a field too specialized to be comprehended. Fear not the "bends" (which can come from breathing nitrogen under pressure). While there are certainly details that will absorb scuba aficionados or occasional snorkelers, you don't even need to be a novice on his first voyage to appreciate the trip.

The author maps out the journey (arguably with a few too many peripheral side trips) and delivers his passengers. Much of this book, as he acknowledges, is about people. The shipwrecks provide "access to individuals, and that allows us most clearly to empathise with the past." (The English and spelling employed is British-style; the book was first published in Great Britain by Weidenfeld & Nicolson.) Here are a few of the people on board:

> a merchant from the time of Tutankhamun, an eye surgeon traveling to Rome in the second century A.D., a Persian sea captain seeking gold in the South China Sea, an archer at the time of King Henry VIII, one of the greatest painters of all time lading his precious works on a ship in the harbour of Amsterdam, a doomed Polar explorer [and] the survivor of a torpedoed ship in the North Atlantic.

Helping to add excitement are the "artefacts" that bring their own stories.

Maritime Trade Affected by Naval Battles

Who's the captain of this trip? It might be, well, a bit (facetiously) rude to say his life is in ruins — but he has spent his professional life in underwater archaeology. He has a Ph.D. from Cambridge University

and has taught archaeology in Britain and abroad. Gibbins is considered a world authority on ancient shipwrecks and sunken cities. As a fillip, his engrossing narration moves.

Then there is the novel aspect of Gibbins' writing. The main fictional character in his Jack Howard series (with 10 titles to date) is also a Cambridge guy who is a marine archeologist. Gibbins' novels have sold more than two million copies in 30 languages. To his credit, the author in the Jack Howard books makes it clear what is fiction and what is not.

One bone that this reviewer has to pick with *A History of the World in Twelve Shipwrecks* is more properly directed at the publisher. Though there is a very good full-color photo section in this book, some maps — considering the out-of-the-ordinary locations — would have been a big plus. That said, the author's website — davidgibbins.com — is excellent, providing sources, many maps, and lots of related photographs and records. A piece of advice: While browsing the print volume, keep that website accessible to get a fuller impact.

With space limitations, we need to cherry-pick some episodes in the book. Early in his career, Gibbins was invited to help excavate a wreck dating to the classical Greek period off the Aegean coast of Turkey. Nearby was Tektaş, a rocky headland. The 208 amphoras and other items recovered from that wreck get plenty of coverage in a chapter about the wine trade, but here's a part that fills in on the historical side:

> The peace that allowed the Tektaş ship to sail unhindered in the Aegean and maritime trade to flourish would not have been possible without the naval victory against the Persians at Salamis in 480 BC. In September of that year a Persian army under Xerxes invaded Attica, sacking Athens and destroying temples on the Acropolis, but only a few days later the Athenian fleet met and defeated the Persians off the small island of Salamis 2 kilometres from the port of Piraeus.

The close-up copy tells us, for instance, that the findings also included two-handled cups, painted table amphoras, and dish-shaped oil lamps. Pulling back the focus, we see the importance of swift Greek galleys called triremes. (Gibbins does not, as Herodotus did, note the key aspect of maneuvering in a narrow channel, as the Greeks "maintained an almost perfect line of battle.")

Then, looking at the even bigger picture, the author makes a first-rate assessment, comparing the triremes with the Spitfires in the Battle of Britain in 1940 — as both took the war "to the enemy while their mother-city burnt, and both attained near mythic status afterwards as symbols of strength and endurance in the face of seemingly overwhelming odds."

Lost Masterpieces

Though these are well worth examining, here we'll jump ahead past, among others, a shipwreck from the height of the Roman Empire in the second century A.D.; Tang China, the land of gold and Abbasid Islam in the ninth century A.D.; Viking seafaring in the 11th century; and the *Mary Rose* (sunk in 1545), the flagship of King Henry VIII that lasted through the entire succession of the king's six wives.

In chapter nine, we get to don scuba gear and go down (figuratively) to examine what has been called the Mullion Pin Wreck — the *Santo Cristo di Castello* that was wrecked in 1667 off Cornwall, on the southwestern tip of England. The shipwreck was discovered in 1969.

Gibbins initially saw that wreck, near the Lizard Point peninsula, in 2018. The author's prose brings us back to the historic period involved, when Amsterdam was home to the Dutch East India Company, the huge trading organization; the ship itself was built in Amsterdam for Genoese traders. When the author first encountered the shipwreck, he saw what had attracted his eye earlier — a "golden sparkle" surrounding cannons in the sand; these were the brass "clothing pins" that gave the ship its nickname. Readers are also reminded that pin manufacturing has its own place in economic theory, with the author citing Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*.

During that period (1660s), there was considerable pin manufacturing taking place in northern France, where pin makers would use "brass wire manufactured in Holland" and supplied by Dutch merchants, "who would then purchase and export them." Division of labor was illustrated by Smith, who is quoted noting that one man "draws out the wire, another straightens it, a third cuts it, a fourth points it, a fifth grinds it at the top for receiving the head; to make the head requires two or three distinct operations."

Earlier in that chapter we view teamwork in action while Gibbins, his daughter, and a diving companion find and record artefacts at the wreck. Whether Adam Smith would be delighted about the next bureaucratic step is debatable. "We reported," recalls the author, "the finds we had recovered to the Receiver of Wreck — the office of medieval origin to which all wreck finds made in British waters must be declared." Nevertheless, paperwork does have its uses, as Gibbins discovered what was in the cargo manifest. In this case, what was *not* found in the wreck certainly draws your attention.

Dutch art in the 17th century, we are reminded, was fueled by maritime trade. Unearthed correspondence about the ship, captained by one Giovanni Viviano, reveals why the ship had been held up in Amsterdam. There were multiple reasons, apparently, including the ship's seaworthiness and illness of Viviano, but related letters reveal "that the biggest factor was the time needed by Rembrandt to complete the commission." (I will now try to resist — brush off — making a crack about still-life art, which many people don't find moving.)

Thinking back on the paintings, apparently lost *modelli*, the author mulls about the fact that they once existed at the wreck site "however fleetingly, before being destroyed by the elements." This means, says Gibbins, "that every artefact seems touched by their presence, making this one of the most beguiling shipwrecks that I have ever investigated."

Gold, Piracy, and Slavery

The stage shifts for the next chapter, though the wreck of the *Royal Anne Galley* in 1721 also took place off the end of Lizard Point. Gibbins says his first dive on that shipwreck was "one of his most challenging" because the rocks and reefs that make it dangerous for ships also threaten divers.

You might have to take a deep breath over the precarious efforts before Gibbins finally finds himself atop the wreck next to, as it happens, a rusty cannonball. (This reviewer did a bit of helmet diving on the ocean floor in Bermuda a few years back, but that's not even remotely comparable to the wild currents, gullies, and fissures off Man O'War rock described by Gibbins.) That April 2021 Lizard Point dive, he writes, "marked the beginning of archeological investigations under my direction that have [been] carried out ever since."

There were only three survivors of the 1721 wreck. The larger story is how such Royal Navy ships fitted into the suppression of piracy and the growth of the trade of African slaves to the Americas. Jewelry,

watches, and coins (especially Portuguese gold "moidores," pictured in the book) are among the reasons that this wreck is considered one of the richest excavated in the area. (Gibbins even digs up contemporary literary allusions, recalling references to Portuguese gold in Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*.)

The galley-frigate in question was designed to chase the Barbary Pirates of North Africa. On her final trip, the *Royal Anne Galley* was under orders "to take the new governor out to Barbados and then to chase down another kind of pirate — including the most notorious still at large, 'Black Bart,' Bartholomew Roberts."

Reinforced with statistics, the author points out what the Royal Navy's efforts accomplished both before and after the abolition of the slave trade in 1807. It was the efforts of the *Royal Anne Galley* and her sister ships off West Africa in 1720-1722 and in the Caribbean that "brought the 'Golden Era' of piracy to an end." At the same time, that meant the number of slaves (rendered as "enslaved persons") from West Africa jumped considerably. In other words, by "ending the threat of piracy," that "also cleared the way for the slave trade to flourish without hindrance." Yet, over time, the Royal Navy's role "changed from protecting the slave trade to suppressing it." Between 1807 and 1861, the "West Africa Squadron" seized more than "1,500 slave ships," freeing "some 150,000 slaves." While these points are not a major part of the book, it's refreshing to see even an attempt to present a balanced account of that brutal era.

These are just snapshots of what the author calls portholes into the past. There are plenty of other time capsules to excavate. These include the Viking warship of King Cnut the Great. We also get to sail with the Vikings traveling "down the rivers of central Europe to trade with Byzantium and the Arab world."

Then there's the ghastly saga of Captain John Franklin's ill-fated *HMS Terror* looking for the Northwest Passage in the Canadian Arctic (if *ghastly* is sufficient to cover, among other things, starvation, hypothermia, tuberculosis, cannibalism, lead poisoning, and scurvy). Recent footage taken by a remotely operated vehicle provides very close looks of the wreck.

Finally, we review a British-flagged merchant ship, whose cargo included 17 tons of silver, that was destroyed by a Nazi U-boat. (The ship was one of 3,500 such lost during WWII, just counting those that were British-flagged). We watch the remnants of the crew of the torpedoed ship, in an open boat, 300 miles from land, struggling for survival. Three seemed to have reached shore, but two of them were lost just at the apparent end of their ordeal. The sole survivor, the ship's second mate, was honored with an MBE (Member of the Order of the British Empire). His recuperation lasted nine months; he then returned to sea.

No, our earlier flippant language notwithstanding, Mr. Gibbins' endeavor is not in ruins. Wrecks, as he tells us, are "catastrophic events" by implication, but the "voyages themselves can seem life-affirming — full of rich experiences, with ever-present danger and the prize always just beyond the horizon, drawing us on." This work may have a small hole here or there, or need the scraping of a barnacle or two, but it is like a model ship — one that is decidedly seaworthy.

New American

Written by **William P. Hoar** on July 23, 2024

Published in the issue of the New American magazine. Vol. 40, No. 15