THE 1824 WRECK OF THE ROYAL HAWAIIAN YACHT
HA 'AHEO O HAWAII (EX-CLEOPATRA'S BARGE): 1996 PRELIMINARY RESULTS.

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This paper details results from the 1995 survey and 1996 excavation of the Royal Hawaiian Yacht Ha 'aheo o Hawaii (ex-Cleopatra's Barge). Built at Salem, MA in 1816, the hermaphrodite brig was the first oceangoing yacht built in the United States. Purchased by King Kamehameha II in 1820, she served as his royal yacht until sinking in Hanalei Bay, Kauai on 5 April 1824. Under the first permits ever issued by the State of Hawaii for scientific underwater archaeological research, the wreck site was discovered by the Smithsonian Institution in 1995 (Johnston, 1996) utilizing historical documentation and remote sensing. During the 1995 season, it was also surveyed and the remains assessed for condition. Excavations began in July 1996.

INTRODUCTION

The wreck of the first oceangoing yacht built in the United States was discovered near the Hawaiian island of Kauai. Extensive excavations of the yacht, originally named Cleopatra's Barge began in July 1996 under the first archaeological permits ever issued by the State of Hawaii.

The Smithsonian's archaeological team was guided in their attempt to locate the wreckage by Boston missionary Hiram Bingham's (1847) written account describing an 1824 salvage attempt by Native Hawaiians. The team used electronic remote sensing equipment to locate the vessel in 1995 (Johnston, 1996).

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Cleopatra's Barge was built in 1816 in Salem, Massachusetts for American merchant George Crowninshield Jr., who spared no expense, spending about $100,000 for the 30.3 m brig. The ship was a New England icon, visited daily in Salem Harbor by up to 2,600 people. During her first cruise, a six-month Mediterranean voyage in 1817, Crowninshield entertained as many as 8,000 curious visitors daily. He died after that one voyage, and Cleopatra's Barge was sold at auction for $15,400.

In 1820, Cleopatra's Barge was traded to Hawaii's King Kamehameha II for $80,000 worth of sandalwood. Kamehameha renamed the yacht Ha 'aheo o Hawaii (Pride of Hawaii) and sailed her around the Hawaiian islands, using her as a diplomatic ship-of-state, missionary transport, merchant vessel and royal pleasure craft.

After only a few years of service in Hawaii, the ship sank on April 5, 1824 in Hanalei Bay, on the north shore of the island of Kauai. Three books (e.g., Ferguson, 1976; Whitehill, 1959) and several articles have been written about this yacht, and she appears in virtually every book on early yachting. However, almost nothing is known of the native Hawaiian chapter of her history, and there is very little material culture preserved from the early Hawaiian monarchy.

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FIELD WORK

Twelve test trenches were dug in 1995 that revealed a sunken vessel carrying an astonishing wealth of artifacts, including Chinese and American ceramics, tableware, a folding knife, glass, English copper hull sheathing, iron and copper hull fasteners, lead patching material, and even a piece of smithsonite, the mineral named for SI founding James Smithson.

Survey results indicate that the ship's hull has been destroyed by shipworms, surf and storm activity, in addition to probable contemporary pilfering. Since she sank, the loss of her hull caused spillage and dispersal of her contents against the adjacent reef. Two 20th-century tsunamis and the 1992 hurricane Iniki, which stalled over Kauai and whose eye passed directly over Hanalei Bay, also took their toll on the famous ship.

The 1996 excavation revealed more of the same sorts of artifacts as the 1995 survey. Highlights include portions of the ship's hull structure, floors, an 11-ft. section of keelson, and hull strakes with copper sheathing still attached. On the last day a trench revealed black and red painted furniture that was covered with sterile sand and reburied for future investigation.

Large concretions (chunks of hardened material) containing multiple artifacts are now being examined, and they promise to reveal additional unique artifact from the early Hawaiian monarchy that have not been seen for more than 170 years. The finds are international in scope and they promise to shed new light on the little-known material culture of the early Hawaiian monarchy, America's only authentic royalty. This archaeological research promises to complete the famous yacht's saga.
After study and conservation, all artifacts will be returned to Hawaii. Other Smithsonian researchers have assisted in analyzing items from the wreck. Anthropologist Melinda Zeder and worm systematist Kristian Fauchauld, both of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History, analyzed bones and worm tubes. Camie Campbell, Mel Wachowiak and Walter Hopwood of the Institution’s Conservation Analytical Laboratory investigated wood and concretions.

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LITERATURE CITED


