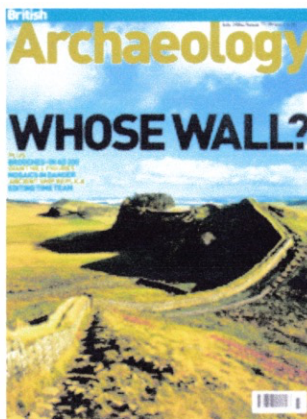


Archaeology



my archaeology

The seas were quite big

London fund manager Philip Beale left his job to fulfill a childhood dream

At primary school I saw a classmate make a model of the Kon Tiki: I was greatly influenced by Thor Heyerdahl. Then in Java in 1982 I saw the ship reliefs at the Borobudur temples, built about AD 800. I knew about Indonesian influence in eastern Africa, and wondered if these boats might have sailed around the Cape.

When it happened, it came together quickly. Until the end of March 2003, I was doing a full time job at Morley Fund Management. When they heard they became the biggest sponsor.

I was incredibly lucky. In Indonesia I pitched straight to the minister of culture. He said, 'When do you want to do it?' I said I need to launch it by the middle of August, otherwise we'll be too late for the trade winds. He said, 'The 15th of August is our national independence day. And it's the 20th anniversary since UNESCO restructured the Borobudur monument. We want you to be part of the celebration'.

I'm not saying it was easy, but the Indonesian government were so enthusiastic. They paid for four crew. At any one time there were about 15, half Indonesians, half multi-national: a mix of cultures and religions.

It took five months to build, 10-12 people working full time on the Kangean islands. We asked the builder to make it 15-17 m long, but he got some good timbers and he went to 19 m. We put this big picture of a relief in his house. He normally makes fishing boats, the same technique using planks and wooden dowels, but not as big.

We sailed to Jakarta, seeing how it all worked out, making modifications. On 15 August we left for the Seychelles. We flew across in 26 days, an average speed of 5.3 knots for the 3,500 miles.

We made a mistake in the Mozambique Channel: we left the mainsail up in a storm. The sky got dark very quickly. There were huge amounts of lightening, and then rain, and very strong winds. The sail was being pulled into the sky. One of the guys was about to cut it free with the machete and all of a sudden it ripped and the boom clattered down. The seas were quite big so we were rolling around a bit. Luckily we had a spare sail. Within about three hours we were on our way again. Then we had another storm. The Indonesians were pretty cool about it, but when we got into Richards Bay in South Africa, four crew left.

At the Cape you've got currents coming down one side, and winds on the other, you get this washing-machine effect. The ship won't point into the wind, you have to have the wind astern or at least abeam.

Within four hours of leaving there was a gale, but we couldn't turn back because the winds were too strong. So we did the whole thing on a storm sail, we'd learnt the lesson. From Cape Town to Ghana we averaged about 100 miles a day. That was a long trip. We reached Accra on 23 February.

Betel nuts, coconuts, rice, yams and the xylophone stretch right across west Africa, but had Indonesian origins. Did they get there via land or sea? The Indonesians were a powerful maritime nation in the 1st millennium. We've shown that a ship of that kind could've gone around the Cape. It doesn't prove it, but I'd like to believe they did it.

I won't work for a big organisation again: they are so frustrating, they keep changing their strategies. I'd like to find a business that could pay some of the bills, and then do some travel and adventure as well. That's the holy grail.

Danielle Eubank's paintings of the voyage can be seen at Thompson's Gallery 30 June-10 July. See www.borobudurshipexpedition.com. Philip Beale talked to Mike Pitts

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