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Anthropology Book Forum

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In Search of Pirates

Review by Russell K. Skowronek

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Captain Kidd's Lost Ship, The Wreck of the *Quedagh Merchant* ISBN 13: [9780813056227](https://www.amazon.com/dp/9780813056227)
\$85.00

By Frederick H. Hanselmann
University Press of Florida, 2019

Frederick "Fritz" Hanselmann is one of the rising stars in twenty first century underwater archaeology. In little more than a decade he has worked on submerged Pleistocene deposits in coastal Texas, conducted shipwreck surveys in Colombia, searched for Henry Morgan's ships off Panama, and worked on Gold Rush era ship sites in California. Around these he also was involved in the discovery of the 200-year-old Monterrey deep water (4300 feet) wrecks in the Gulf of Mexico. In this same period, he has notched an enviable list of publications, reports, and film credits.

In 2008, as a graduate student at Indiana University, Hanselmann and his professor Charles Beeker began the investigation of the site that would be identified as Kidd's *Quedagh Merchant* in the Dominican Republic. This book grew out of his dissertation and a 2016 book chapter titled, "The Wreck of the *Quedagh Merchant*, The Lost Ship of Captain William Kidd" which appeared in *Pieces of Eight, More Archaeology of Piracy*. I note this to underscore and cement Hanselmann's place in the study of pirates in the archaeological record. It was only a decade before his dissertation and his chapter that "pirate archaeology" was first examined within the framework of anthropological archaeology in *X Marks the Spot, The Archaeology of Piracy* (2006). In **Captain Kidd's Lost Ship, The Wreck of the *Quedagh Merchant*** Hanselmann demonstrates his prowess as a writer and scholar and the field is better for it.

Hanselmann opens with a discussion of the guiding principles he used to frame his examination of his data. These include World Systems, Network, and Agency Theory. He notes that these theoretical models provide insights into the social processes involved in the creation, function, and abandonment of the *Quedagh Merchant*. Generally, in anthropology the behaviors associated with these processes provide a snapshot of the past. But in historical archaeology the documentary record can illuminate the agency of individual actors.

With this perspective Hanselmann dives deep into the birth of globalization in the Early Modern era. This includes European competition for New World colonies and commerce, and Old-World trade with South Asia. Competition, whether through war or the machinations of the East India Company or British Crown, result in a complex set of relationships where it could be difficult to know friend from foe. The fluidity which this created meant an individual privateer acting as an agent for his sovereign might slide into the world of piracy.

Captain William Kidd was an individual who fell in the grey region between privateer and pirate. Hanselmann situates Kidd as an individual caught between two eras. One the older model of commissioning privateers who, acted not only in the interest of the parent state but in their own self-interest to the modern centralized professional navy.

Kidd serves on a successful privateer and finds himself a wealthy man by 1691. By the end of King William's War in 1697 many of Kidd's former privateer colleagues had already gone rogue. In the 1690s the Indian Ocean was filled with pirates whose attacks are stifling commerce in the region. Kidd and fellow New Yorker Robert Livingston make common cause with the Earl of Bellomont to suppress the pirates and to profit from their capture, but that was easier said than done. Kidd arrives in the Indian Ocean and fails to find the pirates. Instead he captures first a Portuguese vessel, and later a Moorish ship carrying "French passes" meaning it was a legitimate "target" as France was the enemy of England. Then, early in 1698 they captured the *Quedagh Merchant*. It too carried "French Passes" but had an English captain affiliated with the English East India Company. Furthermore, most of the rich cargo belonged to a courtier of the emperor of Mughal India who controlled trade with the East India Company. He denounced English pirates and threatened the Company.

Kidd's crew decided to keep the prize and steer for St. Mary's Island off Madagascar. At this pirate lair Kidd moved to the *Quedagh Merchant*. Six months later the rechristened *Quedagh Merchant* or *Adventure Prize* sailed for home. By the time Kidd arrived in the West Indies in April of 1699 he was wanted for piracy. He left the *Quedagh Merchant* off Hispaniola at Catalina Island where it was burned and abandoned and returned to New York. There the Earl of Bellomont had him arrested and confiscated the plunder. Kidd's letter of marque and the "French Passes" were "lost" at his trial (and only discovered misfiled two centuries later). Kidd was hanged for piracy in 1701.

How would you identify the resting place of the *Quedagh Merchant* or *Adventure Prize*? The vessel was built and outfitted in Surat, India. Three centuries later in 2008 Hanselmann and his team investigated a wreck site in the Dominican Republic. While no hull structure was initially observed there were broken anchors, 28 iron guns dating to the 17th century and a large unidentifiable ferrous magnetic anomaly. Using the documentary record of a deposition given by Kidd in 1699 noted that when he left the *Quedagh Merchant* it contained ten tons of scrap iron, fourteen or fifteen anchors, and about twenty guns in the hold. Other valuable and easily transportable bales of cloth and sugar were probably taken before the ship was burned. As the site had not been touched for three centuries the archaeological work was limited to testing so as to not disturb the wreck beyond obtaining basic information regarding the possibility it was the *Quedagh Merchant*. To build the case certain questions needed to be answered. What is the age of the wreck? Where was it built? Where had it sailed?

Analysis of one of the “great guns” revealed that in its form it “fit” the 17th-century timeframe. The test excavations revealed that some of the wooden hull timbers had survived. Testing of a sample revealed it was teak (*Tectona grandis*), indigenous to Southeast and South Asia where it was used for shipbuilding. Other articulated aspects of the hull were suggestive of Indian shipbuilding techniques. The final piece of the puzzle was the analysis of ballast stones. They were identified as basalt specifically associated with northwest India and two rivers from these deposits flow into Surat.

Most archaeologically themed studies end with a discussion of the findings and their interpretation. Hanselmann recognizes that the story does not end with his book. Rather the site and its story can continue for future generations as a “Museum in the Sea.” The creation of a marine protected area around the wreck site can create opportunities for economic benefit through cultural and natural heritage tourism. Conservation of marine resources including coral reefs and fish, combined with a compelling story replete with pirates is a winning combination.

Hanselmann chose well to publish with the University Press of Florida. Since its establishment 75 years ago in 1945 the University Press of Florida has become an important player in the publication of anthropology and archaeology topics. Currently these comprise 333 of nearly 2,000 in-print titles. Of these nearly fifty would best be characterized as dealing with maritime archaeology and history, and underwater archaeology more generally. Coming in at 222 pages with references and index this is an attractively produced book illustrated with 43 black and white figures and tables. A bonus is a timeline or “Chronology of Events” which provides a useful scaffolding for the reader. With the exception of one graph which unfortunately refers to colors (orange and purple) undoubtedly present in the original work all help the reader understand Kidd, the archaeological investigations and findings, and how the site was turned into a “Living Museum in the Sea.”

Captain Kidd’s Lost Ship, The Wreck of the *Quedagh Merchant* is a must read for those interested in the archaeology of piracy. And, in an era when funding is limited for the preservation of archaeological sites how a marine protected area can be sustained through heritage tourism. I am pleased to have this book in my library and look forward to Fritz Hanselmann’s future publications.

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Russell K. Skowronek holds the Houston Endowment Chair for Civic Engagement and is professor of anthropology and history at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley where he also serves as Associate Dean in the College of Liberal Arts and as the founding director of the Community Historical Archaeology Project with Schools (CHAPS) Program. He is the co-author or editor of three books dealing with piracy and maritime archaeology- *X Marks the Spot: The Archaeology of Piracy*, *Pieces of Eight*, *More Archaeology of Piracy*, and *HMS Fowey Lost...and Found!* All published by the University Press of Florida.



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