Doctoral candidate Greg Cook discovered an 18th-century shipwreck off the coast of Ghana, and is now amid a comprehensive archaeological survey of the site. He is shown, with his crew, aboard the 50-foot canoe from which he's done his diving. Opposite: Some of the brass bowls he found.

STUDENT RESEARCH

Diving Into the Past

Doctoral candidate and underwater archaeologist Greg Cook found what he was looking for in the waters off Ghana, and thereby pioneered a promising extension of Maxwell’s important work on early European trade in Africa.

In September 2003, Greg Cook stepped from a 50-foot African canoe into rough waters off the coast of Ghana. A trained diver and nautical archaeologist, Cook was hoping to find a shipwreck from the 18th century, when Ghana was the center of European trade in West Africa. He’d targeted this site—and about 70 others—using remote-sensing equipment that detects iron and anomalous shapes on the sea floor.

On Cook’s first dive, the surge proved too intense and dangerous, so he moved to a site further out to sea. “It was still pretty sketchy,” Cook recalls. “Whenever there was any current at all, the sand would come up in the water column and the visibility would go down to essentially zero. There was a lot of net material from fishing vessels and things you don’t want to get hung up in, and lots of moray eels.”

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—Chris DeCorse
Rolled back and forth by the current and unable to see, Cook touched a few small, loose objects and managed to pull them free. He returned to his canoe holding four brass bowls—typical 18th- and 19th-century trade items in West Africa. He later found hundreds of these bowls, along with stacks of brass bracelets (called manillas) and an iron cannon. In all likelihood, Cook had discovered the wreckage of a European ship with, he says, “an intact cargo of trade goods meant for the slave trade.”

With that discovery, Cook, a doctoral candidate in Maxwell’s anthropology department, simultaneously set the course of his dissertation and added a new dimension to Maxwell’s ongoing research in Ghana. Christopher DeCorse, associate professor of anthropology, calls the shipwreck project “unique and very exciting. This will be one of the first systematic surveys of underwater resources anywhere in Africa, certainly the first in West Africa.”

Since 1985, DeCorse has excavated the Ghanaian settlement of Elmina, just a mile and a half from Cook’s shipwreck site, and several Maxwell archaeology students have worked at nearby digs. DeCorse plans to coordinate all these efforts on land and sea as part of a long-term interdisciplinary project on early trade between Europe and Africa and the accompanying transformations in African societies. Shipwrecks are particularly valuable for documenting trade in a specific period, Cook says. Once a trade vessel reaches port, its goods are dispersed and become difficult or impossible to trace; but when a ship goes down, it buries a time capsule below the waves.

Cook returns to Ghana this summer for further diving, accompanied by students from both Maxwell and the University of West Florida’s Archaeology Institute, where he now works as a research associate. This expedition, like his first, is supported by the National Geographic Society.

One of Cook’s immediate goals is to pinpoint the age and nationality of the shipwreck—his findings to date suggest that it dates from the late 1700s and may be Dutch—and to salvage more trade goods that can be studied in detail. The crew will also investigate other target sites he identi-