

Marine archaeology in society and science

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Marine archaeology—treasure hunting, nationalism or science?

The way in which marine archaeology and other scientific fields within the humanities are perceived is influenced by strong values, deeply embedded at the heart of our culture. These values have influenced marine archaeology and its development causing an imbalance. The focus of this paper is marine archaeology in Sweden. There may be similar traits, trends and developments in other societies. In many cases different cultural factors may affect the situation in different societies.

Marine archaeology is concerned, for the most part, with the investigation and analysis of the wrecks of old boats and ships. There are several reasons for this. The ship has always been imbued with a strong symbolic value. It has held a central position in the economic systems of many societies, and this has given it a religious and mythological role. The ship carried the sun over the sky and brought the deceased to the land of death. The ship was one of the magic assets of the gods and was magic also in the sense that it enabled man to 'walk on water'. Perhaps the ship has the same symbolic value and attraction today, in the subconscious of both marine archaeologists and others. If this were the case it would rank with other age-old symbols, including among others, birth, death, the sun, the moon, the temple, the sea, the mountain and the hero.

The long history of commercial salvage of cargo and equipment from wrecks has had a decisive influence on the development of marine archaeology. Salvage was, and still is, an occupation with a potential for great financial gain, requiring great skills and quite sophisticated

technology. Early salvage soon acquired an antiquarian interest, since money could be made from selling ancient material salvaged from wrecks. Gradually, during the course of the 20th century, this antiquarian pursuit evolved into marine archaeology, a scientific development within the humanities with its own techniques of investigation, treatment and analysis. Marine archaeology was therefore partly a development of commercial salvage.

Characteristic of Swedish marine archaeology is a concentration of interest towards certain types of shipwrecks, namely those of the era of the Vasa kings in the 16th and 17th centuries, and those of the Viking to Medieval period.

The Royal Ships

Far from being a case of *deus ex machina* the salvage of the 17th-century warship *Vasa* in 1961 was preceded by extensive diving and salvage operations on a number of wrecks of old warships as early as the mid-19th century. The harbour authorities refused an application for salvage rights to the *Vasa* in 1921. Other wrecks considered for salvage included the *Riksäpplet* and the *Gröne Jägaren*, which both foundered at Dalarö in 1676, and the *Elefanten*, which sank in Kalmar Sound in 1564. The navy, in particular, has promoted interest in the old royal ships. The salvage of objects from old warship wrecks became more frequent when the heavy diving suit was introduced within the navy in the mid-19th century. Sites were required for training and exercises and old warships offered an opportunity for this and also for raising artefacts as well as ship timbers; the 'black oak' which was sold to

furniture manufacturers. Some of the recovered objects were offered to naval and other museums and were put on display. Others were sold to private collectors.

This interest in the big warships of the Era of Great Power in Swedish history during the 16th and 17th centuries can be traced at least as far back as the beginning of the 18th century. It encompasses the most famous warships, the king's ships and their roles in politically decisive and famous naval battles. It also embodies the king as the leader of the country and his officers, the king's men, as heroes on board ship. This ideological interest, coloured by symbolism, also lives and thrives today. Little removed from myths are stories woven today about the old warships, based as they are on stories in history books one or two hundred years old, strongly ideological in character. The stories or myths are at the present time repeatedly told by the media upon the finding or presentation of newly-found wrecks of old warships. This was the case when the *Vasa* was raised in 1961, when the *Kronan* was located in 1980, and when the discovery of a wreck, thought to be King Gustav Vasa's ship the *Lybska Svan*, was published in 1991.

The ideology surrounding the big sailing warships merits an analysis within the field of the psychology of religion. In essence, it is the story of a holy trinity, the *King*, the representative of *God* on earth, and the *King's ship*. The ritual events of going down to and salvaging from the wrecks of big, old warships, have now recurred in Swedish society at intervals of 10 to 15 years during the last 150 years at least. Their regular reappearance and the messages borne along with these activities make it quite possible to see them as recurrent projections of an ideology several hundred years old, surrounding the big warships from the Swedish Era of Power—a ritual with a nationalistic tone (Cederlund, 1994).

The Viking ships and their followers

Wrecks of what we used to call Viking ships were first discovered in Denmark and Norway during the late 19th century, a period of strong nationalism. The Viking and his ship as symbols of manly energy and courage have been vividly fostered in Nordic culture. In works on the history of the Swedish navy from the 18th

and 19th centuries—more or less all written by naval officers—the Viking is found as the precursor of the naval officers, the heroes on the warships of the Great Era in the 16th and 17th centuries.

In contrast with the large Post-Medieval warships, the wrecks of Viking ships were not found in deep water, but buried inland or in shallow water. They were investigated by archaeologists and ethnologists and were, therefore, subject to thorough scientific analysis and subject, also, to the positivist theory of the time.

In Sweden few large Viking ships have been found—perhaps because the cultural identification with them is not so strong as in Norway and Denmark. It seems that ship-finds, as well as other archaeological finds, are—when they have been recognized—quickly taken up in an ideological web of evaluations and activities in society. In this they are treated after the norms by which the web itself is created. In the extent of recognition and positive (negative) evaluation, or negligence, of such finds in this situation is shown society's identification with the find.

In the light of this perspective it is interesting to recall that there have been several large-scale excavations of Medieval ship-finds in Sweden. The most prominent of these were the excavations of more than twenty boats in the harbour of the Medieval town and castle of Kalmar in the 1930s and the excavation of eleven more at Helgeandsholmen, just below the Royal castle in Stockholm, in the late 1970s. Åkerlund's thorough presentation of the Kalmar ship excavations (1951) is a good example of the artefact-orientated approach common within Swedish marine archaeology. Varenius (1989) published a similar report on the Helgeandsholmen finds.

In view of the ideological perspective outlined above it is hardly surprising that the excavations at Kalmar and Stockholm, supported by the Central Board of National Antiquities, both centred on key sites in the formation of the Swedish state during the Medieval period.

Marine archaeology on the eve of the 21st century

The focusing of attention on Viking and royal Post-Medieval ships has caused neglect in other

areas. For example, until 1970 there was virtually no research into merchant craft of the 17th or later centuries. This is a remarkable situation, not least because these remains constitute perhaps the most extensive research material in Swedish marine archaeology today. Marine archaeology has not yet begun to see or define its areas of research. This presents a problem and should be high on the agenda of marine archaeologists.

A discussion of the research questions and priorities for marine archaeology today and in the future is considered elsewhere (Cederlund, in press)

Determining ideological limitations

Ideological and cultural limitations in this context do not only exist in Sweden, though the manner in which they manifest themselves may differ in other societies. If the former can be defined, it might be possible to see beyond them. A partiality for royal or Viking ships may be an expression of genuine interest in early society, ship-types and seafaring. Alternatively it may prove a vehicle for nationalistic feelings, through an imagined past, to economic or political ends. For the Nazi regime, as is well known, Viking symbolism, and also Viking ship symbolism, became a useful propaganda tool, connected with their Aryan-race philosophy. Perhaps the time has come to make an investigation into these ideological connections in society today and their socio-political role. In Sweden it appears that nationalistic (fascistoid) groups are currently using Viking attributes and ideology for their own ideological ends.

It is essential for an individual to recognize and to define his or her own standpoint in these matters. Seldom have the Vikings been so popular or so exploited as a marketing tool, through exhibitions and television programmes, as now in association with current developments within the European Union. Nationalism grows when international unity movements are active. We as scholars need to be aware of serving such masters.

Theory in marine archaeology

Scientific theory is closely connected with the ideas on which we base our standpoints. It is of importance for the development of the latter

that the theoretical aspects are discussed continuously. One of the conditions which should be inherent in this process is a multiplicity of voices and thoughts. In essence, theory for mainstream archaeology and marine archaeology is the same. At the same time one can, in the perspective of the history of science, see that the archaeological researchers who early on interested themselves in maritime culture in Sweden had similar research profiles. Very often they had, beside the archaeological, a strong connection with social sciences, directed toward later periods than that of prehistoric archaeology. Most of them were professionally both archaeologists and ethnologists (Cederlund, in press). One reason for the inclination towards ethnology was, and still is, that marine archaeology to a great extent works with source material later in time than prehistory, corresponding with the periods in which traditional ethnology largely worked. It is not at all unrealistic to state that marine archaeology developed quite early an ethno-archaeological approach—to use a modern term.

An ideological perspective

From an ideological perspective there are certain differences between marine and mainstream archaeology. Early researchers in maritime subjects have noted and discussed the evident imbalance in Swedish research directed towards historic and prehistoric times. There has been a strong concentration of interest in the development of political power based on land-ownership and on agrarian culture: in other words, on the society of landowners, king, noblemen and farmers (Klein, 1932: 141 ff; Hasslöf, 1972; Jonsson, 1988). In mainstream archaeology there has long existed a strong emphasis on settlement and cemetery studies of the agrarian population from the Neolithic Age to the Iron Age: their political and social structure and organization, their burials, monuments, acres and systems of ownership.

Research into these areas has long seemed to have been advocated and encouraged by organizations or individuals in positions of formal power in society. The circumstance that archaeology appears to put a priority on the factors in society underlying the development

of political and economic power has made it appropriate to name this kind of study 'power archaeology'. A disproportionate amount of attention has thus been paid to certain aspects. The result is an unbalanced view of society. This is hardly surprising in a world based on ideologies, but makes the development of a more differentiated approach within marine archaeology all the more important. The aim should be to study and explain structures, processes and ideas which are, and have been, characteristic of maritime society. They should also aim to paint as varied a picture as possible.

The field of marine archaeology needs to be broadened. It has followed the same lines for nearly 150 years. New avenues of enquiry should be sought. These in turn will stimulate and provide new insights and new knowledge. This renewal will also provide the opportunity to enrich our understanding of maritime society, a subject which has long been underestimated both in archaeology and in other historical sciences, but which has played a recognizable role in the past.

Which approach to choose?

Considered a distinct subject area, the role of maritime studies has been debated many times. The present author questions whether marine archaeology should be classified as a separate science, as a separate branch of mainstream archaeology, or as an integral part of the latter. The greatest potential seems to lie in an independent development of marine archaeology integrated with mainstream archaeology: the theoretical basis for archaeology is generally the same, regardless of individual specialist fields. It is essential that scholars in maritime studies continue to broaden our understanding of the maritime sectors of society, without isolating themselves or their results from mainstream archaeology. Indeed it is important to present the results to the whole archaeological profession.

This question and the standpoint taken to it is also of importance in relation to marine archaeological university education and training, and its development. It is for several reasons important that university studies in marine archaeology are integrated in the studies of mainstream archaeology. Both kinds of studies benefit from such a co-ordination; in particular the theoretical part of the respective education programmes should be well co-ordinated.

In several earlier papers the author has discussed a greater differentiation of marine archaeology, one to be developed on Swedish marine archaeological source material and studies (Cederlund 1988; 1991; in press). After the present paper was written for the TAG conference in Durham in December 1993, an article by Alison Gale was published in which this topic was taken up for discussion in a general perspective (Gale, 1993). The paper is a systematic structuring of research procedures and research material in which 'maritime studies' are integrated. Gale takes as the starting-point of her presentation the editorial of *IJNA* 22.1 in which 'Hydroarchaeology' is suggested as a generic term to describe the subject in focus here. Gale's suggestion of a new approach, built on logical reasoning, is to be applauded wholeheartedly. If realized, it may lead to the much needed reorientation of maritime archaeological studies. In the perspective of the ideological conditions, and restrictions, within the subject (something which Gale does not emphasize) the suggested framework may have one great advantage. It may not only widen the scope of the subject of maritime studies and give it the necessary balance; it may also be the means to relieve it from concepts with old and strong ideological connections which have restricted our views of the subject and also deprived us of our means of scientific expansion.

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