Spurlos versenkt (sunk without trace)

Mensun Bound

'Spurlos versenkt' is an expression that was much used by the Germans in submarine warfare. It means 'sunk without trace'.

Whenever I come across these words I smile to myself because I know that whenever a ship goes down there is always a trace – something always remains. It may be quite substantial, in the case of a semi-intact hull, or it may be no more than a fugitive stain in the sand, a few fragments of pottery, or some scraps of worm-riddled wood. Whatever survives, it is, broadly speaking, the task of the maritime field archaeologist to record, and sometimes to excavate and to preserve.

There is only one academic unit in England specialising in the excavation of shipwrecks, and that is Oxford University MARE (the latter word not only means sea in Latin, but is also an acronym for Maritime Archaeological Research and Excavation) which this year is celebrating its 10th anniversary. During our ten consecutive summers under the Mediterranean, we have seen ships and nautical remains from almost every phase of antiquity.

The Etruscan wreck off Giglio

The first wreck on which we worked was of likely Etruscan origin dating to about 600 B.C. It was situated at the foot of an off-shore reef beside the Tuscan island of Giglio, near the western coast of northern Italy. This ship had been carrying a range of goods from Etruria, Corinth, Laconia, East Greece and the Greek Islands.

The most spectacular discovery on this wreck was a series of beautifully painted Greek and Etruscan aryballoi. These were small, round-bodied pots which were used to carry oil, scents and various unguents. Aryballoi are sometimes featured in scenes on Greek vases where, for example, we see them being carried by athletes who used them to hold oil for cleansing their bodies after work-outs.

Our most surprising find on this wreck was a pair of wooden callipers; as far as we are aware these are the only ones to have survived from antiquity. Except that they were made from wood, they resemble callipers that can be found today in any drawing office. Many people, when they first saw them, thought that they were intruders from modern times – until, that
is, they were shown the remains of an inscription in ancient Greek that had been etched into one side of the tool by its owner.

The Giglio ship had landed on a soft seabed and, to a certain extent, was protected by sand from decay, marine parasites and modern-day looters. Some of the other wrecks that the team has examined were not so fortunate. These had landed on rocky bottoms where all the wood and other organic material had been consumed by the dreaded shipworm, or *teredo navalis*, and a variety of other agents of macro-and micro-biological decay.

**The wreck at Devil's Point**

Depth is a vital consideration in wreck excavation; the deeper you go the more dangerous it can become. One problem of deep diving is *nitrogen narcosis*, a syndrome that, broadly speaking, can be compared to drunkenness in which the further down you go the more light-headed and euphoric you become. This leads eventually to a breakdown of your decision-making faculties and the inability to perform even the simplest of tasks, such as taking a measurement or reading the contents gauge of your air-tanks.

One of the deepest wrecks on which we worked was situated at the base of a cliff face, at the very tip of Devil's Point, Montecristo, the tiny, uninhabited and very inhospitable island made famous by Alexandre Dumas in his book *The Count of Montecristo*. Here at a depth of between 50-60 metres, lay a Roman wreck that had been carrying a cargo of wine amphoras from Gaul. I eventually had to stop work on this wreck when the depth made it too dangerous to continue.

**The prison island of Gorgona**

Sometimes the MARE team dive to their absolute limit only to find themselves looking down on an exciting wreck just beyond their reach. This happened to us recently in the previously undived waters off the prison island of Gorgona, where, just outside the penitentiary's harbour, we came across the form of a Roman ship in the sand just ten metres beyond our grasp. On the same island we found a Byzantine wreck, but here work was frustrated by fierce currents.

**Inside a live submerged volcano**

Certainly our most bizarre wreck was that which was found beside the rock of Dattilo, near the island of Panarea in the Aeolian archipelago to the north of Sicily. Here we were actually working within the crater of a live submerged volcano. This wreck was from the late Classical period and contained a cargo of beautiful, black-painted table-ware. All around this site there were vents in the sea bed that gave off continuous streams of hot water and
poisonous volcanic gas. Sometimes as we worked we could hear muffled rumbling beneath us like the sound of distant thunder. On this site much of the pottery had to be cut from the seabed with hammers and chisels because certain of the volcanic processes had created a hard crust over the wreck and its contents.

**Unexpected finds**

Some of the finds that we have made were quite unexpected and frequently raised a laugh amongst the divers over dinner. Recently, while working in Greece, one of the team came across an English anchovy paste jar from around the turn of the century. Once in the early 80s, while working on the Giglio wreck, we happened upon a pair of women's tights, and several years later, while surveying a Roman wreck, we found a full six-pack of beer which presumably had been lost overboard from a passing yacht . . . and yes, it was still drinkable!

Some of the unexpected finds were not so funny. Once in the early years while carrying out a search for a deep-water wreck using a remote-controlled submersible, we came within inches of the horns of a World War II mine; and last summer, while excavating a wreck off the Greek island of Zakynthos, we were horrified to find beside the wreck an unexploded bomb that had been dropped from an aircraft during a World War II combat mission. All work was stopped until an underwater bomb-disposal team from the Greek navy came and destroyed it in a controlled explosion.

**Sharks and jelly fish**

Most people seem to think that our greatest worries are sharks, but so far we have seen only two in the Mediterranean, and on both occasions they passed us by without showing much interest. Sea-urchin needles and scorpion fish (which have poisonous spines down their backs) can, however, cause problems because they can be obscured easily by the clouds of sediment that are thrown up as we excavate. On one occasion our doctor had to treat a diver who had had all the skin on one hand stripped away by the razor-sharp teeth of a moray eel.

One time my wife and I, while searching for a Roman anchor some three kilometres from the Sicilian shore, jumped, without realising it, right into the middle of a pack of speeding tuna fish. They were within touching distance. If one of these 100 kg projectiles had hit us we might well not have survived.

My worst experience, however, came one summer when an assistant and I had the extremely painful experience of being caught in a 'school' of jelly fish. We were decompressing on the anchor line in very strong currents and so could move neither up, down nor sideways as the opaque canopies came directly at us in the current.
More grievous perils remain (Virgil)

Generally speaking, however, the fish life is not a problem; the main worry is the sea itself and the sudden mood shifts of which it is capable. Frequently these concerns are aggravated by the fact that the team is working on the very teeth of the reef which created the wreck in the first place, and of course what was a dangerous hazard in antiquity is still one today. Storms, particularly in the Tyrrhenian Sea, where the team has carried out most of its work, can, with very little warning, whip up the water and slam boats about as if they were made of cork.

In 1983 we were caught in such a storm. At that moment we had divers working on the seabed, below the surface turbulence, and so the boats could not run for shelter. On that occasion a wave overwhelmed one of our open-hulled craft, called Oscar November, and swallowed it down in one gulp. By this time the divers were returning to the surface completely unaware of the drama taking place above them. They later told of their astonishment when, while on their way up, they suddenly found themselves being passed by Oscar November on its way down.

The importance of wrecks

So why do we do it? What is it that makes these wrecks so special and worth all the effort, expense and risk?

The ship (it can be argued) was the most important vehicle in the ascent and spread of civilisation. Not only did it carry products, ideas and emigrants, and fight battles upon which the course of history pivoted, but also it was the finest expression of technology that a society, at any given moment, was capable of. Furthermore, a ship on the sea bed is there because of a sudden catastrophe, and thus represents a frozen moment in time, a section of life, which, if properly investigated, can give a valuable insight on society that is different from that obtainable from most excavations on land.

The maritime archaeologist is, therefore, not just interested in the cargo that the vessel was carrying, but also in the people and lifestyle on board, how the ship itself was constructed, equipped and navigated, and how all these factors together reflect the society and economy within which the crew and its vessel lived and operated. Archaeologists and historians have long recognized the importance of architecture, coinage, vase painting, etc., to the study of ancient history, but they have been slow to appreciate the role of the ship. This is a mistake which is being rectified by work such as ours.
Want to become a maritime archaeologist?

So . . . after all this, are you interested in becoming a maritime archaeologist? If you are then you will probably be wondering if you have to learn to dive. To this the answer is a most emphatic 'no'. There are many dimensions to maritime archaeology and diving is just a small part of one of them. The most important discoveries are often not made underwater, but rather in the library. Besides, from experience, we have found that diving is most certainly not for everyone, or, put another way, you can take a horse to water – but you cannot make it put on a mask and snorkel and go for a swim!

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