

The discovery on U3523 in Archaeological Context

The recent discovery by colleagues at the Sea War Museum Jutland of a Type XXI U-boat thought to be *U3523* raise some interesting points about the archaeological significance of finds of this type and what should be done with them. The primary challenges lie in accurately identifying the wrecks, assessing their status as naval graves and protecting them for the future. Recovery is generally not a realistic proposition.

Identification

Discoveries of U-boat wrecks from the late WW2 period are the most difficult to correctly reconcile to the historic record. In the chaos of the last few weeks, the otherwise meticulous record keeping of the Kriegsmarine broke down and from January 1945 onwards they become progressively sparser. Allied records are more helpful and in this case it seems there is little doubt as to the wreck's accurate identity.

The sea area where this U-boat was located was heavily targeted by the RAF at this time because it was aware of the potential flight of newly-built boats to Norway. We know that in fact on 2 May 1945 an order was issued for all U-boats in German ports which could dive to make their way to Norway. *U3523* had been commissioned January 1945 and would have been in a state of readiness by May. The U-boats leaving Germany had to pass through the bottleneck of the Skagerrak where the RAF was waiting and a number were sunk, including *U3523*, which had sailed for Norway on 4 May. Speculation that it was ferrying high ranking Nazis to the Argentine can be safely dismissed as conspiracy theory.

The detailed sonar scans of the wreck site show that it is without doubt a Type XXI U-boat, of which *U3523* was only one lost in the Skagerrak and unaccounted for. These were new types of submarines which contained a number of innovations which had the potential to make them dangerous opponents. A part of the RAF mission at this time was to prevent any getting to sea to sink ships. This was a success as no Type XXI U-boat sunk a ship during the war.

Naval Grave

With its identity correctly established, it is now known that this is the grave site of its crew of 58 German servicemen. As such the wreck should either be left in peace or more implausibly be recovered and the men reinterred. Germany lost over 800 submarines at sea in WW1 and WW2 and many have been found in recent years. It is hopelessly impractical to recover each one for this purpose, so leaving them in peace is the only option.

Under international law all naval wrecks are termed "sovereign immune" which means it will always be the property of the German state despite lying in Danish waters. Denmark however has a duty to protect the wreck, especially if the German state makes such a request.

Protection

Hundreds of wartime wreck sites such as *U3523* are under threat around the world from metal thieves and grave robbers. The wholesale removal from the seabed for scrap of wrecks such as the British cruiser HMS *Exeter* in the Java Sea and the industrial level of metal theft of the wrecks of

Battle of Jutland, also partly in Denmark's Exclusive Economic Zone, serve as a warning that organised crime will target shipwrecks of any age for the metals they contain.

Germany is among a number of countries which is currently pioneering the use of satellite monitoring to detect suspicious activity on shipwrecks thought to be under threat. The use of this form of monitoring has the potential to offer a cost effective means of saving underwater cultural heritage from criminal activity and its use is likely to become widespread in the next few years.

Recovery

In the past a few submarines have been lifted from the seas. In nearly all cases the results have been financially ruinous. Geographically close to *U3523*, *U534* was also sunk by the RAF in 1945. Its crew all evacuated that boat, meaning that she was not a grave when recovered from the sea in 1993. It was raised in the somewhat incredible belief that it carried Nazi treasure. The operation is thought to have been unprofitable. Similar problems were experienced by the Submarine Museum, Gosport with the raising of the *Holland 1* submarine in 1982. In that case the costs of long term preservation were unknown and proved greater than anticipated

The recovery cost is only a small fraction of the funds needed to preserve and display an iron object which has been immersed in the sea for many years. The caveat is that this sort of activity should not be undertaken lightly. More recently in the USA, the recovery of *USS Monitor* was limited to her gun turret, which is undergoing preservation. This is an example of the sort of limited recovery of significant objects from wrecks which are of a size which is manageable both physically and financially.

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