



## SCIENTIFIC FINAL REPORT

Regnr Östersjöstiftelsen:

Project manager: Anna McWilliams

Project title: A sunken War: the Baltic Sea during Second world war

### 1. Purpose of the project

A Sunken War: The Baltic during the Second World War

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**Ämne:** Arkeologi

**Projektledare:** Anna McWilliams

**Startår:** 2017

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The maritime history of World War II is often told through the events in the Atlantic Sea. The narrative is one of allies against German forces – portrayed as good against evil. But when you turn your gaze to the Baltic, the situation is a lot more complex and it becomes more difficult to categorise people into good and evil as the roles here were less clear. In addition, previous studies of the Baltic region during the Second World War have mostly focussed on one particular area, such as: economic, political, military or civilian. Traffic across the Baltic Sea included military and trade ships, as well as passenger boats but often the distinction between civilian and military is far from clear. This study has therefore taken a holistic view and instead of categorising different actors in advance, it has investigated all types of traffic in order to create a broader picture of the Baltic region during this conflict.

The purpose of this project has been to increase our understanding of the Baltic Sea during the Second World War and how it was used by different actors during this period. The project has had the aim to effectively ‘re-map’ the wartime Baltic Sea based on archaeological evidence. Physical remains still present under the surface, in particular wreck sites offer concrete evidence of the activities and presence of those actors who used and controlled the Baltic Sea during the Second World War.

### 2. The three most important results of the project and what conclusions can be drawn from them

This research has brought us a considerable step further in the understanding of this previously not studied, source material. The project has therefore brought new knowledge as to the physical remains in the Baltic Sea, both as to what these remains look like but also the understanding of how these remains have been treated and viewed by different actors.



This understanding does not just include how they have been viewed in the period since they were lost but also extends to how they may be treated in the future.

The results of this project demonstrate that:

This is a material with a huge potential to add to, or even challenge established historical narratives about World War II in the Baltic Sea. Documents and witness statements relating to periods of conflict can be a problematic source material as they are often created during times of great confusion or due to the highly confidential nature of events. Physical remains can therefore be great additional source of information to already known accounts.

**Physical remains can therefore act as great additional information to already known accounts.**

Physical remains also have the ability to bring us closer to events and sites of the past and this is also the case with the remains studied as part of this project. Studying the physical remains of a wreck or a battlefield therefore helps us understand, not only what has happened but also how it may have been experienced by those who partook. It gives us an emotional understanding both of life on-board as well as death on-board, an aspect not always visible in documents and statistics of war.

The project has also demonstrated that there is a lot to be gained by avoiding the often-used categories of military, civilian and trade when studying war. It is clear from the physical remains studied in this project that these categories merge, especially during periods of conflict, demonstrating the ‘messiness’ of war. This has also helped to ‘re-map’ the war in different areas and during separate periods.

This research has also demonstrated the increasing problem with modern wrecks and weapon dumps currently lying undocumented on the ocean floor causing a major environmental hazard. This research has shown that as these sites are not sufficiently documented and neither their exact location nor the conditions of the remains are generally known. This means it is very difficult to estimate what kind of threat these sites pose. Discussions have been carried out with the Swedish Authority for Marine and Water management (Havs- och vattenmyndigheten) where this project has helped to inform current practices.

The most prominent result of this project, however, has been to expose the severe lack of research in the area of contemporary archaeology of materials in the Baltic Sea in general and dating to World War II in particular. It was clear already ahead of this research that this was a much underdeveloped research area but this work carried out as part of this project has demonstrated that the extent of this lack of knowledge and attention from researchers can only be described as shocking. This lack of research means that the physical remains are completely undocumented and unanalysed and this has several severe consequences:



- This absence of previous research and heritage management is extensive both within the academic research community as well as within the heritage sector. The fact that this material is not dealt with by the heritage sector means there is no protection or discussion of its heritage value at all.
- This research has demonstrated that researchers as well as the heritage industry in the majority of the countries around the Baltic Sea (with the exception of Estonia) have had very little to no focus on 20<sup>th</sup> century heritage as they rather focussed on older periods, such as 15th-18th century marine material, especially Sweden and Finland (see McWilliams forthcoming).  
Based on the results of this project a clear problem with the new Fornsök (the Swedish Heritage Board's online heritage record) was discovered as search criteria was mainly created with older wrecks in mind making modern materials difficult, and at times impossible to find within the database. Communication was held through this project with administrators of Fornsök in order to inform of these problems which is likely to lead to changes to the system in the future.
- This study demonstrates that a lack of research has left this field open to misinterpretation from alternative groups with a more sinister agenda when it comes to history writing, some with historical revisionist motives (see McWilliams forthcoming).

To address this lack of knowledge, the project has also demonstrated that archaeological methods can be used successfully in investigating physical remains under water and how the results of these investigations can be used for several different purposes: scientific reports (McWilliams 2017a), as material to support legislative decision making (McWilliams 2017b) and as well as material to support museums and exhibits. The project supported an exhibition in 2019 at the Baltic Sea Science Centre at Skansen, an exhibition about marine archaeology at the new museum Vrak (part of Statens Maritima och Transporthistoriska museer) which will open in 2021 has also provided research and support in the Archipelago Foundation's (Skärgårdsstiftelsen) work interpreting and creating educational materials for the former military seal training facility at Gålö in the Stockholm Archipelago.

### **3. The project's contribution to the international research frontline**

Throughout this study the research results have been highlighted and communicated to representatives in the countries around the Baltic Sea, in particular Denmark, Germany, Poland, Estonia and Finland. In Poland this research has inspired the investigation of a new inventory to look closely at the physical remains within their territory.

The research has received great interest from researchers and authorities throughout the



Baltic region and in particularly in Germany both in regards to contemporary conflict archaeology and the physical remains and local history perspective.

This research has helped to increase awareness of the importance of contemporary perspectives and materials in marine archaeology, a field that has so far had very little research into modern materials. It has also been able to highlight the importance of marine material to a more established contemporary archaeology community where marine materials have so far not been studied at any great length. In this way this research has therefore been able to bridge a divide between two communities that can greatly benefit from each other's perspectives.

#### **4. New research questions that the project has led to**

This project has 'remapped' the physical remains of World War II in the Baltic Sea and through demonstrating the lack of previous research, several questions are in urgent need of further research:

- 1) More in-depth study is required to fully understand this material focussing on what these remains look like and where they are, how they are protected and how they are used within the different areas today.

These studies need to be carried out on three different levels to reach full capacity:

- Through a Baltic-wide cooperation between different regions and countries;
  - Through national and regional studies which investigate heritage recording, documentation and legislation of these remains;
  - Through a local perspective. There is a huge potential in local studies of physical remains, particularly when studied through a multidisciplinary approach. Studies of this kind will bring new aspects of known events as well as completely new knowledge to light which will widen our understanding of World War II in the Baltic considerably. It will also increase the understanding of how we have dealt with this history and its physical leftovers since then and still do today.
- 2) This research also brings forward questions of how the history writing in different countries and regions have affected the way we deal with, or do not deal with the history of World War II. It is clear that in some countries (such as in Sweden) there is very little focus on remains relating to World War II but a major focus on 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century marine materials. This has created an imbalance of what periods are included and left out within our archaeological research.

#### **5. The contribution of the research to the knowledge of the Baltic Sea Region and Eastern Europe**

This research has contributed to the knowledge of the Baltic Sea Region and Eastern Europe in two ways in particular:

- It has increased our knowledge of World War II in this region, a war which had a major impact on the region, not only during 1939-1945 but also throughout the



Cold War and still today.

- It has also increased our knowledge and opened up the discussion around heritage management of underwater material in the Baltic Sea, in general as well as specifically for modern material, highlighting differences and similarities between different regions.

## **6. The contribution of research to multidisciplinary knowledge formation**

This research demonstrates the value of modern maritime remains and what they can contribute to historical, anthropological, heritage and archaeological knowledge but it is also clear that they can be of great value also for other fields such as environmental studies. Materials such as modern wrecks still present on the ocean floor and modern weapons that have been dumped (especially during the period after World War II) are a major environmental hazard which is creating increasing concern. Understanding where the remains of these hazards are as well as understanding what they are made of, how they were used and how they were deposited is a major help in both estimating this threat as well as creating a management plan for how they should be treated.

## **7. Dissemination of the results of the project within and outside the research community**

### **Participation in conferences:**

2018: Contemporary and Historical Archaeology in Theory (CHAT) conference, Amsterdam

2019: May 3, 1945 - the "Cap Arcona disaster". Contributions to history and memory, Neustadt

### **Invited speaker:**

2020: Södertörns Högskola, Archaeology higher seminar series.

2020: Marine Museum, Karlskrona *Flygplanet som körde vilse över Blekinge* (inställt en vecka innan pga Covid 19).

2019: Statens Maritima och Transporthistoriska museers higher seminar series.

2018: Technische Universität, Berlin, Presentation title: *The two Titanics* (Poster and description: <https://www.identitaet-und-erbe.org/1685-2/>)

### **Acting adviser:**

- Part of advisory board for the new museum Wrecks, part of Statens Maritima and Transporthistoriska Museum.
- Advising on the topic of wrecks from World War II for the Baltic Sea Science Centre at Skansen
- Advising and providing documentation for Skärgårdsstiftelsen in their work to carry out interpretation and information work at the former military seal station at Gålö (<https://skargardsstiftelsen.se/besoksinformation/salstationen-pa-galo/>)



**Publications as part of this research:**

**2021** (submitted) Heritage in Absentia, *Nautical Journal of Archaeology*.

**2021** (submitted) Ett konfliktfyllt århundrade, Publication for the opening of the new museum WRECK, Statens Maritima och Transporthistoriska museum.

**2019** Luftfartsarkeologi – och hur vi fick Sveriges yngsta fornlämning *Marinarkeologisk tidskrift*. Nr. 3/2019.

**2017** *Archaeological report of the wreck of Arado 196-3* Huddinge: Södertörn Archaeological Studies.

**2017** En egendomlig kollision, i: Arnshav, M and Linderoth, A. (ed.) *Sverige och första världskriget: maritima perspektiv*. Första upplagan Lund: Historiska media

**2017.** (Medförfattare Mirja Arnshav) Submarines in the Silent World: Exploring Film as an Archaeological Record, in: *Journal of Contemporary Archaeology* Vol. 4, No 1 (2017)  
DOI: 10.1558/jca.30911. (**peer reviewed**)