

World Archaeological Congress 4

University of Cape Town

10th - 14th January 1999



Symposium: Symposium: Maritime Archaeology - Challenges for the New Millennium.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF MARITIME ARCHAEOLOGY IN NORTHERN IRELAND

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Introduction:

Government has been responsible for archaeology in Ireland since 1882 and the subject is firmly established in universities and more recently in the private sector. Surprisingly government in Northern Ireland has only had a responsibility for maritime archaeology since 1992, when it made an agreement with the Department of National Heritage in London, to take administrative responsibility in Northern Ireland waters for the UK-wide Protection of Wrecks Act 1973.

This paper documents actions taken since that time in the field of maritime archaeology and outlines planned future initiatives.

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Documentary Evidence:

A basis of knowledge was required for management of the maritime resource and to this end Environment and Heritage Service funded a Senior Fellowship in The Queen's University of Belfast to create a Maritime Record. The main brief was to create a computerized database of all archaeological sites in Northern Ireland's coastal waters. The first stage of the Record has been completed, accumulating all the available data from three source types; documentary, cartographic and illustrative.

The Maritime Record has now completed the documentary phase and contains evidence of some 3,000 wrecks as well as a large archive on other maritime sites. While this is a useful starting point, as it stands, the Maritime Record does not fully reflect the potential of maritime archaeology in Northern Ireland. The information is very limited in time, effectively covering only the years AD 1740-1945, while we have had human occupation of the island for at least 9,000 years. A second problem is that the locational evidence for wrecks is often poor.

Geophysical survey:

Environment and Heritage Service funds research in the University of Ulster to conduct a geophysical survey over a three year period around the coast of Northern Ireland. This project will produce a geomorphological map of the sea-bed including cultural data using side-scan-sonar, magnetometer and CHIRP with locational information plotted using a differential GPS mapping system. As most wrecks lie in shallow water, a program of research on shallow water prospection is being supported in the Department of Oceanographic Science, University of Southampton, England. Ground-truthing of the geophysical evidence will be undertaken at a later date.

Archaeological excavations:

The first underwater archaeological excavation took place in isolation in the 1960s when the Belgian diver, Robert Stenuit investigated the Spanish Armada galleass Girona, which sank off the north coast in October 1588. The material from his project forms the basis of the magnificent collection of sixteenth century Spanish Armada material in the Ulster Museum. A total of 26 Spanish vessels are known to have been wrecked on the Irish coast on their long homeward journey around the north of Scotland and along the west coast of Ireland after failing to invade England in the summer of 1588. The 1960s excavation stood in isolation and another generation was to elapse until a second shipwreck was excavated in 1995.

The Taymouth Castle was a fully rigged ship bound from Glasgow to Singapore which left Broomielaw in Scotland on Thursday, 3 January 1867. It was carrying a valuable general cargo which included 738 gallons of wine and spirits, 74 barrels of beer, stlg42,370 worth of

cotton, stlg511 worth of earthenware, stlg2,926 worth of iron and metal building materials, stlg110 worth of saddlery and stlg2,000 worth of sundry articles.

The Taymouth Castle had been built two years previously in July 1865, at Glasgow, by the Connell company and registered with Lloyds in August as A1. It was a fully rigged ship with three masts with square sails. The vessel was an experimentally built composite ship, with iron framing and wooden planking and sheathed in yellow metal.

Shortly after leaving port the vessel got into difficulties in severe gales which swept across the North Channel on the Saturday. It was wrecked that night on the north east coast of Ireland. The wreck site lay undisturbed for over 100 years until sports divers proved a threat to the site in the 1990s. As a result Environment and Heritage Service conducted its first underwater excavation in September 1995.

The investigation recorded the surviving structure of the vessel and excavated two trenches across the cargo mound. Iron framing was found conforming to the known dimensions of the vessel. A

large windlass of iron and wood was found with a taut chain still in position indicating that an attempt had been made to anchor the ship to keep it off the shore. Excavation of the cargo mound

recovered piles of iron cooking bowls which had rusted and helped form a concretion which preserved much of the cargo. There was a great deal of evidence of bottles of alcohol, with maker's marks on the bottles, indicating a Scottish origin. Similarly the pottery of which there was a profusion on the sea-bed, was all Glasgow sponge ware. The importance of the project was that it marked the beginning of underwater excavation by government in Northern Ireland.

Inter-tidal archaeology:

Faced with interesting studies of the archaeology of the inter-tidal zone elsewhere in Ireland and Britain, Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) has responded by conducting fieldwork in Strangford Lough. Systematic searching of the shore found evidence of sea-level change and submerged, 8,000 year-old, Mesolithic period landscapes. Sites relating to communications in the form of boats, landing stages and harbors were encountered in profusion. Agricultural exploitation of the shore was found in the form of field boundary extensions and farm quays. The harvesting and processing of seaweed as fertilizer and in the production of kelp was recorded. Kelp grids for the growth of seaweed, kilns for burning to make potash and kelp stores were found to be part of the coastal repertoire.

Fishing from boats is known to have been conducted in the eighteenth century when historical records indicate there were 150 vessels on the Lough, but no archaeological evidence survived of this activity. A variety of types of fishtraps were located in the inter-tidal zone. These are massive structures designed to catch fish on the ebbing tide. Stone traps close to 6th century monasteries indicate the possibility for an early construction. Wooden traps are more readily dateable and a group of V-shaped traps have provided radiocarbon results from the 7th to the 12th centuries. Stone traps are more difficult to date but a group of V-shaped stone traps show stratigraphical evidence of being more recent than the wooden examples and are thought to belong to the nearby Cistercian monastery in the medieval period. On the basis of knowledge already gathered there has been significant involvement of the private sector in surveying areas planned for development and providing mitigative measures to protect or record the material.

Future Developments:

EHS, in partnership with the University of Ulster, has established the Centre for Maritime Archaeology. This will deliver government's commitments to protect and record maritime archaeology and allow a programme of research and teaching in an academic context. The placing of statutory responsibilities together with research and teaching in a university context is designed to add value to ongoing investigations and to promote further academic interest in maritime archaeology.