A devastated wreck

At first, you hardly see anything but the greenish water surrounding you. But as you follow the gently sloping seabed downward, round ballast stones and timbers can be discerned. And then, at a depth of six metres, more and more pieces of timber come into sight – the remains of the naval ship *Rikswasa*, which sank after a fire accident in 1623.

The Baltic Sea does not provide the best conditions for scuba diving. It is cold and dark, with turbid waters and a species-poor ecosystem. Nonetheless, it does have one great advantage: due to a unique combination of water quality and the absence of wood-consuming organisms, historic shipwrecks are exceptionally well preserved and can stay more or less intact for several hundreds of years. And as the remains are often uncovered, they are easily explored by anyone with a scuba diving licence.

When the *Rikswasa* was launched in 1599, it was one of the largest ships in the Swedish navy, measuring about 45 m in length (Glete 2009:37). The hull was constructed of tonnes of strong oak timbers, fitted together with bolts and framings to form a hull that would resist stormy seas as well as attacks from enemies. Given this, and also the excellent preservation conditions of the brackish water, you would expect large parts of the massive ship to be preserved, with the exception of the parts of the hull that were consumed by the fire. However, on the sea floor, only a fraction of the ship is left, mostly in fragments. What has happened to the wreck? Where have all the missing parts gone?

These strange absences reflect a unique story of purposeful fragmentation. In the 1960s, large amounts of ship timber from the *Rikswasa* were salvaged...
and turned into memorabilia, artefacts and furniture, until it was forbidden by the Swedish Antiquity Act in 1967. How was this fragmentation carried out and motivated? What ideas, traditions and interests underpinned it, and what was the criticism?

As an example of deliberate fragmentation in the recent past and in our own cultural context, the case of the Rikswasa adds to the long history of archaeologically established fragmentation practices. It illustrates how fragmentation can be a way of engaging with the past and helps us recognise that the present authorised heritage discourse should not be seen as timeless or without alternatives.

100 years of wreck oak salvage

In Swedish waters, there is a long tradition of recovering ships and cargo lost at sea. From the 17th century on, expert salvors were recurrently supported by the kingship and the navy, who were eager to regain some of the precious materials so that they could be sold or reused. During the second half of the 19th century, helmet diving became more common, and the old wrecks started to attract attention that did not only have to do with financial interests. The increasing diving activities spurred a more general interest in naval antiquities, which was further fuelled by the high social status of naval officers in contemporary society and the emerging bourgeois’ nostalgic interest in the history of the nation (Cederlund 1983; Cederlund & Hocker 2006).

In the late 1860s, the burgeoning interest in old wrecks found a new expression: waterlogged oak wood. In 1867, an old man-of-war, Nya Riga, was recovered in Karlskrona roadstead, where it had foundered in the 18th century. This time, the salvors were not solely interested in retrieving ship timbers for reconstruction and showcasing purposes but also in paying homage to naval history. To a greater extent, the timbers were now reworked into boxes, letter openers, etc. The material had a unique life history, and to underline the royal connections, the king of Sweden received an entire suite of furniture made out of wrecked wood from Nya Riga (Cederlund 1983:37).

In the following decades, up to the 1920s, an additional number of ambitious salvage projects for the manufacture of furniture and memorabilia were carried out at naval wreck sites. Similar projects took place in the eastern and southern Baltic countries, especially in Finland, but not as frequently as in Sweden. One of the most extensive projects was carried out in 1916 in the city of Karlskrona and was sparked by the finding of the wreck of Småland, a naval ship sunk in 1730. The promotor, a marine engineer, had the wreck dismantled so that more than 20 tonnes of wood could be sawn to pieces for future processing (Ohlsson n.d.).

In fine carpentry, the use of waterlogged oak was not new, but up until then it was mainly found in bogs. It was widely known that, as a result of
the special preservation under water, the chemistry of such oak had changed so that over time it turned harder and darker. As the transformation process took hundreds of years, these clearly perceptible properties of the wood also made manifest a more subtle quality: its great age. The material was appreciated for being beautiful, rare and exclusive and was used for souvenir production, furniture making and interior decorations of affluent 19th-century homes (Cederlund 1983:37–38; HC archive).

Bringing the waterlogged oak wood of historic wrecks into focus made a far wider number of wreck sites potentially profitable. Although it was seldom as aged as bog oak, the wreck wood’s link to past societies was much stronger and fitted well into the growing interest in naval history. Consequently, when waterlogged oak from wrecks was introduced, a new quality was added to the material: an exciting provenance. The wood being part of a wreck raised from the sea floor made it stand out as spectacular, and the life history of the actual ships made it even more special. This opened up for the selection of specific pasts, with a preference for dramatic episodes and glory days in the nation’s naval history. For the most part, the salvors targeted wreck sites associated with the sailing fleet of the 17th and 18th centuries – ships that were also known to be big, built of oak and whose histories and sinking sites were comparatively easy to track down in archives.

A contributing factor to the market for waterlogged oak in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was contemporary style preferences. Materialising the past, the oak fitted well with the historicism in architecture and design. Its characteristic dark nuance, robust texture and aura of great deeds made it especially associated with masculine styles such as the new Renaissance, designated for men’s rooms and furniture, as well as prominent buildings. Its marine origin made it suitable for decorative items in naval contexts, and it also figured in churches in the shape of crucifixes and baptismal fonts. In the daily press of the early 20th century, adverts from sellers of ‘black oak’ from wrecks were recurrent, announcing that furniture made of the precious material was available for sale or that the wood could be bought in bulk (NLS archive).

In spite of an increased interest in waterlogged oak material and better opportunities for collecting it, this never became a large-scale industry. Salvage projects were costly to carry out, and the market was quite easily flooded. Also, in contrast to bog oak, most wrecked timbers turned out to be full of nails and bolts that made them unfit for carpentry. On top of that, due to the breakthrough of functionalism, wood of a lighter colour came into fashion. Hence, considerable quantities of the oak that were salvaged during the different pioneering campaigns were eventually discarded. In 1967, an addendum to the Antiquities Act criminalised all intrusive operations at historic wreck sites, such as black oak salvage (Arnshav 2011:39–43; Norman 2022:16–28). A century-long era of commercial oak salvage from wrecks
was coming to an end. But one last major salvage operation was still to be carried out: the recovery of the *Rikswasa*.

**Salvaging the Rikswasa**

The building of the *Rikswasa* started at a shipyard in Lake Mälaren, some 50 km west of Stockholm, in 1597 and was finished at the royal shipyard in Stockholm in 1599. The ship was built by the English shipwright Tomas Walter to serve as a command ship but was later rebuilt and degraded into a third-rate ship (Glete 2009:36–37).

The wreckage was due to a fire accident caused by the crew. In 1623, the *Rikswasa* and several other naval ships had anchored some 35 km east of Stockholm. Their mission was to block the sea route to Stockholm when the Polish fleet was expected. In October, after months of waiting, a fire broke out onboard. After it had reached the gunpowder kegs, it was impossible to stop. In order to prevent the fire spreading to the other ships and to facilitate later salvage work, the burning ship was towed towards the shore, where it sank. A few years later, salvage operations were carried out at the site, and at least 12 guns and the main mast were recovered (Glete 2009:36–37).

For centuries to come, the wreck of the *Rikswasa* was left on the sloping sea floor. The shallower parts of the wreck were partly discernible in the water, and the locals were not ignorant of it (SMR archive: 6143:3). The shore and the house property closest to the wreck were called *Brännskäret* (Eng. The scorched islet), and stories about the sunken ship were passed on by word of mouth. In the early 20th century, it was either assumed to be an old Swedish naval ship or a Russian naval ship that exploded during the Russian pillage of 1719 (ISOF archive). A salvage company informed about the foundering of the *Rikswasa* in the area made plans to approach the wreck in 1922 but never proceeded (Randall 2013:38–39).

After the aqualung hit the market in the mid-20th century, the wreck was occasionally explored by scuba divers, of whom at least some were aware of its identity. In the late 1950s, a diving group interested in maritime history salvaged the rudder and the transom, as well as a number of cannonballs. Some of the cannonballs were sold or put on display at local museums, while the transom and the rudder ended up as garden decorations. This was after the owner’s suggestion to place it in central Stockholm as a monument for commemoration of the former royal shipyard was turned down by the city’s officials (SMR archive).

In 1956, a uniquely well preserved and richly ornamented early 17th-century naval ship, the *Vasa*, was found in Stockholm harbour. The ship had sunk on its maiden voyage and enclosed more than 40,000 objects from contemporary society. The find and the preparations for the pioneering salvage gained a lot of media attention and sparked a wide public interest...
in underwater heritage and naval history. The recovery was followed by a
ground-breaking excavation and preservation project (Cederlund & Hocker
2006). Today, the Vasa Museum is an important tourist attraction, with
about 1.5 million visitors annually.

Inspired by the commotion around the Vasa, two brothers who ran a
scuba diving and carpentry business had the idea of taking up the, by then,
rather dormant business of wreck wood salvage, and their target was the
Riksvasa. They had learned about the position of the wreck and were also
aware of the fact that it had been ravaged by fire and, to some extent, also
by scuba divers. The brothers assumed that the wreck was inapt as a source
for archaeological knowledge and public mediation and hence lent itself to
alternative approaches (SMR archive). The Swedish Antiquities Act did not
yet provide protection for ancient wrecks, so it was perfectly legal to salvage
timber from wreck sites (Norman 2022:13–28).

In the early 1960s, the brothers started to explore the site. No proper
documentation of the process exists, but contemporary statements in the
press indicate that they started off by recovering artefacts, such as cannon-
balls and loose timbers. Thereafter, they broke the remains of the deck in
order to get access to the inner hull; they removed ballast stones and used a
dredge to remove sediments as preparation for the salvage (Andersson 1964;

The breaking and lifting were mainly done during the winter with the help
of a tree stump lifter placed on the ice. During the summer, a boat with a
 crane was employed. The following year, a large pontoon and a giant crane
were hired for the final lifts. The media were once again invited to witness
the event, and this time large sections of the hull were brought ashore (AFC
archive; Tore 1965; Figure 17.1).

Considering the recent and carefully planned raising of the Vasa and the
great effort that was put into the archaeological excavation and preservation
work that followed, the rough treatment of the Riksvasa stands out as a
striking contrast. But unlike the Vasa project, the goal was not to preserve
the hull as completely as possible to reconstruct an intact early 17th-century
ship but rather to upcycle the individual timbers of the hull. The procedure
for salvaging Riksvasa’s hull parts did indeed become more and more incau-
tious as a new heritage policy on wreck protection was on its way to being
authorised, making the whole project turn into a race against time.

Still, although it was perfectly legal to salvage the Riksvasa, not every-
body was happy about it. Locals living close to the wreck site wrote to the
authorities and expressed the opinion that the wreck was an appreciated part
of the neighbourhood and ought to be left as it was, to be enjoyed by the
community and by careful scuba divers, at least until the time came when
it could contribute to historical knowledge and be explored by professional
archaeologists. In addition, they were also disappointed with the salvors’
A man-of-war in pieces: fragmenting the *Rikswasa* of 1599

279

choice to erect a tomb-like stone by the shore for commemorating the wreck, as they had preferred a memorial made out of original wreck timbers (SMR archive).

The heritage sector, on the other hand, did not so much oppose the ongoing salvage project as such but was more worried about the fragmentation and commodification of the remains and, above all, the lack of control. The ship timbers came in useful as comparison material for the ongoing reconstruction of the *Vasa*, and the heritage sector wished to have them properly documented. However, the Vasa project had already resulted in a great deal of cost and effort for all parties involved, not least the taxpayers, and trained underwater archaeologists did not yet exist. For the foreseeable future, there will simply be no capacity for the heritage sector to lead additional salvage projects (Norman 2002:26; SMR archive).

The solution was to cooperate with the salvors. It was agreed that the Maritime Museum, from now on, would be given the opportunity to document

FIGURE 17.1 A large section of the bottom part of Rikswasa’s hull was raised in the mid-1960s. It was then fragmented for the production of furniture, gadgets and memorabilia (photo: Jonas Berg, courtesy of National Maritime and Transport Museums, CC BY-SA).
choice to erect a tomb-like stone by the shore for commemorating the wreck, as they had preferred a memorial made out of original wreck timbers (SMR archive).

The heritage sector, on the other hand, did not so much oppose the ongoing salvage project as such but was more worried about the fragmentation and commodification of the remains and, above all, the lack of control. The ship timbers came in useful as comparison material for the ongoing reconstruction of the Vasa, and the heritage sector wished to have them properly documented. However, the Vasa project had already resulted in a great deal of cost and effort for all parties involved, not least the taxpayers, and trained underwater archaeologists did not yet exist. For the foreseeable future, there will simply be no capacity for the heritage sector to lead additional salvage projects (Norman 2002:26; SMR archive).

The solution was to cooperate with the salvors. It was agreed that the Maritime Museum, from now on, would be given the opportunity to document
all recovered ship parts and incorporate finds of historical interest into their collections. This resulted in a handful of construction drawings, photo documentation of several ship parts and 25 collected artefacts (Arnshav 2011:39–44; SMR archive).

Meanwhile, work on developing proper legal protection for wrecks was intensified in order to slow down private exploration and gain control over the scuba diving situation. In 1967, an addendum to the Antiquities Act was implemented, popularly referred to as ‘lex Nahlin’ after the brothers who ran the salvage business at the Rikswasa wreck site. It stated that shipwrecks that had sunk more than 100 years ago were to be considered ancient remains and that it was forbidden to dislodge, remove, excavate, cover, or in any other way alter or damage them (Arnshav 2011:39–44, Norman 2022:16–22). Hence, an in situ policy that included remains on the sea floor had finally prevailed. Thereby, further recovery at the Rikswasa wreck site was halted, as was future commercial wreck wood salvaging.

Fragments for sale

There is growing evidence from many past cultures that objects, and even bodies, have recurrently and deliberately been disarticulated in order to create special fragments; these have subsequently been worked, circulated or deposited for reasons having to do with relations, identity and memory (Chapman 2000; Chapman & Gaydarska 2007;Brittain & Harris 2010; Rebay-Salisbury et al. 2010; Brück 2016; Frie 2020). The phenomenon seems to be well spread across the world and throughout history. Acknowledging this circumstance has without doubt enriched the archaeological understanding of past cultures and the many ways in which material culture defines relations and societies. However, deliberate acts of breakage and circulation of fragments in our own time and present sphere of culture have rarely been archaeologically studied.

The Rikswasa was deliberately broken in the early 1960s in order to facilitate salvage of the timbers and hull sections. Thereafter, the parts were further worked and circulated in a similar way as has been found to be characteristic in past contexts in which fragments have been considered significant. Some timbers, like pieces of deck beams, frame tops or beautifully eroded planks, were simply sawn into stumps and marked with a small metal plaque stating that the artefact was made of ‘black oak’ from the Rikswasa and salvaged by the Nahlin brothers. In other cases, elements – often brass items with a nautical touch such as lamps, clocks or barometers – were mounted on a gently polished timber stump. Some furniture was also manufactured, like a bar table for the Shah of Persia. A well-known restaurant run in a building with historical links to one of the commanders of the ship bought large quantities of wood for furnishing a bar. A shipping company had the dining room of
one of their ships fitted up with eroded pieces of wreck timber, together with illustrations of the Rikswasa’s past (AFC archive; NLS archive; SMR archive; Wiklund 2013; Figure 17.2).

Needless to say, the main reasons for dismantling wrecks and circulating the waterlogged oak wood were always commercial. The salvors of the Rikswasa ran a gallery in the city centre of Stockholm in which items made of wrecked wood, such as cutlery, salt and pepper mills, beer taps, whisky racks, cigarette lighters and ashtrays, were put on display and sold. Advertisements were also published by the brothers in newspapers, offering larger quantities of wood for sale. They regularly invited the press to follow their endeavour (a short documentary film about the ‘diving adventure’ was even produced by a Swedish director known for contemporary feature film thrillers), resulting in a number of articles in popular magazines with a predominantly male audience. A narrative was formed about the exclusiveness of the wreck wood, the great value of it, and the entrepreneurship of the salvors. Similarly, the media did not forget that several royalties and other celebrities had been given or had bought items made of Rikswasa wood (AFC archive; Andersson 1965).

FIGURE 17.2 The parts of Rikswasa keep circulating. In 2022 this clock was sold for c. 90 euros. The brass plaque states that the wood is a deck beam from the Rikswasa, built in Stockholm in 1599, foundered in 1623 and salvaged by the Nahlin brothers in 1962 (photo: Anders Båge Wahlström, Höganäs auktionsbyrå).
In the carpentry industry, hopes were occasionally put forward that waterlogged oak could be a domestic alternative to mahogany and other dark-coloured tropical kinds of hardwood, which were again fashionable in the 1960s. Nevertheless, as it seems, the whole basis for commodifying oak from old wrecks was not only a matter of the colour and properties of the wood but also a fascination for its historical qualities and its submarine past, to which the dark colour testified. In other words, the black colour was not primarily appreciated because of aesthetic reasons but rather because of its intrinsic values and affectiveness. The black oak brought the past into focus and added place-value by grounding it in a precise site and the specific life history of a ship.

When fragmented, the mnemonic wood acquired even more meaning. The artefacts, which were all marked or sold with a certificate declaring that they were pieces of the Rikswasa, were loaded with generic references to sinking ships, ship wreck explorations and hidden treasures. And when coupled with nautical objects or pieces of coral or turned into household artefacts associated with predominantly male users, further references were added.

In sales brochures and statements in the press, the salvors’ framing of the Rikswasa products was plain: the wood provided a link to a royal ship dating from the nation’s great power era (SMR archive). As one of the brothers explained in an interview, besides making money, the goal was to offer people an experience of the past in a direct and affective way. By means of the fragmented ship timbers, the salvors provided people with a chance to hold a piece of 17th-century history in their hands, display it in their homes, and experience it together with friends and relatives (Andersson 1964).

In addition, the salvors stressed that by selling their Rikswasa artefacts in a kiosk next to the preliminary Vasa Museum, tourists would stop vandalising the Vasa by cutting fragments out of the hull and instead buy a beautiful souvenir made of its predecessor and namesake. There were even plans to sell the Rikswasa fragments in the souvenir shop of the Vasa Museum so that the full public potential of the Vasa – a whole ship wreck – and the Rikswasa – a fragmented ship wreck – could complement each other (Andersson 1964).

In the minds of the salvors the fragmentation of the wreck was not merely a destructive process, but instead a cultural achievement. It was a way of activating a dormant ship and a means of sharing history by reaching out to a non-diving community. It is noteworthy that these ideas about offering links to history were launched in a particular period in Sweden that has been described as extremely future-oriented and in which interest in the past was declining. Promotion of history related to kings, nations and the great power era was definitely not at the top of the agenda of professional historians and the heritage sector (Grundberg 2004). In that regard, the Rikswasa fragments can be understood as reifications of an unscholarly interest in history. Just like traditions in Nordic folklore suggested that the recycling of timber could
result in the transplanting of household spirits, it is reasonable to assume that the logic underpinning the fragmentation also draws on an acknowledgement of a more animistic and relational approach to old buildings and ships in contrast to modern objectification (Herva 2015).

**Fragmented heritage and the heritage of fragmentation**

It has been pointed out that the discipline of archaeology is strongly influenced by a contemporary ‘culture of wholes’, meaning that there is a strong tendency in the modern western world to emphasise and idealise what is whole in the sense of being original, intact and unchanged. Accordingly, archaeologists recurrently tend to associate bits and pieces with loss, indicating that something has gone missing or is simply wasted. Confronted with a fragment, most archaeologists immediately turn to reconstructions and thoughts on what the piece originally used to be (Chapman & Gaydarska 2007; Brittain & Harris 2010:589; Burström 2013).

This preference for wholes has clearly had an influence on the approach to the *Rikswasa* wreck site. In the early 1960s, the wreck was ruled out as being of no or low archaeological interest because it was not as intact as the *Vasa* (although in international comparison it was remarkably well preserved). Obviously, more emphasis was put on the damage in relation to the fire in 1623 than on the unique preservation qualities of the Baltic Sea. After the events in the 1960s, the wreck site was generally dismissed as messed up or devoid of content. Among archaeologists, the incident was bewailed and often referred to as a tragedy and blot in the history of underwater heritage management (Arnshaw 2011:39–44; Wiklund 2013:13; Norman 2022:13).

If it were not for the extremely improbable but successful *Vasa* project, history’s judgement of the handling of the *Rikswasa* may not have been equally harsh. But there are also reasons of even greater significance that go far beyond the management of cultural heritage under water and the Swedish situation. The salvage of the *Rikswasa* took place during a period of time when underwater archaeology (and historical archaeology) was starting to become professionalised and saw a rapid shift in emphasis from collecting cultural relics for museum displays to *in situ* conservation. A century-long tradition of private commercial wreck oak salvaging was about to come to an end for the benefit of a preservation paradigm, which today is generally accepted and promoted by influential organisations like UNESCO and ICOMOS as well as legislation in most economically developed countries (Brattli 2009; Burström 2009; ICOMOS 1990).

In the paper *Heritage of Heritage*, archaeologist Cornelis Holtorf (2012) points out that every heritage discourse is firmly situated in a specific historical and cultural context and that much of what we take for granted regarding heritage and preservation is bound up with a very particular way of
thinking, disposed to a “sacredness of cultural heritage” (Holtorf 2012:159 citing Beckman 1998:32–39). He discusses how the contemporary heritage discourse is strongly focused on, even obsessed with, conservation, preservation and protection, and he stresses that this “curious peculiarity of our age” (Holtorf 2012:160) has taken over nearly the entire range of legitimate ways of being interested in the past. Finally, he questions what people a century from now will be able to learn about us from studying presently curated heritage sites. What will the traces of our management approach look like? Will the preservationist paradigm unfold, and if so, how will this be understood (Holtorf 2012)?

The past in the past is an interesting subject that has gained considerable archaeological attention. It has been established that many prehistoric cultures show a strong interest in historic artefacts and monuments (Bradley 2002), and that such engagement with the past has sometimes involved the disarticulation of ancient remains and the circulation of mnemonic fragments (Chapman 2000). Most often, the use of the past has been linked to elite groups (Jensen 2002; Lund & Arwill-Nordbladh 2016; Lund 2017). But the phenomenon as such – to relate to history and engage with its materiality in one way or another – is a basic human condition (Schnapp 1996).

What kind of footprint did past salvage activities at the Rikswasa wreck site leave? Unfortunately, there is no documentation of what the wreck site looked like before the arrival of the black oak salvors. Nonetheless, by studying the files of the Maritime Museum and scrutinising the identifiable pieces of timber that were put up for sale, a rough understanding of the salvors’ impact on the wreck site can be gained. It can be concluded that in addition to the stern parts and the rudder that were recovered as early as the 1950s, a large section of the bottom of the hull, a somewhat smaller part of the port side of the hull and many of the deck planks, frames, beams and other timbers were removed from the site (SMR archive).

After the final lifts in 1966, the wreck was seldom visited by divers, as it was widely dismissed as totally destroyed and mostly gone. Left on the site was a remaining part of the hull bottom, covered by a heap of loose timbers, scattered ballast stones, some tiles and pieces of rope, and wires that the salvors had strewn around (Cederlund 1983:224; SMR archive).

When revisited a little more than 40 years later, no further changes were observed. Here and there, nails are sticking out of the frames, reflecting the fact that beams, inner planking and structures have been removed by force. There are no signs of saw cuts in the timbers, which confirms that the wreck was mainly broken by using slings, straps and lifts. Other remains of the salvage events were a cable and ropes, as well as the many ballast stones that were found sprinkled over the sea floor. Most notable, however, is the mess of thousands of loose stumps of timbers. This bears no resemblance to natural fragmentation processes but reveals which wreck parts were rejected; it mirrors the selection process and perhaps also the efforts to clear and lighten
certain sections of the hull as a preparation for lifting them out of the water. The site formation process is in many ways complicated but has great potential, if surveyed in greater detail, to provide information about the salvors’ selection and course of action (Figure 17.3).

A new understanding

To anyone interested in the construction of early 17th-century naval ships, and life on board, the interference of the oak salvors is indeed a serious violation of the wreck site. But what if we instead approach it from another angle, regarding it as an iconic site in the history of maritime cultural heritage management and as a representative of a unique tradition of oak salvaging, of which we still have much to learn? In that case, the very destruction, including all the material spoils of the salvors, along with the striking absences they caused, are telling evidence of the way in which the past was consumed by oak salvors, traders and buyers. It can be argued that the traces of salvage at the wreck site form a heritage in themselves. In addition, the history of Rikswasa can help us reflect on current heritage paradigms and, at the same time, help remind us that this is by no means universal or without alternatives.
On that note, the history of the fragmentation of the Rikswasa forms an interesting example of a popular approach to history, of an elite (of professional heritage managers and archaeologists) taking control over the past, and how a new heritage paradigm spreads while contradictory approaches are shunned and even criminalised. In many ways, the destruction of the Rikswasa marks a turning point in Swedish maritime heritage management. An end has been put to further salvage operations, but the allure of wreck oak is by no means extinct. At auctions, antique shops and internet auction sites, fragments of the Rikswasa and other wrecks keep circulating, like material memories of powerful ships and of the devoted salvors that brought them to pieces.

When considering what kind of artefacts were made from the fragmented ship, much can be learned about how the Rikswasa wreck was perceived by the salvors and their customers. The artefacts clearly reflect a contemporary fascination with old, naval ship wrecks, also revealing how these were closely linked to adventure, masculinity and the wider nautical and submarine sphere. As is often the case with material culture, they also had a part to play in manifesting and negotiating their owner’s identity. They were exclusive but not expensive, and they were not controlled by the elite but rather by specialists and people from the broad layers of society.

Approaching them as fragments brings us a deeper understanding. It makes us aware of the very materiality of the wood and how the fragments are relational and link people to distant places and past events and periods. A strong appreciation of authenticity is present here, but not in terms of original forms and functions but in terms of the wood itself, as a matter with a kind of soul and animated by past experiences (see Herva 2015). This is also expressive of a non-scholarly take on the past and ancient remains. Altogether, the pieces of Rikswasa point towards fragments as something more than just pieces of a former whole. They are new objects in their own right, and fragmentation enabled their transformation. Hence, fragmentation is not the end but rather the beginning, blazing new paths and enabling a diversity of possible trajectories for single composite things, like a ship.

References


**Archives**

AFC, The Archival Film Collections of the Swedish Film Institute, Stockholm.


HC, The Hallwyl Collection

Catalogue 1, 180.

ISOF, Swedish Institute for Language and Folklore, Uppsala.

The place name register, no 1958028.

https://ortnamnsregistret.isof.se/place-names [Accessed 26 August 2022].


Rikswasa 6143:3.


The Newspaper Archive, search word ‘Rikswasa’, ‘svartek’, ‘sjödränkt ek’.

https://tidningar.kb.se/ [Accessed 26 August 2022].