

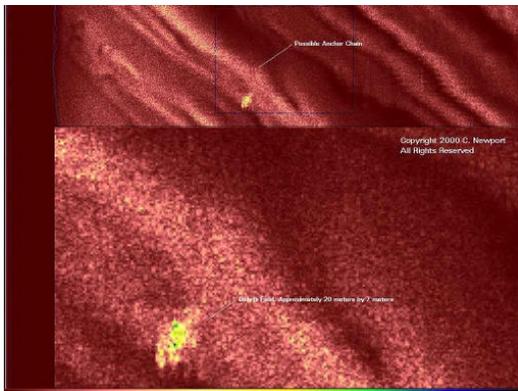
Coconuts of the Deep

By
James Sinclair

This project actually started for me while I was involved as the chief archaeologist on the 2000 Titanic expedition. We conducted the Titanic Expedition from the worlds largest (440' ft.) oceanographic vessel the Akademik Mistislav Keldysh with its two manned submersibles the MIRS from the P.P. Shirshov Institute of the Russian Academy of Science. The Titanic was as deep as I had ever been and was as deep as I expected to ever go. During the course of the project I was contacted about participating in another deep water expedition. I later found out that it was to have taken place that year but due to the tragedy of the sinking of the Russian submarine Kursk it was put on hold until the following year.

The Project

The project that I became involved in the next year really evolved out of the search by Curt Newport for the Liberty Bell 7 Space capsule, which sank in 1969. The project to find the capsule was a success and the survey turned up quite a few interesting objects. One was thought to be a n“old shipwreck” which appeared on side scan sonar.



(©Curt Newport)

Side scan image of the target

Curt got together with Mike McDowell of Deep Ocean Expeditions whose company arranges for and visits the sites of Titanic and the Bismark as well as many other sites, along with the scientific crew aboard the Keldysh. They put the project together mainly because of the proximity of the wreck site to the shipping lanes used by the Spanish Fleets.

Discovery

I was brought on as the archaeologist on the project and was quick to point out that there were a vast number of other possibilities regarding the identity of this shipwreck aside from the possibility that it was a Spanish Galleon loaded with treasure. The group decided to take that risk. The Akademik Keldysh was already mobilized and in the Atlantic with a break between projects. We gathered in Bermuda and proceeded to the area. Transponders were deployed around the target area the evening we arrived on station. I was in MIR I on the first dive down. After a three and one half hour descent we arrived on the sea floor. This was nearly a mile deeper than the Titanic at 16,300 feet.

Most of the deep ocean is fairly unremarkable; flat mud and more flat mud. This area was different. It had the appearance of sand dunes rolling from southwest to northeast. I was in the sub with Dr. Anatoly Sagalevetch and Mike McDowell and we spent the next 13 hours moving up and down these dune lines searching for traces of the wreckage. MIR II was running parallel transects on the other side of the search area. Small piles of dead eel grass had collected in the sheltered dune like rises, an organic detritus; mute testimony to the northward flowing Gulf Stream passing far above us. Animal life was sparse during our search. Some deep water jellyfish, evidence of bottom boring worms and an occasional blood red shrimp passed under the lights of the submersible. The most interesting animal we encountered that day was a Benthos fish.



(© Deep Ocean Exploration and Woods Hole Oceanographic)

We began to run low on energy and were about to begin our ascent when we were contacted by MIR II - they had found the wreck!



Mir and Bow (© Deep Ocean Exploration and Woods Hole Oceanographic)

I asked Dr. Sagalevetch to radio the other sub and ask what they were seeing. The answer came back in Russian and was promptly translated, “We see ballast stones, pottery and coins”! Perhaps we had found the wreck of a galleon after all. We were so low on energy in Mir I we had to leave (5 hours back to the surface) so we in MIR I did not get to see the wreck that day. My first sight of the wreck was that evening on video taken by MIR II. What was thought at first to be ballast stones actually turned out to be *coconuts*! - So much for the Spanish galleon dream.

Recovery

The next day found us on the shipwreck which was an amazing and beautiful sight. The copper cladding that once protected the wooden hull from wood boring organisms was intact and mostly upright on the bottom. There must have been a list to starboard when she settled on the bottom, the structure seem to have collapsed in that direction. The wooden superstructure was in an advanced state of decay wood boring organisms having taken their toll. The upper decks were absent revealing the interior of what appeared to be a small merchantman (70 feet) involved in trade in the Caribbean. Coconuts filled the mid-ships covering any ballast that might have been seen (one piece of quarried granitic rock was recovered). In the bow the remains of a partition was seen and in front of this partition - bottles, many bottles, most at one time held liquor probably rum, which in conjunction with the coconuts earned this vessel the nickname the **Pina Colada** wreck!

The Collection

We recovered some of the materials from the mid ships and bow and some which were sitting on the back deck to help identify the wreck. The collection of pottery was distinctly utilitarian classed as a white salt glaze, some with a “Barley pattern” (Hume, 1969, pg. 116) with no discernable makers marks. There was a rather large multi gallon stoneware jug sitting alongside a demijohn which sadly was not intact and was left in situ. The glass portion of an hour glass, two flintlocks

pistols with brass barrels,



(© Deep Ocean Exploration and Woods Hole Oceanographic)

(Note coins in lower left)

two octants, a wooden telescope, a leather boot, 1300 silver coins of varying denominations and a gold box. Everything about the collection seemed English. But a small section of the wooden structure that was recovered was cedar, a favorite of shipbuilders along the Chesapeake or Bermuda so there is an outside chance the vessel was American. No iron objects were observed or collected, they simply did not survive, like the more contemporary Titanic I believe that a number of factors are at play in the degradation of iron at depth:

1. There is the iron consuming microbes that have been described as attacking the iron on Titanic.
2. There are dissimilar metals associated on the wreck which probably set up an electromotive force where metals that are further down on the electromotive scale deteriorate at a faster rate than those that occur higher on the scale.
3. There is also no mitigating coating that protects the iron from continuously giving off ions into the environment i.e. on shallow water shipwrecks there is a calcareous deposit which in some cases creates a protective layer for the item slowing the deterioration process. At this depth the carbon dioxide level is higher so the acidity level is also raised, calcium rapidly deteriorates. In essence the ocean is a calcium starved environment, so no protective encrusting process is possible.

One of the most dramatic pieces of evidence of the absence of iron came when we lifted away from recovering some of the artifacts from the stern area of the wreck. As we moved up and away the skids of the MIR had broken through the surface cover of brownish white on the ocean floor to reveal a vibrant rust red color underneath. This was apparently all that was left of the iron components of the vessel. This phenomenon only

occurred down current from the shipwreck indicative of the iron corrosion products being carried a short distance away from the shipwreck itself.

Dating the Wreck

If the vessel is English as suspected the presence of a large number of bottles puts the date of the wreck before 1812 when the Chancellor of the Exchequer raised the tax on glass bottles and stoneware vessels became much more common than bottles. Both the telescope and the octants were British manufacture. The coins were mostly Spanish which is not really surprising since Spanish silver was the international monetary instrument of the day. There were a few French coins from both before and after the revolution.

The gold box gave us our best date. When it was opened it contained 14 gold coins wrapped in a piece of newspaper. The newspaper was still legible and the date of 1810 in one of the articles was the latest observable date. Part of the newspaper detailed the availability of slaves at workhouses in Jamaica. This has led some to speculate that the vessel may have been involved in the slave trade. Although coconuts were certainly a part of the cargo, the likelihood that they were the exclusive cargo of this vessel is slim. Perhaps the vessel was involved in the sugar trade and any remnants of this soluble cargo have long since disappeared.

What sank our merchantman? Historic records indicate that there were three hurricanes that swept the Atlantic in 1810. Our vessel may have been the victim of one of these monster storms. Research in the archives is ongoing.

Deep Questions

These objects are undergoing conservation now and I plan to publish more of our findings on this unique shipwreck. To date this shipwreck is the oldest shipwreck to be at this great depth, a designation that will, I am sure, not be held long. The Russian submersibles were the perfect vehicle for this mission. The light recoveries made by the MIR's were more than adequate to the task of answering the archaeological questions posed on this vessel. Unfortunately, the unknown nature of this vessel before the actual expedition precluded the formulation of site specific research goals. Those goals are now fairly straightforward:

What is the identity of the ship? What was the size and composition of the crew? Was this vessel engaged in the common mercantile activity or was there a possibility that it was also involved in the slave trade? Was

the ship traveling alone or was it in consort with a larger fleet? Was the ship perhaps American built and taken as a prize in the escalating conflict Between England and the young American republic? These are some of the questions we are seeking to answer.

One thing is overwhelmingly clear. The deep ocean poses less of an obstacle every year. Shipwrecks which have lain undisturbed will be accessed and materials may well be recovered. Many if not most of these ships will be encountered by the private sector in one form or another; it is incumbent on archaeologists to help guide these forays into the deep and into our past. Many models exist and are waiting to be created that would allow participation by this creative and motivated sector. I would urge all those involved in explorations in deep water to include archaeologists as a part of their team. Further I urge archaeologists to put aside old prejudices and find new, creative and viable ways to harness the private sector for the good of the resource.

Acknowledgements:

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Respectfully,
James J. Sinclair
archaeologist