



Gold vessels from the Belitung wreck, on show at the Asian Civilisations Museum in Singapore.

ARCHAEOLOGY

Salvaged treasures trouble scientists

Archaeologists worry that a museum exhibition will encourage exploitation of priceless historical sites.

BY TRACI WATSON

A museum show of sumptuous treasures from a ninth-century shipwreck is being denounced by researchers, who say that commercial salvage of the artefacts irreversibly damaged the wreck's scientific value.

On 6 February, the Advisory Council on Underwater Archaeology sent a letter of opposition to the Asia Society, the non-profit group that is mounting the show of Chinese Tang-dynasty porcelains, gold vessels and other objects from the wreck at its New York City museum. Critics fear that the exhibition, slated to open on 7 March, will encourage exploitation of wrecks by for-profit firms.

Museums that show salvaged treasures don't intend to promote treasure-hunting, "but that's the effect it has", says Marco Meniketti, an archaeologist at San José State University in California who leads the advisory council.

Artefacts from the Belitung wreck, named after the Indonesian island close to the ship's final resting spot, were scheduled to go on display at the Smithsonian Institution's Sackler Gallery in Washington DC in 2012. The institution cancelled the exhibition in

December 2011 after vocal opposition from Smithsonian scientists and others.

But the problems presented by exhibiting the spoils of commercial salvage remain, says maritime archaeologist Filipe Castro at Texas A&M University in College Station. That type of excavation "silences all the questions that a vessel like that could answer", he says, reeling off data that should have been collected at the Belitung site.

In a statement, the Asia Society said that "American audiences should have an opportunity to see this material because of its significance". The society is also co-sponsoring a public symposium about the ethics of archaeology and commercial salvage.

And the head of Seabed Explorations, the company that excavated the wreck, defended his team's work. "Without Seabed Explorations there wouldn't be any data existing at all about the Belitung shipwreck," says Tilman Walterfang.

With 17,000 islands and a location central to maritime trade, Indonesia is rich in shipwrecks. But it is less endowed with resources to protect and study them. After fishermen found the Belitung wreck nearly 20 years ago,

looters began to circle the site. The Indonesian government granted a cargo-recovery licence, and Seabed Explorations of Nelson, New Zealand, received a contract to excavate the site.

Company staff discovered a spectacular hoard on a Middle Eastern ship bound for an empire that included present-day Iran and Iraq. The wreck confirms that sea-based commerce between China and West Asia was thriving more than a millennium ago.

Workers recovered some 60,000 artefacts during field seasons in 1998 and 1999. In 2005, a subsidiary corporation set up by the government of Singapore purchased the cargo for US\$32 million. The artefacts now belong to Singapore's Asian Civilisations Museum.

But some researchers argue that commercial trade in cultural-heritage objects can lead to the destruction of archaeological sites. And when salvage companies control a wreck, they have an incentive to focus on eye-catching treasures instead of scientifically valuable items such as ceramic potsherds. The New York show is "creating a precedent for continued destruction of sites", says maritime archaeologist Jeremy Green at the Western Australian Museum in Fremantle, near Perth.

Officials from Seabed acknowledge that a good portion of the Belitung artefacts were salvaged without precise documentation, but they say that the Indonesian government's demands and the threat of looting required them to do the first round of fieldwork in haste. Moreover, Walterfang says, political and security concerns made it difficult to recruit archaeologists.

During the second round of excavation, however, the locations of objects were precisely recorded, says Michael Flecker, who oversaw that work for Seabed and is now a maritime archaeologist at the ISEAS Yusof

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Ishak Institute of Singapore. The fieldwork quickly led to a paper about the ship in a peer-reviewed journal (M. Flecker *Int. J. Naut. Archaeol.* 29, 199–217; 2000).

But removing so many objects from the wreck without full knowledge of their original positions means that much of the ship's scientific potential will never be realized, says maritime archaeologist Elizabeth Greene of Brock University in St. Catharines, Canada. The Belitung wreck is "perhaps one of the most important sabotaged treasures of the twentieth century".

When the Smithsonian cancelled its show in 2011, museum officials said that they would pursue further excavation of the Belitung site. But Flecker says that, by 2013, looters had ripped the hull apart. Even if the Smithsonian had been allowed to excavate, "there would have been nothing left to record". ■

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