The Belitung Shipwreck Controversy

In 2005, Seabed Explorations, engaged by the Indonesian government in 1998 to conduct the excavation, sold the bulk of the cargo to Singapore for US$32 million. Subsequently, the Singapore Tourism Board, the National Heritage Board of Singapore and the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery collaborated to mount the exhibition Shipwrecked: Tang Treasures and Maritime Winds. After it opened in February 2006 in this year's ArtScience Museum in Singapore, complaints by archaeologists, both within and outside the Smithsonian as well as museums associations, led to the postponement of the planned exhibition in Washington. They pointed out that the Smithsonian is bound by the ethics governing that members shall “not knowingly acquire or exhibit artifacts which have been stolen, illegally exported from their country of origin, illegally salvaged or removed from commercially exploited archaeological or historic sites.”

Prominent among those who objected to the exhibition was Elizabeth Barmann, president of the Archaeological Institute of America, who issued a strongly worded statement saying that while the excavation and disposition of the materials may be technically “legal”, involvement by the Smithsonian in the exhibition “will serve to blur the distinction between bona fide archaeology and treasure hunting”, putting it “in the indefensible position of aiding those who believe that antiquities is a commodity to be mined for personal or corporate financial gain.”

Echoing her concern, a group of archaeologists and anthropologists from the National Academy of Sciences wrote to Smithsonian Secretary Wayne G. Clough, cautioning that sponsoring the exhibition would “seriously damage the status and reputation” of the institution. Among the signatories of the letter was Dr. Robert McC. Adams, former Secretary of the Smithsonian. Some critics cited the 2001 UNESCO Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage, which outlaw trade in marine heritage. However, others were quick to point out that the Convention only came into force in 2009 and that neither the United States nor Indonesia had ratified the Convention.

Not all experts critical of the commercial nature of the Belitung cargo’s exhibition object to its exhibition. James Delgado, director of the Maritime History Program at the National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration, is one critic who argues for a thoughtful exhibition that not only highlights the historical value of the exhibits, but also clearly indicates what cannot be learned, interpreted or shared as a result of looting and contrasts what non-commercial excavations have achieved in offering a more scientific approach. “I see it as an opportunity for a constructive and open dialogue, to share knowledge about the research and excavation process, to highlight the challenge and opportunity to educate and inspire discussion on the subject,” he said. Nevertheless, Delgado thinks that the debate is not simply about the Belitung. He said: “In many ways the questions have more relevance in terms of discussing what happens with new and important shipwreck discoveries in Indonesia I believe, as do many of my colleagues, that significant shipwrecks should be excavated scientifically, with adequate funding to recover all artifacts and to preserve, study, and interpret them.”

Seabed Explorations founder Tilman Walterfang defended the company’s work on the Belitung, arguing that immense pressure to save the shipwreck in the face of heavy looting and a volatile political climate distracted the pace and manner in which the artifacts were recovered. When first approached by the Indonesian government for help, commercial benefit was the last thing on his mind; it became an emergency operation to save as much of the cargo as possible before it fell prey to looters.

Paul Johnston, curator of Maritime History at the Smithsonian questions the reasoning that political, legal or cultural conditions in Southeast Asian countries justify a less than professional approach. He asked those who raised this argument: “Do they suggest that international professional ethics, or the principles of scientific archaeological investigation, should not apply, because somehow things in Southeast Asia relating to culture or money are different?”

He also feels that circumstances differed from country to country and case to case, pointing out that Cambodia has signed the UNESCO Convention, and that problems in conducting proper underwater archaeology do not apply to the region as a whole.
Excavation of the Cargo

An information list produced by UNESCO noted that the cargo of the Gokduen I was lost for the commercial value of its artifacts and with little regard for its potential scientific importance. The site was subsequently excavated in both 1986 and 1999, with the artifacts being auctioned off in Singapore at a national museum in 1999.

Excavation of the Belitung began in September 1998 and was conducted over two seasons, disrupted by the monsoon. It was said that the Indonesian Navy patrolled the site during the monsoon but did not take any active part in the excavation entirely. During the second season, which began in April 1999, Dr Michael Flecker, a maritime archaeologist and supervisor of the project, noted that the site had experienced a decade of experience in Southeast Asia, on board to supervise the operation and detailed records of the excavation were kept. Findings were catalogued, photographed in situ and described, while their locations were mapped and plotted. According to an article written by Flecker in the International Journal of Nautical Archaeology, even during the first season, the site was gridted and records were kept of the ceramics recovered.

The reality of Southeast Asia is harsh. With a dearth of public funds available for maritime archaeology, wrecks discovered have either been left to rot or excavated in conjunction with commercial interests. There seems to be no other option at the present. However, the degree to which a scientific element is stressed during the excavation can distinguish what is desirable from what should be condemned.

The excavation of the Belitung has been acknowledged as an admirable example of what can be achieved under difficult conditions in Southeast Asia. What distinguished the company that carried out the excavation project is that some other commercial operators is that the ship structure itself was properly recovered, and the cargo was kept together rather than dispersed, and the finds were well conserved, studied, catalogued, and published. A global exhibition was created and a reconstructed ship based on information gleaned from the excavation sailed across the Indian Ocean.

According to Nia, there were also different opinions in Indonesia as to whether private companies should be allowed to survey, salvage, remove and sell anything from shipwreck finds in Indonesian waters. Although a law was passed in 1992 to mandate the protection of cultural heritage objects, earlier regulations allowing private companies to explore shipwreck sites remain in force. Looting continues to be a serious problem for Indonesia's underwater cultural heritage, and culprits are not just private companies, but also local fishermen who hunt for artefacts and even iron from old ships to supplement meagre incomes. We always try to raise public awareness through workshops, focus group discussions, seminars and training wherever we go to the field... Our audiences are the local government and local people such as villagers, local representatives, religious figures, divers, fishermen, youths, NGOs etc,” she said.

While seemingly irreconcilable differences remain, some feel that the ongoing debate is nonetheless a positive development and important for the future of maritime archaeology. Former Foreign Minister of Singapore George Yeo, who played a pivotal role in obtaining the Belitung cargo for Singapore, sees it as necessary for the international supervision of the salvage of old shipwrecks. “Singapore is in all favor of greater international oversight of the excavation of old ships. Even if international agreements cannot be forged or enforced, moral pressure should be brought to bear. It is a good thing that the Tang (Belitung) Cargo should be the subject of discussion about the ethics of maritime archaeology,” he said.

The reality of the Belitung cargo is that the artefacts were recovered from before too much information is lost. The disposition of the artefacts after thorough documentation, while of great importance, should not dictate policy, for if commercial transactions are banned outright, the finds will be driven underground, and there will be no hope of archaeological intervention. Archaeologists, governments and salvors must co-operate. Archaeologists must be more tolerant, more flexible, for there is so much to lose. Governments and salvors must be made aware of the importance of6 of greater international cooperation. From a purely pragmatic viewpoint, the cargo from a properly documented wreck-site is worth more financially than the cargo from a less documented site. Cultural awareness gains the upper hand over profits and politics, this may be the best argument to ensure that irreparable damage is not done to the non-renewable resource of historic shipwrecks in Southeast Asia.