

**Christian Ahlström, Looking for leads: Shipwrecks of the past revealed by contemporary documents and the archaeological record. The Finnish Academy of Science and Letters, Humaniora Series, Vol. 284. Helsinki 1997, 238 p.**

Archaeologists, anthropologists, historical demographers, and cultural geographers who study historical subjects within the post-medieval Swedish domain are already aware of the rich body of documentation contained in sources like parish and government records. The Swedish empire was one of those documentary "mother lodes" of information rarely matched in other parts of the world. As Christian Ahlström has shown us in his book, this richness of historic documentation also applies to the underwater world and to the study of shipwrecks. His book provides a guide to these sources and useful tips on how to use them effectively to identify and interpret shipwreck remains in the Baltic region.

Ahlström's book is based upon many years of sleuthing through bureaucratic documents in Swedish archives, hence the book's title. Maritime archaeologists do not always have the patience or the expertise to engage in this kind of research, which often requires sifting through mind-numbing accounts of official trivia to unearth useful nuggets of information. As one colleague of mine, Nicholas Rodger (former Keeper at the Public Record Office, London, and an eminent maritime historian), has pointed out, sometimes there may be *too much* in the way of written documentation to deal with effectively, and maritime archaeologists are easily overwhelmed. Ahlström acknowledges this problem, too, but he shows how an organized approach to such masses of documentation can yield useful results.

Every maritime archaeologist who works with historic documents needs some guidance, especially in relation to the peculiarities of each archive. As this reviewer can attest, this kind of guidance usually is provided by archivists, whose enthusiasm and diligence cannot be praised enough. Archivists, however, rarely ever publish their findings in detail, and this is where Ahlström's book makes its unique contribution.

After reviewing Swedish documentary source materials and methods for evaluating these materials, the author presents several detailed examples of Baltic shipwrecks. These cases reveal some of the difficulties

involved in such studies, with special attention to ambiguities that may arise in the interpretations about them. I particularly appreciated the author's scholarly rigor and his cautions against wishful thinking in making such interpretations. His examples include some important shipwrecks in Swedish waters like the frigate, *Birger Jarl*, and the cargo vessel, *Anna Maria*, as well as the Jussarö Wreck in Finland. Ahlström's findings have added substantially to our knowledge of these and other shipwrecks.

In a special preface to the English edition, the author addresses his international audience. Publishing in English broadens the book's readership, but does it make the book truly international in scope? It does in the sense that it acquaints maritime historians and archaeologists generally with the complexities of post-medieval Swedish documentary sources and their relationships to the archaeology of some important Baltic shipwrecks. But it is still not clear how extendable the author's findings are to other regions, where both the archives and the archaeological sites differ significantly. For example, the low salinity of Baltic waters does away with the problem of shipworms, which normally eliminate exposed ships' timbers from the archaeological record. What this means is that in the Baltic we have exceptionally rich archaeological preservation of shipwrecks. How applicable, then, are results in the Baltic to maritime archaeology in other areas where site preservation (and perhaps even documentation) is poorer? To what extent are such detailed comparisons between documentary and archaeological remains as Ahlström's possible outside the Baltic region?

In short, it remains to be seen how generally applicable the author's approach to documentary sources in maritime archaeology to other parts of the world. But for the Baltic region we have a model study in Ahlström's book that sets a new standard for the use of documentary sources in the study of historic shipwrecks. This book should be read by archaeologists working on the subject of post-medieval Baltic maritime archaeology.

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