Salvage Stories, Preserving Narratives, and Museum Ships

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Abstract

Preserved ships and other vessels are associated with a historiography, in Europe at least, which is still marked by parochialism, antiquarianism, and celebratory narrative. Many evidence difficult histories, and they are also extremely expensive to preserve. Yet, they are clearly valued, as nations in Europe invest heavily in them. This survey examines a range of European examples as sites of cultural, political and national identity. An analytical framework foregrounding the role of narrative and story reveals three aspects to these exhibits: explicit stories connected with specific nations, often reinforcing broader, sometimes implicit, national narratives; and a teleological sequence of loss, recovery and preservation, influenced by nationality, but very similar in form across Europe.

Key words: European; maritime; ships; narrative; nationalism; identity; museums.

Introduction

European nations value their maritime and fluvial heritage, especially as manifested in ships and boats. What may be the world's oldest watercraft, from around 8,000 BC, is preserved at the Drents Museum in Assen, the Netherlands (Verhart 2008: 165), whilst Greece has a replica of a classical Athenian trireme, and Oslo has ships similar to those used by the Norse to reach America. Yet, such vessels are implicated in a problematic historiography (Smith 2011) tending to parochialism and antiquarianism (Harlaftis 2010: 214; Leffler 2008: 57-8; Hicks 2001), and which often (for whatever reason) avoids new historiographical approaches in favour of conventional celebratory narratives (Witcomb 2003: 74). They are also linked to well-known problematic histories of imperialism and colonialism. They are sites of gender bias: '*Vasa* has from its construction to its excavation been the prerogative and the playground of men' (Maarleveld 2007: 426), and they are still popularly seen as providing access to 'toys for boys' (Gardiner 2009: 70). Warships present particular difficulty given their connection with conflict, with some preserved ships being used in major European conflicts within living memory. Although presented as, for example, 'a great day out for the whole family' (panel title, access gangplank of HMS *Belfast*, 2011), they cannot disguise their original purpose, which was to deliver extreme violence, death and destruction to enemies of the state – often, other Europeans. Finally, ships (and other vessels) are notoriously expensive to save and preserve. Why then, given all these issues, do European nations invest in them?

Although there are a few studies regarding the broader connections between society and the initial preservation of specific ships, such as the *Vasa* (Cederlund and Hocker 2006), maritime museums, including preserved vessels, are generally poorly represented in museological research (Beneki *et al.* 2012: 347; Day and Lunn 2003: 289; Littlewood and Butler 1989: xiii). We do not know how many vessels are preserved: there is no unified catalogue of museum ships, and whilst data from a range of international sources, such as the World Ship Trust, national organizations, such as Germany's *Schiffshistorisches Archiv Flensburg* and the UK's National Historic Ships register, could form the basis of one, the situation is complicated by varying definitions of 'ship', 'boat', 'restoration', 'replica', or 'reconstruction', and of the nature

of the organizations preserving them. Van Beylen (1976) discovered around 380 museum ships and maritime museums (or significant collections) in Europe, most of which would have parts of, or complete vessels. More recently, a survey in 2011 identified about two hundred and fifty maritime museums and preserved ships in Europe.[1] However, many more preserved vessels are held in non-specialist museums such as science or national collections, whilst yet others are preserved by private owners or trusts.

In exploring the utility of these objects, exhibitions on (and around) more than twenty vessels were examined, not as technical exhibits, or examples of preservation or antiquarian interest, but rather as a genre: a medium where narratives of cultural, political and national identity are made. The objective was to identify commonalities in these narratives, and site visits were made to each, with exhibits recorded in a combination of notes, plans, comprehensive digital photographic surveys and some video to provide a basis for descriptive citation used in support of the arguments made here. The museums' guidebooks and websites were also used.

Most of the exhibits are richly interpreted and speak eloquently of aspects of maritime heritage. Here, however, it is the pursuit of specific themes or *topoi* through these narratives and stories, rather than the histories and complexities of individual collections, which are the focus of enquiry. The exhibits are: from Bulgaria, small craft in the national and military museums in Sofia; from England, SS *Great Britain* in Bristol, HMS *Belfast* in London, and the *Mary Rose* museum (as of 2012), HMS *Victory* and HMS *Warrior* in Portsmouth; from Germany, the Havel Barge in Berlin and the Hansa cog and the *Wilhelm Bauer/ U2540* in Bremerhaven; from Greece, the Battleship *Georgios Averof*, the *Olympias,* the *Velos* and the *Thalis o Milissios* in Faliron, in Athens; from the Netherlands, HNLMS *Abraham Crijnssen*, HNLMS *De Ruyter* (bridge and radar installation only), the *Schorpioen* and the *Tonijn*, all at Den Helder; from Norway, the Gokstad, Oseberg and Tune ships in the *Vikingskiphuset* in Oslo; from Poland, the SS *Soldek* in Gdansk; from Russia, the *Aurora* in St Petersburg; and from Sweden, the *Amphion* (stern and cabins only) and the *Vasa* in Stockholm. Supporting evidence from several other vessels and exhibits is cited in passing or referenced in secondary literature.[2]

I argue that the value of these exhibits is derived from their assumed effectiveness as a nexus for stories around national identity. Moreover, the stories told in these exhibits fall into two types: the story may centre on a unique, specific, national event, sometimes contributing to an overarching, if not always explicit, national narrative; and there is also a nationalized variant of a common template or pattern narrative of loss, discovery, salvage and preservation, found at many preserved ships across Europe. Though not mutually exclusive, some exhibits emphasize one of these variants at the expense of others.

Stories and narratives in museums

The terms 'story' and 'narrative' are used widely and variably in museum studies, but are deployed here in a rather precise manner. The context is introduced by Megill (2007: 31-2), who argued that nineteenth century historicism was composed of layered narratives, including ultimately a 'grand narrative' of progress, a secularized version of the Christian concept of pristine origin, struggle, and ultimate salvation. With this background, national 'master narratives' were generated. Although Lyotard posited an incredulity towards such 'meta-narratives', and the function of narrative in the work of professional historians has been problematized in the work of White and others (see Gunn 2006: 26-53), the form still has currency in historical writing. It also holds sway in the museum, for example, where practitioners champion 'stories' (e.g. Bedford 2001) and policy-makers argue that museums need to 'retain some kind of coherent narrative, to show the nation's progress and to hold all the other stories together' (Gore, quoted in Carroll *et al* 2003: 6, see also McCarthy 2004). Of such narratives, Presiozi (2011: 58) argues that 'ideological beliefs which amplify and perpetuate earlier religious narratologies and essentialisms', and which are now formally secular, provide an epistemology which is theocratic in function, rather than democratic. This in turn shapes the nature and scope of teleological, social, and national narratives, with the museum providing the setting for more overt stories. Like Presiozi, Hooper-Greenhill (2000: 77) acknowledged that stories in museums had 'deep connections and are themselves partly formed by narratives written elsewhere'. Similarly, Bodenstein and Poulot (2012: 14) argued for an external 'narrative' as an over-arching, if widely

shared construct, referencing an 'ideological message about the past that motivates the museum's general programme and structures its display(s)'. In their synthesis of these strands with recent writing on national identity (Bodenstein and Poulot 2012: 9-18), they use the term 'great narratives' to indicate external, contextualizing narratives (in contrast to 'internal' stories, found in public-facing, explicitly and dramatically staged exhibits, guidebooks and websites). Indeed, some museums recognize and play upon the contingency of their interpretations (see, for example, Widen 2011: 898 and Knell 2012: 334 regarding Sweden's *Historiska Museet*).

Evidence from the sites visited may illustrate these narratives. The 'story', 'epic' and 'tale' of the *Vasa* it is claimed, 'is founded on archival research, historical studies, object studies, handbooks and published research in history, archaeology and related subjects' etc. (Helmerson 2006: 10). The newly restored SS *Robin* will provide a nexus for 'the stories of London's industrialisation, trade, energy, commodities, migration, wealth creation, seafaring and shipbuilding' (Mulhearn 2012: 27). These are situated stories, in the contexts of scholarly research, and of London's past greatness respectively. The significance of 'great narratives' is also clear in Bulgaria's National Museum of History and National Museum of Military History, both in Sofia. In ascending to Hall 5 of the Museum of History (the 'Third Bulgarian Kingdom'), the visitor passes a small portable rowing boat, labelled simply (in Bulgarian and English), 'Boat from the Russian landing at Shvishtov, June 15th/27th 1877'. There little if any explanation of why it is displayed there, but a similar boat, used by the Russian General Dragomirov to cross at Zimnitza in the same conflict, is in the 'Hall of the Russian-Turkish War', of the Museum of Military History, just after the visitor (and Bulgarian history) turns a corner in the gallery. Both craft, I suggest, are preserved because of their connection with Russian intervention in Bulgaria in 1877. This led to the collapse of Ottoman rule and, as Bulgarian historiography claims, the restoration of the Bulgarian state. These simple craft are not at all significant in themselves, and nowhere is there technical information about the craft or the means, if any, used to preserve them. Rather, they are freighted with and obtain significance from an external, patriotic story supporting an older, Bulgarian identity linked with a medieval past (the 'First' and 'Second' Kingdoms). By contrast, in the foyer of the Museum of History, in the entrance, a liminal zone of entering (or leaving) the museum, and therefore not linked with a specific historic period or event, there is a preserved dugout canoe. In contrast to the previous examples, the label relates the technical details, its previous use, discovery, and the conservation work being employed. Here (though simplified for a modest artefact), there is a story of loss, discovery, restoration and preservation, and not some historic event *per se.* In essence, this pattern is of a vessel that sinks or is otherwise lost until someone with vision 'rediscovers' it (in this case, for example, the label notes that the preservation of the craft is funded by a private individual), followed by financial and technical vicissitudes, before ultimate success and preservation.

This loss and restoration narrative is powerfully communicated by the *Vasa*, which may have informed a 'template', as its curators have, perforce, had to lead the way in preservation techniques for such ships. Also, it has been deliberately promoted by Sweden as a cultural asset (Cederlund 2006: 144), and so therefore gained international fame. Thus the *Vasa* represents a princely return on investment in a widely understood narrative of loss and recovery, international, or at least Europe-wide in application.

Despite these national contexts, the same 'building blocks' and sequences are shared by many ship exhibitions across Europe. The evidence can be found in many examples. In sequence, there is, first, an initial period of use ('when she retired in 1933 she had sailed 100,000 miles around the world', text panel, SS *Great Britain*). Then there is a moment of loss, often poignant or mysterious (famously, the sinking of the *Vasa*). Next is the heroic intervention, such as those by Karl Kortum, Anders Franzén and Alexander McKee, influential in saving the *Balclutha* (in San Francisco), the *Vasa* and the *Mary Rose* respectively (heroes save; curators merely collect). Finally, there is preservation through science and technology in the museum, using for example the 'filter plants, reconstruction drawings, the mobile crane, tools, transportation containers and a stereogrammatric camera' which, the guide book explains, were needed to preserve the Hansa cog at Bremerhaven (Lahn 1985: 28). These stories almost always demonstrate a simple teleological sequence of creation, loss, recovery and preservation, often featuring a key actor with the belief and determination to salvage the vessel, and usually stressing science's role in changing a decaying hulk into an exhibit that can be kept 'for ever',

which, it will be argued, echoes deeper, redemptive 'grand narrative'. We can turn now to examine a series of exhibits in connection with explicit stories and wider narratives.

The nation's stories

Displaying stories of national, or even nationalist, significance (such as Russia's intervention in Ottoman Bulgaria) presents some challenges, as they are usually domestic and relevant to one nation. They may also relate to over-arching narrative, which may be opaque to international audiences. Although they are often highly technical artefacts, they may be of limited technical interest, and therefore unable to exhibit putative technological 'givens' such as 'universal' scientific principles. Instead, it is valued as a unique 'witness' to a moment or story full of meaning for the nation. For example, in the *Marinemusuem* in Den Helder, the Netherlands, HNLMS *Abraham Crijnssen* is preserved. It is a small and very ordinary mid-twentieth century warship, which was stationed in the former Dutch East Indies during the Second World War. In 1942, Dutch and allied forces in the region were annihilated by the Imperial Japanese Navy, but this ship, by a clever ruse, escaped to Australia. The story of its escape is the basis of the main interpretive display, for apart from this escape, 'the ship would have been quite unexceptional' (information panel).

It was restored by the museum in the mid 1990s, when increasing unease at 'multiculturalism, globalization, and political and economic instability' marked Dutch society, impacting state cultural activity (Van Hasselt 2011: 314-18). The period also saw much more space given to 'Indische Nederlanders' in Dutch school textbooks (Ohliger 2005: 49). Behind this lay a history of Dutch colonial power in the East Indies, their conquest by Japan (and the internment of Dutch nationals), the consequent Indonesian National Revolution, the repatriation of many 'Indische Nederlanders' and domestic terrorism by South Moluccans in the 1970s. These were all significant episodes in the Netherlands, influencing literature (see Nieuwenhuys 1982 [1978]), and relived and explored in films such as *Max Havelaar* (Rademakers 1976), and *Ver van familie* (Bloem 2008), and documentaries such as *De slag in de Javazee* (Koppen 1995). *Havelaar* was based on a novel of the same name by E.D. Dekker, published in 1860, 'a powerful critique of Dutch policies in subjugating Javanese labor for commercial ends' (Yengoyan 1985: 480). However, none of this is explored in the exhibit, and *Abraham Crijnssen* tells a straightforward national story. If the *Abraham Crijnssen* escaped catastrophe in the Dutch East Indies, it is not clear that the Netherlands has escaped the legacy of 300 years of colonial rule (Yengoyan 1985: 480), though in the hold of the *Amsterdam*, a reproduction of a Dutch 'East Indiaman' at the *Scheepvaart Museum* in Amsterdam, exhibits give some explanation of Dutch mercantilism and colonialism in Indonesia.

Stories and narratives of a 'Golden Age'

Dutch unease at a colonial past contrasts with the evocation of a 'Golden Age' in and around some vessels. In Portsmouth, the original Mary Rose Museum linked the ship itself closely to the reign of Henry VIII, an iconic figure from the Tudor dynasty, and still a popular element of English heritage. A life-size manikin of Henry, traditionally arms akimbo, shoulders padded, and beady eyed, greeted visitors at the entrance to the museum in 2012. HMS *Victory*, in dry dock nearby, is linked to another heroic figure, Admiral Nelson, still a familiar symbol of identity in the UK (Leffler 2004: 48 and Watson 2006: 131-135). Largely a technical and social-historical exhibit, it cannot escape the celebrity and aura of Nelson: a brass plate is fixed to the deck where he was shot, and below decks, at the place where he died (the 'Shrine'), photography, allowed everywhere else, is banned (Anon a n.d.). Whilst *Victory* was one of only a few ships of its size, it was saved as 'Nelson's flagship', not because of any technical interest.[3] Henry VIII and Nelson have both long held a key role in English popular heritage, which includes stories of 'the triumphs of Agincourt and adventures of Empire, when Henry VIII built castles and Nelson Fell, when Spitfires held firm and the Dunkirk Spirit was forged …' and so on (Promotional Tourist Brochure 1993, quoted in Palmer 1999: 316).

Whilst the Early Modern Period has little to offer Greece in terms of a 'Golden Age', its classical past is vested with significance, in Greece and beyond. The *Olympias*, a replica of a 'trireme' or oared warship from the period, is exhibited at the Hellenic Maritime Grove (a small

harbour) in Faliron, Athens. The Kyrenia ship, in Cyprus (the image of which has been used on Cypriot euro coins), and the temporary exhibition of the 'Antikythera Shipwreck' (3 September 2012 to 31 January 2013) at the national archaeology museum in Athens also emphasize the strong classical element in the maritime heritage of the Greek-speaking world. Also at the Maritime Grove in Faliron is the B/S *Georgios Averof* which was key to Greek naval success in the Balkan Wars of 1912–13, by which large areas were reclaimed from the Ottoman Empire, and the main exhibits reflect that period. The ship was commanded by Admiral Kounouriotes who 'soon liberates all the North and Northeast Aegean islands from Turkish suppression', and the displays largely site the ship in that period: 'Inside these compartments lived Admiral Koundouriotes [...]' (text panels). As well as the restored compartments, there is a poster featuring Koundouriotes, plans of the naval battles, and film from the Balkan Wars showing the ship in action. It also saw significant service in the First and Second World Wars. The ship is a minor footnote in the technology of warship development (for only specialists will point out the technical features of this 'armoured cruiser'), but as a site of national stories, it is a headline act.

Two key vessels in Dublin, Ireland, offer different approaches to a 'Golden Age'. One vessel, at the Collins Barracks site, is an eighteenth century ship's longboat. It is a very common type, but this boat was used by French forces seeking to aid the Irish against British (mis)rule in 1796–7, and is exhibited as the 'Bantry Boat' (the French arrived in Bantry Bay). If the expedition had succeeded, the guidebook indicates, 'Ireland would have been invaded and the British Army defeated, changing Ireland's history forever' (Joye *et al.* 2007: 31). This 'might have been' is referenced elsewhere in the gallery. For example, from a panel entitled 'What if?/ CEARD FAOI?' we learn that a Spanish naval assault on England in 1588 (known to the English as 'the Spanish Armada') failed, but had it succeeded, 'Philip II of Spain would have taken the throne from the Protestant Elizabeth. England under a Catholic monarch might have had a very different relationship to Ireland' (text panel). The Bantry Boat is valuable because it evidences a 'what if' narrative, the Golden Age *manqué* of a Catholic British Isles.

The other vessel (at the Kildare Street site) is a *faering*, a small Norse fishing boat. Originally, it would not have found a place in an Irish museum, for a mythical prehistoric Celtic 'Golden Age', growing out of the Gaelic Revival in the nineteenth century, and closely allied to the early twentieth century struggle for independence against the British, provided a very exclusive background narrative. This had radical and long-term effects on what stories could be told in Irish national museums (Kirwan 2011: 448-451), and the Hiberno-Norse heritage (among others) was excluded. A shift in this nationalist narrative in the last quarter of the twentieth century (Wallace 2008: 166, 168-71) led to a Viking gallery opening in 1995. Here, the *faering* has a useful role in evoking the Hiberno-Norse society and culture, though the object itself has no history: it is a reproduction, but gains authenticity from its prototype, a *faering* found in the Gokstad ship in Oslo. A modification to an out-dated 'Golden Age' narrative thus enables new stories.

Narrating the polity

Ships also provide a focal point for more overtly political stories. The *Velos,* one of the ships at Faliron in Athens, was built in the USA, served in the Second World War, and was sold to Greece in 1959. It is significant because in May 1973 the officers and crew mutinied and took the ship into refuge in Italy in protest against the military Junta then in power (Guttridge 1992: 289-90). According to the Hellenic Navy, in 1994 the *Velos* was overhauled to become a 'Museum of the Struggle against the Dictatorship'.[4] This is commemorated in the only display on board called 'The insurgency movement in the Navy: Thirty Years After', which shows the development of resistance to the dictatorship in the Hellenic Navy. The modest display includes a cartoon by Rudolf Dirr showing the Greek dictator Papadopoulos as the 'Colossus of Rhodes', with the *Velos* crashing into his leg, and Greek, English and Italian newspaper cuttings about the event, such as 'Mutineers in Greek Navy facing death penalty', a *Times* article from 29 May 1973.

In fact it is not entirely clear that the mutiny, or protest, was pro-democracy: Guttridge (1992: 290) claims the officers involved in the mutiny were Royalists. However, in an interview (Nichols 1973 1), the ship's captain, Nicolas Pappas, claimed 'we are not monarchists, even less are we communists. We are for democracy and for a Greece freed from slavery'. That the

Junta moved quickly against Navy personnel, and undertook constitutional changes to abolish the monarchy, suggests that it, at least, feared a royalist coup (Couloumbis 1974: 359-60). If these political nuances are not obvious to the casual visitor, the ship is nonetheless a witness to anti-dictatorial action. Only this story renders it valuable, for as a 'Fletcher' class ship it was a very common type, and three others are preserved in the USA.[5]

HMS *Victory* is by no means an explicit celebration of the Battle of Trafalgar (1805) and Britain's triumph over French and Spanish enemies, but is rather implicated in politics, and arguably the UK's current questioning of its naval investment (Sawyer 2012). Instead of triumph over 'enemies' as a theme, the professionalism and proficiency of the Royal Navy, past and present, are foregrounded, together with the celebrity of Nelson. Past glories are touched on in the nearby Royal Naval Museum, but the story here is really one of the present: HMS *Victory* is still a commissioned ship, naval officers still meet there on special occasions, and the UK's most modern and expensive warships are often moored, very publicly, within a few metres of the vessel. Besides this celebration of national identity, the ship (and its surrounding heritage) is physically and narratively associated with the modern Royal Navy and the industries that support it.

In Poland, the SS *Soldek* was the first commercial sea-going ship built in Gdansk Shipyard in 1949, restored there in 1985 and then preserved, as it is under the patronage of the shipyard, as a prominent cast brass plate screwed to the ship explains. In the hold, the story of the post-war recovery of the Polish shipbuilding industry, and the role of Henryk Gieldzik in designing the ship, is recounted in the first section. It includes a bust of Stanislaw Soldek, a shipyard worker after whom the ship is named. The *Soldek*'s relevance to Gdansk (home of the shipyard workers' *Solidarnosc* union, itself instrumental in the fall of communism in Poland) is stressed. As 'pierwszego statku typu B-30' ('the first ship of the type B-30', text panel), it also relates to the reconstruction of Gdansk and its industries after 1945. This was Poland's own 'Ground Zero', echoed in the maritime museum nearby (*Centralne Museum Morski*), where a separate gallery encompasses the period 1945–89, showing the extensive destruction suffered during the war and recounting the reconstruction of Gdansk and its ship building industry. Thus post-war reconstruction, including that of historic Warsaw (now a UNESCO World Heritage Site) is part of Poland's national story. This story, and the inclusion of the 'shock worker' Soldek (a tracer in the shipyard) in displays on the ship bearing his name would seem more relevant to Communist Poland than to the more nationalist and liberal environment post-independence. Technically, the *Soldek* was unremarkable.

The Russian cruiser *Aurora* (whose gun started the October Revolution in 1917), is a focus of many stories: about the Battle of Tshushima, 1905; assisting earthquake victims in Messina, Italy, in 1908 ('Russian sailors selflessly worked among the fires and ruins', text panel); the defence of Leningrad during the Second World War, with maps and diagrams of 'Battery "A" – "Aurora"' (manned by the ship's crew); the role of the Orthodox Church (including the ship's chapel); and the modern Russian Navy (with an image of the modern warship '*Moskva*' visiting Messina in 2006). The stories are heavily laced with the biographies, photographs and medals of many of the crew throughout the ship's history. The story of the October Revolution is prominent, but with the fall of the Soviet Union, there seems no political frame of reference. Instead, the exhibition 'glorifies the Russian shipbuilding industry, the history of the Russian state and the Russian Navy' (introductory text panel). Russian patriotism, rather than communism, is foregrounded. Again, the ship itself is unremarkable if separated from narrative and story, one of a large collection of ex-Imperial ships rusting at Kronstadt before it was preserved.

Stockholm's *Sjöhistoriska museet* features the stern section of the *Amphion*, the pleasure craft of Gustav III (1746–1792). It was a technical failure ('she sails like a gilt clog', text panel), yet its heavily gilded timbers are given pride of place in the Memorial Hall of the museum, which is opposite the entrance, and visitors therefore often enter this space first. It rises to the height of the museum, so is also visible when passing from one wing of the building to another. Although there are a few exhibits of marine wood carving in the hall, ship decoration is not really the subject of the exhibit. Rather, the story, explained in panels and digital media in the alcove around the stern, is about Gustav III, with the ship in a supporting role. Gustav is popularly seen as 'de mest begåvade, aktiva och kontroversiella kungarna i den svenska historien' ('one of the

most gifted, active and controversial kings in Swedish history').[6] A political innovator, he also led Sweden in a successful war against Russia, but his reign ended in assassination, for 'Gustav III's politics have brought him dangerous enemies' and after his death 'Amphion's halcyon days are over' (text panels). Sweden has a problematic relationship with its imperial past, which is only really addressed at the *Vasamuseet*, *Sjöhistoriska museet* and the *Armémuseum*, (Widén 2011: 881, 888). If Swedish nationalism remains opaque to foreign visitors, the narrative here eschews the glorification of the past, in that both the *Amphion* and the *Vasa* (whose stern is a fulsome iconographic expression of princely martial ambition) were failures from a technical point of view. Like these Swedish examples, HLMS *Schorpioen* was not a success. Launched in 1868 to ram other warships, and now preserved at Den Helder (the Netherlands), we learn that 'soon after its launch it became clear that ramming vessels was not very effective' (information panel). Its uneventful career as a training and dormitory ship support a narrative, like Sweden's, of a policy of neutrality.

Even where technology could be the main story, these relics lean on popular patriotism. The Wikipedia entry for SS *Great Britain*, preserved in Bristol, starts: 'SS *Great Britain* is a museum ship and former passenger steamship, advanced for her time. She was designed by Isambard Kingdom Brunel ...'.[7] Very few other entries record the designer's name, least of all in the first paragraph, and for this ship the story is as much about Brunel (a major figure in British industrial history), as it is about the ship as a vehicle for his innovations. The museum's web site has seven sections headed 'The Story', starting with 'Isambard Kingdom Brunel ...' , and the museum's logo carries the words 'Brunel's SS *Great Britain*'.[8] There is also a regional aspect to this ship, as Brunel had strong associations with Bristol, and the city has an engineering and aerospace heritage. Thus, in one part of the museum is a large jet aero engine, a 'Rolls-Royce Olympus 593-B', of the type used to power Concorde, an Anglo-French supersonic airliner. 'Both the SS Great Britain and the Concorde engines were groundbreaking designs …' we are told on a panel entitled 'The Concorde of Her Day'. We also read the same jet engine was used in warships such as HMS *Bristol*. Nonetheless, this is not a technical display, but rather an expression of national, and especially civic and regional pride. Similarly, at Faliron in Athens, the *Thalis o Milissios,* a cable-layer built in the USA in 1909 (as the *Joseph Henry*) is preserved. With little interpretation, it exists not, perhaps, as an example of cable-laying technology, but rather in memorial to its role, carried out for decades, connecting and maintaining telecommunications between the numerous Greek islands. The only museum vessels surveyed, which stressed technology in particular, were in Den Helder, where HNLMS *De Ruyter* (bridge and radar structure) and *Tonijn* (a submarine) both strongly emphasize technological innovations used as part of NATO forces in the Cold War.

A narrative of loss and recovery

Other vessels, besides, or even instead of, being associated with nationalism, often serve both as evidence and result of a story of oblivion, heroic rediscovery and restoration. The *Vasa* is probably the most well-known example in Europe (and possibly beyond), and this narrative is celebrated in the exhibits and publications surrounding the vessel. The *Vasa Museet* comprises a large and complex exhibition, but there is space given to the story of the ship's loss and recovery. On level 4, 'Kungens Skep/His Majesty's Ship' explains its construction and loss, up to the salvage of some guns in 1670. Then, 'Barningen/Salvaging Vasa' explains how no one knew the position of the ship, until 'during the 1950s a private researcher, Anders Franzén, began to search for her. He knew that wooden ships had been uniquely preserved in Östersjön's brackish water.' The story proceeds to its climax, illustrated with models of salvage ships etc., until, 'at 09:03 on the morning of 24 April, the *Vasa* broke surface [...] afloat after 333 years' (text panel). As one of the museum directors notes, the *Vasa* tells a story of 'the excitement of searching, finding, and raising a relic from the sea [and] Anders Franzén understood this' (Helmerson 2006: 10), and this pattern or template narrative is found in many other preserved vessels.

However, thanks to Cederlund and Hocker's work (2006), a detailed account of the ship's history and, to some extent, the 'authoring' of its current story, have been plotted, and it is not quite so simple. After the ship's loss, salvage attempts took place until late into the

seventeenth century, with cannon being recovered as late as 1683 (Hafström and Hocker 2006: 96), and the memory of those efforts is likely to have remained into the eighteenth century. By the 1840s, diving techniques enabled the position of the wreck to be recorded. Moreover, Cederlund (2006: 114) argues that those employed in and about the harbour would have always been likely to know about the wreck, if only because anchors would have caught on it from time to time. Thus, the *Vasa* was lost only from one perspective.

Nonetheless, the simpler template is widely used. Like the *Vasamuseet*, the 'time capsule' approach is the main theme in the Mary Rose Museum (as of 2012), but again the story of the ship's loss, of being forgotten, then found and recovered is exhibited. The *Mary Rose* sank and 'the wreck lay forgotten and undisturbed' until, 'in 1965', 'Alexander McKee, a war historian and diver, recruited a team of enthusiastic divers' to search for the ship, which they eventually find, and, 'the *Mary Rose* broke surface at 0903 on Monday 11 October 1982' (text panels, Mary Rose Museum). Untidy details revealed in the *Guide* booklet, noting salvage attempts subsequent to its loss, and that divers worked on the ship in 1836 (Anon b n.d: 4), do not distract from the story in the exhibition.

This story, of loss, visionary individuals, recovery and restoration, is echoed in most of the other examples too: on a text panel we learn that 'After Gustav III's death in 1792, his beautiful schooner [*Amphion*] falls into protracted obscurity [and] later, she is broken up', illustrated by black and white images of the hulk of the ship, until the stern at least is rescued. By 'an almost impossible feat', HNLMS *Abraham Crijnssen* escapes the catastrophe in the Dutch East Indies. In St. Petersburg, as the guidebook and exhibition explain, 'the *Aurora* turned into a lifeless organism', after being 'mothballed' in 1918, but 'in August 1923 a momentous event happened in the history of the cruiser: the Central Executive Committee of the USSR took the ship under its patronage' (Petrova 2003: n.p.). Furthermore, after being sunk at her moorings in 1941, a second loss, the Deputy People's Commissar of the Soviet Navy gains support to have the ship raised in 1944 (Petrova 2003: n.p.), an event celebrated in a patriotic painting by V.A. Pechatin in Hall 4. When Nazi Germany invades Greece, the crew of the B/S *Georgios Averof* are ordered to scuttle the ship, which they thought 'out of the question' (text panel) and they spirit the ship away, until, in 1944, at the end of the occupation, it arrives back at Piraeus with the Greek government returning from exile. On HMS *Warrior* the text panel 'A Sad and Lonely Journey' explains that at the end of its career the ship was unwanted even for scrap, and ended as 'Oil Fuel Hulk C77' near a refinery. The panel acknowledges the key role of one individual, Sir John Smith MP, who was instrumental in promoting the preservation of the ship in the late 1960s and in fact had played a significant role in preserving SS *Great Britain* and HMS *Belfast* (Aslet 2011). The story of HMS *Belfast*'s preservation is not explicit in the exhibition, but the guidebook fills in these blanks for us: an image of the ship is captioned 'alone and forlorn, the old cruiser lies in Fareham Creek, near Portsmouth, awaiting her final journey to the ship breakers', but 'fortunately, help was at hand [and] the Museum encouraged the formation of an independent trust led by one of HMS *Belfast*'s former captains, Rear Admiral Sir Morgan Morgan-Giles'. A 'devoted band of enthusiasts succeeded in bringing her to London, where she opened to the visitors on Trafalgar Day, 21 October 1971' (Anon c 2010: 24-5). In Berlin, the loss, around 1855 of the Havel barge and its recovery in 1987, followed by an 11 year process of preservation with polyethylene glycol, is explained in the *Deutsche Technikmuseum*, whilst in Bristol, a giant de-humidifier is sited at the base of SS *Great Britain*'s hull, bearing panels explaining the science employed to preserve the ship.

Many of these craft intertwine aspects of both national stories and this more widely shared redemptive narrative. An example might be the notable Norse ships preserved in Scandinavia. At the *Vikingskiphuset* near Oslo, the museum itself resembles a church, and this 'sacral expression is highly intentional as it is created to frame important national treasures' (Amundsen 2011: 659). Although the Oseberg, Gokstad and Tune ships are presented here almost as aesthetic objects, with only limited stories of their discovery and preservation, there is a large photograph of Gabriel Gustafson (who excavated the Oseberg ship in 1904–5), astride the site, and in one wing of the museum is a portrait of Fredrik Peder Johannessen, whose boat building experience and technical knowledge helped preserve the Oseberg and Gokstad ships. The information about ongoing preservation efforts ('Osebergskipet får nye stø tter/New supports for the Oseberg ship', text panel) is also sparse. On the other hand, we learn of the

tantalizing possibility that the ships might have been the grave of almost mythical Norse leaders. A skeleton from the Oseberg ship may be that of Queen Asa of the Yngling clan, ruling dynasty in what is now Norway. In a separate part of the gallery, some of the battery of scientific methods used to investigate the skeletons found with the ship are explained, such as the 'isotopes that tell us what the Oseberg women and the Gokstad man ate'. We also learn that the skeletons themselves have a history, for having been originally excavated, the Gokstad skeletons were re-interred, marked by a ceremony in 1929 'on St Olav's Day […] with King Haakon, several prominent guests, and 10-12 thousand people present', and there were 'strong political currents' linked to the reburial (information panel). However, there were real fears for the preservation of the remains, and in 2007 they were recovered, somewhat damaged, to be carefully preserved. The pattern of loss, heroic recovery and salvation through science emerges clearly here, closely entwined with national identity.

The absence of maritime narratives

To the extent that vessels are preserved because of their role as nodes or points where national identity is augmented, we should expect correspondingly less emphasis in states where an overarching maritime theme is not useful to nationalism, or where the stories surrounding such ships are simply too difficult to be useful. There is some evidence to support this.

An example is the Hansa cog (*Bremer Kogge*). This medieval ship (it can be dated almost exactly to 1380) was discovered near Bremerhaven in Germany in 1962. It has all the ingredients of a 'ship rescue story' of loss and recovery, including the mystery of its sinking (the ship appeared to be freshly built with no signs of wear), the discovery of an unknown wreck, the recognition of its importance by an individual (Dr Siegfried Fliedner), the technical challenges of salvage and restoration, and finally, the successful display of the restored vessel. Most of the elements of the redemptive narrative exist (and can be extracted from the guide book by Kiedel and Schnall, 1985), and in addition, several working replicas have been made, revealing much about the technology and sailing characteristics of this ship type, which was used extensively by the Hanseatic League.

However, these elements are not drawn together in a story, and, although it is very difficult to assess the popularity and level of interest in such iconic objects, it does not appear to be as famous as other preserved ships. For example, both the *Vasa* and the *Mary Rose* have featured in the *National Geographic* magazine (Franzén 1962 and Miller and Rule 1983), whilst the cog has not, and similarly, the results of a range of online searches on various social media sites will, at a glance, show great disparities in the results for the three ships. It can be also be noted that German museums tend to be closely linked to academic and research activities, with perhaps less focus on popularity and visitor numbers, and finally, that the *Deutsches Schiffahrtsmuseum* in Bremerhaven presents the ship in a relatively low key way.

It is possible that the cog is simply less impressive than the *Vasa,* and not linked, like the *Mary Rose,* with celebrity, but rather with anonymous Hansa merchants. But it can also be argued that Germany (a relatively recent polity) has no significant maritime narrative to leverage. In Berlin, the *Deutsches Technikmuseum* gallery on shipping (the 'Hochseeschifffahrt' gallery on Level 2) tells a global story, on an axis running the diagonal of the gallery. An aisle takes visitors along a Brandenburg and Prussian 'turn' off this axis, and this diversion includes slavery and emigration, before concluding with the scuttling of Imperial Germany's navy in 1918, and a display on submarine warfare in World War II, all of which offer little for the modern state to celebrate. The national maritime museum at Bremerhaven dilutes chronology with large thematic galleries, breaking up sequences that would support a conventional nationalist narrative. In a broader context, we know that (for example) in German textbooks 'the nation is valorised negatively, if not disavowed, for its dangerous inclination toward nationalism' (Soysal *et al.* 2005: 16), whilst research in the *Deutsch Historische Museum* (Dodd *et al.* 2012: 18, 84) shows that many German museum visitors are suspicious of nationalism. Thus, we argue that there is a limited over-arching narrative in which to position the Hansa cog. Old ships are simply not very useful for a relatively new, continental polity with a difficult history.

France offers some parallels. Bodenstein's review of national museums in France has indicated the significance of its military museum (*Les Invalides*) in Paris, but barely mentions maritime heritage (Bodenstein 2011). The story of the three-masted barque *Belem* is illustrative:

launched in France in 1896, it was purchased by a British aristocrat in 1914 and in 1951 it became an Italian sail training ship until it was laid up. It was 'discovered' in Venice by a French enthusiast, Dr Gosse, who eventually raised funds (and the ship's profile, for '...*une opinion publique française assez indifférente sur l'existence de ce voilier issu d'un chantier nantais*'), so that it could be returned to France in 1979, after a gap of sixty-five years.[9] Sail training ships often have an international history, but as Péron (2000: 94) observed, France's maritime heritage itself lacks continuity and its 'maritime identity still holds a minor place in national priorities'. Another example is the large modern warship *Colbert*, built in 1956, which was a popular if controversial attraction in Bordeaux in the 1990s, but which was later sent for scrap. Like Germany, France has limited use for old ships.

Similarly, we should expect that even when saved, ships without a useful 'story' languish, and again, there is some suggestive evidence, such as the fate of the sailing ship *City of Adelaide*, built in 1864.[10] The ship was used to carry emigrants from Britain to Adelaide, in South Australia, and although this heritage is of interest in Scotland and Northern Ireland (Watson 2011: 764-5, 770, and Sawyer 2011: 638-39), as a story emigration has very limited utility for the English or their maritime museums (Leffler 2004: 37-38). This may be because of a history of penal transportation to Australia in the nineteenth century, and also because of extensive negative publicity about orphans sent to Australia in the years after the Second World War. The 'betrayal of a generation' according to the press, British orphans had in fact been sent overseas initially and for many years for philanthropic reasons (Constantine 2002: 99-1001). For whatever cause, the efforts to preserve the ship in the UK failed, despite it being the oldest extant 'clipper' (a large, fast sailing ship), recognition as part of the UK's 'National Historic Fleet', and strong Scottish interest. By contrast with Britain, migration is perhaps the key narrative in Australia, and it is claimed that 'one in five' South Australians can trace an ancestor who was a passenger on the *City of Adelaide*.[11] An Australian group made a bid to move the ship to Adelaide in 2011, so that whilst in the UK the story of this hulk was insufficient to save it from scrapping, in South Australia the same story is strong enough to drive the financing of restoration and preservation.

Perhaps the most striking example of a vessel with very limited utility in terms of patriotic myth is the *Wilhelm Bauer,* a German submarine. Now named after a nineteenth century German engineer who built early submarines, it was originally launched towards the end of the Second World War in January 1945, as the *U2540*. Information panels explain that it was an advanced design, a 'Type XXI' boat, which 'fortunately' did not see action, but was scuttled on 4 May 1945. From the guidebook we learn it was speculatively salvaged by the company Bugsier Reederei in 1957 (Kludas n.d: n.p.). In 1958, the Federal German Navy obtained permission from the Western European Union to commission a submarine as a test boat for the design of post-war German submarines, and *U2540* was available and taken over by naval and civilian researchers until it was laid up in 1980. Now moored with other historic vessels by the national maritime museum in Bremen, *Technikmuseum U-Boot Wilhelm Bauer* (opened 1984) claims to highlight 'the pioneering technology of this submarine type, while the exhibition is also designed to provide an impression of the terrors of submarine warfare' (introductory panel, gangplank). Inside, it is argued (in German and English) that 'it is not a harmless monument to the history of technology [but] an impulse for reflection on how we use technology today' (information panel). Clearly it is difficult to use such vessels to celebrate national stories because of their destructive role, their association with a sinister regime, the enormous losses suffered by their crews, and a certain notoriety (Hadley 1995).

Yet, the recovery of the *U2540* does illuminate an interesting moment in European post-war history. The victors of 1945 had decided emphatically that Germany should be disarmed, and the remaining Type XXI submarines were distributed among them, including four to the Soviet Union. Only in post-war trials did the allies realize that they had been 'woefully unprepared' for such a threat (Benedict 2009: 97), and the US Navy in particular was extremely anxious at the prospect of facing reconditioned boats in Soviet hands (Barlow 2009: 162-166). Whilst these specific fears slowly subsided, the Cold War was developing, and with the outbreak of the Korean War in particular (1950–53), Britain, the USA and west German leaders all came to favour German rearmament (Dockrill 1991: 4-20). In 1950, this was an alarming prospect for many Europeans, and initially opposed by France, but in 1955, German armed forces became

part of NATO (Dedman 2010: 64, 79). However, accords signed in London and Paris in 1954 limited the size of submarines which Germany could build, and a re-commissioned Type XXI was the solution to this restriction, hence the ex-*U2540* emerged from overhaul as the *Wilhelm Bauer* in 1960. It thus embodies the tense negotiations and the geopolitical shifts that led ultimately reconciliation, the European Union, and decades of peace, though this story remains untold.

Conclusion

Preserved ships and boats are among the most expensive and complex objects preserved by museums, but many of these exhibits are preserved across Europe. Each exhibit, and its context (including its national setting), is of course unique, but evidence from a study of these exhibits suggests that they are useful as a basis or focus of stories celebrating the nation. As well, they often relate to extensive if sometimes implicit over-arching narratives, whilst a teleological sequence, of creation – loss – discovery – recovery – exhibition, arguably a secularized version of the Christian meta-narrative, is also widespread. Ships are effective vehicles for these stories because, compared with many museum objects, their loss and recovery tend to drama. They are often impressive, complex exhibits and they usually require very specialist preservation techniques, reflecting and reinforcing the significant status of science and technology in European society. Stories and narratives enable such exhibits to be utilized by the polity, justifying the expense of collecting and museualizing ships, even if they are technically unremarkable, or have difficult histories.

Notes

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[2]   This research is based in part on data resulting from the EuNaMus project (http://www.eunamus.eu). I would like to thank colleagues on that project, especially Dr Sheila Watson and Prof Simon Knell for their help and encouragement. I would also like to thank the reviewers of this article for their advice; any remaining errors are my own.

[3]   Anon, (n.d.) 'HMS Victory', The Society for Nautical Research, http://www.snr.org.uk/victory.htm, accessed 3 May 2012.

[4]   Anon, (n.d.) *Velos (*1959-1991) (Hellenic Navy),
http://www.hellenicnavy.gr/
index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=257&Itemid=490&lang=el, accessed 3 April 2013.

[5]   The United States warships Cassin Young, Kidd and The Sullivans, see Historic Naval Ships Association, (n.d.) 'HNSA Ships By Type', http://www.hnsa.org/class.htm#DD, accessed 3 April 2013.

[6]   Wikipedia contributors (Norway) (n.d.) 'Gustav III', Wikipedia, Den fria encyklopedin, http://sv.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gustav_III, accessed 18 June 2011.

[7]   Wikipedia contributors, 'SS Great Britain', (n.d.) Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=SS_Great_Britain&oldid=548152091 accessed 3 April 2013.

[8]   Anon, (n.d.) 'The Story: Isambard Kingdom Brunel', SS Great Britain Trust. http://www.ssgreatbritain.org/story/isambard-kingdom-brunel, accessed 11 February 2012.

[9]   Anon, (n.d.) 'L'Histoire du Belem', Fondation Belem, http://www.fondationbelem.com/histoire_1896-1914_l_antillais_de_nantes.htm, accessed 3 April 2013.

[10]   My thanks to Serena Iervolino for alerting me to this case.

[11]   Roberts, R. (2013), '1/4 Million Descendants' Clipper Ship City of Adelaide Ltd. http://
        cityofadelaide.org.au/history/genealogy/1-4-million-descendants.html, accessed 3 April
        2013.

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