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Anarchic Archives: The Potency and Problems of Maritime Archaeological Archives

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Introduction

Maritime archaeological archives have a particular cultural potency. Logistical complexities and economic costs make accessing many underwater and intertidal sites difficult for researchers and the public alike, endowing their archives with a specific sense of rarity. Whilst, the very-present threats of treasure-hunting and salvage as well as imbroglios of their production and curation make them peculiarly multivalent assemblages. Yet in England they remain neglected, largely un-curved, inaccessible, under-researched and sometimes sold.

This article examines this apparently anomalous situation. Firstly, by drawing on the *Securing a Future for Maritime Archaeological Archives*¹ project to characterize the present, acute crisis. Then, by relating three 'stories from the archives' to examine what archives have to say about the history of maritime archaeology in England and the contemporary legal, economic and cultural politics enmeshing their production. In doing so, this paper reframes these scattered, 'orphaned' archives as *source* and *subject* but also *practice*, and emphasizes their rich, research potential. Finally, it highlights key questions of 'ownership', the production of archaeological knowledge and, ultimately, how we conceive of the 'archaeological record'.

Powerful and Problematic

Maritime archaeological archives are particularly powerful assemblages for two principal reasons. Firstly, the context in which they are produced makes them both comparatively scarce and hard-fought. The relative inaccessibility of most maritime sites, the inhospitality of the physical environment and additional time it takes to investigate them imbue these collections with a specific kind of rarity value. Sites are also often inaccessible to much of the public, placing added importance on the artefacts, images, samples and interpretations gathered in their archives as the primary means of engagement with them. This image of archaeology in remote and hostile conditions is generally resisted by maritime archaeologists for whom maritime fieldwork practices are routine and who wish to emphasize the common scope, practices, aims and responsibilities of archaeology in

¹ This project was undertaken by the Hampshire and Wight Trust for Maritime Archaeology and the Institute of Field Archaeologists (with support from the Archaeology Data Service and Archaeological Archives Forum), and funded by English Heritage, Historic Scotland, the Royal Commission for the Ancient and Historic Monuments of Scotland and the Society of Museum Archaeologists (<http://www.maritimearchaeologytrust.org/sfmaa> accessed on 10 July 2014).

different environments. Yet, whatever the ordinary realities of most maritime fieldwork, the ‘double’ inaccessibility of seabed archaeology—to researchers and the public alike—impacts on both how people conceive of the archive and its cultural currency, its potency. Moreover, it skews concepts of the *value* and significance of an archive (or an element of one) away from ideas of research potential and towards the act of *collecting* (and sometimes to owning) ‘rare’ objects and information.

Secondly, there is a coexisting and entangled politics of treasure-hunting, contested ‘rescue archaeology’ and long-established salvage regimes surrounding these sites and collections. The most high-profile examples are often stranded within legal and political tangles over ownership and legislative jurisdiction and quantified in economic terms (Dromgoole 2004, 2007b; Van Duivenvoorde 2006).² These connections, the consequently messy politics of archive production and the correlate perceptions of maritime archaeology they bring are a potent mix. They produce a sense that these archives are created within an ungoverned, ambiguous legal (and physical) environment. Although most maritime investigations take place within Territorial Waters,³ this false image of archaeology in a ‘frontier’ space, pushing both physical and legal boundaries, persists. It overshadows the everyday work most of maritime archaeologists undertake in intertidal mudflats and grey inshore waters, and stokes the rhetoric of scholars, practitioners and avocational archaeologists about the ‘value’ of our archives. It feeds a public image of these assemblages as rare, contested and in need of rescue, as well as economically valuable, which focuses on artefacts as commodities rather than research and interpretation. And, at times, it represents very real threats to both maritime archaeological sites and archives. From eBay to Christie’s and from the imagined to ‘authenticated’ values,⁴ artefacts from maritime sites have *prices*.

This impression also feeds—and is fed by—the acute crisis facing maritime archives in England, and the long-standing systemic vacuum which produces it. For despite the multivalent meanings woven into these archives, they are neglected in both policy and practice and, as a result, often dispersed, un-curated and insecure (Hampshire and Wight Trust for Maritime Archaeology (HWTMA) 2009a, 2009b, 2009c; Ransley and Satchell 2006). There is a near-complete lack of public museums or repositories willing or able to receive archaeological archives from the maritime sphere. The regional museum model for curating land-based archaeological investigations has a statutory underpinning, and despite its shortcomings (including gaps in museum ‘collecting areas’ and increasingly overburdened museum stores) there *is* a system. There are national guidelines on archaeological archive practice to support ‘a stable, ordered, accessible archive’ (Brown 2007: 3) and professional standards that require a receiving repository is in place before any archaeological project

² As well as generating considerable media coverage, questions have been raised in Parliament about *HMS Sussex* (wrecked 1694), the VOC ship *Rooswijk* (1739) and *HMS Victory* (1774) (e.g. Hansard 2006, 2012).

³ England’s Territorial Waters extend up to 12 Nautical Miles from the coast.

⁴ For example, the New World Treasures site (<http://www.newworldtreasures.com/rooswijk.htm> accessed on 10 July 2014) offers ‘certificates of authentication’ for coins from the Rooswijk site (see also English Heritage 2009: 7).

begins (Institute for Archaeologists (IfA) 2009), along with parallel ‘best practice’ stipulations made by regulators in commercial and licensed work. But there remains a gulf between these guidelines, the intention of regulators and the profession and the situation in practice where museums often have no remit for collection or curation (see for example, HWTMA 2012a: 8–36). In 2002, when the National Heritage Act extended English Heritage’s (EH) remit into the marine zone, sites designated under the Protection of Wrecks Act 1973 became EH’s responsibility. Archaeological interventions on the 49 designated wreck sites in English waters, a terrifyingly tiny fraction of total *known* maritime sites, now require full archive planning and secure deposition (supported by EH). EH are also supporting the slow process of identifying and piecing together the rest of the archives⁵ of these sites (e.g. Camidge 2006; HWTMA 2009d; Needham et al. 2013; Read and Overton 2014). Yet the renewed and retrospective processes of archive management surrounding these few sites, only serve to throw into sharp relief the extent of the problem for the rest of the marine historic environment and all the other numerous undesignated sites, from shipwrecks and downed aircraft to now-submerged (pre)historic landscapes and occupations (see Ransley and Sturt 2013). This systemic disconnect, combined with a lack of appropriate, public (and therefore secure) repositories, creates a void that makes adhering to ‘best practice’ impossible—a gap through which maritime archives continually and inevitably fall.

The result is anarchic, scattered archives. These archives are often produced through multiple interventions by multiple investigators over a number of years, through anything from site surveys or surface recoveries of exposed artefacts to full-scale excavations, and subsequently held by multiple individuals and institutions both public and private.⁶ Artefacts and records are held indefinitely (and ultimately insecurely) by archaeological units, individuals and groups (both professional and avocational) with no other choice but ‘passive’ storage. In the worst cases they are simply sold. In 2009, the *Securing a Future* project reported that a significant amount of maritime archive material including 48,864 artefacts, 153,191 photographs and 4358 samples was *not* held in public museums or archives were 48,864 artefacts, 153,191 photographs and 4358 samples (fig. 1; HWTMA 2009). It is only in exceptional circumstances that specific, sometimes piecemeal, agreements are negotiated with museums for particular sites (often after fieldwork has taken place and when a ‘significant’ artefact(s) has been recovered; e.g. Milne et al. 2012). As a result thousands of artefacts, samples, data sets, documents and images are placed beyond the reach of the public, and in most cases, without exceptional commitment and

⁵ It is worth noting here the difference between an archaeological archive which ‘comprises all records and materials recovered during an archaeological project’ (as defined by European guidelines <http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/arches/Wiki.jsp?page=STANDARD%20for%20archaeological%20archiving> accessed on 10 July 2014), an ‘orphaned collection’ (see Voss and Kane 2012: 88) and the larger site archive of a shipwreck site which often includes a dispersed assemblage of material from and about the site, including artefacts, images, data and samples as well as a number of archaeological archives. Throughout this paper we are addressing these larger site archives as well as specific archaeological archives.

⁶ See the small but growing body of work on Protected Wreck Site archives (Camidge 2006; HWTMA 2009d; Needham et al. 2013; Read and Overton 2014).

both diplomatic and detective skills, beyond that of the researcher. They remain largely uncurated, under-interpreted and unpublished.

Detailed responses to the SFMAA survey revealed 571,156 archive elements not currently residing within public museums or archives, which included the following types of archive:

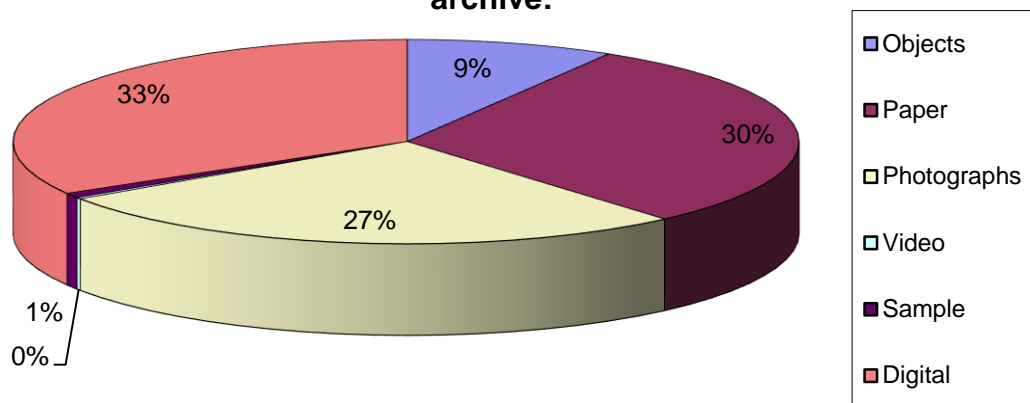


Fig. 1. Number of maritime archaeological archive elements reported as not residing within public museums or archives in 2009 (reproduced with permission of the Maritime Archaeology Trust).

Stories from Maritime Archaeological Archives

The current, anomalous situation in England is the product of the fractured legislative and disciplinary history of maritime archaeology. Only 12 years ago, there was no formal heritage management system for the marine historic environment and today many marine archaeological investigations take place outside any regulatory framework.⁷ Fragmentary protection was afforded to a handful of specific wreck sites by the 1973 Protection of Wrecks Act; a group generated through chance discoveries and the commitment of individuals rather than strategic planning (fig. 2). During the latter twentieth century, this was the curatorial backdrop to the rise of scuba-diving as recreational activity in the UK and the increased access to and location of seabed sites. Parallel to this a handful of high-profile archaeological projects took place around Europe as the disciplinary practice of maritime archaeology began to emerge (including the *Mary Rose* project⁸). The stories maritime archives can tell us about this history elucidate the complicated, contemporary legal,

⁷ Most maritime archaeological interventions address un-designated sites, either undertaken by commercial units in advance of development or as part of avocational projects. These projects do not require permission or licensing by heritage agencies.

⁸ Henry VIII's Tudor warship, the *Mary Rose*, was famously raised in 1982 as part of the UK's largest maritime archaeological project (Marsden 2003). Still ongoing, it now includes a purpose-built museum.

economic and cultural politics of the production of both maritime archaeological archives *and* knowledge.

For example, in the archive(s) of *HMS Colossus* (fig. 2) we can pick out both the patterning of disciplinary and legal history and a story about the politics of ownership and practices of collecting. *Colossus* was wrecked in 1798 in the Isles of Scilly on its return from the battle of the Nile, whilst carrying wounded sailors along with part of Sir William Hamilton's collection of Greek pottery. Following historic salvage of the site, Roland Morris, a marine salvor, located part of the wreck in 1974. It was designated under the Protection of Wrecks Act in 1975, and a large quantity of pottery recovered, some of which went to the British Museum and became absorbed into the museum collection. Designation was revoked in 1984, though the records related to this work have not been located (Dunkley 2007). The 1970s interventions reflect the uncertain position of the marine historic environment at that time. With hindsight, this designation looks like a manipulation of the Protection of Wrecks Act—a process, and approach to the site, legitimated by the British Museum's willingness to acquire artefacts divorced from their archival context.

Through the 1980s and 1990s, though some artefacts were simply acquired by divers, others were donated to local museums creating a further dispersed assemblage from the site. In 2001 divers located the stern and the new site was re-designated. A series of surveys, small-scale excavations and stabilization trials followed, carried out under licence by the Cornwall and Isles of Scilly Maritime Archaeology Society (CISMAS), or Wessex Archaeology (WA), the Protection of Wrecks Act contractor and producing more clearly defined archaeological archives. Notably by the time EH's remit was extended into the marine environment, there was both a desire and ability to protect the site locally. CISMAS, and its relationship with an experienced professional maritime archaeologist, had developed independent of the fragmentary heritage management framework. This reflects patterns of informal guardianship by local divers and avocational groups (often bound to competing notions of individual 'ownership' of the site), present at multiple sites across the UK, which developed in the absence of formal heritage management systems.



Fig. 2. Distribution of Protected Wreck Sites. (reproduced with permission of Will Foster Illustration).

Artefacts from the site are now held in at least three museums, multiple private collections and two private museums, with other documentary and digital data held by the Isles of Scilly Museum, WA and EH. Trying to identify *Colossus'* larger site archive before any research might take place is therefore a complex task. The geographical dispersal, uncertain extent and complicated questions of ownership and therefore of access, curation and long-term security are common to many UK shipwreck archives.⁹ It has long impeded fuller research and interpretation of these sites, particularly regional or thematic analysis. As a result, the stories (and the archaeological knowledge) that they produce are about discovery and recovery, focused on the politics, methodologies and most attention-grabbing artefacts from the sites. Narratives that are, again, threaded through with practices of collecting and ownership.

⁹ For example, the archive of the *Stirling Castle* (fig. 2), a seventeenth-century Restoration warship lost in 1703, is dispersed among at least nine known institutions and private individuals (HWTMA 2012b: 81).

Our second story concerns a key contemporary problem of shipwreck archaeology: lack of agreement over how the ship's remaining pieces of hull-structure and associated timbers ought to be treated. The 'big-event' projects that jumpstarted the discipline, particularly the *Mary Rose* project, have lent a ship's hull disproportionate emblematic importance (Ransley 2007: 224–226). Discussion often centres on the need for conservation and permanent display of ship remains (echoing the *Mary Rose* project; Mary Rose Museum 2013), rather than comprehensive analysis and interpretation of the whole assemblage. This emotive discourse inhibits discussion, let alone development, of selection and retention guidelines and casts conservation of maritime artefacts as challenging, expensive and potentially unsustainable. The *Mary Rose* archive is (perhaps uniquely) complex and vast, and the scale of the project required to conserve, curate and display it skews ideas about the nature of maritime archaeological archives as a whole. These perceptions not only stymie selection and retention strategies within new projects and focus them on the material remains of the vessel, but they are a key stumbling block in working relationships with an already stretched museum sector. Equally importantly, the privileging of hull remains underpins a 'ship technology' research bias that limits the kinds of histories maritime archaeology contributes to. Frequently, the full research potential of maritime archaeological archives, which have often global and multi-national relevance, are thus over-looked.

Resistance to engaging with selection and retention strategies feeds a tendency within many projects to 'keep it all', further undermining the development of much-needed reference collections (since artefacts selected for dispersal from site archives contribute to such collections). Whilst conversely, debates about selection and retention are made more difficult where there are no publicly held reference collections for the majority of shipwreck material culture. The drive to 'keep it all' is also fed by the knowledge that most extant shipwreck archives are dispersed and insecure and the idea of potential conflict over ownership (amplified by high-profile cases and real legal ambiguity of underwater cultural heritage outside Territorial Waters; Dromgoole 2007b, 2013). The consequent, competing and polemic discourses of either 'keep it all' or 'sell it all', generated by the shadow of treasure-hunting, have so entrenched discussion that even consideration of discard, as part of selection and retention strategies, is largely taboo.

Questions of ownership converge again in the salvage law that is central to the patchwork of legislation governing maritime archives—and our third story. Since 1854, all wreck material recovered from the sea, whether through archaeological investigation, salvage or chance, falls under this legal framework and must be reported to the Receiver of Wreck. The Receiver's primary role, a legacy of Britain's long history of maritime commerce, is to allow the owners of ships and cargoes to recover property lost at sea (see Merchant Shipping Act 1995 part IX). Those recovering material may be entitled to a salvage award or be allowed to keep the material in lieu of an award. This is property law, a paradigm long embedded, unchanged within maritime legal space. Thus, maritime artefacts are understood through the prism of salvage law and it is as property that maritime archives are constituted.

It is important to point out that the majority of modern, commercial salvage relates to recently lost vessels. However, archaeological artefacts make up a significant part of the Receiver's case load. In 2013, 42 percent of the 35,450 objects reported were 'historic' objects (defined as over 100-years-old; Receiver of Wreck 2013: 5). Between 2001 and 2010 an average of 31 percent of finds reported were historic (HWTMA 2012a: 65), whilst c. 5700 historic artefacts were retrospectively reported during the 2001 'Amnesty' (Receiver of Wreck 2001). Although the Receiver currently undertakes investigation of historical objects, liaises with heritage agencies and attempts to place artefacts with museums, this relies upon the resources and goodwill of the Receiver, heritage agencies and 'finders' alike (Receiver of Wreck 2001: 66–67). Furthermore, the system has particular concrete effects on maritime archives. It separates objects from the site and all the plans, images, datasets and eco-samples in its archive, as well as from the evidential value of their archaeological context. It contributes to the scattering of archives as finds from the same site are frequently reported, and therefore treated, individually—creating dispersed material assemblages rather than archaeological archives or even orphaned collections. Objects from government-owned wrecks are often given in lieu of a salvage award—moving publicly held heritage into private hands (Receiver of Wreck 2001: 7). Moreover, it relies on reporting of finds by those with sometimes vested interests and, importantly, allows them to do so confidentially, which has at times prevented the Receiver discussing threatened sites with heritage agencies. Yet despite these systemic flaws (and the broader economic structures and power dynamics they highlight), the role of the Receiver and the work she does also underlines the complete lack of any system for the recording of un-designated non-wreck finds from marine contexts (HWTMA 2012a).

This long-established, bureaucratic attention to artefacts at the expense of archaeological context normalizes practices of collection. As well as dispersing site archives, the current system shapes the ways they are conceived of and generated. Engaging with the marine historic environment through this system's paradigm distorts the relative importance of objects over all other information in an archaeological archive. From the moment an individual interacts with a site on the seabed it pushes them to conceive of it not in terms of archaeological contexts, but as an assemblage of artefacts. It's a subtle distortion, but one that nonetheless impacts on the practices and understandings of avocational and professional archaeologists alike.

This process further skews ideas of archaeological significance and value towards the collecting of objects (and their economic value), and interacts in complicated ways with the apparent legal ambiguity of archive production. In this illusory, buccaneer space, an 'acceptable' mode of personal acquisition, underpinned by some vaguely moral sense that guardianship is required and a pseudo-antiquarian collecting impulse, seems to persist among archaeologists, avocational groups and members of the public alike. It is apparent within the taboo surrounding selection and retention strategies, and reinforced by the insecurity of extant archives and the importance of committed 'amateurs' (sometimes

framed in opposition to acquisitive public bodies; Ransley 2007: 232–233) in the fractured history of maritime archaeology. Yet it is within this complicated tangle of economic and cultural politics that not only maritime archives but maritime archaeological *knowledge* are produced.

Archive as Source, Subject and Practice

These stories are only brief examples, but reflect some of the energizing possibilities in addressing archives as *subject* as well as source. For, the anarchic archives of English maritime archaeology, though terrifyingly insecure to the emotionally invested maritime archaeologist, have one key advantage. They push us—the researchers, curators and creators—to consider them as more than un-complicated repositories of archaeological data. They oblige us to approach them as material assemblages in themselves, as instruments and products of changing legislative, cultural and disciplinary practice. They are endowed with historical and narrative time-depth and with their own epistemic and practical histories to tell—offering a reflexive lens through which to scrutinize our discipline and the processes through which archaeological knowledge is constructed. Often sparse, interrupted and dispersed, they are potent and problematic in equal parts. As an archaeological community, we may not yet be in a position to create, nurture and curate maritime archaeological archives as we might wish, but these archives nonetheless situate us at the centre of what Stoler has identified as “the archival turn” in humanities (2009: 44).

Within history, anthropology, film and literary studies, archives have become analytical objects in themselves, both as metaphor and as physical collections (see Burton 2006; Hamilton et al. 2002; Steedman 2002; Stoler 2009; Velody 1998 and the papers within that volume). This shift towards archive as subject, as well as source, has growing purchase within archaeology, where the excavation-curation imbalance and “international curation crisis” (Advisory Committee on Curation 2003; Fagan 1996) has gradually begun to produce a reassessment of archaeological archives (see Voss 2012 and other papers in this volume).

Yet archaeological archives are also different to the historical and documentary archives that Stoler and others are reconsidering. Historical archives have complex politics and histories, certainly. Just as the processes that bring archaeological archives together are as revealing as the collections themselves, multiple acts of domination, concealed narratives and undeclared affects are woven into the record-keeping of public and private institutions. Yet underpinning the archaeological archives which were produced during the last half-century, there is also an explicit intent to maximize research potential. This motivation to preserve ‘resources’ is not unique to archaeological archive practices, but the desire to provide an even-handed, comprehensive record for future scholars to re-interpret is. The ‘preservation by investigation’ imperative drives the standards we set for ourselves as a profession (Brown 2007; IfA 2009). It frames our archival practices and their overt struggle towards transparency and, as far as possible, completeness, as well as their implicit reach for an elusive, unachievable objectivity.

The Practice of Maritime Archaeological Archives

Perhaps, then, the key challenge is not so much in recognizing archaeological archives as subject, but in engaging with them as a *practice* and asking what this could tell us. This approach might offer two paths.

Productively and refreshingly, curation practices are just beginning to be recognized within archaeology as “generative research processes in and of themselves” (Voss 2012: 146). Voss’ work on ‘orphaned’ collections demonstrates the value in understanding curation as research process and a central part of the cultural practice of archaeology (Voss 2012; Voss and Kane 2012). Work on the *Stirling Castle* archive, a seventeenth-century warship with an archaeological and archival history at least as complex as *Colossus*, is revealing similar possibilities for maritime archives (HWTMA 2012b). Researching the archive establishes the potential of the site to offer insights into larger questions about the Restoration period, particularly about the politics of monarchy, navy and nation (MAT forthcoming). By generating new research questions, this work highlights the potential for archival practices to drive future fieldwork, but *also* to produce new archaeological knowledge of depth, complexity and wider significance, in and of themselves.

Secondly, we might productively place archival practice within broader discussions of the embodied practices of archaeological knowledge production. On the one hand, the bodily practices of archives— of touching, unfurling, smelling, hearing, and pouring over artefacts, ecosamples, photographs, plans and digital data—offer a particular kind of material encounter. These embodied archival practices are the means through which we interpret, translate, order and curate archives. On the other, as we begin to reflect on the creative, sensory activities involved in archaeological fieldwork more critically—in diving (Simonetti forthcoming), drawing (McFayden 2012), excavation (Edgeworth 2010:141; 2003; 2012), photography (Hamilakis et al 2009), cataloguing and conserving—they push us to think of archives as material expressions of embodied experiences. Archives then become records of processes and practices, but also of sensorial perception and engagements with time, environment and place, as much as of the landscapes and objects we now imagine as the ‘archaeological record’. They become repositories of sensory engagements both in and out of the field, but also the site and source of those engagements. Thus, archives can be understood as active and in-process, rather than a stable, static and unchanging.

Conclusions

Archaeological archives, then, require us to address them not only as *source* and *subject*, but also as *practice*. Moreover, they call out for us to write “ethnographies of the archive” (Stoler 2009: 45), to investigate what they expose about our discipline *but also* about the production of archaeological knowledge.

In this short paper we suggest the productive potential maritime archaeological archives offer for doing so. If we were to ask, for example, what the form of a site’s archive tells us about the formation of archaeological knowledge, we might point to the economic and

cultural politics shaping them, an analysis that highlights the historically and politically contingent nature of that knowledge. For, driven by chance and the legal and historical framings of maritime salvage, it is fractured, often individualistic, artefact-focused and underlain by a culturally particular logic of collection and acquisition. The privileging of artefacts, as commodified, material objects, over the evidential value of sites and whole archives reflects the broader politico-economic frameworks (see Carmen 2005 among others), but also constrains archaeologists, affecting the approaches and the nature of the knowledge they produce in subtle ways. The production of maritime archaeological knowledge is thus revealed as a cultural practice with all the political, historical, emotional as well as material facets we might expect.

More than this, however, this privileging of artefacts (and even the 'preservation' imperative that underlies archaeological archival practices more broadly) highlight a perception of the archaeological 'record' as tangible and finite. The desire to establish a comprehensive and objective record of the 'record' reflects an imagining of archaeology as a *thing*, or in Hamilakis' (2005: 99) words, "a metaphysical entity that has been produced by archaeologists themselves out of the material fragments of the past" (see also Hamilakis 1999; Ransley 2007: 228–230). Derrida and Prenowitz (1995: 24) have described the tension or "weight" inherent within the idea of the archive,

...a movement of the promise and of the future no less than of recording the past, the concept of the archive must inevitably carry in itself, as does every concept, an unknowable weight. ... It involves the history of the concept, it inflects archive desire or fever, their opening on the future, their dependency with respect to what will come, in short, all that ties knowledge and memory to the promise.

There is something of this attention to the promise of the future in this imagining of archaeology. As a physical, finite entity archaeology can be used up. It can run out if not properly curated and fail the future. Yet the three stories from the archives related here point to the multiple potential narratives *of*, and indeed the potential *for*, multiple dialogues with the past that are present in our scattered, imperfect archives. They suggest the enormous potential in establishing a disciplinary culture which sees archival research and curation as much a part of the practice of maritime archaeology as fieldwork. Moreover, by interrogating these stories we open up the possibility, then, of re-imagining the archive and the archaeological record itself—not as a finite *thing*—but as a practice, rich, generative, sensorial and ongoing.

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