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Sunken history: shipwreck Scheurrak SO1 in the late sixteenth-century Dutch maritime cultural landscape

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Summary

In 1984, a four hundred year old shipwreck was discovered off the coast of Texel. It was named Scheurrak SO1 after its location. During the 1980s and 1990s, professional excavation of the ship led to the recovery of over three thousand objects, varying from food remains, woollen mittens, and woodworking tools, to personal chests, kitchen utensils and the skull of a black rat. The proverbial golden bars and diamonds are absent at the site. However, the value of Scheurrak SO1 lies in the wreck as a witness of the everyday context of the common sailor in the late sixteenth century, with the finds representing all aspects of shipboard life and the coherent network of initiators, suppliers, and officials of the trade.

The ship was in operation during a transitional phase in Dutch history. Rapid developments and innovations marked the last quarter of the century, many were related to international trade and shipping. The maritime world permeated the culture of the entire society, and this marinization reached a momentum in the 1590s. The Fall of Antwerp in 1585 started a shift of the economic center of gravity to Amsterdam, which became the hub of international trade of the Low Countries. The Dutch skippers explored new harbours on the edges of the European continent, the flow of commodities increased in variety and numbers, and more and more people found direct or indirect employment in shipping. In 1602, the Dutch East India Company (VOC) was founded, heralding a new phase of intercontinental shipping and trade and the accompanying upscaling, increasing institutionalization and administration.

This study aims to examine the full width of the material culture of Scheurrak SO1 in the widespread network it was operating in. To study this network, the originally archaeological concept of the maritime cultural landscape is used with a historical approach. The maritime cultural landscape is the network of components that impacted the ship and consists of groups of people, geographical locations, historical events, cultural patterns, and climate conditions. In mapping the landscape, Scheurrak SO1 is the vantage point. The finds on the seabed determine what belongs to the landscape and what not, and thus determine the structure of this study. This leads to the following central question: What can Scheurrak SO1 tell us about the maritime cultural landscape of the Low Countries in the crucial period 1585-1602? For answering this question, the wreck finds are combined with a variety of archival sources. The written sources offer information that cannot be retrieved from the material sources and vice versa. The study of this interdisciplinary set of sources leads to new insights and provides a unique perspective on the history of the late sixteenth century Low Countries.

The study is divided into five chapters in which the many aspects of the maritime cultural landscape are thematized in five main components: the trading networks, the merchants, the supply network, the seafarers, and finally the seascape – the shipboard

life. Chapter 1 on the trading network shows the spatial components of the maritime cultural landscape. The *Straatvaart*, the trade with the Mediterranean, is the context in which Scheurrak SO1 operated. The coherent landscape stretches from the grain fields in the Polish hinterland, the purchase market of Danzig, and the Sound Toll in Denmark, to the sales markets in the Italian port cities. Chapter 2 draws attention to the initiators of trade: the merchant community. This community is broader than just the merchants themselves: shipowners, brokers, agents and administrators also played a large role in the mechanism of seaborne trade. The 1590s were a period where the growing trade led to specialization, outsourcing, risk management and an increasing regulation of the sector. These processes allowed the initiators to send their ships further, explore new markets, add new commodities to their cargoes and invest in bigger vessels. Chapter 3 focusses on the intricate shore-based network of suppliers for the shipping sector. In a ship like Scheurrak SO1 many crafts came together, and a wide range of retailers supplied the inventory and provisions for the journey. Because of the exceptional preservation conditions of Scheurrak SO1, all components of the supply network are represented in the recovered finds. Where the accounts of expenses on late sixteenth century voyages as recorded in the Van Adrichem archive explain what we see on the seabed and shows what is missing in the wreck, the wreck finds show what the written sources can only describe. Chapter 4 focusses on the blue collar workers of the trade: the crews that embarked on the ships. The written sources show how the crews were composed, where they were from and what they earned. The crews on the *Straatvaarders* were relatively small and counted no more than thirty. The West Frisians were well-represented on the fleet, and the recruiting happened mostly through networks of family and fellow villagers. The personal finds of Scheurrak SO1, some customized tools, engraved chests, and remains of clothing, brings us closer to the cultural world of the seafarer. Chapter 5 deals with the seascape, the shipboard life that started at the roadstead when the crews embarked. The aspects dealt with are the facilitating role the Wadden islands played in the shipping, the navigation of the vessel on open sea, the domestic life on board, and disaster at sea. The fact that the ship was an isolated society once the mooring lines were cast loose, impacted shipboard life in many ways. Although there is substantial knowledge on life aboard the seventeenth century ships, Scheurrak SO1 offers an unique insight to the sixteenth century situation which was quite unknown until now.

In conclusion, the study of material culture opens up new perspectives on historical periods and themes that have been frequently studied in the past. Although the 'material turn' has taken place over fifty years ago, (maritime) historians are still often reluctant to include objects in their set of sources. At the same time (maritime) archaeologists limited themselves by consulting the archives for identifying shipwrecks only – if they consult written sources at all. Using the concept of the maritime cultural landscape, that is, thinking in networks while using an interdisciplinary set of sources, can lead to a fruitful cross-fertilization of the two disciplines that results in a better understanding of the past.