wreck rap

Diver Flavio Cavalli with the captain's compass on the wreck of the *Plus*, located off the Åland Islands in the Baltic Sea

The Plus Wreck

— A Baltic Elegy

ANDREA MURDOCK ALPINI

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Located in the Åland Archipelago of the Baltic Sea is the wreck of the late 19th-century, German-made, three-masted, iron-hulled barque named *Plus*, which was lost on a stormy night in 1933. Andrea Murdock Alpini describes his journey there and his dives on this wreck.

Today, I head to Stockholm. There, a ship is waiting, which will carry me to Mariehamn, the largest town in the Åland Islands. Once I arrive in this autonomous region of Finland, my return to the Baltic Sea will finally be accomplished. The last time I was here was 15 years ago, and since then, I have never forgotten it.

I return to the Baltic Sea, no longer a student studying architecture, but rather one who studies wrecks, with a passion for rust and mist. I knew that I would return here. After all, wrecks not only mark the graves of crew members, but also encapsulate tales of the sea, engineering and naval manufacturing, which the sea has preserved over time. So, I left the fog of land, clouded by humidity, so that I could return to the wreck with new eyes.

While researching the archives, I came across some notes dating to 1918. Translating them a little from the Finnish and a little from the Swedish, I discovered that they told the story of a ship, which headed from the Baltic Sea to Argentina. And by the tradition of the port where it called before setting sail across the Atlantic Ocean, the crew had to participate in what was literally called a "rough party."

Perhaps if I was lucky, I would finally see the final resting place of this ship and its crew, wrapped in the eternal embrace of silence that only the cold and dark waters of the Baltic know how to give.

Two and a half hours after the dive boat cast off its moorings, we arrived at the point where Lake Mälaren meets Salt Bay, an arm of the Baltic Sea. The view finally opened up, as the horizon widened, and with it, the silver surface of the sea, which each people in the region call by a different name.

View of Stockholm, Sweden, from the Viking Line ferry, heading towards the fjords and Åland Island, Finland (above); Aerial view of the ferry approach to Mariehamn, the capital of Åland (right); Location of Åland on map of Scandinavia (lower right inset)

A sea of many cultures

Among us Mediterranean folk, the Baltic Sea is called the Eastern Sea, bearing the Greek name of *Βαλτική Θάλασσα* or *Baltiké Thálassa*; but by its ancestral peoples, it is called *Ostsee* in German, *Östersjön* in Swedish, *Østersjøen* by the royals of Oslo, *Itämeri* in the language of Alvar Aalto, *Østersøen* by the Danes, and *Morze Bałtyckie* by the Poles.

To all these peoples, the Baltic is the Sea of the East, except for the Estonians to whom it represents the Western Sea, and they call it *Läänemeri*, as well as the Russians, who call it *Балтийское море*, while to the Lithuanians, it is *Baltijos Jūra*, and finally to the Latvians, who define it similarly to their neighbours, calling it *Baltijas Jūra*. As Shakespeare wrote: "A rose by any other name would smell as sweet," and this is true for the Baltic Sea as well.

This slightly salty sea, which is black as tar, shallow and inhabited by bony fishes (or osteichthyes), has hidden stories of great trade and shipwrecks, which were caused by storms or difficulties in navigation due to thousands of emerging islands and islets posing obstacles along shipping routes. The Baltic Sea preserves the memory of long battles, bloody revolution against tsars, independence of republics, as well as stories of Russian submarines. The Baltic is a book with endless pages yet to be written. Its depths conceal wrecks and preserve the remains of civilian or military sailors and passengers, cultures that have vanished, and vessels that were the pride of a nation.

A First Officer's grandson

"Hi, Andrea," said Ville Lundqvist in greeting, as we met each other's glance on the pier in Åland.

Who was Ville? Well, he was the grandson of the First Officer of the Finnish cargo ship, SS *Argo*, which was sunk during WWII by a Russian submarine that threatened the defensive network created by the Finns, between their land of birch trees and the coast of Estonia. According to Lundqvist, 12 of the crew members died, but Ville's grandfather was saved.

Ville had an old fishing boat adapted for dive excursions, where cylinders were kept along its sides. The line hauler was now used to retrieve the downlines of safety buoys near dive sites or attached to shipwrecks. On board, Ville showed me some archive photos—some of them I knew, others I did not. Then, he took out an old nautical map, with notes and coordinates, distance, and direction to be taken. Sometimes, he was amazed by the fact that I recognised the position of some wrecks or lighthouses. I think I made a good impression on him. So, a bit later, he invited my assistant, Flavio Cavalli, and I to his house for dinner.

It was now my second day waking up on the island. Here, in the morning, it got light around 7:40 a.m. The sky cautiously became clearer, with the mists of the night dispersing, allowing the blue sky to appear among the thinning clouds. The air was pleasantly fresh. On board, we prepared our equipment, as the dive boat headed towards the *Plus* wreck, from the western port of Mariehamn.

History of the wreck

The *Plus* was a three-masted sailing vessel of 1,268 gross tons, which was built in 1885 near Hamburg

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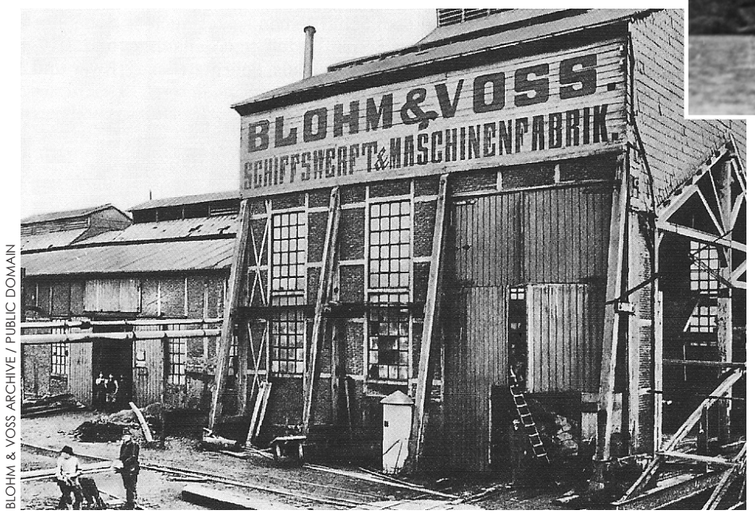
Plus

The deck of the *Pommern* (above), known as the sister ship of the three-masted sailing ship *Plus*; The shipyard Blohm & Voss 1877 in Germany where the *Plus* was built (right)



BLOHM & VOSS ARCHIVE / PUBLIC DOMAIN

in Germany, in the dry docks on the Elbe at the Hermann Blohm and Ernst Voss shipyards. The Laeisz shipping company was the first shipowner. Its maiden voyage was made from Hamburg to Valparaiso in Chile, under the command of Captain Carl J. Steincke, who, in just 61 days, reached the Spanish-speaking lands.

In 1908, the sailing ship *Plus* was sold to Henrich Hansen in Lillesand, Norway. Eight years later in 1916, the vessel was sold to Lauritz Schübeler, who registered the ship in Fredrikstad. But the story of the *Plus* does not end here.

From Norway, it was subsequently sold to the main Finnish trading company in the Baltic, Aktieselskapet Spes, which was based in the Åland Islands. This time, the new owner loaded the ship in Söderhamn, as it was bound for London in Great Britain. The purchase of the vessel, which took place in 1927, was to help implement trade with the English crown and South America.

Newspapers in Mariehamn, the capital of Åland, reported that on the night of 14 December 1933, a terrible snowstorm raged over the Baltic's Archipelago Sea. Chronicles stated that night came earlier that day; so dense was the darkness that it enveloped the coniferous forests, which clung heroically to the rocky slopes of granite and gneiss that descended into the sea.

The previous reports become diluted like aquatints, when they describe the true story of the sinking of the *Plus*, which left London on the day the patron saint of Scotland, Saint Andrew, was celebrated—November 30th.

Tragedy strikes

Back from the island of Kobbaklintar, Captain Eriksson decided to steer the ship into the dock himself. The blistering snow pierced faces and obscured the view for the whole crew, who were returning to Åland to celebrate Christmas, bringing with them exotic gifts, perhaps obtained while trading with sailors of other ships during stops at ports of call where the *Plus* had landed to load or deliver goods.

At full steam ahead, the ship left its shelter, after the sailors had laboriously turned the bow winch to retrieve the heavy anchor. Then, the ship's hull, tossed around by the wind and the current, soon became unmanageable. A quarter of a mile farther, the ship went adrift near the island of Korsölandet, where her keel hit the rocks. The iron of which the hull was built proved to be useless.

The lifeboats were launched, but the leak in the hull was so great that in just a short while, the ship sank. Ten crew members died on board, according to some sources. To this day, their remains rest among the planks of the *Plus*, which had become the shroud that enveloped them for their journey to the Beyond. Those who find

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The captain of the *Plus*, Karl Emanuel Eriksson (above); A rare photo of the sailing ship *Plus* at anchor in a harbour (top right)

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Found on the wreck was a shoe of one of the officers on board the sailing ship *Plus*.

burial at sea rarely find their bodies surrounded by wood; very often, water and sheet metal become their only shrouds. The *Plus* crew had an earthly burial, with their hopes encapsulated in a shipwreck.

It is said that Captain Eriksson tried to swim to Korsö Island, less than 50m away, but the cold and heartbreak from the loss of men and the ship caused his death before he touched the shore. His remains today lie alongside those of his crew.

Only four men, wet and semi-frozen, reached the island. Later, they said that they were so dazed and disoriented that they did not know exactly on which island they were, a confusion no doubt made worse by the wind and snowstorm that raged. One of the survivors remembered having seen a glow of light; he thought it was a house, but his companions did not believe him, thinking the island was uninhabited.

The following day, someone indeed emerged from that glow of light—the only fisherman and inhabitant of the island of Korsö. After a night out in the open, the four sailors were finally rescued.

Memorial

Today, I found myself facing the island that revealed the point where the *Plus* sank. Here, reddish-grey rock emerged from the waters for approximately 15 to 20m. On top of this rock, one could see a small block of granite that was topped with a bell. It was the memorial dedicated to the local community of the *Plus* crew members. Carved into the block of granite were the names of the ones that today lie on the seabed of the Baltic:

- Captain Karl Emanuel Eriksson of Vårdö
- First Official J. Törntoth of Brändö
- Boatswain Stanley Työrä of Torneå
- Seaman Karl Palmén of Godby
- Seaman Johan Andersson of Jomala
- Ordinary Seaman Levi Ahlström of Hammarland
- Ordinary Seaman Bernhard Karlin of St. Marie
- Ordinary Seaman Armas Altonen of St. Karins
- Ordinary Seaman S. Wernow of Malmö
- Ordinary Seaman Claes Häggblom of Eckerö
- Ordinary Seaman Martin Lingren of Hammarland
- Cabin Boy Gösta Mattsson of Mariehamn

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The captain's ladder on the wreck of the *Plus* (left); The sailors' toilet (above); Artifacts from the *Plus* wreck, on display at Åland Maritime Museum (right)

Diving the wreck

I found myself at the surface, ready to dive, wrapped in a cloud of a million moon jellies. The water was green and cloudy. In front of me was the point of land that was the salvation of some of the crew. Below me, not far away, was the wreck of the *Plus*.

At 12m, the colour of the water changed drastically. The green colour disappeared in favour of darkness. It was just a matter of time—about an hour—when I would return to this point, and the dark would only be a memory of what I saw at the bow of the wreck.

I started swimming in the direction of the wreck, which, a couple of minutes later, appeared like a solid black mass. The stern was huge, massive. It towered over me. Below was the large rudder blade, which was no longer in its natural vertical position; the blade had come off its hinges due to the impact with the seabed.

Planktonic algae enveloped the wreck. The wood of the main deck appeared in perfect condition; indeed, one could see all the veins of the wood.

Visibility at this time of year was limited, often due to surface winds that raged every day. I followed the starboard side. Along my path, objects and shapes appeared, which took time to be recognised for what they were.

The ship was large, and it was hard to get an overall view. A rather thick layer of light-coloured sediment covered some parts of the ship. Features of the ship appeared in sequence, including some portholes, the glass of the sloping skylights that were placed on the deck, and finally, the silent cranes that lowered the lifeboats.

At the stern, along the centreline of the ship, there was a large skylight that led to the first of the decks below. Here, the remains of the captain's cabin were found. The space was divided into several rooms of various sizes and shapes. I moved with extreme care, both in order not to alter the state of conservation of the wood, and because in some spaces, the structures were very precarious. Hitting them would mean destroying history more so than the wreck.

I found myself facing an old piece of furniture with drawers. If it were not for the fact that the distance between its headboard and footboard seemed too short to me, I would have said that it could have been Captain Eriksson's bed. To its right, there was a metal tube that ended with an opening suitable to accommodate a person's mouth or the shape of a person's lips. In 19th-century ships, these artifacts were positioned by the captain's bed so that he could

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A coco-de-mer from the Seychelles found in the captain's room on the wreck of the *Plus* (right); Carpenter's tools found at the stern of the wreck (below)

At the entrance of a corridor in the floor plan, there were two perfectly preserved coconuts. They were coco de mer, an endemic species of the Seychelles Islands. I had seen them many years ago in the rainforests on islands in the Pacific and had not seen them since. Now, finding them on the bottom of the Baltic Sea, at tens of different degrees in latitude, gave me a very special feeling. It was like being back on that hot and humid journey I took among palm trees with primitive leaves and tough bark trunks rising towards the light.

Instead, today I was here, immersed in the green waters that surrounded and protected me. I remained motionless for a few minutes contemplating this memory. Then, I got out and headed back to the main deck. The external darkness now appeared less intense to me, because of the even more harsh one in which I was wrapped just moments before. As always, it's all relative; reality is never unequivocal.

On the main deck, as I moved forward towards the bow, a second hatch led me back below deck. A shoe lay on the silt that had accumulated on the wooden planks. My thought was that this shoe had belonged to a man who had not left the ship.

A little farther on, a few metres away, there was a room with shelves.

There, between the shelves, which had collapsed with the effects of time, rested a pair of shoes waiting to be resoled. They still had the shape of the foot that had moulded them. Who knows how many miles they had travelled from bow to stern, as the vessel crossed the seas and oceans of the world.

I moved forward more with my sight than with my fins. I often moved my torchlight with my arms, stretching as far as I could, so that I could collect visual references but also information about the environment that surrounded me, before choosing whether or not to continue in that direction.

Artifacts

A metal circle attracted my attention. It was barely visible, sticking out of the mud just a couple of millimetres, perhaps less. I left my dive lamps behind me at the entry point because they were too bulky, and the space was tight.

I gently placed my hand in the silt, under the circular shape that seemed finally to be what I was searching for since the previous day. In the half-light, my fingers slid under something concave, and a cloud of silt arose. Finally, I saw that I was now indeed holding Captain Karl Emanuel Eriksson's compass in my right hand. The ceramic dial was intact. The geographical directions and wind angles could still be read perfectly.

I deposited the compass on what was left of the hatch through which I had entered the small space. I wanted to photograph it with better light than what I had inside the space, but above all, I want to show the photo to my dive partner who, until now, had been waiting for me in open water. We could not both go down to this spot together. After shooting, I paused, cherishing this small piece of *Plus* history. Then, I gently picked up the compass again with my fingers.

This time, I left my torchlights off. I entered the semi-darkness to see the wreck as it appeared in natural light. The main bridge, broken in some places, and a dorm window let in some greenish light. The show was truly incredible, unique, unrepeatable.

I hid the compass between the silt and the boards to return it to its wreck, or rather to its ship. I passed through the narrow corridor that led from the cobbler's room to the captain's cabin. I found the coconuts again, retracing each space as I passed. I went out of the stern hatch and back to retrieve my dive lamps at the entry point.

Structural features

Entering the *Plus* wreck means understanding how the ship was built. The structure determined its shape. A net of beams and pillars divided the space into three levels. The first two could be seen distinctly, the third level disappeared in the silt that had


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The captain's compass on the wreck of *Plus*

permeated the wreck for almost a hundred years.

I tried to move in different directions, looking less for images to be filmed and more for engineering aspects to better understand the ship. Among the various notes that I brought to the surface, one certainly fascinated me more than the others: the mainmast that fit into the keel. It was made from a solid tree trunk, a single piece. I knew it had to be like this to be a load-bearing structure, but seeing it inserted into the planking was quite another thing. The reality, in comparison to the idea, was overwhelming. The veins of the wood seemed as if they were still alive. Their lines slid and circled along the circumference of the tree trunk, appearing like wrinkles of time, subtracted from natural aging.

A square metal profile of a structure stood up from the wooden deck, about a metre high. There were no impediments of any kind in the descent inside the wreck. My dive buddy, Flavio Cavalli, waited for me, leaning against the square structure like a good family man, with his light on for my return. I started to descend.

A ladder, located under a skylight, connected all the ship's levels up to the rib of the keel. The holds were completely empty, but I already knew that they would be. The *Plus* had left its last cargo load in London and was returning to Mariehamn for the winter. There, it would have stayed in the harbour, protected from the winds, together with other sailing ships like the *Prompt*, *Avenir*, *Regina*, *Baltic*, *Viking* or *Pestalozzi*. Instead, that cursed night of 14 December 1933 saw the *Plus* dragged to the bottom of the sea, transforming it forever into a mystical place.

A few minutes later, I exited from the holds in the middle of the ship and headed to the bow. After a last glance at the bowsprit and its bobstays, I turned my fins again and headed off beyond the starboard side. There, I had seen in previous days some partially visible remains of cookware from the ship's galley. They were almost buried in silt. Touching them would mean raising a cloud of silt that would prevent the photography of them.

A "rough party"

My thoughts fled to that anecdote I read in the weeks before my departure—the note dated to 1918, transcribed in the mid-1960s, in which a crew member remembered a dinner that took

A rare painting in the Åland Maritime Museum's collection, which shows the sailing ships docked in the main harbour of Mariehamn, by Gordon Macfie, 1935 (right); A very rare photo from 1885 of the "rough party" dinner on board the three-masted sailing ship *Plus* (below). This was a traditional custom for the crew when they were docked in the harbour of La Boca, Argentina.

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place in the river port of La Boca, an Argentine barrio in Buenos Aires. Below, I relay in its entirety what I translated from a modern transcription of the old Scandinavian:

"On the last night before the ship left the port, Pastor Johan Nielsen invited all the crew to a 'rough party.' The mass had been reserved for the officers. Immediately after the ceremony, the shepherd boarded the *Plus* with a portion of shortcrust pastry. The cook had already prepared some good coffee; the crew boys instead began to decorate the dish with flags and with what they had at hand. The 'rough party' was prepared to be in good company, singing, playing and telling stories of the sea and of the ports where each sailor had a 'family.' Towards the end of the evening, the pastor read some passages from the Bible and gave them the blessing for a safe trip."

No Scandinavian boat has ever left the port of La Boca without having experienced this centuries-old tradition.

Afterthoughts

Almost nothing remained of the galley on the *Plus* sailing ship, except for some pots, now overboard. The silt was too thick to be moved by hand; one had to be patient for the sea to do its job, covering and uncovering parts of the ship as it pleased. Its waves write the history of this sailing ship.

As for me, from this first trip to the Åland Islands, I tried to relay the best of the *Plus*—not the wreck, but the sailing ship. I spent nearly 300 minutes diving on what remained of it under the sea and visited the Maritime Museum to see its memorabilia as well. After having done all this, I once again looked for myself in a cup of black coffee, which I drank while sailing the waves of the petrol-green sea on our return to shore. Below the waters, I had explored a ship that was no longer able to sail, but whose history deserved to be passed down to future generations. ■


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SOURCES: ÅLAND MARITIME MUSEUM, BLOHM & VOSS ARCHIVE, NORSK MARITIME MUSEUM, WIKIPEDIA.ORG

Based in Italy, author Andrea Murdock Alpini is a technical diving instructor for TDI, CMAS and PSAI. Diving since 1997, he is a professional diver focused on advanced trimix deep diving, log dives with open circuit, decompression studies, and research on wrecks, mines and caves. Diving uncommon spots and arranging dive expeditions, he shoots footage of wrecks and writes presentations for conferences and articles for dive publications and websites such as ScubaPortal, Relitti in Liguria, Nautica Report, ScubaZone, Ocean4Future *and* InDepth. *He is a member of the Historical Diving Society Italy, and holds a master's degree in architecture and an MBA in economics of arts. He is the founder of PHY Diving Equipment (**phidiving.com**), which specialises in undergarments for diving, as well as drysuits, hoods and tools for cave and wreck diving. Among other wrecks, he has dived the Scapa Flow wrecks heritage, Malin Head's wrecks and the HMHS Britannic (-118m), Fw58C (-110m), SS Nina (-115m), Motonave Viminale (-108m), SS Marsala (-105m), UJ-2208 (-108m) and the submarine U-455 (-119m)—always on an open circuit system. His first book (in Italian), Deep Blue, about scuba diving exploration was released in January 2020 (see **amazon.it**). For more information on courses, expeditions and wrecks dived, please visit: **wreckdiving.it**.*


VILLE LUNDQVIST

Flavio Cavalli (left) and Andrea Murdock Alpini (right) on the dive boat, a renovated fishing boat owned by Ville Lundqvist, after a dive on the *Plus* wreck

A model of the Bremer cog, which is the most well-known cog in existence today, dating from the 1380s. It was discovered in 1962. Cogs were a type of round ship primarily made of oak and clinker-built.

800-year-old shipwreck found off Sweden's western coast

A wreck discovered outside of Fjällbacka on Sweden's western coast is the oldest shipwreck ever found in the province of Bohuslän. This is also one of the oldest cogs ever found in Europe.

"The wreck is made from oak, cut between 1233 and 1240, so nearly 800 years ago," said Staffan von Arbin, a maritime archaeologist at the University of Gothenburg.

Dyngökoggen

Last autumn, the University of Gothenburg conducted archaeological diving inspections along the coast of Bohuslän to find out more about known wrecks on the seafloor. It was during this work that the maritime archaeologists came upon the wreck outside of Fjällbacka, which has been given the name "Dyngökoggen."

The limited survey of the wreck showed that it is a cog, a type of ship that first appeared in the 10th century, and was widely used from around the 12th century on.

Cogs were a type of round ship, typically constructed largely of oak and clinker-built. The most famous cog in existence today is the Bremen cog. It dates from the 1380s and was found in 1962; until then, cogs had only been known from medieval documents and seals.

The wreck has a bottom planking that is flush-laid (carvel-built), while the side planks are overlapping (clinker-built). Seams between planks are also sealed with moss, which is typical for cogs. The surviving hull section is about 10 metres long and five metres wide. Von Arbin believes, however, that the ship would originally have been up to 20 metres long.

Analysis of the wood samples showed that the ship was built of oak from northwestern Germany. How did it end up outside of Fjällbacka?

While cogs are mostly associated with the medieval Hanseatic League, ships of this type were common throughout the Middle Ages in northern Europe and Bohuslän, which was part of an important transit route for international maritime trade during this period.

Why did it sink?

It is not yet known why the ship sank but that would likely be an exciting story. The survey of the ship clearly showed indications of an intense fire.

Perhaps the ship was attacked by pirates. The first decades of the 12th century were a turbulent time in Norway, which Bohuslän was a part of at the time, with intense internal struggles for the Norwegian crown, and the coast was plagued by periods of intense pirate activity during the Middle Ages. ■ SOURCE: UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG

(File photo) The Swedish Coast Guard apprehended divers in the process of plundering protected shipwrecks.

Four divers charged with systematic plunder of protected wrecks in the Baltic

The accused individuals appear to have engaged in large-scale systematic looting and disturbance of several wrecks and protected sites, including wrecks of older warships in the Baltic Sea, according to a spokesperson from the Public Prosecutor's Office in Kalmar.

The Swedish Coast Guard apprehended the divers in July 2020, as they were found retrieving artifacts from a wreck off the Baltic island of Öland. A subsequent house search uncovered a large number of objects, which were suspected to originate from wrecks classified as protected. Among the objects was an iron cannon dated to the 17th century.

The indictment includes 10 charges for incidents during a number of dives that took place from 2013 to 2020. Two of the men stand charged on all counts.

"My assessment is that the crimes should be assessed as serious, partly because they led to extensive destruction of protected sites," said prosecutor Magnus Ling with the Public Prosecutor's Office in Kalmar.

The Swedish Antiquities legislation states that it is forbidden to intentionally or negligently disturb, remove, dig out, cover, or by means of construction, plunder or otherwise alter or damage, historic sites. Offences can result in imprisonment for up to four years. ■ SOURCE: SWEDISH PROSECUTION AUTHORITY