

Protection of Underwater Antiquities: Challenges and Obstacles

In order to deal with the protection of underwater heritage we must initially define which cultural products we refer to, given that each of them is under a different kind of threat and requires individualised handling. These products can be: **a]** wrecks - cargoes, **b]** occasional finds such as part of cargoes, anchors, weapons, offerings, etc., **c]** structural submerged remains, **d]** remnants of harbour installations, **e]** wrecks of pre-modern ships and airplanes, especially military or other ones sunken during war conflicts, thus of historical interest. These different cultural heritage elements may be under different kinds of threats, but all of them can be finally linked to human actions. Natural factors of course can play a significant role in the destruction process. However, they are inevitable, predictable and they do not generally destroy archaeological information.

Threats and hazards

a] Wrecks and cargoes are in danger in deep waters mainly because of fishing trawling; in shallow waters they can be easily reached by scuba divers, therefore are more exposed to looting. **b]** Occasional finds face even greater danger, being more attractive to looters -who light-heartily retrieve them as souvenirs- because of their portable nature. **c]** Structural submerged remains suffer especially from waves and erosion in the shallow sea bottom and from modern building on the shore. **d]** Harbour installations bear the impact of modern “development”. Ancient harbours were ideally located so as to offer the best protection against weather conditions. Today there is still need for using the same areas for modern harbours. But the lack of master plans composes a serious threat, and even when they exist, they do not usually include any protection measures. **e]** Pre-modern wrecks have the same “enemies” with ancient wrecks and occasional finds; moreover, the need for their protection is not clearly reasonable to the average diver.

Protection obstacles

Prerequisite for the protection of the underwater cultural heritage is of course its recording and mapping. Otherwise, if we do not know their number and location we can not, in fact, discuss about effective protection. Unfortunately, there are not systematic and accessible records of all the above-mentioned cultural products neither for Greece nor for the entire Mediterranean region, due to the following reasons:

a] It is not yet realised how important records of the total of underwater heritage is, although the present workshop and the STACHEM objectives prove, fortunately, the opposite tension b] even when records do exist, there are very frequently kept hidden for several reasons and c] even when the importance of recording the underwater cultural products is well understood, it is not always possible, yet, to explore every sq. meter of the sea and locate all monuments. As a result, there is not a systematic, complete and accessible database of underwater or front-shore cultural sites or at least pertinent information, neither in Greece nor in any other Mediterranean country, as far as the internet or any book series is concerned.

These necessary issues must be foreseen in an effective legislation framework, which will take into consideration the characteristic nature of this kind of heritage and would be easy to implement. In order to be affected strong political will is necessary. On the other hand, governments and politicians with even a proven interest in the matter must “get something in return for their interest”, along the lines of sustainable development or in terms of “politicians” time. In Greece but elsewhere too, the reality, at least until now, is that the legislation and its implementation do not go hand in hand. Sometimes, basic legislation acts are entirely missing or downgraded because of the lack of implementation measures.

Accordingly, management and promotion of the underwater cultural heritage need sufficient and generous financial support. In Greece, the priorities of the state and the current (and past) financial situation do not support and promote the research in the field, taking into consideration that underwater exploration itself is an expensive operation.

Finally, even if all the above obstacles were to be overcome, the problem of the methodology used for the protection of underwater heritage would still be an issue. Protecting in situ or retrieving? Confining wrecks in cages? Forbidding, limiting or encouraging access to underwater sites? Linking the underwater heritage with the tourism industry in general and diving tourism especially? Is the declaration of a wreck as a marine archaeological site a step towards its protection? This procedure at the moment consists of an announcement of this declaration in the state’s official gazette, accompanied by a relevant map depicting the concerned area. Can this practice without provision of necessary protection instruments prevent lootings? It reminds us the maps with a black dot over the “prohibited military areas”!

Integrated protection

Even though, sustainable approach and an integrating protection management scheme could be conducted, including the following: locating, recording and mapping of the cultural elements, and dissemination of the relevant archaeological information,

especially among locals, aiming at their sensitisation; This could be achieved by effective and attractive educational methods, organising relevant events, creating some of the best-known sites as archaeological parks and by “establishing cultural paths” in larger geographical areas, in connection with land sites, emphasising on the unique nature of this kind of cultural heritage. This process can transform locals to protectors and guardians of their underwater sites and offer the possibility of a concrete income and benefits both to the local inhabitants and the governments, urging them to invest more to the protection and promotion of underwater cultural products.

Towards this direction our Ephorate started in 2005 cooperation with NTUA, adopting and further developing *Limenoscope*, an existing internet database with information on ancient harbours (www.limenoscope.ntua.gr). Moreover, in 2007, on the island of Lesvos, at North Aegean, a project called *Recording Lesvos' ancient harbour network*, financed until now by the Port Fund of Lesvos and the Prefecture of Lesvos was initiated. Aim of the project is to map all the ancient harbour remains around the island and disseminate the information collected by presentations, the internet and a publication including a CD-Rom with 3D virtual reconstructions. Finally the Ephorate, with the cooperation of the local authorities, intends to submit proposals to national and European authorities so as to secure funds for promotional activities regarding the creation of the above mentioned “cultural paths” in the land and seascapes around the island. Information on these paths will be obtained from the internet, leaflets and computer stations placed at the entrance gates of the island (harbours and airport) and at the sites themselves.

Dr Theotokis Theodoulou
t_theotokis@hotmail.com