

## **Underwater archaeological research in the Mediterranean: Problems and possibilities for the cooperation of governmental and non-governmental institutions**

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Most Mediterranean countries have opened or are in the process of opening their seas to underwater archaeological research. A close cooperation between the governmental administration, who by law regulate such activities, and non-governmental institutions, who often have the scientific and technological know-how, as well as the financial possibilities, is beneficial for the development of this highly specialised scientific field, in a sea rightly considered the cradle of many civilisations.

I will not focus on the advantages of a wide Mediterranean collaboration of state-controlled and independent institutions, the benefits are obvious. Rather, without exhausting the list I will enumerate and briefly comment on the numerous problems encountered that make such cooperation difficult and often impossible.

In principle local and foreign non-governmental institutions are welcomed or accepted to take part in such scientific surveys/excavations. The reason is that underwater archaeology is a highly specialised discipline requiring important funds, a complicated interdisciplinary collaboration and a sophisticated technology. Often the governmental infrastructure is not in a position to carry out such scientific activities or if it is, an additional cooperation with a non-governmental local or foreign Institution widens its possibilities.

The non-governmental institutions that seek to obtain a permission to carry-out an underwater survey in their own country or abroad represent a wide spectrum of associations, institutes, and universities. Their reliability, their scientific consistence, their technical equipment and know-how vary greatly. There are of course extreme cases, and it is not seldom that amateurish groups with an uncertain scientific capability often work, side by side with well organised highly scientific expeditions. Treasure hunters well equipped and subsidised by powerful sponsors are sometime a threat as often their survey focus to a search for treasure troves. They are more interested at retrieving statuary and works of art, ignoring totally modest finds which in fact may be of invaluable importance for archaeology and history.

There is no uniformity in the formalities set from a country to the other for obtaining a permission to carry out an underwater survey. Thus the problem in understanding the complexity and discrepancy of the set rules.

In countries where there is a legislation permitting the presence of non-governmental institutions, there is often a discrepancy between the intention of the law maker who interprets the government who welcomes such activities and the supervising department of antiquities who just tolerate the presence of a non-governmental mission, considering it as an “intrusion” to its all-mighty possessiveness of the “territory” and will do whatever is possible to deter, disappoint the continuation of the work.

In many countries the security measures and the permissions required from military authorities or from the coast guard are so complicated that often missions are discouraged and decide not to persevere.

Surveys in international waters create additional confusion. The enclosed morphology of this sea results in a lack of uniformity in the distances from the shores applied by each country to determine its territorial waters. Additionally, beyond the set territorial boundaries exists the continental sea-shelf region, often a disputed zone of economical interests that also may discourage surveys in deeper waters.

There have been attempts to set internationally accepted legislation and some progress has been achieved in regulating the norms for submerged cultural heritage.

Customs' formalities is another serious problem as importing the equipment in transit into a non-EU country, not to mention the sophisticated and often voluminous electronic apparatus, is always a hectic achievement, often insurmountable.

Such customs' formalities are even more complicated when a research ship, belonging or hired by a non-governmental institution seeks permission to carry-out such survey. One then realises that the governmental permit-granting authority cannot interfere with decisions of other branches of the government responsible for customs and security.

Governments may refuse the use of electronic equipment beneficial to an archaeological survey on the grounds that they are of dual use and may be employed in various other commercial fields of research

Presently, there is not even a faint possibility for the application of a unified policy between Mediterranean countries aiming at a smooth cooperation of governmental and non-governmental institutions: obtaining permission by a non-governmental institution for an underwater survey in France, Italy, or Spain is different than carrying out that same survey in Cyprus, Greece or Turkey. A concession obtained in Egypt is governed by different regulations than Libya or Tunisia. I have not even a faint idea of what are the requirements in Albania, Croatia, Israel, Syria, Lebanon or Malta. Formalities differ radically from one country to the other and often result in traumatic experiences for the foreign archaeologists trying to carry out the research. It is a fact, often regulated by law, that a governmental administration considers itself the exclusive beneficiary of the national cultural heritage that lies in its seas – while this is often a common Mediterranean cultural heritage. I could cite several examples of *bona fide* leading scientific institutions, highly specialised in this field, that have become disenchanted and just stopped trying. From what I know there is no *Esperanto* that could be applied to the Babel of what can and what cannot be done.

It goes without saying that each country has to protect the submerged heritage that falls within its jurisdiction.

There is one additional most serious factor to be taken into consideration: Even in accessible depths a scuba-diver is at risk if not abiding to the strict rules of diving. We

must also admit that there are instances when the non-governmental institutions are not up to the scientific and technological standards required for a particular survey. To justify in a way the feeling of mistrust, often rampant among governmental administrations when it comes to grant a concession or permission to a non-governmental institution, one has to admit that an amateurish behaviour in an underwater survey can be disastrous to the site. Contrary to what happens on land archaeological surveys or excavations, wrong deeds on the sea-floor are difficult, often impossible to detect; independently of the competence of the supervising archaeologist-diver delegated by the governmental administration. So caution is necessary when considering granting permissions.

In concluding I have to say that there are several examples of smooth, successful collaboration between governmental and non governmental institutions at local and international level. So one should not be deterred because of these difficulties and a first step in the right direction would be to catalogue the regulations prevailing in each country, understand how these rules are applied, and exchange experience-based information.

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