Preserving Underwater Cultural Heritage in a Globalized World

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Abstract
The circumstances surrounding the preservation of underwater archaeological sites are mired in complex international laws, private greed, and government bureaucracy. In an age where climate change and the continued looting of such sites threaten now more than ever the integrity and continued existence of such cultural heritage, stakeholders need to mobilize effectively to conserve, for the long term, these sites of history. This paper will seek to outline the ways in which governments are most responsible for this effort, the current steps they have taken, the challenges ahead, and possible solutions. Without intervention and strict enforcement of laws from governments, there can be no meaningful change in the preservation of such sites.

Keywords
Archeology — Anthropology — Antiquities — Classical Studies — Shipwrecks — UNESCO — Mediterranean

The threat to classical archaeological sites currently submerged under water including shipwrecks remains great even in the face of international recognition of the need to protect such sites. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) spearheads a number of conventions dealing with the issue of conserving underwater sites, and yet there are still problems with damage to sites stemming from causes that are both natural and manmade. As such, the need for governments and international organisations to work at preserving and protecting such sites from endangerment is urgent. The various legislations and conventions drafted over the years, both international and national, hold great sway over the continued survival of such relics of cultural heritage, but there still remain a number of complications that make enacting such policies difficult. Many conservation projects are in the hands of governments, who offer permission, funding, expertise, and protection. But when the governments lack the resources or will to fulfil their role in preserving underwater sites, some projects have to turn to private sponsors which brings in the risk of illicit antiquities dealing. There is also the further problem of territorial disputes and questions of jurisdiction, which is especially difficult to gauge in the case of underwater sites. All this points to the need for governments to increase their efforts at collaborating with one another as well as improving their own internal actions in working to help archaeologists preserve underwater sites.

The roles and actions of governments will be examined in order to determine what countries are currently doing within the framework of the 2001 UNESCO Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage, and what challenges they face. The official National Report(s) on Underwater Cultural Heritage produced in conjunction with UNESCO from Turkey, Libya, and Cyprus will be referenced in this regard, as these three Mediterranean countries contain many classical underwater sites. Interestingly, out of these countries, only Libya has ratified the 2001 UNESCO Convention. These reports will give insight into the challenges faced by countries in trying to preserve national underwater heritage and what measures they should be taking to rectify the problem. Ultimately, it will be shown that the state plays a pivotal role in conserving and protecting vulnerable archaeological sites. Its shortcomings in this area must be addressed so that it can effectively facilitate better international cooperation as well as work at implementing other solutions to this problem. The 2001 UNESCO Convention will be the framework to which the current state of underwater site preservation is measured, and as i

“States Parties shall, individually or jointly as appropriate, take all appropriate measures in conformity with this Convention and with international law that are necessary to protect underwater cultural heritage, using for this purpose the best practicable means at their disposal and in accordance with their capabilities”.

The full extent to which governments have invested their resources and willpower into adhering to the promises they made in ratifying the convention cannot be known, and the effectiveness of a country’s policies on the matter require long-term analysis of the results. However, Paul Forsythe Johnston states that out of 105 members of the International
Congress of Maritime Museums (ICMM), 29 institutions consider the existence of underwater archaeological legislation in their countries to be “ineffectual in protecting” the sites. The same number also stated that legislation did not affect their collection policies for archaeological specimens, which is worrying in light of the complications that can arise regarding rightful ownership of an artefact as well as problems with black market antiquities dealing. Furthermore, “more than 10 percent of the responding institutions did not know whether their countries had legislation in place, or responded in the negative.” Johnston places the onus on museums to uphold ethics regarding collection of underwater artefacts. He believes that a possible solution could be for ICMM members to adopt a common policy of ethics among themselves while becoming more cognizant of existing legislation.

In their journal article “Preserving the Maritime Cultural Heritage of the Mediterranean, A Cradle of Cultures, Religions and Civilizations—the Holy Land Perspective”, Ehud Galili and B. Rosen recommend that each Mediterranean state should “prepare and apply national master plans for the protection of the marine archaeological heritage.” A collaborative approach to the preservation of underwater sites is encouraged, with the authors suggesting international and regional projects “aimed at mapping the cultural resources, assessing the risks and protecting and preserving the endangered archaeological sites.” In a sense, Galil and Rosen are more optimistic regarding the involvement of governments in preserving underwater sites, seeing such collaborative efforts as not only possible, but necessary. This would address the issue of countries not knowing whose jurisdiction a site is in, as the idea is for all Mediterranean states to come together and work for their shared culture. The fact that this is being proposed for the Mediterranean region makes it more feasible as the location is centralised and many countries share a common classical past. Galili and Rosen’s suggestion accounts for some major issues currently faced by nations trying to preserve underwater heritage such as “assessing cultural resources at risk, establishing policies and master plans for the protection and preservation of cultural resources.”

Cyprus’s national report on its underwater heritage shows that the country took some steps toward international collaboration by “participating in seminars and workshops” in Croatia, Greece, and Egypt in 2009 and 2010. While Cyprus did not necessarily collaborate officially with other countries to preserve its underwater heritage the way Galil and Rosen suggested, its positive outlook on sharing expertise and information with other countries shows that international collaboration between institutions and governments is beneficial to the cause. Libya, as a ratifying State Party of the 2001 UNESCO Convention, outline in its report that some of the major challenges faced by Libya in preserving its underwater heritage are “man-made threats... threats from natural and climatic impact, such as tectonic movements, earthquakes, the erosion of ancient cities, the consequences of storms hitting the coast as well as the movement of tides and changes in sea-level rise, leading to the removal of sand covering coastal archaeological sites (fig. 1).”

The “man-made threats” in the quotation refer to the “establishment of petrol platforms and desalination sea water stations, pipelines, cables or ports.” In the report, the Libyan Advisor in the Department of Antiquities Abdelssalam.A. Elkawash insisted that the country must spare no exception in putting its utmost effort into protecting their national underwater heritage, adding that the Department of Archaeology of Libya is taking steps to establish a “Department of Maritime Archaeology and an underwater heritage museum.” Libya’s efforts as detailed in its report showcase a country’s individual efforts in upholding the objectives of the 2001 Convention, highlighting the importance of political will and government involvement in making sure existing legislation is put to use so the goals of the convention are being met with some effort. Meanwhile, Turkey established a project in 2005 called the...
Shipwreck Inventory of Turkey (SIT), initiated with the support of the Scientific & Technological Research Council of Turkey and sponsored by the Turkish Underwater Archaeology Foundation (TINA), Dokuz Eylul University, Institute of Marine Sciences and Technology, and The Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism. This demonstrates a country’s ability to amass its resources and bring together various expert institutions to work together on a unifying project is an important aspect of the preservation of its cultural heritage. By the report’s publication date in November 2010, “20 underwater surveys had been conducted by the SIT project team (fig. 2) which located several new shipwrecks along the Turkish Aegean coastline.” Turkish Underwater Archaeologist Harun Özdas also said in the report that “the SIT team is open to any kind or level of international cooperation.”

This idea of governments coming together to cooperate on an international level is reiterated in the journal article “Mare Nostrum? Ethics and Archaeology in Mediterranean Waters”, in which the authors state that “archaeology needs to be approached—now more than ever—as a cooperative venture with affected communities and interested state parties,” calling for Mediterranean countries to come together for the cause. Some challenges the authors foresee to this end hinge on the shaky political situation over territory, jurisdiction, and ownership of culture in the Mediterranean. They state “while the maritime boundaries of modern nationstates provide a framework for oversight, they fit uneasily with the shifting political spheres and cultural fluidity that were characteristic of the ancient Mediterranean.” By this, the authors were referring to the fact that individual components of the cargo on one ship are very likely to have originated in “ancient locales that are today occupied by multiple modern states... [which] might make it subject to overlapping claims from different states.” Situations involving these difficulties make collaborative research and communicative discussion between multiple nations greatly important within the Mediterranean. Because of the nature of the Mediterranean with the size of its sea and how close the surrounding nations are to one another and to the sea, it is difficult to say for certain who should lay claim over what (fig. 3).

UNESCO further argues the case for government action and international cooperation. A big problem facing the cause to preserve underwater cultural heritage is the fact that “a number of States offer no legal protection for their underwater cultural heritage, [and] even when such protection exists, gaps in the legislation and State sovereignty enable treasure hunters to pursue their activities and exploit artefacts.” According to UNESCO, even the most stringent national legislations cannot be entirely effective in safeguarding underwater cultural heritage, as only a small part of the world’s oceans fall within the exclusive national jurisdiction of a specific State. Thus, there is “an urgent need for an international legal instrument to regulate and coordinate the protection of underwater archaeological sites and encourage cooperation between states.” It is believed that the 2001 Convention can help governments because joining the convention “prevents the commercial exploitation and dispersion of underwater cultural heritage, guar-

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11 Ibid., 2.
12 Ibid., 2.
14 Ibid., 312.
15 Ibid., 313.
17 Ibid., 10.
Preserving Underwater Cultural Heritage in a Globalized World — 4/5

Figure 4. Part of a granite tower being lifted from the underwater site of Cleopatra’s palace with the skyline of Alexandria in the background. This tower is expected to be part of the planned Underwater Museum here. (CBS News)

Borodkin also elaborated on some other problems of policing antiquities looting in countries, such as underpaid guards, fresh archaeological sites being under-guarded, and corruption in all levels of law enforcement including customs officials. She pointed to a case in Greece in which “former Prime Minister Costantine Mistokakis and his deputy police chief were implicated in a scheme” to cooperate with an international smugglers. This points to the other side of government involvement, proving that governments do not just need to cooperate with one another, but that there is also a need for governments to organise themselves internally and enforce cooperation between departments and institutions in a committed effort to preserve their national cultural heritage. Political will is therefore at the forefront of this conversation, making it a crucial point for the future of underwater sites all over the world.

James P. Delgado provides the concluding worldview on this issue in his article “Underwater Archaeology at the Dawn of the 21st Century.” He states that with underwater sites becoming increasingly more accessible and thus more threatened by exploitative forces, archaeologists will need to “forge partnerships with the government agencies, institutes, and technicians who have the tools and resources.” Though the issue of funding still presents a problem, especially with salvors and treasure hunters dominating the debate by being more active in their projects, Delgado believes that there is enough will and cause for the archaeological community, and with support and help from the government, a difference can be made. His words reflect the idea that cooperation is the pivotal point in the crisis to salvage the underwater sites of the classical world. In the Mediterranean, overlapping cultures and jurisdictions make for fragile political situations. Within each country, corruption and lack of political will as well as funding plague a nation’s efforts in trying to achieve the goals set by the 2001 Convention. It is clear that governments have a large role to play in this issue and that there are many challenges ahead for them to get by. As such, their positions and capabilities should not be overlooked, and the archaeological community as well as the citizens of each nation should hold their governments to task in this matter, knowing the importance of the role they play in enforcing relevant laws and cooperating with other countries in the interest of education and preservation of heritage.

Works Cited


18Ibid., 11.
19Ibid., 9.
20Ibid., 9.
22Ibid., 389.
23Ibid., 390.
24Ibid., 393.
26Ibid., 15.


