
UNDERWATER ARCHAEOLOGY: A NEW TURNING-POINT IN MALTESE ARCHAEOLOGY *

Anthony Bonanno

Introduction

Since prehistoric times the Maltese islands have been the destination, or convenient stop-over, of an ever-increasing sea traffic which plied from one end of the Mediterranean Sea to the other. At times they became the undesired and tragic terminations of voyages directed elsewhere. All this could not but enrich the waters around the islands with a wealth of relics of this intensive human maritime activity. In view of this it would appear unthinkable and unjustifiable that a country surrounded by the sea, like Malta, should remain without a proper administrative and technical set-up to explore scientifically and safeguard this heritage. Nevertheless, it took almost a quarter of a century from the acquisition of independence for the Maltese nation to realize the importance of this heritage and to take concrete measures to protect it. Underwater archaeology is, indeed, a late-arrival in the scene of the Maltese heritage management.

Between 1989 and 1990, when the present writer was in charge of the Mediterranean Archaeology Centre at the Foundation for International Studies, the Centre was commissioned to prepare a document related to underwater archaeology on behalf of the Regional Activity Centre for Specially Protected Areas (based in Tunis) as part of the Mediterranean Action Plan of the United Nations Environment Programme. The document was completed in 1990. It consisted of three parts: a) a directory of researchers and research institutions concerned with Mediterranean underwater archaeology; b) a directory of the legislation concerning the underwater archaeological heritage of all the countries bordering the Mediterranean; and c) a report on the state-of-the-art techniques and apparatus in current use for underwater archaeological exploration. The latter report was prepared by Mr Reuben Grima, then a student reading Archaeology as part of the B.A. programme at the University of Malta.

Until a couple of years ago the proper infrastructure for the safeguard and the evaluation of the underwater archaeological heritage of the Maltese islands did not even exist. On paper this heritage, by law, fell within the jurisdiction of the Museums Department which, however, simply did not have the personnel to

enforce the existing legislation. For the same reason, there was little or no possibility of compiling an up-to-date inventory of the stock of shipwrecks and other archaeological remains in Maltese territorial waters. It was only after the appointment of our former student Reuben Grima as Assistant Curator, following his graduation from the University of Malta in 1992, that the Museums Department could avail itself of the services of a properly trained person who was able and competent to undertake the serious and efficient evaluation of this part of the Maltese archaeological heritage. As a result, the Museums Department, with the invaluable assistance of a number of local and foreign bodies, is now in the process of drawing up a programme of the long-term strategies for the protection and the study of this precious heritage.

Concurrently, it should be pointed out, another Maltese institution which is responsible for the overall protection of both the natural and the cultural environment, the Planning Authority, has just started to systematically take stock of the underwater archaeological resource as part of the exercise of the preparation of the local plans for the Maltese islands. While this paper is being recast, the underwater archaeological resource of the northwestern half of Malta is being assessed.

Fortunately, before his appointment with the Museums Department, Reuben Grima had already involved himself deeply in local underwater sporting circles and he had formed, therefore, the proper connections to be able to prepare and present a programme of education and sensibilization meant to raise awareness among the members of several of the local diving clubs.

Before 1988, the only underwater discoveries of archaeological objects which took place in Maltese waters were purely fortuitous. A noteworthy exception was the systematic excavation of the Roman shipwreck carrying a cargo of mortars at Mellieha Bay by a team led by Honor Frost, the results of which campaign were published in 1969. Those recoveries which took place with the proper permissions from the competent authorities can be counted on the fingers of one hand. A special mention must be made of the massive lead stock of a Roman anchor, the largest known example, which was recovered from Qawra Point, near St Paul's Bay in 1963. In 1961 and 1970 a diving team from the Imperial College of Science and Technology of London, made up, it seems, of engineers and doctors, recovered several archaeological objects from off Xlendi in Gozo. A report of these campaigns on what is a site of extreme importance can be consulted in the archives of the National Museum of Archaeology. A map containing the locations of the then known underwater archeological relics was published in the preliminary report of the *Missione Italiana a Malta* for 1964.

In addition to these authorised recoveries, one often used to hear of

archaeological objects, mainly amphorae and Roman anchor stocks, which had been accidentally discovered and brought up from Maltese waters without ever being reported to the Museums Department, or of more organized depredations carried out by foreign divers using their own boats.

Recent Underwater Investigations

Between 27 September and 20 October 1988, Specialist Archaeological Systems, an English diving group led by Dr Margaret Rule, best known for her recovery of the *Maryrose* conducted several surveys of promising sites off local shores.

The main aim of the expedition was to carry out an extensive hydrographic survey inside the Grand Harbour and at St Paul's Bay. It was said on various occasions that the actual purpose of this latter survey was to attempt to identify the ship which was carrying St Paul to Rome and which, as one can deduce from the Acts of the Apostles (Chap. 27-28), was wrecked in the area. At the completion of the expedition, there were no claims for any success in this area of research.

The survey in the Grand Harbour, on the other hand, was intended to identify wrecks connected with the Turkish Siege of 1565. The sophisticated equipment used identified many anomalies on the bottom of the harbour, but further visual verification and actual removal of silt deposits failed to give positive results. Although the final report has not yet been published, the preliminary conclusions can be consulted in a cyclostyled report, *Specialist Archaeological Systems, Malta Archaeological Survey 1988. Preliminary Report Submitted to the Government Departments of Tourism and Education*, dated January 1989.

A French mission, which carried out its work between 11 and 22 December 1992, had a greater success and achieved much more tangible results. The team consisted of Luc Long, Guy Dauphin, and Albert Illouze of the *Département des Recherches Archéologiques Sous-Marines*, better known as DRASM. On the Maltese side they were joined by the archaeologist Reuben Grima and by Michael Gauci, Mario Micallef and Charles Tanti, professional divers and instructors. The main aim of the mission was to draw up a map-inventory (*carte-inventaire*) of the Maltese marine archaeological heritage, identifying remains, anchorages, isolated objects and submerged structures.

Of this mission, I would like to single out the survey carried out around a large section of Manoel Island, inside Marsamxett Harbour. The presence on this island of a quarantine hospital, better known as the 'Lazzarett' (in use from 1643), and of a massive defensive fort (1723) must have generated an extensive human activity in the waters around it, giving the entire site a particular importance. Moreover, the imminent development projects for the island and

its surrounding shores present a very real threat for any archaeological remains and deposits that may lie on the bottom off the island. It was for this reason that the mission paid particular attention to this site.

The team carried out its work right in the midst of intensive maritime activity. In general the sea-bed nearest the hospital was found to be covered with an accumulation of modern detritus partially covered with sand. Beneath the superficial strata, it is believed, there must certainly be older human deposits. The presence in several places of fragments of pottery datable to the seventeenth, the eighteenth, and the nineteenth centuries, which were discovered accidentally after the silt on the bottom had been disturbed by the propellers of boats, seems to confirm this thesis. A fragment of an amphora testifies to the possibilities of even more ancient remains.

The DRASM mission also carried out archival research at the National Library, in addition to on-site inspections in a number of other localities such as Xlendi, the channel between Gozo and Comino, Mellieha Bay, and Ras il-Pellegrin. A preliminary report of the work carried out by the French mission can be found in a cyclostyled report entitled '*Rapport Malte 1992*' signed by Luc Long.

1992 seems to have been a bonanza year for Maltese underwater archaeology because it also saw the publication of the corpus of shipwrecks of the Mediterranean patiently compiled over a great number of years by the well known underwater archaeologist, Dr Anthony Parker of Bristol University. The publication contains an important section on the archaeological discoveries recorded in Maltese territorial waters.

The most important development in the field of Maltese underwater archaeology took place, however, in depths of more than 100 metres. This research was carried out during the visit of the Triton, a French navy ship specialized in rescue operations in depths which are not normally accessible. The Museums Department had proposed such a survey to the French authorities and it was made possible thanks to assistance of the French Embassy in Malta and the Maltese Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Unfortunately the Triton's visit in March 1993 was marked by bad weather and it was only on the last day that the ship could carry out its projected mission. The ship was equipped with various sophisticated equipment intended to carry out reconnaissance and salvage operations in immensely great depths. For this particular one it was decided to make use of the Griffon, a small submarine which was built in 1972 and subsequently modified in order to reach depths of 600 metres. The submarine also has a plexiglass hemisphere which permits a clear vision of the outside, television cameras, and two extremely versatile mechanical arms.

For reasons of security the site inspected has been described as 'off the southern coast of Gozo'. The operation itself was a very delicate one and it was made even more difficult by the sea which was still quite stormy. A sonar transmitter was placed on the sea-bottom to assist in the manoeuvring of the submarine and to control its movements. Reuben Grima was allowed to descend in the vessel together with three French navy officers. It was reported that on the bottom 'at a depth a number of times deeper than can be reached with normal means of diving' there was a deposit of more than 90 amphorae almost all of the same type, the ovoid-shaped amphora typical of local Punic production. It could very well have been a single homogeneous cargo. Although this type of amphora is often found locally, particularly in funerary contexts from the fifth to the second century BC, it has rarely been encountered in underwater deposits and certainly never in such quantity. This is by itself already an important discovery that will help in the study of the economic and commercial history of Malta in ancient times. It is hoped that further studies of these remains will throw even more light on the subject. Indeed, the Griffon, by means of its mechanical arms, recovered a fragment of amphora, incidentally of the Dressel 28 type, of which only a few examples were noticed on the seabed.

During another visit of the DRASM mission in November-December 1993, attention was concentrated on a full-scale rescue excavation of a thick archaeological deposit in very shallow waters inside Marsascala Bay which had been exposed by dredging operations in previous years and eventually reported to the authorities by Mr Albert Brian Rosso, a local diver. From under a thick blanket of poseidonia, the Franco-Maltese team recovered animal bones and ceramic material mostly datable to the 5th-7th centuries AD. Given the homogeneity of the material, the excavators tend to think it might consist of a shipwreck with a part of its cargo, even though no part of the ship's wooden structure, except for a possible small piece, was found.

The Underwater Archaeology Section in the Maritime Museum.

Another important development in the study of Malta's maritime heritage was the inauguration of the Maritime Museum which is housed in the imposing building of the former Naval Bakery of the British Fleet at Vittoriosa. The person behind the initiative was the then Minister of Education Dr Ugo Mifsud Bonnici (today the President of Malta) who set up a Steering Committee to see to the realization of this project. The present writer had the honour of being nominated to sit on this committee and, eventually, to take up its presidency following the demise of Judge Stephen Borg Cardona.

The Museum was officially inaugurated in 1993, thanks to the sterling work

put in by its present curator, Mr Antonio Espinosa Rodriguez. So far only one part of the building has been opened to the public and further work is necessary to complete the project. The Steering Committee was, therefore, replaced by an Advisory Management Committee for the Maritime Museum to oversee the proper management and development of the Museum. The present writer continued to occupy the chairmanship of this committee.

The section of the Museum dedicated to underwater archaeology is still in process of completion and it is intended to set up a didactic exhibition. The present display is limited to Roman remains and the relevant authorizations have been given by all the authorities concerned to transfer the massive Roman lead anchor stock from the National Museum of Archaeology in Valletta.

Conclusion

This paper could very well have been entitled 'A new future for underwater archaeology in the Maltese Islands'. In it I have tried to highlight the important steps made over the last couple of years. A lot has happened in a relatively short time. A lot more needs to be done to bring our nation in line with our European neighbours. This requires a considerable investment in terms of financial and human resources; it stands to reason that underwater archaeology is even more expensive to undertake than land archaeology. But everyone agrees, one would hope, that our country has achieved a sufficient degree of prosperity and overall advancement in various fields to enable it to look after its own cultural heritage, including that concealed by the water that surrounds us.

* This paper is a revised edition of an account of the recent developments in underwater archaeology given by the writer at the 8th *Rassegna di Archeologia Subacquea* held in Naxos, Sicily in October 1993. It also includes recent researches and discoveries made since then.

Anthony Bonanno, B.A. (Hons) (Malta), D. Lett. (Palermo), Ph.D. (London) is Professor of Archaeology and Head of Department of Classics and Archaeology at the University of Malta. His publications include *Portraits and Other Heads on Roman Historical Relief up to the Age of Septimius Severus* (Oxford, 1976); *Excavations at Hal Millieri, Malta. A report on the excavation campaign conducted on behalf of the National Museum of Malta* (Malta, 1990) (co-author and co-editor with T.F.C. Blagg and A.T. Lutrell); and *Roman Malta. The Archaeological Heritage of the Maltese Islands* (Rome, 1992).