
O. F. Gollcher and underwater archaeology

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During the last three years of his life Olof Frederick Gollcher (1889-1962) took an interest in the archaeological possibilities of underwater diving. He was anxious to encourage Maltese divers to include an archaeological interest in the pursuit of their hobby. His contact with the Sicilian pioneer, the Marchese Pier Nicola Gargallo, led to the formation of the International Institute of Mediterranean Archaeology and its Malta branch. He coordinated several activities and also provided essential logistic and financial support to the fledgling Maltese underwater archaeological scene.

Olof Frederick Gollcher (1889-1962) is mostly remembered for his home, Norman House in Mdina, containing his extensive and varied collections, and now a Museum known as Palazzo Falson Historic House Museum, managed by Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti. In the last two or three years of his life Gollcher played a crucial role in the development of underwater archaeology in Malta (Azzopardi 2005; Azzopardi and Gambin 2012) and in this article I will expand on his role in those formative years. Gollcher, an only child, was educated in Greece and England and served in both World Wars. Whilst in Greece, Corfu and Italy with his parents he took a general interest in archaeology, an interest which persisted after he bought the Norman House in 1927 and later came to live permanently in Malta. This is reflected in the many books and newspaper cuttings on archaeological matters in his archive and extensive library holdings. When in Rome his main interest was painting and he participated actively in artistic circles.

Gollcher, a keen anglophile, was close to the then British Colonial administration and he was a personal friend to Sir Harry Luke, the powerful Lieutenant Governor of Malta from 1930 to 1938. In 1935 he was appointed member of the Antiquities Board set up by the Malta Government and he systematically toured, possibly under Harry

Luke's tutelage, the villages and countryside listing buildings and archaeological sites to be preserved. The OBE awarded in 1937 was directly related to his work on this Board. He remained a member of the Antiquities Board and of the Aesthetics Committee till 1950, and in 1944 was appointed member of the Ancient Monuments Committee to report on the state of ancient monuments including prehistoric, Phoenician and Roman sites damaged by enemy action. He was a friend of David Trump and Capt. Charles Zammit but it might be safe to say that his interest in land archaeology seems to have been more as a constituent part of the general cultural scene rather than any deep interest in archaeology. In August 1958, whilst driving near his country residence, Villa Brunswick in Mġarr, Gollcher noted obvious archaeological remains which were being uncovered by a Government road-widening scheme. He informed the Museum authorities who investigated the area which was definitely Roman, probably a villa (The Times of Malta 1958). He also visited archaeological excavation sites in Italy, such as ancient Stabiae in 1960 and Fulci, north of Rome in 1961. The small collection of archaeological items in Palazzo Falson unfortunately lacks any provenance information and some may have been bought from local antiquarians or obtained directly from excavations in Malta or abroad such as Stabiae.

Underwater archaeology

The story of the early stages of underwater archaeology in Malta has been described in recent publications (Azzopardi 2005; Azzopardi and Gambin 2012) when the primary role of the British Services teams in the late fifties was highlighted. Gollcher's interest was acknowledged without delving into his seminal role in involving Maltese divers in organised underwater archaeology. The first indication of an interest in underwater archaeology by Gollcher is a short entry, 'Sub Aqua', in his diary on 24 March 1959, possibly indicating a visit to a meeting of the Malta Subacqua Club which had been formed in 1955 by Eric Pace Bonello and others (cf. Pace Bonello 2014). It is likely that this interest in underwater archaeology was triggered by an article in *Time* magazine of 9 March 1959 describing Gargallo's underwater activities. Gollcher wrote to *The Times* of Malta suggesting that Maltese divers should dedicate some time to Underwater Archaeology besides spear-fishing (Gollcher 1959a). This provoked an immediate response from a British serviceman, in a personal letter to Gollcher, strongly rebutting this call saying that Maltese divers are only interested in killing all available fish before someone else does, and anyway there is nothing worth diving for from an archaeological viewpoint (P[alazzo]F[alson], O[laf]FG[ollcher]A[rchives], f002/008/01: Larn/Gollcher 1959). Chief P.O.R. Larn RN, HMS Falcon, Kalafrana, stressed that only the Services, especially the Royal Navy, had the necessary divers and equipment. He had made 530 dives around Malta and had kept the World Council of Underwater Archaeology, the World Federation of Underwater Activities and the British Sub Aqua Club informed of his findings. Gollcher was not discouraged by this letter and later that month in April 1959, wrote to the Sicilian Marchese Pier Luigi Gargallo, enclosing a copy of his letter to *The Times* of Malta and requesting photographs for a forthcoming talk he was planning to give (PF, OFGA, f187/007: Gollcher/Gargallo April 1959).

Marchese Gargallo was one of the pioneers of underwater archaeology in the Central Mediterranean (Gargallo 2012). He had set up and ran an Istituto Mediterraneo di Archaeologia Sottomarina (Mediterranean Institute of Underwater Archaeology) in 1955 which had conducted a number of dives in Sicilian waters. At least since 1958 he had the cooperation of British divers in some of his Sicilian

expeditions. In the summer of 1958 he, together with a Royal Navy Diving Team led by George Wookey, of Whiskey Galore fame, and a German team which included Gerhard Kapitän, were diving at Marzamemi, near Syracuse, to investigate giant marble columns on the seabed, which were to lead to a historic find related to Palaeochristian studies (Kapitän 1969).

The Gargallo name must have evoked some childhood memories in Gollcher and in his letter to him he had enquired whether Gargallo's mother was born in Giannina (Ioannina, Greece), in which case he knew her from his childhood. This appears to be the first letter between Gollcher and Gargallo. However, although contact between them had now been established Gollcher was not involved in any way in Gargallo's summer 1959 expeditions in Sicily. The Syracuse 1959 expedition included members of the Cambridge University Underwater Exploration Group led by Nick Flemming now a doyen of Underwater Archaeology (Special Branch of British Subacqua Club 52), Royal Navy divers under Lt George Wookey, and Stephen Keleny, an English solicitor and keen underwater diver, many of whom were Gargallo's guests at Palazzo Gargallo in Syracuse (Fig. 1).

The British Services, especially the Royal Navy, were developing the technology of underwater diving, chiefly for its military potential, but they also indulged in its other possibilities such as spear-fishing and the recovery of items from the seabed including scrap metal and occasional archaeological finds. It was in the latter area that British teams worked with Gargallo in Sicily. This expedition was later featured in a talk at the Institute of Archaeology in London by Margaret Guido, later author of the then best archaeological guide to Sicily (Guido 1967). Unfortunately this expedition was to lead to a number of disagreements between Gargallo and the Cambridge University contingent. It is interesting to note that the Cambridge Underwater University Group which is still active with an excellent website describing their expeditions does not include the 1959 Sicilian one.

Although several letters had been exchanged and Gargallo had also visited Malta in July 1959, when he was Gollcher's house guest, it was only in November 1959 that Gargallo responded to Gollcher's enquiry about his mother (PF, OFGA, 160/007: Gargallo/Gollcher 2 November 1959). The answer was in the affirmative and she remembered him well in Greece to which Gollcher nostalgically responds that 'a sua madre io sono Olly figlio di Elisa e Gustaf che

erano tanti amici' (PF, OFGA, f165/007: Gollcher/Gargallo 1959). This fortuitous connection must have contributed to the future close collaboration between Gollcher and Gargallo. During Gargallo's July visit he was scheduled to give a lecture at the University of Malta. However he was recalled to Rome for urgent business and, at very short notice, the talk was passed on to David Trump, then curator of the Archaeology Section of the Malta National Museum, utilising Gargallo's notes and slides (The Times of Malta 1959). Trump, who had no experience of underwater archaeology, was at a dinner party when the forthcoming lecture was mentioned and to his astonishment found that he was designated to give it (*pers. comm.* D. Trump, 2009).

The presence of British and Italian teams diving together in the Sicilian expedition of September 1959 mooted the idea to the participants, especially to Keleny, to establish an International Institute of Underwater Archaeology. Keleny, seemingly the main instigator, prepared the first draft regulations and came to Malta to meet Gollcher, whom he knew from a social meeting in Malta the previous year. In a letter to Gargallo, Gollcher enthuses on underwater archaeology and supports the idea of the formation of an Institute (PF, OFGA, f175/007: Gollcher/Gargallo 6 November 1959). Although the word International is bandied about it is clear the original intention was a joint British and Italian organisation, which was very much Gollcher's inclination.

Later, Gargallo complained to Gollcher about the behaviour of the Cambridge contingent ("boys"), their withholding of the expedition photographs and their intention to unilaterally publish an expedition report (PF, OFGA, f142/007: Gargallo/Gollcher undated). On the other hand Gargallo was pleased with the RN support especially the use of their diving equipment and in September 1959 he wrote to Gollcher regarding the possibility of "obtaining" this diving equipment for the next expedition. There appears to have been some delay in the return of the RN diving equipment and, possibly as a result of unofficial Royal Navy pressure, both Keleny and Gollcher wrote to Gargallo on the issue. The diving equipment was eventually returned to the Royal Navy in Malta in October 1959. The copies of the 1959 expedition photographs were sent to Gargallo by Jocelyn Toynbee, an archaeologist at Newnham College, Cambridge, together with a promise not to unilaterally publish the expedition report, again



Figure 1. Palazzo Gargallo, Siracusa, Sicily

probably following personal intervention by Gollcher. Keleny now had a dual role to play, primarily to draft the statute for the projected Institute but also to clear the air regarding the discord which had followed the 1959 expedition. A legally vetted draft constitution for the proposed Institute was prepared in London to be discussed at a forthcoming meeting in January 1960 to be held in Malta, according to the British group, and at the Lipari Islands according to Gargallo (with Gargallo always expected to foot the bill). Gargallo made short shrift of this suggestion and made it clear that he would not work with members of the Cambridge University team. Meanwhile Gollcher seems to have realised that the future lay with Gargallo and in October 1959 he published two long articles on underwater archaeology (Gollcher 1959b, c), highlighting Gargallo's work in Sicily.

1960

Whilst drafting the new constitution Keleny had appreciated that everything hinged on an efficient secretary able to co-operate with both factions.



Figure 2. Model anchors made by O.F. Gollcher. (Photograph reproduced courtesy of the Malta Maritime Museum).

Initially it appeared axiomatic that such a person had to be British and several unsuccessful feelers for possible appointees were made in the UK. During his short stay in Malta at the Xara Palace Hotel, suitably close to Norman House, Keleny realised that Gollcher with his military background and knowledge of Italian and English was well suited for such a position. Gargallo approved and Gollcher became – *de facto* – honorary secretary of the proposed Institute. Gollcher revised the suggested statute and resisted the proposal to have the HQ in London. Whilst the British team, spearheaded by Keleny, was still tinkering with the statute, Gargallo pre-empted the situation and the International Institute for Mediterranean Archaeology (IIMA) was officially launched, the deeds signed by Sicilian notaries at Palazzo Gargallo in Syracuse on 5 January 1960 (Sunday Times of Malta 1960). The signatories were Marchese Pier Nicola Gargallo,

Presidente, La Marchesa Emilia Costarelli, Capitano Olaf (*sic*) Frederick Gollcher, scrittore (Segretario), Signorina Evelyn Prebensen, studentessa, and Dott. Francesco Lino (Tesoriere).

The next hurdle to be tackled was to give meaning to the international aspirations and plan the future programme of the Institute. Enquiries were made regarding the control of and regulations on diving expeditions in Greece and Turkey as well as the establishment of contact with related international bodies. Whilst Gargallo's main interest was to organise, under his sole leadership, future expeditions and promote propaganda in the English language press, Gollcher was trying to strengthen the Institute by establishing contact with other international bodies and personnel and to create a permanent diving unit with a suitable boat and equipment.



Figure 3. O.F. Gollcher reconstructing broken pots in his laboratory at his private residence, Norman House in Mdina. (Photograph reproduced courtesy of Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti).

In previous expeditions Gargallo had recovered a number of ancient anchors of which he made models and prepared notes. These models and accompanying notes, translated into English by Gollcher, were distributed in 1960 to many science and maritime museums (including the National Museum of Malta, which eventually passed them on to the Malta Maritime Museum, set up in 1992) as an activity of the Institute (Fig. 2). Naturally with Gollcher as secretary it was essential to organise some activities in Malta by establishing a Malta Underwater Archaeology Branch of the IIMA. Commenting on the Malta Branch activities Gollcher writes to Gargallo: 'I had a meeting with Scicluna who is interested in underwater archaeology, and as soon as he finds four or five others I shall ask the Royal Naval Diving School to give them some training' (PF, OFGA f088/007: Gollcher/Gargallo 1960). On 30 January 1960, S. A. Scicluna was appointed leader of the

IIMA, Malta Underwater Section. By this time Keleny, in London, had given up all attempts to maintain a British input and ruefully remarked to Gollcher 'only wish that you had been in charge last summer' (PF, OFGA f021/007: Keleny/Gollcher 1960). Gollcher is now working on two fronts – as general secretary he is trying to plan the Institute's future expeditions in Sicily and Greece although this seems to have been mostly a supportive role as Gargallo still worked in his usual autocratic manner independent of the Institute. Furthermore, Gollcher also strongly supported the fledgling Malta Group in their Malta activities, and in June 1961 a formal deed forming the Malta Underwater Archaeology Branch of IIMA was drawn up and signed with Major J. H. (Sunny) Muscat as President and Mr S.A. Scicluna, Secretary.

Gargallo had loaned his boat "S. Agata" to Sicilian underwater archaeologists working in Motya and



Figure 4. O.F. Gollcher at Xlendi Bay, Gozo. (Photograph reproduced courtesy of Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti).

was looking for a bigger boat. Gollcher made several attempts to find a suitable boat in Malta but Gargallo eventually purchased the corvette “Carolina” in Palermo.

In the summer of 1960 a Royal Naval team dived with Gargallo at Marzamemi, but this was more a continuation of the 1959 working arrangements and was not much influenced by the new Institute. Gollcher made contact with Quentin Hughes, later professor of Architecture at the Royal University of Malta, to recruit interested student volunteers to join the Sicilian summer 1960 expedition. Another member of Gargallo’s 1960 team was G. Kapitän, an East German who eventually defected to the west and played an important role in Gargallo’s expeditions. He also imparted some badly needed Teutonic thoroughness to the activities.

Gollcher, who was not a diver himself, saw his role as a facilitator and promoter of underwater archaeology. At that time the National Museum of Malta also catered for archaeological matters and Gollcher, who felt the need for a dedicated organisation, wrote to H.E. The Governor, Sir Guy Grantham, urging the setting up of a Maltese Institute of Archaeology

under the patronage of the Government with the aims of encouraging and cooperating with visiting archaeological expeditions, as well as mounting expeditions in its own right. The Governor found the suggestion valuable and important but was unable to give any financial support. Gollcher stressed that a token support would be instrumental in giving the Government an active interest in the proposed Institute which however never materialised (PE, OFGA f021/007: Gollcher/Grantham 1960).

1961

This was to be his only full working year and the editor of *The Sunday Times of Malta*, George Sammut, writing under the pseudonym ‘Roamer’, undoubtedly prompted by Gollcher, noted that the object of the IIMA was to search for sunken wrecks and their cargoes, to promote visits of foreign teams to work in Malta and to engender collaboration between and a common policy for the various underwater clubs in Malta who were working independently (Roamer 1961). Gollcher

went to Italy on a course for the cleaning and repair of objects found under the sea and on land. Two laboratories were set up, one at Palazzo Gargallo in Syracuse and another at Norman House in Mdina (Fig. 3), where artefacts recovered in Maltese waters were cleaned and handed over to the National Museums in Malta and Gozo.

Gollcher had, with Services support, drawn up the requirements to establish an equipped diving unit. He wrote to many international institutions for funding, without much response. Locally the response was just as bleak and besides providing his boat and using Norman House as a laboratory, he also often helped the various activities financially. Gollcher was often asked by British Services teams to advise and facilitate their expeditions in Italy. He was able to help such expeditions both in his capacity as secretary of the IIMA and through his many personal contacts. These expeditions included one to Sicily from the Royal Navy base HMS Falcon, RNAS Hal Far (Lt. Martins) in 1962, the RAF Maintenance Base Safi (Flt. Lt. P.L. Hills), R.A.F. Malta Sub-Aqua Club (Sqn. Ldr. P. Lithgow) for a possible expedition to Sicily and Sardinia in 1962, the RAF Sub-Aqua Archaeology Group from Germany (Beaton) regarding a possible diving expedition to Sicily, and the Imperial College team (Matthews) to Motya, Sicily in 1962.

The dramatic increase in diving activities including uncontrolled recovery of archaeological items and the proposed setting up of diving schools was a source of worry. Gollcher wrote several times to the relevant authorities as well as in the local papers on the urgent need for legislation to control illicit recovery of underwater archaeological material pointing out that the loss of context of such finds considerably diminished their research value (Gollcher 1961).

Imperial College

Gollcher played an important supportive role in the July 1961 expedition of the Imperial College Submarine Archaeological group, led by John D. Woods. The group consisted of a range of specialists but did not include an archaeologist. Their main aim was to try out the latest technology with emphasis on propulsion, communication and surveying methods in underwater research. At first Gollcher attempted to use the Institute

and his Italian contacts to facilitate their plans to dive somewhere in Italy, Sicily or Turkey but finally it was agreed that they come to Malta. He also suggested that they contact Trump at the National Museum of Malta, who suggested Marsaxlokk as the most promising site. The RAF underwater team was helpful in offering tent accommodation at Hal Far and use of equipment but initial dives at Marsaxlokk proved disappointing from an underwater archaeological viewpoint, although many previously unrecorded biological specimens were recovered and presented to the Natural History Museum (London). In June an RAF team was diving at a promising site in Xlendi which was followed up by an RN team in July. Unfortunately the logistics for the Imperial College team to join them in Gozo whilst still accommodated at Hal Far proved too difficult and time wasting. Gollcher then offered his summer house at Mgarr as a base. This made it feasible to transfer their attention to the Xlendi dive (Fig. 4). They participated in the recovery of archaeological material as well in the drawing up of a detailed survey map, possibly for the first time in an underwater survey, of the Xlendi Bay ridge. The finds were examined by the director of the Archaeological Section of the National Museum and deposited at the then newly opened Gozo Museum. Woods, a physicist who visited and lectured in Malta and Gozo in 2011, was to become a member of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Changes which, jointly with Al Gore, was awarded the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize.

Commenting on underwater archaeology, the Museum Annual Report for 1961 reports that: 'Results from this new branch of research continue to accumulate. The Museum's grateful thanks are due to the various diving teams who have helped – HMS Falcon, the Fleet Diving Centre (Manoel Island), the RAF Subaqua Club, the Malta Subaqua Club and Capt. O.F. Gollcher's team (a branch of the International Institute of Mediterranean Archaeology)' (Trump 1961, 6).

1962

The Malta Branch of the Institute was still recovering archaeological items and presenting them to the Museum authorities (Masini 1962) when Gollcher's health began to fail and his last contribution to the papers (Gollcher 1962) was a review of activities of the International Institute of Mediterranean Archaeology. Trump, in a review of underwater archaeology, comments 'no record of acknowledgement, however,

would be complete without mention of the valuable work of co-ordination on all underwater archaeology around Malta carried out by the late Captain O. F. Gollcher, whose help is sorely missed' (Trump 1963).

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