

Editorial

““U nderwater cultural heritage” means all traces of human existence having a cultural, historical or archaeological character which have been partially or totally under water, periodically or continuously, for at least 100 years’ (Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage, UNESCO, 2001).

Over the centuries, vessels of various shapes and sizes have plied our seas and rivers carrying merchandise and men with dreams of trade and conquest. Relics of this past are found in almost every part of the world, buried beneath both freshwater and saltwater. Famed underwater archaeological sites include Port Royal in Jamaica and the ruins of the famous Lighthouse of Alexandria on the island of Pharos (one of the Seven Wonders of the World). But above all, there exist 3 million shipwrecks, some of which are believed to contain valuable items. Unfortunately, underwater excavations of such sites have become associated with treasure hunting. But these remains lying in sand or silt are representative of a much greater wealth: the history of humankind in all its diversity. With modern diving techniques, the underwater kingdom, its wrecks and its archaeological deposits, have become easier to access and as a consequence are now at risk. Because States have concentrated their efforts on preserving land-based cultural heritage (both tangible and intangible), underwater heritage, for its part, is only partially covered by protective legislation.

On the basis that the principle of cultural diversity will only be recognized if common interests are defended, UNESCO has drawn up a complete set of hard and soft standard-setting instruments for the cultural sphere. These include the 2001 Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage. Following the example of land-based heritage, this offers States Parties ‘common principles’ on safeguarding the underwater cultural heritage of humanity. The 2001 Convention came into force on 2 January 2009 – eight years after it was adopted. This unusually long period is a reflection not only of the range of political and economic issues surrounding the Convention, but also of the stormy nature of the accompanying discussions.

The ups and downs of cooperation between States, the market value of underwater heritage, and the role that preservation of submerged sites and wrecks plays

in social and economic development are just some of the questions being raised by underwater cultural heritage – a heritage that, for the first time, is being defined by its place of discovery.

This current issue of *MUSEUM International* attempts to address these issues, starting with an overview of site exploration and the problems that this new form of cultural heritage pose for preservation. The first article by David Nutley examines underwater sites as ‘time capsules’, and looks at the ways in which their opening by diving archaeologists can shed light on history. This has obvious benefits for science, while enabling us to better comprehend our roots in time and place. However, this hardly corresponds to the media’s romantic approach to the discovery of submerged remains. But as Tatiana Villegas Zamora demonstrates, underwater treasure hunting may be synonymous with profit for some, but represents an irreversible loss for the great majority.

In many cases, archaeological artefacts end up in the hands of unscrupulous traders, with the result that whole swathes of human endeavour are lost to science and the public. This being the case, why not allow wrecks to remain in their original surroundings? Indeed, as Martijn Manders explains, water is also extremely effective in preserving the remains of wrecks it causes. As Jean-Bernard Memet makes clear in his article, increasingly sophisticated technological innovations make possible the conservation of shells of submerged wrecks regardless of the material from which they are made. But then arises the question of how to arrange public access. Ambitious museology projects are already being planned in the Bay of Alexandria and the artificial lake of the Three Gorges Dam in China. The once-distant dream of ‘underwater museums’ as environments not only for divers and snorkellers, but where visitors can view sites without even getting wet, is no longer a figment of our imaginations: it is about to become a reality.

Today, we are more aware that in order to preserve a cultural item it is first necessary to recognize its existence in law. Unfortunately, where underwater heritage is concerned, the situation varies considerably from one State to another. Some States had no specific legislation while others had only a bare minimum. Even the most protective domestic law proved insufficient to the task. An international agreement was therefore essential. The UNESCO Convention of 2001 complements States’ existing legal arrangements as well as the 1982 Convention on the Law of the Sea by providing a specific framework not only for protection, but also for cooperation between its States Parties. The articles by Ulrike Koschtial and Thijs Maarleveld in the second part of this

issue examine the debate and ensuing controversy surrounding the Convention, and demonstrate that it fills a gap in the law that formerly gave free rein to trafficking, looting and illegal excavation. The Convention and the rules it lays down are not intended to curb intelligent initiatives or affect titles to wrecks. On the contrary, its purpose is to find common ground. Its enforcement nevertheless remains a challenge for many States. In his article, Gilson Rambelli discusses the case of Brazil, which, thanks to the work of ARCHEMAR, among others, is an example of what countries can achieve in terms of public awareness to promote protection.

The third part of this issue explores how underwater cultural heritage is rolling back the frontiers of theory and practice with regards to heritage protection. The professional sphere is seeing the emergence of cross-training, with more archaeologists and conservators learning how to dive, and sports divers becoming advocates for underwater heritage preservation. The field of sustainable development is expanding, now reaching beyond the boundaries of coastal areas to encompass entire regions – a subject that Jansen Mesić explores, using the example of Croatia. Francisco J. S. Alves describes advances in the experimental field, with Portugal's creation of underwater archaeological trails, while Luis Alberto Martos López explains the importance of the exploration of underwater *cenotes* in the heart of Maya country – themselves unique heritage sites, whose existence is now at risk.

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