



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization



The Protection of the  
Underwater Cultural Heritage

CLT/CIH/MCO/2010/RP/171  
12 November 2010  
Original: English

## EGYPT

### National Report on Underwater Cultural Heritage

*Report made in the UNESCO Regional Meeting in Istanbul*

*25 -27 October, 2010*

Egypt was a crossroads by which the most important trade routes transit to the three continents of the old world: Africa, Asia and Europe. Egypt is bathed by two seas, the Mediterranean to north and the Red Sea to the east, is crossed by the famous Nile and is inlaid with several lakes and lagoons, which explains the richness and the importance of its underwater cultural heritage.



It is clear that Egypt, as the home of one of world's greatest ancient civilizations, must have had a very long nautical experience which generated many developments in marine technology. The abundant scenes of aquatic life and activities decorating the walls of the ancient tombs, the large number of ships found buried in the desert and the numerous remains of coastal installations are witness. It might be supposed that the lack of information is due to a simple lack of exploration both within the sea and the Nile.

Although that activity on underwater cultural heritage was undertaken in Egypt since one hundred year, the Department for Underwater Antiquities (DUA) was founded in late 1996. The necessity to such organization appeared after the discovery of the submerged remains of Alexandria Lighthouse at the foot of Qaitbay fort and the rediscovery of a part of the royal quarter in the Eastern Harbor in 1994 and 1996 respectively.

It would seem that for long the responsible parties were uninterested in this field although, from time to time, they were faced with discoveries in this domain<sup>1</sup>. Despite all these discoveries, the

---

<sup>1</sup> For example, in 1909 submerged port installations were discovered at Dekhela and in the following year some marine constructions were found near the entrance to the Western Harbour to the west of Anfoushy Bay. In 1933, the sunken ruins of the city of Menoutis at Aboukir were found and then in the 1960s & 1970s Kamel Abu el-Saadat made a series of important discoveries in the areas of the Eastern Harbour, Qaitbay, Aboukir and also along the north coast. In the 1980s this pioneer of underwater archaeology was to the fore in the search for the sunken fleet of Bonaparte.

proper organization of underwater archaeology was delayed for a number of reasons. First, the technical requirements were not available in the early part of this century and financial support was difficult to come by. Then from 1945 to 1979 the coasts of Egypt were effectively sealed due to the military situation.

The DUA is based in Alexandria, under the direction of the Egyptology Sector of the Supreme Council for Antiquities (SCA), which is an arm of the Ministry of Culture. The DUA is charged with protecting the entire submerged heritage along the coasts of Egypt, whether in the Mediterranean or the Red Sea, and even in the Nile and its branches, as well as the five lakes, in addition to supervising all aquatic archaeological activities.

The department recently created was confronted with many challenges. First, the lack of know-how, second, the opening of the Red Sea to tourism - in particular the diving -, third the growing number of fishermen-divers on the Mediterranean coast and finally, the increasing demand of construction on non-prospectured coasts or zones. Of course, the DUA is confronted with a variety of other problems, such as marine pollution, the development of coastal districts, land reclamation, the widening of coastal roads, etc., all of which are undertaken often without reference to the DUA. There is also the danger of unknown or little-explored sites being looted by sport divers and fishermen.

When first founded, there were fourteen archaeologists at the department, later increased to twenty-five. They are of various specialties (Egyptology, Graeco-Roman period, Coptic and Islamic period). They are sufficiently proficient to be able to undertake the necessary tasks of documentation (drawing, photographing, topography, etc.) while diving. These diver-archaeologists have been well trained and are acquainted with modern methodology through initial participation in foreign missions. It is now their personal enthusiasm that helps to extend their competence.

Egypt realized that in order to explore, document and preserve its heritage, of international significance, some form of co-operation between various Egyptian agencies and even foreign institutions will be needed. Since 1996 the DUA has supervised many archaeological surveys and excavations in its territorial and internal waters. These geophysics and visual archaeological surveys and underwater excavations were conducted by Egyptian and foreign institutions. Archaeologist from Egypt, Europe and USA took part in the discoveries and the studies of different sites under the waters of the Mediterranean Sea, the Red Sea, the Nile, Lake Quarun, on the island of Nelson and around Lake Mareotis. These discoveries cover the Pharaonic, Hellenistic, roman, byzantine and Islamic periods<sup>2</sup>.

Once the artifacts are lifted from water, they are transported to conservation and restoration laboratories in Alexandria. When treated, the artifacts are stored in the storerooms of the DUA, or handed to museums for display. As for the immovable submerged antiquities, the coasts-guards are charged with their protection following a request made by the DUA.

In 1986, a decision was taken to establish a National Maritime Museum at Alexandria to hold artifacts representing Egyptian maritime history from ancient times to the present day. Unfortunately, this project has not yet been realized. Following the underwater discoveries, many voices demanded the creation of an archaeological underwater park or museum. Although, the SCA has allowed the paid diving visit on few sites, this demand was not fully executed.



---

<sup>2</sup>For more information see: M. M. Abd El-Maguid: "Underwater Archaeology in Egypt in a Century", in *proceedings of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Scientific Meeting of the Arabs Archaeologists*, Cairo 2001, (in Arabic). I. Darwish, M. M. Abd El-Maguid: "Underwater Archaeology in Egypt", *Tropis VII*, Athènes 2002, pp 881-889. E. Khalil, M. Moustafa: "Underwater Archaeology in Egypt", in *Ruppe, C. & Barstad, J. International Handbook of Underwater Archaeology*, Plenum Series in Underwater Archaeology, New York 2002, pp 519-539.

After fifteen years, we noticed that the archaeological activities were concentrate in the Mediterranean, especially in Alexandria, because of its heritage and its history. Therefore, the Department for Underwater Antiquities became –recently- the General Department for Underwater Antiquities (GDUA), for a better management and control of the underwater cultural heritage and to spread archaeological research activities on the whole area of responsibility. This later is divided into four departments: Eastern Mediterranean & its lakes; Western Mediterranean & its lakes; Red Sea; the Nile & the lake Qarun. Their tasks are to manage the antiquities in their areas of responsibility, their conservation and their diffusion to the public.

## Legislation

The Antiquities' protection law (Law No. 117 of 1983 amended with the law No 3 of 2010) was issued to supersede law No. 215, issued in 1951, and all other previous texts that contradict its articles. The first two articles define the antiquities and their sites and placements. Article 5 indicates the organizing authority. Article 6 considers antiquities as being common wealth with some exception. Whereas the articles 31 & 32 care with the administrative and scientific organization of the archaeological activities.

### ARTICLE 1

In application of the provisions of this Law any real-estate or chattel is considered an antiquity whenever it meets the following conditions:

1. To be the product of Egyptian civilization or the successive civilizations or the creation of art, sciences, literature or religions that took place on the Egyptian lands since the pre-historic ages and during the successive historic ages till before 100 years.
2. To be of archaeological or artistic value or of historical importance as an aspect of the different aspects of Egyptian civilization or any other civilization that took place on the Egyptian lands.
3. To be produced and grown up on the Egyptian lands and of a historical relation thereto and also the mummies of human races and beings contemporary to them are considered like any antiquity which is being registered in accordance with this Law.

### ARTICLE 2

Any real-estate or chattel of a historic, scientific, religious, artistic or literal value may he considered an antiquity by a decree from the Prime Minister upon recommendation of the competent Minister in cultural affairs, whenever the State finds a national interest in keeping and preserving such real-estate or chattel, this without being bound with the time limit specified in the herein before article. Said estate or chattel shall hereby be registered in accordance with the provisions of said law, and in this case the owner of the antiquity shall he deemed liable for the preservation of such and has no right to make any change therein as from the date such owner is notified of said decree by a registered letter attached with a receipt.



#### ARTICLE 5

Taking into consideration the provision of ARTICLE 32 of this law, the Council is the exclusive authority concerned with all that is related to antiquities' affairs at its museums and stores, at archaeological sites and areas, over or under earth's surface, at the internal waters and the Egyptian territorial waters and any antiquity discovered by accident. The Council undertakes exploration and excavation in lands even if owned by others as well as any cultural, tourist, commercial or promotional activities relating to antiquities to be exercised at the archaeological sites or inside the antiquity sacrum. The executive regulation of this Law regulates the exercise of these activities realizing rehabilitation and security of the archaeological site.

#### ARTICLE 6

All real-estate and movable antiquities and lands which are considered archaeological lands are considered public property except the wakfs and private properties. The ownership, possession or disposal of is not permitted except in the terms and conditions stipulated in said law and its executive regulation.

#### ARTICLE 31

The Council shall arrange priorities of permission for missions and authorities to excavate antiquities starting with places that are more subject to the environmental dangers and more affected by the State's projects of urban extension in accordance with an objective timetable that is decided by the Board of Directors.

#### ARTICLE 32

The Council undertakes discovery of antiquities located over earth surface and excavations for antiquities underground and in the local and territorial waters. According to terms and conditions stipulated in the executive regulation of this Law and after the approval of the Competent Permanent Committee, the Board of Directors may license any specialized scientific institutions and universities, whether national or foreign to excavate and search for antiquities in specified sites and for limited period of time due to a special license, which cannot be assigned to any other party. Such license is granted only after verification of the availability of sufficient scientific, technical, financial and archaeological practical experience of the institution or the university demanding this license.

The above-mentioned provision is applicable even if the search and exploration were in a non-archaeological land.

The licensee are licensed to study, draw, photograph antiquities discovered by the same within the license period, and the right in the scientific publication about its excavations is preserved for five years as of date of its first discovery at the site.

From these selected articles we note that the Egyptian law is in accordance with the UNESCO chart and that the lawmakers were aware of the protection of the underwater cultural heritage whether in inland water or in territorial water. But the main issue is not the deficiency of the law but the application of this one. Although the law on antiquities mentions that all the restrictions are applicable on the antiquity found on or in land like in water, it remains always a problem to guard a discovered and registered site even if the coastguards prohibit the diving in this site. The increasing number of sites and their distance make the mission impossible.

#### **Education:**

In 2001, we wrote "It worth mentioning that there are no special courses in Egypt for studying marine archaeology. One year ago, the department of Greco-Roman Archaeology of Alexandria University began to include an introduction to the subject within the rubric of excavation methodology. Thus, the archaeologists of the DUA are obliged to start from nothing and rely on trials and experience"<sup>3</sup>. In 2004, I stated in a report that "I do not believe that this field can be managed scientifically in an adequate manner without having an educational program to provide the future researchers. Thus I proposed to create a diploma equivalent to Master that applies to specialties which touch with sub aquatic and naval archaeological research. It could be planned to allow to the professional archaeologists there to have access, to bring them up to date or to increase their competences in this field". Fortunately, the Alexandria Centre for Maritime Archaeology & Underwater Cultural Heritage was established as a European Union project under the EU-Tempus III Programme in 2009. The project

intended to form a specialized centre for postgraduate studies which provides education and training at different levels in aspects of maritime and underwater archaeology, and to develop a postgraduate Diploma and Master programmes in Maritime Archaeology and Underwater Cultural Heritage, designed and structured in accordance with EU standards. The centre was created through collaboration between eight consortium institutions from the EU and Egypt who among them provided the necessary academic, technical and administrative expertise required for the establishment of the centre. The centre is hosted by the Archaeology Department, Faculty of Art of the Alexandria University<sup>4</sup>. Nowadays, The GDUA is collaborating with the recently created centre in the training of the new students of this centre and the archaeologists of the department in its projects. Moreover, three archaeologists have joined partly the centre in order to transmit their experience and knowledge.

Mohamed M. Abd El-Maguid  
General Department for Underwater Antiquities  
Supreme Council for Antiquities, Egypt



**Disclaimer:** This document is for information purposes only; it is based on information communicated by a representative of the country; it is not an official UNESCO document or statement and does not reflect in any way the Organization's views or positions.

---

<sup>4</sup> [www.foa.edu.eg/cma](http://www.foa.edu.eg/cma)