Chapter 5

Greece

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Introduction

Greece, one of the most archaeologically-rich nations in the world, with its long coastline and numerous scattered islands, has a particular interest in protecting its underwater heritage. The waters around Greece are full of cultural remains: submerged coastal sites and shipwrecks of all kinds – ancient and modern, prehistoric and historic. The first evidence of seafaring comes from the Mesolithic strata of Francthi Cave in Argolid in the Peloponnese (c. 9,000 B.C.), which contained obsidian tools originating from the island of Melos. The Minoan civilisation was well-known for its trading with Egypt and the eastern Mediterranean, whilst the voyages of the Myceneans throughout the eastern Mediterranean are echoed in the heroic epics of Homer and the tale of the Argonauts. Moving into the historic period of Greece (c. 1,100 B.C.), early writings and archaeological finds show Greek civilisation and colonies spreading throughout the Mediterranean via penteconters (oared galleys with fifty rowers), which gave way to the triremes of classical Greece. The centuries that followed produced a series of cultures

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* The opinions expressed in this essay are strictly personal.
in Greece: Roman, Byzantine, Venetian, Ottoman and others, often in conflict with each other, which left a ‘rich tapestry’ of archaeological material on the seabed.¹

Many statues and other ‘treasures’ of great artistic value were found on the seabed around the coasts of Greece, together with innumerable pieces of pottery, coins, jewels, and instruments in metal or wood. A few examples of such discoveries are the Poseidon of Kreusis (Gulf of Corinth, 1889), the Boy of Marathon (1925), the famous Poseidon (or Zeus) of Artemision, the Jockey Boy (off Cape Artemision, 1928), the Venus of Rhodes, Augustus, the ‘Beauty’ of Kalymnos (1994) and, more recently, the Youth of Kythnos (2004), a magnificent bronze statue found near the island of Kythnos. Most of these masterpieces were found accidentally by Greek fishermen and sponge divers and are now displayed in museums around the country.

The first systematic underwater survey was carried out (although unsuccessfully due to technical difficulties) in 1881 off the island of Salamis in an attempt to locate the remains of the famous naval battle of 480 B.C. Another famous early excavation was that of the ‘Antikythera Wreck’, which was discovered by sponge divers in 1900 and produced remarkable bronze and marble statues, such as the Youth of Antikythera, as well as the only truly scientific instrument surviving from classical times, the famous Astrolabe.²

The invention of the aqualung in 1943 constituted an important landmark in the development of marine archaeology, since it offered archaeologists the opportunity to investigate underwater sites by themselves. After World War II several expeditions were undertaken by Greek or foreign scientists at, for example, the ancient site of Pheia in the Peloponnese, the two ancient harbours of Corinth, Cenchreai and Lechaeum, the Early Bronze Age Settlement of Pavlopetri in the southern Peloponnese, and the ancient harbour of Haliea in the northeastern Peloponnese. In the 1960s, Peter Thockmorton investigated sites such as Methoni, Porto Logo and Sapienza, whilst the 1970s were years of intensive archaeological activity underwater. One should specifically mention the rescue excavation of a Byzantine wreck near Pelagos Island, necessitated by its looting and the appearance of ceramics plundered from it in foreign museums, and the investigation by Cousteau of Cape Artemision, Navarino Bay and the ‘Antikythera Wreck’.³ During this period two important scientific institutions were established: a private, non-profit-making organisation, the Hellenic Institute of Marine Archaeology (HIMA) (1973), and a governmental agency, the Department (Ephorate) of Underwater Antiquities (Ministry of Culture, 1976).

Since the 1980s, the Department of Underwater Antiquities has undertaken many underwater surveys and excavations, occasionally in co-operation with foreign archaeological institutions. Such projects include the investigation of the ancient harbours of Samos, Naxos and Thassos, and the excavations of the Early Bronze Age settlement of

² The expedition, which constituted the first rescue excavation under the authority of the Greek State and was carried out by sponge divers, left one diver dead and two paralysed: Agouridis, ibid., p. 181. See also W. Bascom ‘Deep Water Archaeology’ (1972) 174 Science 261–269 at 262.
³ Agouridis, ibid.