

International and National Organizations and Agreements Related to the Protection of Submerged Cultural Heritage

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Received: 10/2023, Published: 11/2023

Abstract:

In recent years, there has been an increased focus on the exploration and preservation of submerged archaeological sites, whether in seas, oceans, or other bodies of water. These underwater sites are rich in artifacts dating back to various historical periods, reflecting human activity in various domains. Due to the significant importance of these discovered relics as complements to those found on land, it has become imperative for various international organizations to enact laws aimed at protecting this type of heritage. Algeria, like many other countries worldwide, has not overlooked this aspect, as evidenced by Law 98-04 concerning the protection of cultural heritage. What are the most important international agreements regulating submerged cultural heritage within water? In this research, we will discuss the key international organizations working in the field of culture in general and archaeology in particular, and their roles in safeguarding submerged archaeological sites. We will also examine the efforts of some countries in this field, in addition to Algeria's endeavors to protect this type of heritage.

Keywords: Marine Archaeology, Submerged Archaeological Sites, Law 98-04, Heritage Protection, UNESCO.

INTRODUCTION

The depths of oceans, rivers, and lakes abound with evidence of significant historical events, such as battles, natural disasters, ancient ports, trade exchanges, and more. Many of these submerged underwater sites remain intact over hundreds or even thousands of years when suitable environmental conditions exist. Various countries are diligently striving to protect this type of heritage, considering it a memory from the past that represents a specific event or era in human history. This necessitates their preservation, whether through scientific methods that ensure the conservation and restoration of artifacts or through legal means by enacting international or national laws and agreements. What are the most important international and national organizations and agreements related to the protection of submerged cultural heritage in water?

1. Concept of Submerged Cultural Heritage

The UNESCO has defined submerged cultural heritage as all the manifestations of human existence that possess cultural, historical, or archaeological significance and have remained partially or entirely submerged in water, periodically or continuously, for at least one hundred years. According to this definition, submerged cultural heritage is primarily linked to the location where the artifact is found, regardless of its type or the region it is located in. In other words, the criterion for describing an artifact as submerged or underwater heritage is primarily a spatial one ([Khalil, 2016, p. 17](#)).

2. Types of Submerged Cultural Heritage

2.1 Shipwrecks

There are numerous ships scattered on the bottoms of oceans and seas, dating back to different eras. These sunken ships can provide valuable historical information, as they serve as evidence of commercial activities among various civilizations. ([Abdullah, 2013, p. 16](#))

In this context, there are two approaches or methods for studying boats and ships as sources of archaeological knowledge. The first approach treats them as archaeological artifacts in their own right. Their function, construction methods, materials used in their making, and other physical characteristics are studied. The second approach views boats and ships as material reflections of the cultures that produced or used them. From these vessels, we can glean a wealth of information about the environments in which these societies lived, their knowledge and technology, as well as their relationships, beliefs, and religious practices, among other aspects ([Khalil, 2016, p. 70](#)).

2.2 Submerged Human Settlements

The waters now engulf countless ancient structures and settlements due to land subsidence, earthquakes, floods, and sometimes entire cities can be submerged by floods ([Abdullah, 2013, p. 17](#)). Some archaeologists believe that certain cities mentioned in religious texts, such as Sodom and Gomorrah, were lost when the earth collapsed and they were submerged by the waters of the Dead Sea. There are also mythical cities like Atlantis, a legendary sunken city that has fascinated humanity since the time of Plato. Recently, archaeologists discovered the city of Port Royal on the island of Jamaica, which was submerged due to earthquakes ([Sténuit, 1965, p. 12](#)).

2.3 Submerged Landscapes:

Entire natural landscapes have been submerged in some regions due to land subsidence or rising water levels ([Abdullah, 2013, p. 17](#)).

2.4 Ports

Ports and other maritime structures, such as lighthouses, are essential subjects studied in marine archaeology. The relationship between ships and these structures is a significant and historical one, evolving with the development of ship types, sizes, and functions. The Mediterranean Sea serves as a perfect model for studying ancient ports as it witnessed the rise and prosperity of many civilizations, leaving behind a vast number of maritime structures of different types and styles, some dating back over five thousand years ([Khalil, 2016, p. 117](#)).

2.5 Submerged Wells and Caves

Submerged cultural heritage includes artifacts and remnants of ancient human life preserved in caves and wells that were always submerged underwater or inundated due to rising sea levels. The Cosquer Cave in France, for instance, contains prehistoric paintings despite having its entrance submerged 37 meters below the water's surface (UNESCO, 2001, p. 04). There are also sacrificial wells, where some ancient cultures regularly offered items in deep wells to ensure good fortune. Among the most peculiar of these practices are the Maya in Central America, who had elaborate rituals involving offerings of living beings in deep wells, along with jewelry and other gifts to appease the gods (Sténuet, 1965, p. 12).

3. The Beginning of Underwater Archaeological Research

The field of underwater archaeology is a relatively new science. Historically, the focus was primarily on archaeological discoveries on land. However, in the early 20th century, interest began to shift towards underwater archaeology, and this shift was partly catalyzed by the discovery of a shipwreck off the coast of Greece in 1900 (Abdullah, 2013, p. 18).

The study of underwater archaeology in the Mediterranean Sea has passed through several stages. Initially, there were sporadic efforts to salvage valuable artifacts submerged underwater. Many underwater archaeological sites were discovered by chance. However, it wasn't until after 1900 that these sites received significant attention. In 1900, the wreckage of a sunken ship from the 1st century BC was discovered near a Greek island. This ship carried numerous valuable artifacts, including bronze and marble statues, as well as various pottery and glass items. This discovery caught the interest of the Greek authorities, who decided to salvage the ship's cargo for its artistic and historical value. The project was carried out by Greek archaeologists with the assistance of divers (Khalil, 2016, p. 49).

During this period, an important turning point in the history of underwater archaeology occurred with the excavation of a massive Roman commercial shipwreck from the late 1st century BC, found off the northwest coast of Italy. From 1961 to 1981, Italian archaeologist Honor Frost managed an archaeological excavation of this ship, which was discovered to be carrying between 11,000 and 13,000 pottery vessels. Notably, the team that worked on the project primarily consisted of archaeologists who studied the recovered artifacts after their retrieval. Honor Frost, for instance, believed that diving was best left to professional divers, while archaeologists collected data about the site by questioning the divers about their underwater observations (Khalil, 2016, p. 51).

The 1960s marked a pivotal period in the history of underwater archaeology when the first scientific underwater archaeological excavations were conducted by specialized researchers. During this time, there was a growing interest in studying underwater archaeology, leading to the publication of various scientific books and research papers on the subject. These contributions laid the foundation for the theoretical and practical aspects of this emerging field. Additionally, during this period, there was an increased focus on studying ancient ports and maritime structures in different areas of the Mediterranean Sea.

For example, British archaeologist Honor Frost (1917-2010) played a significant role in studying Mediterranean maritime sites such as Tyre, Sidon, Arwad, and others. She also produced the first classification of various stone mooring blocks used by ancient ships. Her research findings were published in a book in 1963 (Khalil, 2016, pp. 51-53).

It's worth noting that Egypt has been one of the pioneering Arab countries in the field of underwater archaeology, with increasing recognition of this discipline since the mid-1990s. The Supreme Council of Antiquities established a specialized department for underwater archaeology at the end of 1996. This was prompted by the retrieval of underwater artifacts at the Pharos site in 1995 and the surveys of the Eastern Harbor in 1996. While some consider the beginning of underwater archaeological work in Egypt to date back to 1993, with the retrieval of the Isis statue from the same location, the actual origins of this work go back much further. One significant early discovery occurred in the Dakhila Gulf when Malval, a French harbor engineer, uncovered the remains of an ancient stone quay, measuring 210 meters in length and 9 meters in thickness at the base, in 1908 (Abdullah, 2013, p. 22).

In Algeria, the first recorded underwater archaeological expeditions took place during the French colonial period. A shipwreck was discovered in Cherchell's harbor, and in 1961, cannons and shipwreck remains were found off the coast of Annaba. In 2005, several metal artifacts and the cargo of a sunken ship were discovered east of Tamnoufast. Additionally, the Public National Maritime Museum cataloged cannons in Cherchell, some of which were retrieved in 2008, and are now preserved in the Cherchell Museum. In 2019, 23 cannons were discovered on the White Rock beach as part of the construction project for the Hamdaneya port in Cherchell (Fahima, 2021, p. 512).

In recent years, there has been significant progress in underwater archaeological research worldwide, with the discovery of thousands of underwater sites and the execution of hundreds of underwater archaeological research projects, particularly due to technological advancements. Underwater archaeological techniques have witnessed tremendous development, including the use of remote sensing technology for discovering submerged artifacts and advanced underwater imaging techniques for recording and documenting the discovered sites.

4. International Organizations Concerned with Submerged Cultural Heritage

4.1 United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

UNESCO is a specialized agency of the United Nations headquartered in Paris, established in 1946. It is responsible for various fields including education, natural sciences, social and human sciences, culture, communication, and information. Currently, UNESCO safeguards 1,073 sites of world heritage located in 167 countries.

4.2 International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM)

ICCROM is an intergovernmental organization based in Rome, Italy, established by UNESCO in 1956. Its regular activities include overseeing research programs, documentation, technical assistance, training, and public awareness with the aim of enhancing the preservation of movable and immovable cultural heritage. It also monitors the status of safeguarding cultural properties listed in the World Heritage List and studies international assistance requests made by member states (UNESCO, 2019, p. 17).

4.3 International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS)

ICOMOS is a non-governmental organization based in Charenton-le-Pont, France, established in 1965. Its role is to promote the theory of preserving architectural and heritage assets, as well as its

scientific methodologies and techniques. Its activities are based on the principles of the International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites (the Venice Charter) from 1964. ICOMOS evaluates properties nominated for inclusion in the World Heritage List, monitors the conservation status of cultural properties listed in the World Heritage List, studies international assistance requests submitted by member states, and contributes to capacity-building activities and support ([UNESCO, 2019, p. 17](#)).

4.4 International Centre for Underwater Archaeology

This center is located in Zadar, Croatia. It was granted the status of a center working under the auspices of UNESCO by the General Conference of UNESCO in October 2007. This center focuses on international cooperation in the protection of submerged cultural heritage ([Fahima, 2021, p. 530](#)).

5. Organizations Interested in Heritage in Arab Countries

5.1 Arab Towns Organization

Established in 1967, its goals include preserving the Arab and Islamic identity of cities to protect their cultural heritage.

5.2 Arab Organization for Education, Culture, and Science (ALESCO):

Founded by the League of Arab States in 1970, one of its objectives is to preserve the cultural heritage at archaeological sites.

5.3 Islamic Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (ISESCO):

Established in 1982 with headquarters in Rabat, its objectives include safeguarding the Islamic identity and landmarks of Islamic civilization ([Abdullah, 2013, p. 41](#)).

6. Institutional Framework for Submerged Cultural Heritage in Algeria

The responsibility for protecting submerged cultural heritage falls under the Ministry of Culture, which must involve national institutions and experts to promote this type of heritage.

6.1 Ministry of Culture

The executive decree No. 05-79, dated February 26, 2005, defines the Minister of Culture's powers regarding the protection and enhancement of cultural heritage. These include ([Executive Decree No. 05-79, 2005, pp. 15-16](#)):

- Contributing to preserving the national cultural identity and strengthening it.
- Preserving the collective memory of the nation by collecting all documents and materials related to national cultural heritage.
- Protecting and valuing both tangible and intangible cultural heritage.
- Studying the protection rules of geographical areas with cultural significance and enhancing them by collaborating with relevant sectors.
- Ensuring the safeguarding of cultural heritage against any form of threats, encroachment, and damage.

- Promoting national culture abroad and encouraging all work in this direction.
- In the field of research and training, promoting research in cultural heritage, arts, and literature and contributing to the process of writing national history within the national programs of scientific and technological research. It also develops policies for training in the field of cultural heritage by establishing suitable programs and facilities.

To effectively carry out these tasks, various structures were established within the ministry, including ([Executive Decree No. 05-80, 2005, p. 01](#)):

- Directorate of Legal Protection of Cultural Properties and Cultural Heritage Enhancement.
- Directorate for the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Heritage.

The Ministry is making clear efforts to protect submerged heritage by providing the necessary material and human resources. It also seeks to enhance international cooperation by organizing training courses on underwater archaeological research. One such course was organized in collaboration with the Algerian Navy in June 2005 under the theme "Sailing in Knowledge - Network of Historical Arsenals in the Mediterranean Sea." Five Algerian trainees, three Maltese, and three French participants took part in this course, which led to the discovery of the wreckage of a ship called the Sphynx, and some of its parts were excavated during this training ([Fahima, 2021, p. 525](#)).

6.2 National Office for the Management and Exploitation of Protected Cultural Properties (OGEBEC)

The OGEBEC is a national commercial institution under the authority of the Ministry of Culture, established on January 1, 2007. It was created as a result of the transformation of the National Agency for Antiquities and the Protection of Historical Sites and Monuments, which has been active since 1987. The OGEBEC is based in Algiers, specifically in the Lower Casbah, where the General Directorate is located at Dar Aziza, one of the palaces in the city of Algiers. The OGEBEC is responsible for managing, exploiting, protecting, and guarding cultural properties within its jurisdiction across the national territory ([OGEBEC, 2007](#)).

6.3 National Center for Archaeological Research

Established by Executive Decree 05-491 dated December 22, 2005, this is a public scientific and technological institution placed under the supervision of the Minister of Culture. Its headquarters are located in the city of Algiers, and it can be relocated to any other place within the national territory based on a decree issued upon the Culture Minister's recommendation. The center is tasked with conducting scientific research in the field of archaeology to contribute to the history of Algeria, Morocco, and North Africa based on material and archaeological evidence. It also participates in the development of educational programs in the field of archaeology and carries out other related tasks. ([Executive Decree Number 05-491, 2005, pp. 22-24](#))

This center plays a crucial role in the protection of submerged cultural heritage by conducting archaeological surveys, searching for underwater artifacts, and training experts and divers. It organizes training courses both within the country and abroad. The center has also signed an agreement with the University of Aix-Marseille, which includes training and research components

aimed at training Algerian professionals in underwater diving and archaeological research (Fahima, 2021, pp. 524-525).

6.4 The National Public Maritime Museum

In accordance with Article 3 of Executive Decree No. 85-277, dated November 12, 1985, a national maritime museum was established with its headquarters located in the basement of Khair al-Din at the Algerian Navy. This museum is responsible for the retrieval, acquisition, restoration, and preservation of objects and collections in the field of maritime cultural heritage (Executive Decree No.07-233, 2007, pp. 08-09).

On May 14, 2008, a joint ministerial decision was issued between the Minister of National Defense and the Minister responsible for Culture, which outlined the conditions for the use of Khair al-Din's basement, where the National Maritime Museum is housed. Subsequently, another joint ministerial decision dated April 25, 2010, established the internal organization of the National Maritime Museum and its annexes. However, the provisions of this decision were later canceled by another joint ministerial decision dated June 20, 2013, which included the internal organization of the National Public Maritime Museum and its annexes (Fahima, 2021, pp. 526-527).

The significant addition in this latest decision was the creation of the Department of Submerged Water Archaeology and Research, which is responsible for the following tasks in particular (Fahima, 2021, pp. 527-528):

- Introduction to the national maritime cultural heritage.
- Inventory of submerged heritage sites.
- Preparation of subject cards on the diversity of maritime cultural heritage.
- Conducting research on submerged artifacts in coordination with specialized centers and universities.
- Documentation of the diversity of maritime cultural heritage and other tasks related to underwater archaeology research.

7. Agreements and Charters related to the Protection of Cultural Heritage

7.1 Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property, 1972

This convention emerged from the General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) held in Paris in its seventeenth session in 1972. It was recognized that cultural and natural heritage is threatened not only by traditional causes but also by changing social and economic conditions. The disappearance or loss of any part of cultural and natural heritage constitutes a harmful impoverishment of the heritage of all peoples worldwide. Protecting this heritage at the national level is often lacking due to the resources required for such protection and the scarcity of economic, scientific, and technological resources in the country where the heritage that needs to be preserved is located. This convention was established to ensure national and international protection of cultural and natural heritage through its specified provisions (UNESCO, 1972, p. 03).

Among the outcomes of this convention is the establishment of the World Heritage Committee, whose role is to protect cultural and natural heritage of exceptional universal value (UNESCO,

1972, p. 06). Additionally, the World Heritage Fund was established with a similar role in protecting cultural and natural heritage of outstanding universal value (UNESCO, 1972, p. 09).

7.2 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea 1982

Since the failure of the Hague Conference in 1930 to reach an agreement on defining regional seas, three major international conferences were held after World War II to discuss maritime laws and territorial waters under the auspices of the United Nations. The first conference was held in 1958 in Geneva, the second in 1960, but they did not succeed. The most recent and successful of these conferences was held in 1982. During this conference, the latest convention was established.

The key point of contention was the determination of each country's territorial sea. Ultimately, most countries accepted the new text (Articles 3 and 4) which granted each country the right to establish its territorial sea extending up to 12 nautical miles measured from the baseline (Abdullah, 2013, p. 52).

To determine the specific point, or rather the baseline from which the territorial sea, typically 12 nautical miles, is measured, the furthest point from the shore where the sea water withdraws at low tide, usually considered the last dry land in the state's territory, is taken as a starting point. This point was, in the past, used as the baseline from which lines were drawn parallel to the coast, both inward and outward, to measure the width of the territorial sea. The area of the sea enclosed between the coastline and this line is considered the state's territorial sea (Abdullah, 2013, p. 52).

Now the situation has changed slightly with the 1982 convention allowing the use of straight baselines connecting different points. These are called "basepoints," and the width of the territorial sea is measured from them. Every state is required to produce approved maps clearly indicating the shape of its territorial sea.

Every state has the legal right to exercise innocent passage through the territorial sea of another state. This means that foreign vessels have the established right to transit through it without damage or humiliation to the coastal state, provided they comply with existing laws and regulations and do not harm the coastal state's interests. This is not a permit granted by the state that owns the territorial sea, but rather an established right of foreign vessels. As for submarines, the convention obliges them to pass through a foreign state's territorial sea floating on the surface of the sea, flying their flags and signals, in their entirety.

Naturally, the state that owns the territorial sea may establish rules and regulations to safeguard security and navigational safety, and prevent pollution according to its discretion (Abdullah, 2013, pp. 52-53).

8. Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage 2001

This is an international convention aimed at safeguarding underwater cultural heritage. It serves the following purposes (UNESCO, 2001, p. 12):

- It outlines fundamental principles related to the protection of underwater cultural heritage.
- It includes provisions for international cooperation plans.
- It provides practical guidance for dealing with such heritage.

The basic principles of the 2001 convention are as follows (UNESCO, 2001, p. 13):

- **Obligation to preserve underwater cultural heritage:** It is the duty of the participating countries to preserve underwater cultural heritage in the interest of humanity and to take necessary measures for this purpose. The convention also requires respect for all human remains in the marine waters.
- **Prioritizing the preservation of artifacts in their original location:** Priority should be given to the preservation of underwater cultural heritage in its original location. However, this does not mean it's the only option; in certain circumstances, artifacts can be recovered when the heritage is at risk of damage or destruction, or when their recovery significantly contributes to knowledge, protection, or understanding.
- **Prohibition of commercial exploitation:** It is prohibited to exploit underwater cultural heritage for trade, barter, or any commercial purposes. Additionally, it should not be dispersed in a way that makes recovery impossible. This rule aligns with ethical principles applied to cultural heritage on land. It's important to note that this rule aims to prevent intrusive interventions for commercial purposes, not to hinder archaeological research or tourist access to the relevant heritage.
- **Training and information exchange:** Participating countries must enhance the exchange of information, provide training on underwater archaeology, transfer technology, and raise public awareness regarding the significance of underwater cultural heritage. They should also cooperate and assist each other in protecting and managing this heritage, including collaboration in research, preservation, study, and display.

The convention aims to ensure effective protection of underwater cultural heritage and its preservation for future generations based on these principles.

9. Protection of Underwater Heritage in Algeria:

Algeria, like other countries around the world, seeks to protect its underwater cultural heritage, both through scientific approaches and legislative measures.

9.1 Law 98-04 on Cultural Heritage Protection

The Algerian legislator defined the nation's cultural heritage under Article 02 of Law 98-04 concerning the protection of cultural heritage as follows: It includes all cultural immovable properties, dedicated properties, and moveable properties located on the national estate properties' land and within it, owned by natural or legal persons subject to special law, as well as those found in the subaquatic strata of inland and national regional waters, inherited from various civilizations since prehistoric times to the present day (Mersali, 2009, p. 15).

Upon examining this article, it becomes evident that the Algerian legislator did not overlook underwater artifacts when defining cultural heritage, considering it an integral part of local history. Consequently, underwater cultural heritage is subject to the same protection procedures applied to land-based immovable artifacts, such as listing in the additional inventory, classification, establishment in reserved sectors while considering the unique characteristics of this type of artifact. There is also a reference to underwater heritage in Article 50 of Law 98-04 when it defines moveable cultural properties as follows: "Moveable cultural properties include, in particular, the results of archaeological exploration and research on land and underwater, antique objects like

tools, ceramic artifacts, writings, seals, jewelry, etc., and cultural properties with historical, artistic, or scientific significance may be classified or registered on the additional inventory list, following a decision by the Minister responsible for culture, upon consultation with the National Committee for Cultural Properties" (Mersali, 2009, pp. 38-39).

According to Article 64 of this law, cultural heritage artifacts cannot be the subject of commercial transactions if these properties are a result of programmed or non-programmed excavations, ancient or recent discoveries on national territory or in inland or national regional waters, as these cultural properties belong to national assets (Law No. 98-04, 1998, p. 13).

Article 77 of Law 98-04 states that anyone who discovers cultural properties while carrying out authorized work or by accident should report their findings to the local authorities, who will then inform the Ministry of Culture's relevant departments. The discoverer may be rewarded, and the amount is determined through regulation.

Furthermore, Article 78 of the same law makes it obligatory for anyone who discovers cultural properties in inland or national regional waters to report their findings according to the procedures outlined in Article 77. Additionally, it is prohibited to remove, transport, destroy, or damage any cultural property discovered in this manner. Anyone who intentionally removes cultural property in inland or national regional waters must report it and hand it over to the competent local authorities, who will then inform the Ministry of Culture (Mersali, 2009, pp. 52-53).

This law also stipulates a range of penalties, including Article 95, which imposes imprisonment for two to five years or a fine ranging from 100,000 DZD to 200,000 DZD in cases involving the sale or concealment of objects resulting from research conducted under the sea (Mersali, 2009, p. 62).

9.2 Submerged cultural heritage in the context of Order 76-80, which encompasses maritime law

Order 76-80, encompassing maritime law, addresses submerged cultural heritage by defining maritime wreckage in Article 358. Article 381 of Law 76-80 stipulates that maritime wreckage of historical, archaeological, artistic, or scientific significance shall be declared as the property of the Algerian state. The individuals who make such discoveries are entitled to compensation in accordance with Article 15 of Order 67-281 related to excavations and the protection of historical and natural sites (Fahima, 2021, pp. 521-522).

Moreover, any person who discovers or rescues maritime wreckage is required to submit a declaration to the maritime administrative authority within forty-eight hours of the discovery of the wreckage on the coast or upon arrival at the first Algerian port after the discovery or rescue at sea. This declaration must include specific information regarding the time, location, and circumstances of the discovery or rescue of the wreckage (Fahima, 2021, p. 522).

CONCLUSION

In this article, we have attempted to familiarize ourselves with various international organizations and national institutions operating in the field of submerged heritage. We have also explored various international agreements that work towards the protection of underwater heritage. Additionally, we have delved into the Algerian legislative texts related to the protection of this type of cultural heritage, considering it an integral part of the nation's heritage that must be preserved through various scientific and legal means.

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