

The Impact on the Development of Maritime Archaeology in Sri Lanka through the UNESCO Regional Maritime Archaeology Field Schools.

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ABSTRACT

Maritime Archaeology in Sri Lanka began in 1992 with focus on the historic port of Galle, but most of those programs were supported by foreign funds and involved foreign consultations. The *Avondster* (1659) Marine Archaeology Project carried out from 2001 to 2004 contributed to an extent in the creation of a group of local archaeologists and conservators. This was useful when the Sri Lankan team took over the research and conservation independently in 2005, after the tsunami disaster.

In 2006, UNESCO initially provided funding to Sri Lanka so that an Asia-Pacific Regional Field School Program for Maritime Archaeology could be set up in Galle. The first and second sessions for Training the Trainers Program took place in 2006 and 2008. However, the lack of support from the Sri Lankan government as well as the ongoing war in the country, prompted the transfer of the field school project to Chanthaburi, Thailand. Three Foundation Courses and two Advanced Courses for GIS and In-situ Conservation were conducted. From 2009 to 2012, 76 participants from 17 different countries joined the training courses, with 11 representatives from Sri Lanka.

This paper deals with measuring the development of maritime archaeology in Sri Lanka, especially after the field school program. This will focus on developing infrastructure, field research, conservation, and human resources of the Maritime Archaeology Unit (MAU). This will also discuss the steps taken to start collaboration projects in the Asia-Pacific region and among the participants of the previous field schools. Further, the progress of the ratification process of the UNESCO 2001 Convention in Sri Lanka will be examined.

Key words: UNESCO, Maritime Archaeology, Field Schools

List of Figures

Figure 1: The UNESCO field School 2006

Figure 2: The UNESCO Second Field School (2010)

Figure 3: UNESCO Second Field school 2010 (Thailand)

Figure 4: Godawaya *First* international Collaboration research Project

Figure 5: Cover page of national Shipwreck database

INTRODUCTION

In 1992, maritime archaeology fieldwork in Sri Lanka started on the historic port of Galle in cooperation with foreign maritime archaeologists and supported by foreign funds. As a milestone for the field activities, the *Avondster* Research and Conservation Project (2001-2004) focused on the shipwreck *Avondster* (1659) that sank in Galle harbour. The project involved maritime archaeologists from Australia, the Netherlands, England, and the United States of America among others (Parthesius 2007). The Dutch government provided the funding while conservationists comprised the human resource. The project helped produce a group of Sri Lankan maritime archaeologists as well as conservators for underwater artifacts. The project laid the foundation to complete the building construction and other infrastructure, the purchase of equipment and chemicals needed to run field operations. The unfortunate tsunami disaster that took place at the end of the project hampered all the improvements gained and caused confusion. Although the tsunami disaster did not cause harm to the maritime archaeology staff, other physical resources were greatly damaged (Bonke, 2007). The necessary financial and labor investment to restart the fieldwork was done with the intervention of countries like Australia through the Australian Institute of Maritime Archaeology (AIMA), and the Netherlands through the Cultural Emergency Response (CER). Furthermore, the process of establishing the maritime archaeology training center in the Asia-Pacific region in Galle also commenced with funds coming from the Royal Norwegian Grant and UNESCO. Under this program, two field schools for Training the Trainers were conducted in 2006 and 2008 held in

Galle (Figure 1 & 2) participated by local maritime archaeologists, conservationists, and foreign trainees. However, UNESCO decided to transfer the Asia-Pacific Regional Center to the Underwater Archaeology Division (UAD) in Chanthaburi, Thailand. The new training program hosted three Foundation Courses, one Advance Course for Geographic Information Systems (GIS), and one Advance Training Course for In-situ Conservation (Figure 3). These were attended by 11 representatives from Sri Lanka (Menders, 2002). An expectation is to conduct a follow-up on the development of maritime archaeology in Sri Lanka concurrently with the above courses and thereafter.



Figure 1: The UNESCO field School 2006



Figure 2: The UNESCO Second Field School (2010)



Figure 3: UNESCO Second Field school 2010 (Thailand)

The Inter-cooperative Research Project at the Archaeological Wooden Shipwreck Site in Godavaya in 2010.

The main topic of discussion at the experts meeting held in conjunction with the Second Foundation Course in Chanthaburi, Thailand, was to implement a preliminary research project based on international cooperation regarding the recent discovery of the Godavaya wooden shipwreck in the southern coast of Sri Lanka. The Maritime Archaeology Unit (MAU) in Galle proposed to organize the expedition and shoulder the initial expenses of the experts to participate through the UNESCO Bangkok Office and the Netherlands Cultural Fund. Maritime archaeologists representing India, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia participated in the first two weeks of December 2010 and conducted an initial maritime archaeological exploration in the aforementioned site (Chandraratne, 2017) (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Godawaya *First* international Collaboration research Project

In parallel with the implementation of this research process, several research papers were published in international journals that helped make relative and scientific chronologies concerning this archaeological site.

The archaeological assemblage included pots, grindstones, glaze ingot, and copper ingot established the date of the shipwreck to the 1st century CE (Common Era). The glazed and copper ingots had been among the major trade components in the ships during that period.

Further, the management and conservation of Sri Lanka's coastal belt and internal waters as part of its maritime cultural heritage was assigned to a team of four (4) maritime archeologists and two (2) conservationists who were working at that time at MAU. The severe lack of human resources meant the team was unable to deal with the existing heritage issues and concerns, and therefore it was emphasized that the development of human resources in the field had to be improved.

Human Resource Development in the Maritime Archaeology Unit

Most of the heritage managers who joined the archaeology field schools in Sri Lanka and Thailand, as well as in the *Avondster* project were affiliated with the Department of Archaeology, Department of Museum, and the Sri Lanka Navy. Thus, they did not always have direct access in taking part of the MAU fieldwork. Due to this, applications were called for the recruitment of archaeology graduates to the MAU. Ten archaeology graduates with a special interest in the field of maritime archaeology and who participated in the short-term residential maritime archaeology field schools were selected for further training from the initial 39 applications received by the unit. In 2011, field training activities and diving training activities were started for the newly recruited graduates.

With the addition of the new recruits, the number of the Diving Research Section members of the MAU increased to 14. Also in 2011, the Northwest Coast Archaeological Research Project started work on the coastal areas from Chillaw to Mannar to expand the maritime archaeology research activities to other parts of the islands. These areas were previously limited to the southern coast of Sri Lanka for more than two decades.

The civil war situation that had started in the 1980s in Sri Lanka completely ended in 2009. By the beginning of 2012, the work of removing the landmines and death traps in the northern and eastern coastal areas had also been completed. In the same year, archaeological explorations were extended to the

Eastern coastal belt, and, in the following year, in the Northern coastal belt. It is a special achievement of the MAU to be able to start maritime archaeological activities in the Western coastal area in 2013.

Due to the monsoon weather conditions, diving research activities in Sri Lankan coasts can only be done from November to March in the Southern and Western seabords, whereas from April to October, in the North Eastern and North Western seabords. Thus, the annual work plan of the MAU's Research Section was limited to two months or less per coastal area each year.

Opportunities for training in international maritime archaeology field schools were very rare for the second generation of maritime archaeologists. The main factor that affected it was the field school training activities in Chanthaburi, Thailand by the UAD (Underwater Archaeology Division). Also, as a low-income country, Sri Lanka's institutional economy was in a weak state and political inadequacies created a disadvantageous situation for MAU members to attend international training and postgraduate opportunities. However, some members were able to take advantage of opportunities based on their initiative. For example, the participation of two trainees and one trainer representing MAU in the International Maritime Archaeology Field School held from 15 June to 12 July 2015 in Vietnam. This training program was hosted by the Institute of Archaeology in Vietnam in coordination with UNESCO and the Southeast Asian Regional Centre for Archaeology and Fine Arts (SEAMEO SPAFA) with the financial support of the Netherlands RCE (RIJKSDIENST V00R Net Cultureel Erfgoed).

The newly recruited MAU archaeology graduates will undergo theoretical and practical training programs designed to develop their knowledge in maritime archaeology, document and maintain underwater databases, and study possible damages and solutions. Studying the weaknesses in the existing legal framework and making proposals for amendments was also included.

Due to the increase in the number of new coastal archaeological sites discovered annually by the maritime archaeology regional exploration projects that started in 2011, the existing human resource capacity of the MAU was not sufficient at all to protect and manage those sites. As a result, the MAU joined hands with the Sri Lanka Police, Sri Lanka Navy, Sri Lanka Coastal Guard, Sri Lanka Fisheries Department, and the National Aquatic Resources Agency (NARA) to manage the situation through an inter-ministerial committee to control the damage caused to the maritime heritage sites by the fishing industry, old iron collectors, and the ones who are using prohibited fishing strategies such as dynamiting. After the establishment of this committee, a great effort was made to protect heritage sites from the very damaging and deterministic influence that had been in place until then.

That is, the authority given to the Divisional Secretaries to issue licenses to the private sector to cut and remove metal ships or other vessels sunk in the Sri Lankan coast is subject to the recommendations of the above-mentioned inter-ministerial committee. It is a victory to be able to control the destruction of metal vessels of historical value that have been pilfered through false licenses of the Divisional Secretaries and pretending these vessels to be recent.

Further, although it is legal to conduct an Archaeological Impact Assessment (AIA) of the land on which medium and large-scale development projects are started, the implementation of that legal situation around the coastal belt of Sri Lanka is very slow. However, legal amendments in the year 2000 provided some relief to overcome this situation. Further, awareness programs organized for the guides of the tourism diving centers that had taken the diving tourists to the maritime cultural heritage sites were arranged to give an understanding of what their responsibility should be in maritime heritage management.

Also, despite long discussions for Sri Lanka's inclination to adhere to the 2001 UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Preservation of the Underwater Cultural Heritage, the negotiations have not been effective enough to reach a final agreement. This can be attributed to the disorganized communication and lack of focus in the organizational structure. This can be due to political instabilities that arise from time

to time as well as unstable policies and plans have had a strong impact on the study of the process of updating national legal systems and adapting to international conventions related to the sustainable existence of maritime cultural heritage. Also, regarding the existing legal status of Sri Lanka's Underwater Cultural Heritage (UCH) and taking necessary actions to increase its capacity, MAU and the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) works very closely with its subsidiary the International Committee on the Underwater Cultural Heritage (ICUCH) in the formulation of necessary policies.

National and International Activities of the MAU

After the year 2010, MAU embarked on many initiatives of national importance such as the establishment of the Museum of Maritime Archaeology (MMA) in 2010. Even though MAU was established in Galle in the same year, the necessity of creating a museum to exhibit the artifacts recovered from it was strongly emphasized. The old Dutch warehouse building in the historic Galle Fort was converted into the MMA after it was removed from its state institutional use and was thereby conserved. Currently, this museum attracts thousands of tourists daily. Consisting of four galleries, the museum is dedicated to the knowledge and entertainment of the public by constantly updating science with discoveries.

Conducting short-term maritime archaeology residential field schools for archaeology undergraduates in the Department of Archaeology of the National University System. The MAU has been conducting in-house field schools for archaeology undergraduates in universities since 2008 but was done only for a limited number of selected candidates. After 2010, the course structure of those field schools is patterned after the course structure of the UNESCO maritime archaeology field school. Consequently, the archaeology study departments of the respective universities involved all the final year undergraduate students and recommended that the program be sustained. Because of this, all archaeology graduates are equipped with a wide range of knowledge about maritime archaeology.

In relation to the collaborative maritime archaeology projects between the MAU and the Underwater Archaeology Unit (UAU), the Department of Archaeology of Sri Lanka possesses the legal authority to impose policies. However, since 2001, all aspects of marine cultural heritage exploration, reporting, publishing, and exhibition are being implemented by the MAU, which is controlled under the Central Cultural Fund (CCF). Nevertheless, the UAU, with limited human and physical resources, also functions under the Archaeology Department. Accordingly, a limited number of maritime archaeologists who have acquired knowledge from the UNESCO field schools are working with both MAU and UAU. Post 2010 emphasis was placed on maintaining maritime archaeology projects in collaboration with both these units.

The UAU members were regularly involved in all the maritime archaeology projects carried out in connection with all aspects of the Godavaya excavation.

The MAU also collaborated with UNESCO-supported projects in 2010. From 2011 to 2014, the UAU also cooperated with MAU.

The MAU was involved with collaborative projects with the American Institute of Nautical Archaeology (INA) organization, centered around the historic wooden shipwreck Godavaya. This cooperation between MAU and UAU was the main reason for the development achieved so far in the field of maritime archaeology.

CREATION OF NATIONAL SHIPWRECK DATABASE

The MAU planned from the beginning to include all the data into the system that identified underwater archaeological sites discovered since the beginning of maritime archaeology research in Sri Lanka. Since this is not a task that can be done alone, the volunteer services of the Institute of Archaeology and Heritage Studies (IAHS), a private-sector heritage research institute, have been obtained. Thus, the Sri Lankan National Shipwreck database was published in the year 2022 and it contains data on 109 marine archaeological sites discovered by the MAU (Figure 5). This is not a database prepared with complete data entry and is created based on data updates.



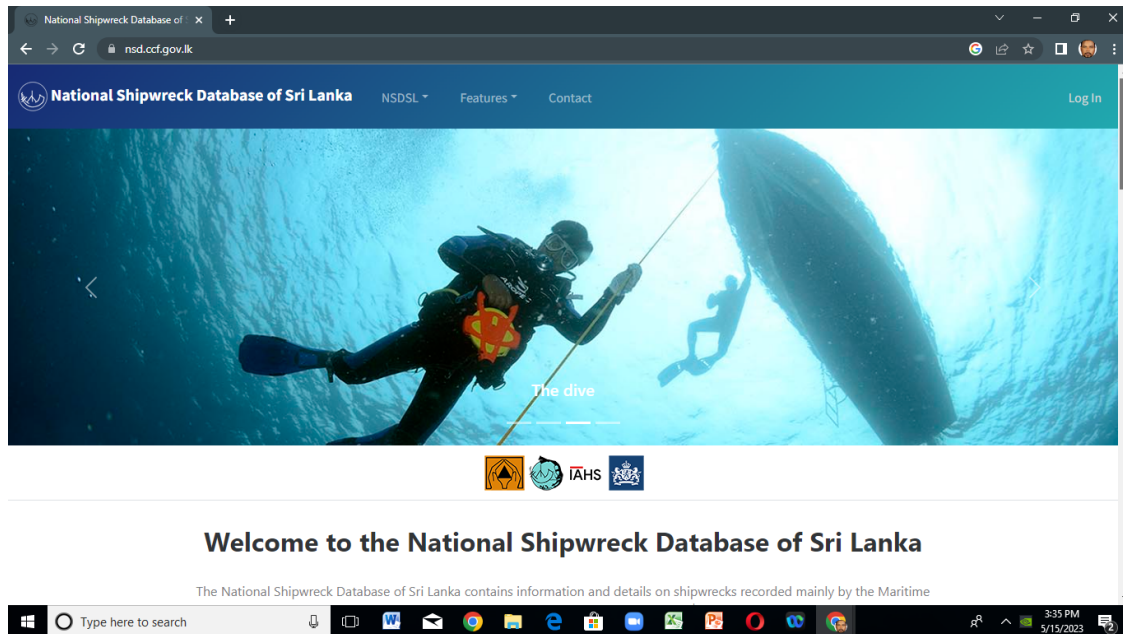


Figure 5: Cover page of national Shipwreck database

CONCLUSION

The maritime archaeology research that started three decades ago in Sri Lanka was done gradually and was unorganized in the first two decades. However, beginning in 2010, developing research activities were on a more organized and sustainable basis. The civil war situation in the country had ended and a peaceful atmosphere was created. The socio-economic situation that had been unstable previously had improved to a significant level, which enabled maritime archeological activities to be gradually directed to an organized approach.

In the third decade, the MAU was able to create the necessary background for developing human resources in maritime archaeology to produce a group of professional maritime archaeologists and experts in the conservation of underwater artifacts. The programs implemented for the participation of professionals in related fields and the general public in managing marine cultural heritage were attainable. The projects implemented so far for the publication of maritime archaeological heritage discoveries together with the Maritime Archaeology Museum and MAU have been extremely successful.

The awareness programs about maritime archaeology to university undergraduates, the confirmation by local people's participation for the protection of maritime archaeological sites discovered regionally, and the awareness programs such as educating the school student community regarding underwater cultural heritage has been effective. An important achievement is the discovery of underwater archaeological heritage sites hidden in the regional coastal belt around the island by the regional maritime archeological explorations. Also of equal significance is the publication of a national shipwreck database carried out in parallel with the recording of the identified heritage sites. Finally, the UNESCO Maritime Archaeology Field Schools was a great help for all these developments achieved by Sri Lanka in the field of maritime archaeology.

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