

A podcast by Professor Jon Adams

Maritime archaeology is the study of the ways in which humans live by the water - harvesting it, travelling along it, and across it, and in some cases into it. It's the archaeology of the seas, rivers, lakes and the landscapes in between.



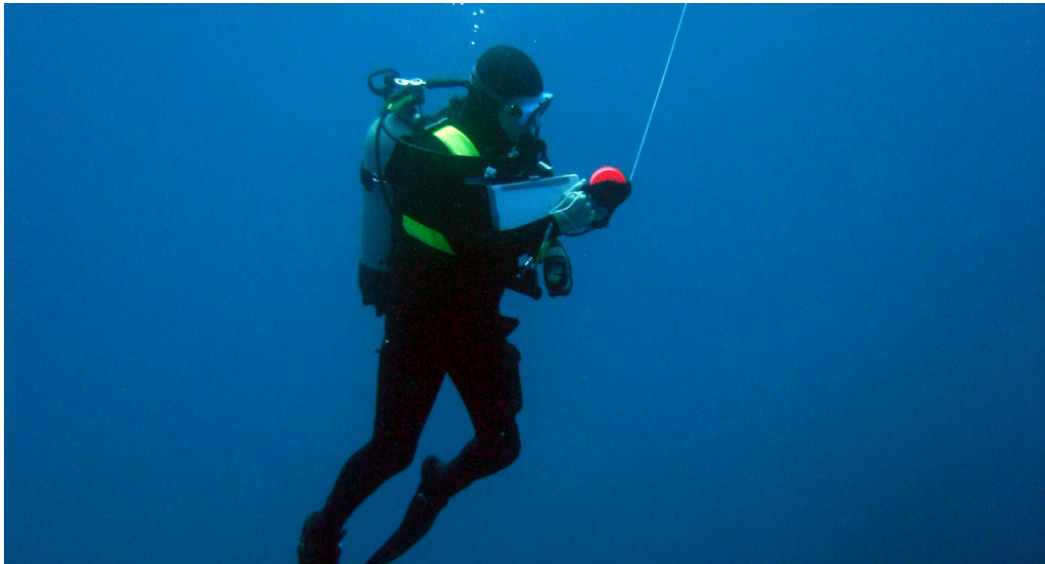
Island of Orosay, off South Uist. Photograph taken by Dr Fraser Sturt. © University of Southampton, 2014.



Photograph by Dr Fraser Sturt. Copyright: University of Southampton, 2014.

History of Maritime Archaeology

Maritime archaeologists work on land and in and around these environments, but we also investigate and recover data from the water itself.



Photograph by Dr Fraser Sturt. Copyright: University of Southampton, 2014.

At one time, it was thought (even by some archaeologists) doing archaeology underwater was impossible and one can see why, for if you don't understand marine and aquatic environments, you could be forgiven for assuming that if a ship should wreck, a harbour or settlement be abandoned to the sea, their destruction would be both violent and inevitable.



© University of Southampton, 2014.

The first indications that this was not so, go back a surprisingly long way. It has often been observed that the modern discipline of archaeology emerged partly out of the antiquarian traditions of the 18th and 19th centuries. Yet there were protracted efforts to access and understand archaeological remains found in the water in medieval England, Renaissance Italy, 19th century Switzerland and in many other places.

The even older motive of salvaging valuable materials lost in the water also gave rise to an interest in sunken history. A notable example from 19th century England were the brothers John, Charles and Anthony Deane who developed [helmet diving equipment](#) to salvage shipwrecks. Some of the wrecks they worked on were already old at the time, and they became increasingly fascinated in the historical rather than the monetary value of what they were recovering. So fascinated, indeed, that in order to publish their work, they commissioned beautifully scaled [watercolour drawings of finds](#) from such sites as the *Mary Rose* that they discovered in 1836. The Deanes had shifted from being salvagers to maritime antiquarians.

In the 20th century there were many more recoveries carried out more or less within an antiquarian tradition, but we also see a succession of investigations that were carried out not just for interest in the sites themselves, or the materials therein, but for wider reasons.

Amazing works of art from the classical world were found on wreck sites in the Mediterranean, for example at Antikythera in Greece. But, although they were almost priceless as objects in themselves, their value as symbols of a national past was recognised as being of even greater value especially for the young modern state of Greece. In Italy, Mussolini enjoyed something of a public relations coup as his engineers drained Lake Nemi to reveal two enormous Roman ships creating a more or less explicit link between his regime and the world of all-powerful Roman emperors.

However, at the same time, we also see the beginnings of an academic approach to investigating and understanding the maritime past in Scotland. A monk, Odo Blundell, ventured into the water in standard diving dress to try and understand the nature of prehistoric settlement sites called crannogs. This is probably the first time anybody in the British Isles entered the water purely for the purposes of research.



A Scottish crannog on the banks of Loch Tay. © Andrew Mclean/Shutterstock, 2014.

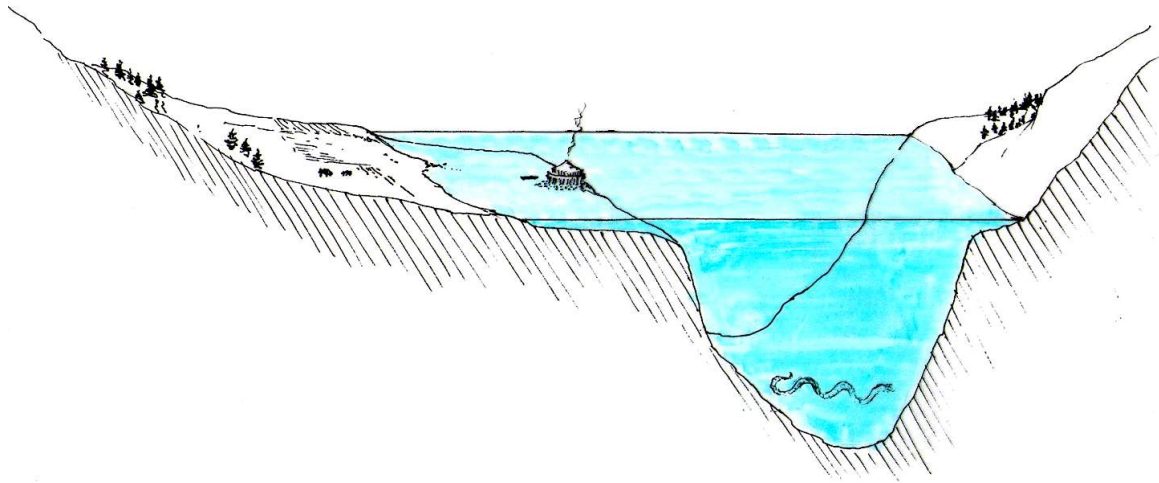
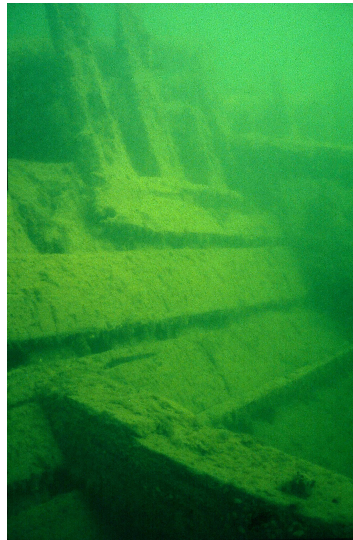


Diagram of a crannog on the banks of Loch Ness © University of Southampton, 2014

In the 1920s, a Jesuit priest was surveying Bronze Age harbours in the Levant and in 1930s Sweden a naval officer Carl Ekman carried out what would be surprisingly sophisticated

investigations on the remains of great Swedish warships and more humble merchant ships, for reasons entirely based in academic research, heritage preservation, and education.



The wreck of the warship *Elefanten* © University of Southampton, 2014.

It is therefore a little surprising, that we have to wait until after World War II before we recognise an archaeology carried out in maritime environments or underwater that accords with current standards of research-based controlled excavation and recording and which is then held in a publicly accessible museum and published.



Kuggmaren © University of Southampton, 2014

History of Maritime Archaeology

One of the great pioneers of diving Jacques Yves Cousteau, with his collaborator, Emile Gagnon, developed the aqualung, a modern form of Self-Contained Underwater Breathing Apparatus. Cousteau's attempts at underwater archaeology weren't particularly successful, but he did set a precedent and demonstrated the facility of the new equipment not just for archaeology, but for all underwater science in the shallow zone. Following Cousteau, many others tried their hand at investigating sunken ships, harbours, fish traps and other submerged sites, but no-one really succeeded in putting the whole archaeological package together.



The first person who did was George Bass, a young doctoral researcher from Pennsylvania University. He was convinced by Peter Throckmorton, another great pioneer of the time, to bring his research questions on eastern Mediterranean Bronze Age trade to the Turkish coast.

Throckmorton, with the help of two Turkish sponge divers, had found a site off Cape Gelidonya that turned out to be the wreck of a ship that had sunk around 1200BC. In his approach to excavating this important site, Bass made several advances over his predecessors. Firstly, he made few, if any, concessions to the fact that the site was underwater. Even though the water depth limited him and his team to 30 minutes on site at one time, he saw no reason that the 30 minutes should be any less controlled than it would be on a land site. He also realised that teaching archaeologists to dive was a much quicker way of creating a professional team than teaching divers to be archaeologists, a somewhat longer process.



© Tupungato/Shutterstock, 2014

Bass and Throckmorton excavated with control, recorded meticulously, conserved and published, contributing to the debate about Bronze Age trade and exchange and then backed this all up by establishing a museum to display their finds. The remarkable thing about this project, is that it would satisfy all the requirements of modern professional codes of practice, including the UNESCO Convention on the protection of Underwater Cultural Heritage.

History of Maritime Archaeology



Replica of a Viking ship in the Lofoten Islands, Norway © MP CZ/SHUTTERSTOCK, 2014

Following Bass, things started to develop a little faster. Ulrich Ruoff transposed land archaeology into the ice-cold water of the Swiss lakes; Viking ships were excavated in Denmark, setting new standards of recording.



The Vasa ©Yory Frenklakh/Shutterstock, 2014.

History of Maritime Archaeology

In Sweden, the warship Vasa was salvaged from the bottom of Stockholm harbour, while in Germany a medieval cog was recovered from the Weser River.



By Artistdesign, CC-BY-3.0

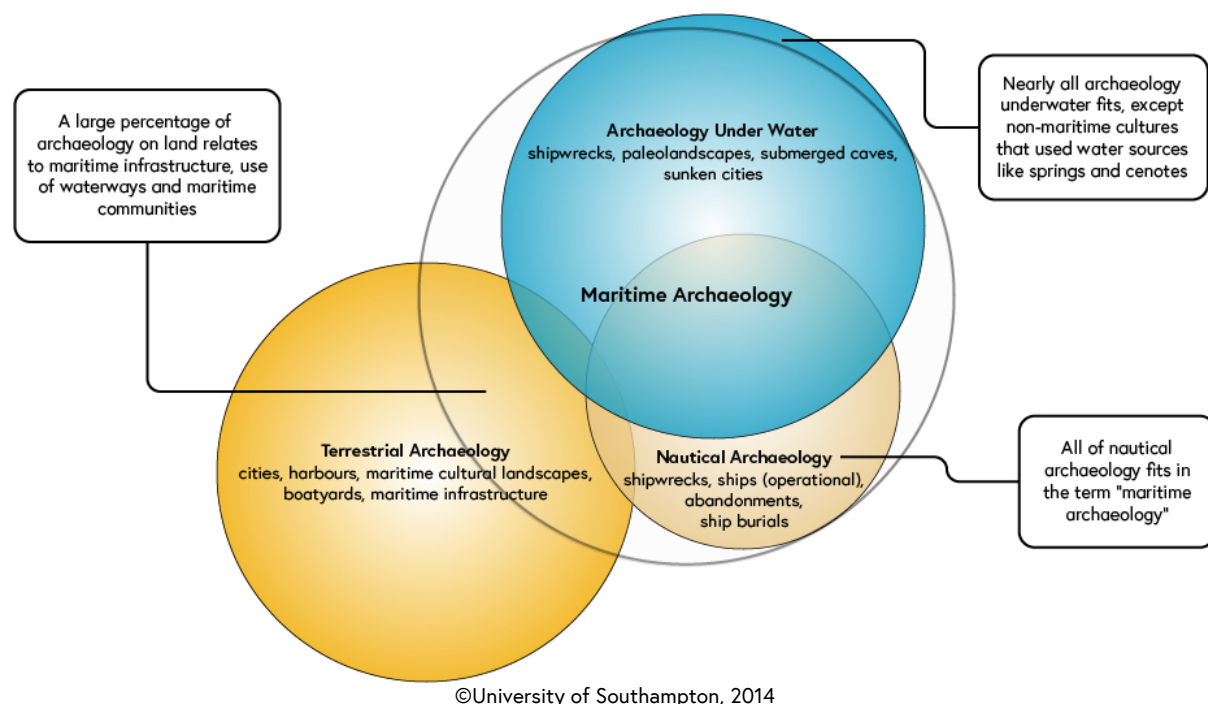
East Indiamen were found in Australia, Armada wrecks in the waters off Scotland and Ireland and so on.



©Alexander Cherednichenko/Shutterstock, 2014

History of Maritime Archaeology

But just as maritime archaeology was building its database with these exciting finds, and refining its methods, the wider discipline of archaeology was just about to enter a period of protracted and often aggressive theoretical debate: what can archaeology know about the past? How can it know it? And through what methods can we obtain our data? How do we interpret them?



At first those working underwater, in marine or nautical guises (all common terms at the time) remained largely unaware of the arguments raging around them. But gradually, they began to transpose the theoretical approaches of the day to these new fields. Keith Muckleroy published "Maritime Archaeology" - in effect a manifesto for what he saw as a new, rigorous, areas of archaeological research, full of potential to tackle big questions about the past. Maritime archaeology, he argued, was a more inclusive term largely encompassing the narrower fields of nautical archaeology and archaeology underwater. Even so, Sean McGrail felt that Muckleroy's suggested scope was too narrow, as he had excluded such sites as ship burials, and coastal communities from his definition.

History of Maritime Archaeology



©University of Southampton, 2014

In fact, the ways that maritime archaeology has developed since then has proved McGrail right. Maritime Archaeology encompasses all these and more. Now the subject is vibrant, fast-developing, established in universities and rising up the agenda of governments around the world who have come to realise that much of their most interesting archaeology is maritime in nature and much of that is under threat, so in the rest of this course you will learn not only about the theories and methods and new technologies of this fascinating subject, but our current priorities and future directions.