

Underwater Cultural Heritage in Eritrea



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Eritrea's maritime environment is rich both in marine biodiversity and underwater cultural heritages. Due to its strategic location, the Red Sea has been an important trade route between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. One of the ancient trade centers in the Red Sea was the port-city of Adulis, located 56 kms southeast of Massawa.

The ancient city of Adulis had trade links with parts of the Mediterranean (Rome and Greece), Indian Ocean (India), and the Far East (China). Then, following the decline of Adulis in the 7th C.AD, the Dahlak Islands became an influential trade center. Along with the introduction of Islam a civilization started to flourish in the Dahlak. There are traces of the civilization such as the necropolis in Dahlak Kebir, 365 cisterns and wells and other structures awaiting thorough research. The archipelago consists of various ancient as well as modern terrestrial and underwater cultural heritages.

In 1997, research was done in the ancient wreck of Black Assarca, a joint effort of Eritrean Diving and Training Center (EDTC), Ministry of Marine Resources, and Institute of Nautical Archaeology (INA). Some documentation of modern shipwrecks has also been made by EDTC.

In addition, with the collaboration of some institutions, the Northern Red Sea Museum has initiated inventory of an underwater cultural heritage (UCH) in parts of the Dahlak Islands and Massawa. Based on the inventory and some historical accounts, we are now able to understand the nature

of UCH in Eritrea which includes ancient wrecks, modern cargo and war-ships, fishing boats, airplanes, floating dry docks, T-55 tanks, cars, bombs (detonated and undetonated), and different armaments. For now, let's look at some known wreck sites of the Eritrean maritime.

The Black Assarca Island, where a wreck dating back 5th – 7th AD is found, is located to the south west of the Dahlak Island. In 1995, a cargo of different types of amphora was found underwater. In 1997, an underwater archaeological excavation and artifact recovery was made by Ralph K. Pedersen (INA), EDTC, and the Ministry of Marine Resources. During the course of the excavation, examples of conical and lentoid/globular amphorae were found, as were two small non-descript iron pieces, one glass shard, and one lead steelyard counterweight.

In ancient times amphora was used for the transport and storage of various products, both liquid and dry, but mostly for wine and oil. It was functional from the Neolithic up to the 16C.AD. It was produced in various parts of the world, in different periods of time, and with several production techniques. Findings of amphora in archaeological sites are very helpful understanding the source and period as well as the nature of ancient trade networks. In the case of Eritrea, amphora shards are abundantly found in the archaeological sites of Adulis, Qohaito, Metera and other places. These findings are similar to the types of amphora pots and shards recovered from the wreck of Black Assarca.

The Second World War was another reason for the existence of various shipwrecks in Eritrea. During that period, many ships had been sunken in the Eritrean maritime environment. In 1940 Italy entered the War and to prevent its military hardware from falling into the hands of the British, in April 1941, many cargo and war-ships were scuttled in the Massawa channel and the Dahlak Islands.

The estimated number of Italian and German ships bombed and scuttled around Massawa, the Dahlak Islands, and Assab is believed to be more than 36. The British did retrieve, maintain and then return some ships to service. One of the well documented shipwrecks is the Nazario Sauro. The 130m long Nazario Sauro is found in the Dahlak Islands in a minimum depth to wreck 5m (to mast top) and maximum depth to sea bed 40m. The wreck is a beautiful dive site not only due to her size but also the beautiful marine life there. These are now part of our underwater cultural heritage.

On May 07-12, 2019, a joint expedition was made to the Dahlak Islands by the Northern Red Sea Museum, Eritrean Diving and Training Center, and the Ministry of Marine Resources. The objective of the expedition was to conduct a preliminary survey and inventory of underwater cultural heritage in parts of the archipelago. During the period of the expedition another cargo ship known as Prometio was discovered. The ship's mast is

found in 18m depth and the bottom at 37.1m. It is oriented in the East-West direction with a length of approximately 120m and 12m average width. Since no traces of bombing were found, it might have been scuttled during the war.

During the Derg regime's rule of Eritrea, a naval base (a naval station and communications station) were established in Nakura. When the Derg regime lost control of Massawa, Dahlak Archipelago and the northern Eritrean coast in 1990, it had scuttled ships, T-55 Tanks, a dry dock, BM 21 armored vehicles and different armaments in the Nakura channel. The ex-Navy ships of Nebelbal and Ras Dejen are still visible on the surface and the others are located underwater in the channel.

One of the Northern Red Sea Museum's objectives is locating cultural heritage sites within the region. Therefore, the Museum, along with other stakeholders, is planning to carry out a survey and document both on land and underwater cultural heritages. The main significance of research and conservation of the UCH is to understand the maritime history and ancient trade networks. The wrecks have also become a haven for various marine life, making them important parts of the tourism industry worldwide.

Northern Red Sea Museum

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