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French undersea archaeology: an international benchmark



Underwater view of the wreck of the Mauritius, zinc bars and emblazoned bronze cannon
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Our underwater heritage holds many treasures. For centuries, thousands of shipwrecks and their precious cargoes have lain undisturbed at the bottom of the seas. French archaeologists from the Department of Underwater and Marine Archaeological Research are recognised internationally and are involved in exploration in every sea on the globe. Their mission is to provide expert assessment, to make an inventory of marine cultural property and to ensure its protection. But they are also involved in the study of archaeological sites, as well as the dissemination of the knowledge acquired.

The oceans that cover a large percentage of our planet still hold many secrets. “*France has the world’s second-largest maritime territory. It has a little over 11 million km² of EEZ (Exclusive Economic Zone), nearly as much as the United States. And it is estimated that this maritime area includes between 150,000 and 200,000 undersea sites,*” explains Michel L’Hour, cultural heritage curator and director of DRASSM (Department of Underwater and Marine Archaeological Research).

Set up by André Malraux in 1966, DRASSM, which is a public service under the Directorate-General of Heritage at the Ministry of Culture and Communication, was the first body devoted to submerged archaeological research in the world. Originally conceived as a tool for expanding France’s influence across the world, it is responsible for studying and protecting marine archaeological heritage, especially from the plundering of wrecks. Now the world leader in the undersea archaeology sector, carrying out research, advisory and assessment missions in all the seas of the globe, DRASSM is at the technological cutting edge.

UNESCO estimates that there are over three million undiscovered wrecks scattered around the sea bed. The wrecks that lie at the bottom of the seas and oceans hold inestimable treasures. The hull, arms, crockery and cargoes of gold, ivory, amphorae of wine or containers of wheat of each ship help us to reconstruct the daily lives of people in the period in which the ship sank.

The UNESCO Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage, adopted by the UNESCO General Conference in 2001, is designed to help states to better protect their underwater cultural heritage.



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The DRASSM archaeologists, highly respected across the world, are called upon to work in many countries. They direct or advise on major operations. They took part in the research on the French frigates, the *Astrolabe* and the *Boussole*, which foundered off the Archipelago of Vanikoro (Solomon Islands) in the South Pacific in 1788, lifting a veil on the mystery of the disappearance of *La Pérouse*, the famous French naval captain in charge of the expedition. “*What news of La Pérouse?*”, Louis XVI was still asking shortly before his execution in January 1793. The exhibition that followed the work of experts from DRASSM, held at the National Maritime Museum in Paris in 2008, attracted over 200,000 visitors in six months.

One of the most significant underwater excavations undertaken so far is that of a late 15th-century Chinese junk, which sank off Borneo and was discovered in 1998. Directed by the DRASSM, this expedition was the fruit of an ambitious project conducted jointly by the Brunei authorities and the French government. This shipwreck illustrates a sumptuous period in the history of the Sultanate of Brunei, a key moment when this small kingdom established itself as the hub of maritime trade in the South China Sea. A remarkable exhibition, *The Engulfed Memory of Brunei*, was held in the Salle des Gens d'Armes of La Conciergerie in Paris in 2002.

Partnerships have been forged with Italy, Egypt and Pakistan. In 1985 the wreck of a large merchant ship built in Europe, loaded in Asia and lost in Africa was found in the Gulf of Guinea. A study carried out by the DRASSM enabled the wreck to be identified as the *Mauritius*, a ship of the Dutch East India Company, which ran aground off Gabon in 1609.

In 2007, at the request of and in collaboration with the Taiwanese government, a team from the DRASSM carried out an expert appraisal of an archaeological site discovered in the port of Makung, in the Penghu archipelago, in the Formosa Strait. A series of talks given by the archaeologists of the DRASSM at the University of Tainan then enabled them to share the outcome of the many decades of activity of this significant French body, as well as its long experience, with academics and professionals from the National Centre for Research and Preservation of Cultural Properties.

“We have to meet a strong international demand. One of our areas of operation consists of intervening in relation to the right to fly the flag – the nationality of the wreck. We have obtained two Franco-American agreements in relation to this,” points out Michel L'Hour. *La Belle*, which disappeared in 1686, was discovered off Texas, in the Gulf of Mexico. The research, in which specialists from the DRASSM took part, enabled the American authorities to recognise full ownership of the wreck by France. *Le Griffon*, built by the French explorer Cavelier de la Salle, was lost in Lake Michigan in 1679. In 2009, following negotiations, the State of Michigan bowed to the arguments presented by France and recognised its rights over the wreck.

Demand in terms of the training of specialists in underwater archaeology is immense. Many countries are expressing their wish to safeguard and evaluate their submerged maritime heritage. France, whose pioneering role in the matter is recognised by all, is constantly approached. *“We recently received a major delegation from mainland China. We have also trained Chilean researchers for a year. A Taiwanese delegation arrived last week to initiate a training programme. Our aim is to create, by 2013, an international training centre in undersea archaeology,”* says Michel L'Hour.

The ship the *Archéonaute*, companion to several generations of undersea archaeologists, will soon be replaced by a new ship, better fitted out to meet new challenges and to deal with the exploration of deep-sea areas. Named the *André Malraux*, it is due to be launched in 2012.



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For further information:

www.culture.gouv.fr: Drassm

www.culture.gouv.fr/culture/archeosm/fr/: Undersea archaeology