



On the Past, Present and Future of Nautical Archaeology with George F. Bass

Interview by Erkan KURUL*

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The interview which is here presented happened in 2016, when I visited the *Institute of Nautical Archaeology (INA) - Bodrum Research Centre* in the course of my dissertation studies. Conversations were carried out via e-mail with *emeritus* Professor George F. Bass who undertook the initial actions in the field of Nautical Archaeology and is also the founder of the *Institute of Nautical Archaeology*. The questions answered in the interview had the aim of sharing with a wider interested audience, scientists, scholars and researchers in the field of nautical archaeology and other interested specialists, some of the extensive knowledge and experience obtained by Professor George F. Bass in Turkish territorial waters over the course of the past 50 years. In this way, the foundations of nautical archaeology and its development, its current status in Turkey and the place, importance and its impact specific to historical research is examined. Finally, opinions concerning the employment situation and the current concerns of nautical archaeologists are included with the scope of the interview.



2003 - George F. Bass before dive to Titanic (by David Concannon)

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The record of the interview presented to the reader was typed without *corrigendum* or *addendum* and published with Professor George F. Bass' own statements in his e-mails.

I would like to thank to Professor George F. Bass who accepted my proposal concerning this interview and shared his fruitful experience, opinions and thoughts. Again, I would like to thank Mrs. Tuba Ekmekçi, the director of Institute of Nautical Archaeology - Bodrum Research Centre whom I took as a reference for this interview. Lastly, I would like to thank to Özge Acar for her valuable assistance in the redaction of the text.

I. When you undertook the first underwater excavation oriented dive into the Bronze Age Shipwreck in Cape Gelidonya in 1960, you took the very first steps to transform the discipline of underwater archaeology from being an auxiliary method next to the archaeology, into an independent discipline and you pioneered its development. In this respect, in the light of the fund of knowledge and experience of more than half a century since 1960, what do you think about the development of the discipline of underwater archaeology and its current situation?

I don't really think of nautical archaeology as an independent discipline. Just as some archaeologists concentrate on the study of Greek vase-painting, architecture, or sculpture, and often teach in Art History departments; and numismatists specialize in coins; and epigraphers in inscriptions; we nautical archaeologists specialize in the study of things nautical. We are all archaeologists dependent on one another. I amassed a large archaeological library in the naïve belief that in my retirement I would write a textbook like *The Archaeology of Greece* by William Biers (who took my *Introduction to Classical Archaeology* when he was a student at the University of Pennsylvania), but I would add ships to the chapters, which run in chronological order. After all, we now know how Late Bronze Age, Archaic Greek, Classical Greek, Hellenistic, Roman, and Byzantine ships were built and sailed, so why not add them to the vases, temples, tombs, statues, coins, and inscriptions in the chapters? Alas, I ran out of steam and at age 83 found it too great a challenge to read all the publications, especially about preclassical Greece, that have appeared since my retirement. An Egyptologist cannot be confused with a Classical or Biblical archaeologist, nor a Nautical archaeologist, but we are all archaeologists. You will have noticed that in my first book, *Archaeology Under Water*, that I already objected to us being called "*underwater archaeologists*" since we do not speak of desert archaeologists or mountain archaeologists or jungle archaeologists or cave archaeologists based on the environments in which different archaeologists work.

With all that said, I am astounded by how broadly our sub-discipline of archaeology has grown. There are now academic programs of varying quality in the U.S., the U.K., Israel, Denmark, Sweden, Australia, Mexico, Turkey, Canada, China, and surely elsewhere, with government-sponsored fieldwork in India, Spain, Japan, Poland, Scandinavia, and elsewhere, with Museums ranging from the Vasa Museum to the Bodrum Museum of Underwater Archaeology, to the Mary Rose Museum, to the Molasses Reef Wreck Museum in the Turks and Caicos, to the Kyrenia Wreck Museum in Cyprus, to many, many museums that include shipwreck materials among their other holdings. The *International Journal of Nautical Archaeology* started by Joan du Plat Taylor shortly after she returned to England from Cape Gelidonya was at first a slim publication that accepted almost anything submitted to it, of rather slipshod editing. Now it is a first-rate journal on a par with any in archaeology. It used to be possible for one person to keep up with just about everything occurring in our field. No longer! I can't keep abreast of what just INA is doing, with its excavations and surveys on four continents: North America, Europe, Africa, and Asia. INA has excavated wrecks in the U.S., the Caribbean, Spain, Bulgaria, Turkey, Israel, Egypt, Eritrea, Sri Lanka, and Japan, and surveyed in Italy, Morocco, Malta, Mexico, Jamaica, the Caymans, Georgia, and in all the countries where it has excavated.

How could I possibly have imagined this in 1960!

II. Considering the studies and researches directed to understanding maritime history, what distinctive values does Turkey, surrounded on three sides by the sea, possess in terms of Un-

derwater Archaeology; and what kinds of contribution do you think the knowledge comprising these values, could and can supply, towards our understanding of Mediterranean history?

Turkey's coastline, from Syria to Georgia, is very long, and much of it is rock, making it ideal both for many wrecks to have occurred and for their discovery and excavation. Further, because of its long history, there are chances of finding older wrecks than in almost any other body of water. Wrecks have already shown us that the idea of a Mycenaean Greek monopoly on maritime activities, long accepted by most scholars, was totally wrong. We have made legal discoveries as well. Medieval maritime laws specifying the numbers and weights of iron anchors on ships of different sizes had their beginnings at least as early as the seventh century, as shown by the Yassiada Byzantine wreck, the weights of whose seven iron anchors were based on multiples of 50 Roman pounds; this was centuries earlier than the earliest codification of such a law. Ironically, we have traced the history of Greek ship construction, from Archaic through Classical and Byzantine times, in Turkish waters.

III. Which are the principal disciplines that Underwater Archaeology has the closest interactions with; and of what kind of interactions are they?

Besides the disciplines used by most branches of archaeology, such as dendrochronology, paleobotany, lead-isotope analysis, and radiocarbon dating, we depend on hyperbaric medicine, oceanography, and marine technology. Hyperbaric medicine determines how deep we may dive, how long we can remain at any given depth, and how long we must decompress to avoid the bends (decompression sickness or caisson disease). We nautical archaeologists also interact, as do terrestrial archaeologists, with Ancient History, Classical Literature, Near Eastern Studies, Art History, etc., both learning from and providing new information to those disciplines.

IV. You are known to have conducted shipwreck excavations within the territorial waters of Turkey, concerning the vast period of time extending from the Bronze Age to the East Roman Empire. In addition the collecting and conserving of the whole of the material culture remains that you found in these excavations, in Bodrum Castle, you have turned that structure into one of the most remarkable museums of Underwater Archaeology in the world today. And, on the other hand, it is a well-known fact that a majority of the important artefacts unearthed by other archaeologists in various excavations in the 19th century were transported to foreign countries, and exhibited within the collections of European or American museums. So what would you like to say concerning the path you have followed concerning the material remains from your excavations and your current attitude towards this aspect of cultural heritage?

I am happy that all of my archaeological discoveries in Turkish waters are curated and displayed in a Turkish museum, and especially glad that this museum is in Bodrum, for it was Bodrum sponge divers who made my pioneering work possible by showing Peter Throckmorton the first wrecks I excavated, and Throckmorton reported them to me. I made the modest beginning of the museum in the Bodrum castle, with permission of the Turkish government, in 1960. The present world fame of the Bodrum Museum of Underwater Archaeology, however, is actually due to the foresight, imagination, and hard work of museum director Oğuz Alpözen. He had learned to dive and excavate under water with us at Yassiada in the early 1960s, when he was an undergraduate archaeology student at Istanbul University. So we had a long history together and, therefore, the mutual trust that allowed us, as foreigners, to work more easily in his

museum than normal and to collaborate on the displays of our finds. This trust, therefore, worked out to our mutual advantage.

The transport to their own countries of discoveries by 19th-century archaeologists remains controversial. The display of these finds in encyclopaedic museums around the world certainly heightened interest and awareness of ancient history and archaeology in the days before television documentaries and the ease of jet travel to distant lands; few people then could visit Egypt, Mesopotamia, or even Greece or Turkey. Thus, I think it had a good result. Modern times are different, however, and INA makes it a practice wherever we excavate to leave our discoveries in the appropriate museum closest to the wreck, whether it is in the United States, Japan, Egypt, Eritrea, or Jamaica. I'm happy there are encyclopaedic museums, however, for it would be sad if everyone had to travel to China or Japan to see Oriental ceramics, or to South America to see Inca artifacts.

V. What do you think are the major problems facing the discipline of underwater archaeology and facing underwater archaeologists today; and could you suggest some possible solutions to these issues, and, to what extent do they differ in nature from those that you faced in the 1960's?

I firmly believe that the public generally takes the side of treasure hunters against archaeologists. This is partly the fault of archaeologists for not making their case stronger by publishing more for the public about their work. This has not been a problem in Turkey, which has never allowed, as far as I know, the exploration of ancient shipwrecks for monetary gain rather than for the search for knowledge. Some nations, however, still grant treasure-hunting permits in return for a percentage of the valuable finds. This seldom if ever has worked. Turkey has gained far more monetarily from its laws. The Bodrum Museum of Underwater Archaeology, for example, when I was last in Turkey sold about 250,000 entry tickets annually for about \$10 each, totalling about \$2.5 million for the Ministry of Culture and Tourism to support other cultural things. Add to that the money spent by museum visitors in Bodrum on souvenirs, meals, taxis, and perhaps even hotels, and the income is surely greater than that other nations have gained from a division of the spoils. Once all nations have learned to appreciate the value of shipwrecks for other than objects to be sold, they will take steps to guard and protect them.

There is a new problem, however, and that is the ability to locate and salvage wrecks from great depths, far off shore in international waters. To whom do these wrecks belong and who should excavate them? International laws should certainly protect them from looting by treasure hunters. The idea that they should be returned to their country of origin is not feasible. For more than thirty years I claimed that the ship that wrecked at Cape Gelidonya was Canaanite, whereas other scholars argued that it was Mycenaean Greek. Should it, if from international waters, have been returned to Lebanon, Syria, or Israel? Or to Greece? Recent laboratory analyses of the ship's stone anchor and much of its pottery show that they were Cypriot in origin, so now we would have to give it to Cyprus. Similarly, a shipment of Roman pottery could have originated in North Africa, England, or Italy – or maybe the pottery cargo was purchased in another land.

I hesitantly suggest that archaeologists in international waters might best return to the ways of their 19th century pioneers, who were sent out by wealthy museums to collect artifacts for the museums to display. I know that this is a controversial suggestion, but it bears consideration. The costs of deep-water archaeology are considerable. Let us say that the British Museum, the Louvre, the Hermitage, or the Metropolitan Museum of Art would pay for a deep-water excavation in international waters. Why should they not own the recovered works of art, which they

could properly conserve, publish, and display for the world? If Canaanite, why should it be displayed in, let us say, Lebanon, with its population of 4 million any more than in the United States, with its population of perhaps 3 million Lebanese-Americans? Surely there are more visitors to New York annually than to Beirut. I realize I am suggesting something that could be a dangerous slippery slope, but it's worth discussion.

VI. What are your thoughts concerning the essential elements and methods to be followed in the processes of conservation, preservation and exhibition of the material culture remains found underwater?

Since the late 1960s, we have usually had a professional conservator on our excavations staff in Turkey. And although we have one of the best known conservation labs in the United States here at Texas A&M University, I am only an occasional visitor and am amazed at what they are doing, without understanding much about it. For example when the Texas state archaeologists excavated French explorer La Salle's ship *La Belle* off the coast of Texas, they paid our lab to conserve and arrange for the display of the hull and all of its contents. The conservators disassembled the hull, constructed a huge "swimming pool" with equipment to submerge and raise many tons. Then when the hull was reassembled in the pool, the pool was filled with diluted polyethylene glycol (*PEG*) for several years. When the price of *PEG* became too expensive to complete that treatment, the staff built what I believe is the largest freeze-drier in the country and put individual timbers in it for further treatment. They are now reassembling the hull as the centerpiece and main attraction in the new museum of state history in Austin, our state capitol. The ship's gear and cargo has similarly been conserved and restored, and will be displayed nearby in the museum. At this moment the lab has been sent from Louisiana about 100 tons of iron from a 19th-century steamboat to restore! They will use electrolysis on the iron. They have also patented a method other than soaking in *PEG* or freeze drying to treat organic materials, such as wood, cloth, and leather, with silicon oils. I really understand and know little about how the lab technicians work, but they hire graduate students in our Nautical Archaeology Program as assistants. I believe there is a chapter on *Belle* in my book *Beneath the Seven Seas*, which must be in the library there.

VII. What are your thoughts concerning the future of the discipline of underwater archaeology?

I can't imagine what it will be. I never guessed in 1960, when I went to Cape Gelidonya, that it would ever have major, important journals in various languages. I never envisioned a research institute devoted solely to it, nor many university programs offering classes and even degrees – in the U.S., Turkey, the U.K., Denmark, Belgium, Israel, and various other countries. When in 1963 I attended the first conference on underwater archaeology held in the U.S., in Minnesota, many of the leading figures were in one room and we all knew each other and what was going on around the world. Today, one person cannot keep up with a hundredth of the global news about our field.

VIII. What kinds of studies and research should be conducted to document the material remains beneath the territorial waters of Turkey; and what are the major precautions to be taken regarding the conservation - preservation of this material?

A study of the history of ships' hulls' construction is now a requirement for nautical archaeologists, as is a knowledge of the literature, languages, and art of the periods of the site being studied. Professional conservators should always be involved. I have no knowledge about the training offered by universities other than my own, but I am concerned that standards might be lowered for local archaeologists in any country, for national interests. I hope this does not happen.

INA's success has been based on sound scholarship.

IX. What advice would you give to young underwater archaeologists?

I have urged most of our students to work for an M.A. in nautical archaeology and then go elsewhere to obtain a doctorate from another university in a related field. They can then get a job teaching in that field, but always have the knowledge and training to collaborate in nautical archaeological research should the opportunity arise. For example, some of our students with M.A.s have gone on to get their Ph.D.s from other universities in Classics, Anthropology, Egyptology, American History, and Near Eastern Studies, and all of them now hold university faculty positions in different departments at good universities. I doubt that there will be that many jobs for nautical archaeologists, although most of our graduates have found work in museums, for state and federal agencies, as contract archaeologists, sometimes as conservators. Others have become doctors, dentists, and even computer specialists!

X. What are your hopes concerning the mission and vision of the Institute of Nautical Archaeology (INA) for the coming decades, an institution which has shaped new écoles in the field of underwater archaeology and proven the significance of this discipline to the world?

Today (March 29) I saw the news that American military families have been asked to evacuate certain Turkish provinces, including the *vilayet* of Muğla, in which Bodrum is located, because of the danger of *ISIS* attacks from neighbouring Syria and Iraq, and our State Department has issued a travel advisory about Turkey to all Americans going abroad. I worked happily in Turkey for 50 years, under leftist governments, right-wing governments, military governments, and Islamist governments, at times when there were constant murders between left and right groups throughout the country or when the *PKK* threatened to attack the major tourist cities of Turkey's west coast. I even took my sons out of school for a year so they could spend it with my wife and me in Bodrum; when they were 9 and 12 years old they travelled by bus alone from Ankara to Izmir. So I was never fearful before about our future in Turkey.

When I left the University of Pennsylvania to form INA, we were first based on Cyprus, from which we hoped to work in Turkey, Cyprus, Lebanon, Syria, and possibly Egypt and Greece. Michael Katzev, INA's founding vice-president, was already on Cyprus restoring the IVth century B.C. shipwreck he had excavated near Kyrenia (Girne). Alas, in less than a year the Cyprus War broke out, ending that island as a base. I went directly to Lebanon with a Lebanese archaeologist and got a permit for a survey there, but a year later civil war had broken out in Lebanon, too, so the survey never occurred. Because a letter I wrote to defend the Turkish position in Cyprus was published in *Newsweek* Magazine, there were newspaper editorials against me in the Greek press, one of them saying that George Bass was the number one enemy of Greece! I was no longer welcome in the Greek part of Cyprus.

Although our work was stopped for a year in Turkey by the military, we soon resumed our excavations and surveys there. So Turkey has always been central to our Mediterranean research. INA archaeologists have conducted excavations in Israel, Egypt, Eritrea, Bulgaria, Portugal, and Spain, and surveys in Georgia, Lebanon, Israel, Greece, Malta, Italy, and Morocco, but its Bodrum Research Center is its Old World headquarters. INA has now worked on four continents: North America, Europe, Africa, and Asia, with excavations ranging from Alaska to Japan, from Sri Lanka to Kenya to the Caribbean. But with the money to build a 25-meter seagoing ship, *Virazon* II, designed just for INA, we chose to have it built and berthed in Turkey; it will fly a Turkish flag with a Turkish crew.