

Underwater Archaeology in Portugal: Policies, Budgets, and Results

by Filipe Castro

Portugal has often been called *um jardim à beira-mar plantado*, or “a garden by the sea.” It encompasses a long, rough coast running west and south along the western edge of Europe. It also includes two small archipelagoes in the Atlantic Ocean: the Azores and Madeira. Portuguese seafarers have operated at this crossroads of trade between the Mediterranean and North Atlantic worlds for centuries. Today, an impressive number of shipwrecks remain to tell the stories of this dynamic maritime tradition.

Archaeologists hardly represent the first to tap into Portugal’s rich underwater cultural heritage. The popularity of spear fishing and SCUBA diving (starting in the 1950s) led to the discovery of numerous wrecks. As public awareness of these historic treasures increased, so did instances of looting. Cases of both authorized and unauthorized disturbances continued throughout the early 1970s, being finally forbidden in 1976.

In 1982, Dr. Francisco Alves, the newly appointed director of the Museu Nacional de Arqueologia (MNA), made an old passion one of his priorities and started to promote active government involvement in the protection of Portugal’s shipwrecks and other underwater historic sites. Dr. Alves received backing from a number of fine scholars, among whom was the late maritime ethnographer Octavio Lixa Filgueiras. Convincing the Portuguese government of the importance of these sites was not an easy task at first. Many politicians opposed Alves’s work because they saw archaeology as an unnecessarily expensive discipline. Meanwhile, treasure-hunters were beginning to lobby for permits to salvage wrecks with precious metals and promised a percentage of the spoils to Portugal. MNA kept its direction and encouraged the idea that shipwrecks can be studied archaeologically and preserved for the public without incurring exorbitant expenses. Operating on small budgets with largely volunteer crews, MNA worked to bring the stories of these vessels to the public and prevent treasure-hunters from doing their damaging work.

Dr. Alves managed to push the treasure-salvage interests out of Portugal by the late 1980s. The first underwater archaeological excavation came in 1984 with the *Océan* Project. *Océan* was a French man-of-war of 80 guns sunk by the British in 1759 off the southern coast of Portugal. In 1986, MNA followed this project with the excavation of the Spanish galleon *San Pedro de Alcántara* which was later under the direction of archaeologist Jean-Yves Blot. Publications of these and many other projects, both in scholarly journals and in widely read magazines, and public presentations by Dr. Alves on television and radio, helped promote MNA’s efforts. By 1991, a non-profit or-

ganization called Arqueonautica Centro de Estudos emerged out of MNA, and sponsors started to show interest. Arqueonautica published its first popular magazine—the *Correio de Arqueonautica*—funded in part by Alcatel and Proctor&Gamble. The goal was to appeal to the younger generations of divers in Portugal and encourage their interest in the historic value of shipwrecks.

A potentially devastating setback occurred in the summer of 1993 when new legislation allowed treasure-hunters into Portuguese waters. Salvage companies quickly moved into Portugal, and from there into Cape Verde, Mozambique, and Brazil, all Portuguese-speaking countries where opposition by archaeologists was still weak. Portugal itself felt the ill-effects of these new regulations. The remains of a late 15th-century vessel found during the construction of a Lisbon subway line underwent thorough archaeological documentation (funded by the *Metropolitano de Lisboa EP* and the contractor *Bento Pedroso Construções SA*) only to be left to dry out and warp in a government warehouse. A second 15th-century shipwreck in the Vouga River, near Aveiro, was not excavated until 1995 for lack of government authorisation.

Arqueonautica (with some 300 members) championed the cause against this new legislation. The group embarked on a public campaign to promote awareness concerning the differences between archaeology and treasure-hunting. They circulated informative brochures, including a translation of “The Man Who Stole the Stars” by Dr. George Bass, and used the media to reach an even larger audience. Finally, in 1995, national elections in Portugal brought a different government into power and with it a different approach to underwater cultural resource management. New laws were passed putting an end to the treasure-hunting legislation before any permit was granted to the companies that applied for salvaging concessions, and a separate administrative arm within the Ministry of Culture called the *Instituto Português de Arqueologia (IPA)* was formed in 1997. Today, one of the more active departments within IPA is the *Centro Nacional de Arqueologia Náutica e Subaquática (CNANS)* which deals directly with underwater sites.

Watchdogs like IPA and CNANS have helped to clarify the distinction between profit and science. Even accidental finds have undergone a series of new regulations. Traditionally, the person who made a discovery was entitled to half of the market value of the objects found when recovered. Today, finders rewards are granted if the sites are left undisturbed and based both on the monetary value and the scientific importance of the sites. Fines and other penalties have also increased for those insisting on



Fig. 1 (left) a cannon and fig. 2 (right) an archaeologist recovering four chinese porcelain plates from the many uncovered during excavation of Nossa Senhora dos Mártires. Photos courtesy of COAS.

evading the law. Finally, mandatory preventive measures were defined for every construction project that may disturb potentially rich archaeological zones.

The creation of the official CNANS was preceded by an informal organization, created in July 1996. It was named Centro de Operações de Arqueologia Subaquática (COAS) and provided by the Ministry of Culture with a spacious warehouse and enough equipment to carry on its projects. In this new environment several projects started to emerge.

First, the excavation of the middle 15th century wreck found in the Aveiro estuary—the Ria de Aveiro A wreck—started in 1996. The work was done in conjunction with the University of Aveiro and the Instituto Português do Património Arquitectónico e Arqueológico (IPPAR)—the state institute from which archaeology depended at the time—and was supported by a grant of the Junta Nacional para a Investigação Científica e Tecnológica (JNICT) and the European Union program for scientific development PRAXIS XXI. In the 1996 and 1997 seasons archaeologists excavated the interior part of the hull and documented and recovered all of the frames.

Second, work started on the remains of the late 15th century hull found at the subway works, the Cais do Sodré wreck, under the direction of Dr. Paulo Jorge Rodrigues. The structure had been found lying on its port side and although the digging machines had done some damage amidships, forty frames were in place, the ones between the tailframes

showing sequential numbers in roman numerals that must have started on the midship frame or frames.

Third, the remains of another ship found in the beginning of 1996 during the subway works at Lisbon, dated by radiocarbon to the late 14th century, were recuperated and documented. They proved to be the lower part of the sternpost and the aftermost part of the keel, preserved together with an inner stern knee, three “Y” frames and five planks. The existing structure measured about 1.8 by 1.6 m size.

At the end of the summer of 1997, during the construction of an underground parking garage at the Praça do Município, also in Lisbon, a set of large timbers—mostly floors and keel sections—were found close to the place of the old shipyard of the Ribeira das Naus.

A fifth project was started in the fall of 1996, within the program of the Pavilion of Portugal in the World Exposition of 1998 (Expo’98). This was the official reason why COAS was created. In 1995, the Commissioner of the Portuguese Pavilion, Dr. Simonetta Luz Afonso, decided to initiate the underwater archaeology reorganization process by adopting the theme of the Carreira das Índias for the Expo’98 exhibits. She invited Dr. Francisco Alves—and myself—to direct the survey and excavation of an area previously identified by MNA as the wreck site of the nau *Nossa Senhora dos Mártires*, lost in 1606. Here the wooden remains of a large hull had been spotted in 1993–94 by a team of young divers and archaeologists, under the direction of Dr. Francisco Alves (figs. 1–2).

In the Azores, Dr. Kevin Crisman and the Institute of Nautical Archaeology (INA) started a series of annual survey operations in cooperation with the COAS and the regional Portuguese authorities. Since 1996, a number of wrecks have been found, positioned, and recorded through their efforts in Angra Bay, at the Island of Terceira, and around the Islands of Faial, Pico, and S. Jorge.

Two of the wrecks in Angra Bay appear to be *Lidador*, a Brazilian steamer wrecked in 1878 and *Ran-Her*, a British built Confederate blockade runner of the American Civil War wrecked on November 5, 1864. Two other Angra Bay wrecks were designated as Angra A and Angra B, and date to the 19th and 17th centuries respectively.

Two more wrecks dated to the 16th century and designated as Angra C and Angra D were found during a preventive survey operation that preceded the construction of a marina in Angra Bay. A team of archaeologists coordinated by Dr. Francisco Alves recorded, dismantled and stored the hulls in deeper waters in a quick emergency operation, before the stones of the harbour wall started to fall on them. The rescue started in March 1998 under the direction of Catarina Garcia and Paulo Monteiro and invited archaeologists from several countries. At the end of May, the remains of the first hull—Angra C—had been recorded, dismantled, and removed to a safe area, under the supervision of Canadian archaeologist Peter Waddell. By August, the remains of Angra D had been placed in a safe storage having been



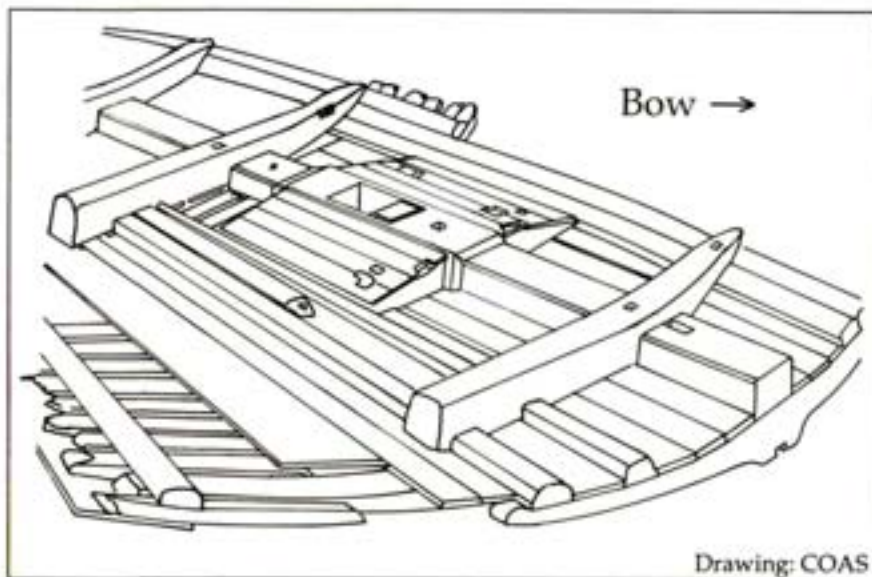
Photo: COAS

Fig. 3. Archaeologists record hull details of the Angra D wreck.

recorded and dismantled under the supervision of French archaeologist Eric Rieth.

All these works were presented in a Symposium organised by the CNANS in Lisbon, on September 7th to 9th, 1998, during the World Exposition EXPO'98, in collaboration with the Academia de Marinha and supported by UNESCO and ICOMOS. Under the title, "Archaeology of Medieval and Modern Ships of Iberian-Atlantic Tradition," a number of scientists joined to present twenty reports on this type of ship. The proceedings of the symposium will be available in 1999, and the preliminary results of the São Julião da Barra wreck excavation have already been published in the catalogue of the Portuguese Pavillion at EXPO'98. Preliminary reports of the wrecks Aveiro A, Cais do Sodré, and Corpo Santo await publication in the *International Journal of Nautical Archaeology* and in a CNANS monograph to be completed in 1999.

By adopting a strict policy towards the underwater cultural heritage, Portugal is proving that it is possible to develop a coherent and sustainable strategy toward the preservation, study and publication of its maritime history, without the need of large budgets or complicated and expensive technologies. The study of the important maritime cultural heritage and tradition in Portugal is now being enriched by the study of the archaeological remains of its vessels. ✎



Drawing: COAS

Fig. 4. Mast step construction of the Angra D wreck.

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