

UNCOVERING SECRETS FROM THE BOTTOM OF THE MEDITERRANEAN

The Xlendi shipwreck is a much-heralded underwater discovery which sheds light into the lives of the Phoenicians; Paul Grech delves into the importance of this discovery and how it contributes to the Islands cultural heritage

It all started with a blip.

In 2007, a routine offshore remote sensing survey, meant to map our islands' underwater cultural heritage, registered an anomaly. Over the years, this was inspected in detail by a team of professionals that combines staff from the University of Malta as well as several international counterparts. Together, they have been uncovering the secrets of one of the most exciting discoveries in recent history.

Because, deep in the waters outside of Xlendi Bay in Gozo, lay the shipwreck of a Phoenician vessel with a *quasi*-intact cargo, despite the passing of more than 2,700 years. This much-heralded discovery has allowed historians to form a clearer picture of the trade routes as well as the general economics of the Archaic period.

The Phoenicians were renowned for being remarkable traders; moreover, as seafarers they scarcely required any navigational devices, relying almost exclusively on the position of the stars when

travelling. They managed to sail extraordinary lengths including, purportedly, to Britain, where they were eager to acquire tin. As early as 750 BC, a number of Phoenicians also settled in Malta. They considered our islands as a safe haven, to the extent that they even referred to the archipelago as Maleth, meaning shelter.

The above are a few of the known facts concerning the Phoenicians, however, information is a bit sketchier when it comes to the details concerning their lives at sea. While numerous Roman shipwrecks have been copiously studied, only eight Phoenician shipwrecks pertaining to this period, have been discovered. Among those eight, is the Xlendi discovery, which is particularly noteworthy because of the pristine condition as well as the variety of cargo which should prove to be of particular value.

Indeed, it should also shed some light onto the Phoenicians' seafaring habits, including how cargo was loaded onto ships. For archaeologists and historians, such opportunities to fill gaps in

knowledge, don't come around too often, which further explains the excitement surrounding this discovery. Apart from working hard to raise awareness about this amazing discovery – on both local and international media – much work was undertaken over the past months, to learn more of this site's secrets. The work ranged from: the recording of the entire site using 3D imaging, to the recovery of all site objects as well as further digging to uncover anything that may lie beneath the sand.

The most recent discovery was a surprising find: a human tooth. This was the first time that human remains were found on this particular site which could shed further light onto the people who were travelling on this vessel when it met its end. To this extent, further research is required, which makes it quite opportune that a new agreement has been signed between the University of Malta and the Ministry for Gozo to pursue site research over the next four years, through a grant totalling €140,000.

Similar to the Viking ships discovered and excavated from a large burial mound in Norway, the ultimate ambition of this research is – as expressed by Gozo Minister, Clint Camilleri – that of lifting the vessel from its current gravesite. While parallels are easily



drawn, both the condition and the age of the two ships differs wildly; thus at this stage, that objective remains a goal for the future.

The more pressing desire is to continue funding “this exploration which yields surprising results and will certainly be of help to historians and academics, both local and international, while this discovery continues to stimulate interest abroad”.

Still, this grant will put the researchers further along the path that will eventually lead to the excavation of the ship's lower parts that will hopefully, in turn, continue to reveal as many of the site's secrets as possible. Such a systematic search will take a few more years to complete, yet, with palpable interest coupled with the necessary funding, all the arrows point to the right direction.

What started as a blip and anomaly, eventually proved to be among one the most valuable discoveries made in Malta's coastal waters. This has left many to wonder about the secrets contained within this ship, as well as those held by the Mediterranean Sea surrounding our island.

