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Bridging the gap between maritime archaeology and public engagement in the Arab region: Egypt as a case study

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Abstract

Public appreciation for Underwater Cultural Heritage (UCH) is vital for its protection. The Bahar Project tackles this challenge by providing Arabic-language outreach resources and workshops in Egypt. This initiative promotes UCH education and fosters a more inclusive understanding of this cultural heritage.

Key words

Public Engagement, Bahar Project, Arab Region, Branding

Introduction

Countries of the Arab region was the core of some ancient civilisations; the wealth of material culture inherited from these civilisations is unparalleled. Interestingly all the Arab countries adjoin or contain water bodies. Throughout ancient history, the shores of the Eastern Mediterranean, Red Sea, Arabian Gulf, and the banks of the Nile, Tigris, and Euphrates Rivers bore-witness to thriving maritime cultures and their waterborne activities. Hence, we have inherited a vast array of maritime and underwater material culture. Moreover, most Arab countries witnessed some of the earliest discoveries in the field of maritime and underwater cultural heritage (MUCH), such as the discovery of Dahshur boats in Egypt in 1894 and the discovery of the Mahdia shipwreck in Tunisia in 1907 (Khalil, 2021).

Current situation

However, the progress of MUCH in the Arab region has not shown significant growth. In several Arab countries the field of MUCH is still a nascent discipline. Notably just Egypt (Alexandria University) and Lebanon (the American University in Beirut) are the only two Arab countries that have active academic programmes related to MUCH and have national specialists carrying out several research projects. Generally, the Arab region has a distinct lack of local expertise and significant variations in capacity building (Khalil, 2023).

Challenges

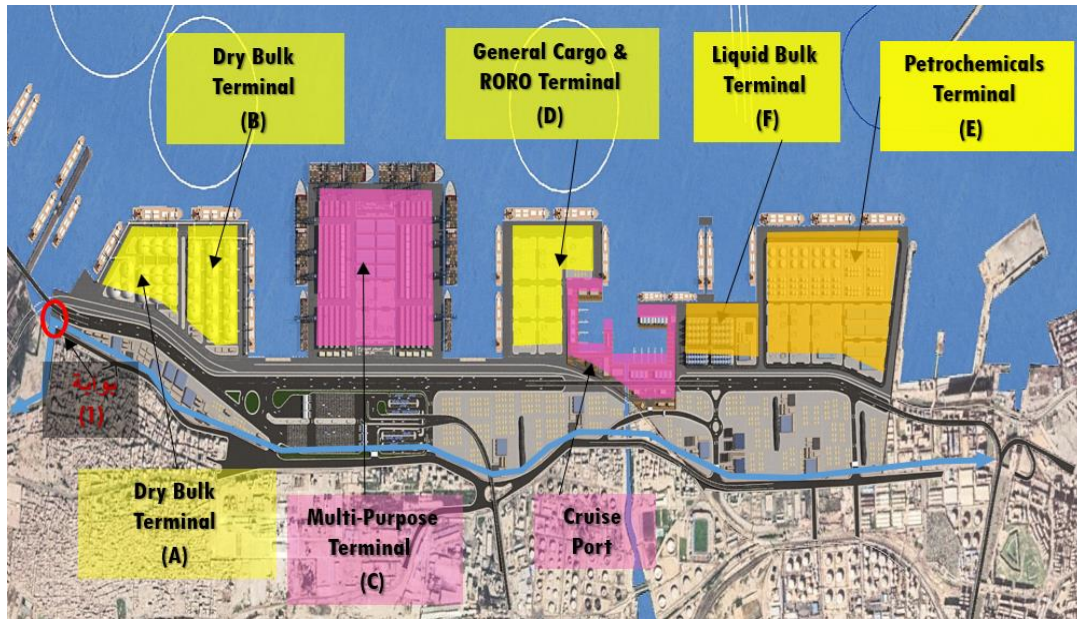


Figure 1 The planned development of El-Max Port, one of the traditional maritime communities in Alexandria. www.mts.gov.eg.

The Arab region is a dynamic area where political issues, ethnic issues, and conflict areas are widely seen. Hence, MUCH in the Arab region is encountering various distinctive challenges. Some of these challenges include:

1. Urbanization and coastal development: the region is undergoing rapid urbanization and coastal development that has led to the destruction and loss of several maritime cultural heritage sites (Fig.1). Land reclamation projects and construction near coastlines encroach upon underwater archaeological sites, leading to their destruction (El Safadi et al., 2022).
2. Conflict areas: within the region, there are countries that have experienced devastating wars resulting in the destruction of their cities. Aleppo in Syria, Benghazi in Libya, and Al Hudaydah in Yemen are a few examples of cities that have been heavily impacted by conflict (El Safadi et al., 2022).
3. Variation in economic status: a considerable number of Arab countries suffer from unstable economic status, which has a serious impact on MUCH, either on funding for preservation, promotion, and accessibility or public perception. During economic uncertainty, priorities

shift towards immediate needs, potentially leading to decreased public perception of the value of maritime heritage.

4. Language barriers: since there is a significant variation in capacity building and limited local expertise in the Arab region, most of the available resources on MUCH, in terms of documentaries, movies, books and stories are not in Arabic.

Public engagement activities in the Arab region

Consequently, there are limited initiatives and avenues through which the public can engage with maritime cultural heritage. There are six maritime museums in the Arab region (Fig.2). Surprisingly most of them are in the Gulf region where the discipline of MUCH is underdeveloped conversely, the countries that have active practice, education programmes and professionals such as Egypt and Lebanon, do not have maritime museums.

Moreover, the Gulf region has a number of maritime festivals which play a key role in immersing visitors of all ages in traditional coastal life, i.e., the Katara International Dhow Festival in Qatar (Fig.3) and the Maritime Heritage Festival in the United Arab Emirates. These festivals include exhibitions displaying maritime heritage collections from various participants, special pavilions of traditional handicrafts, and workshops showcasing ship-building processes and ancient craft.



Figure 2 The geographical distribution of maritime museums in the Arab region. Map by Nada Kamel.



Figure 3 The Katara International Dhow Festival in Qatar. www.katara.net.

Egypt as a case study

Egypt's location along the Mediterranean Sea, Red Sea and the Nile has made it a hub of trade and exploration. Most people associate all Egyptian heritage with the pyramids of Giza, temples, and mummies. The public perception of MUCH in Egypt is overwhelmed by land discoveries, as well as UCH in Egypt accompanied with the history of Alexandria and the early salvage of a Ptolemaic queen from the site of Pharos. Hence many people cannot relate to their maritime history.

Over the past two decades there have been a few genuine initiatives to introduce different Egyptian communities to their valuable maritime heritage, i.e., the Community Archaeology Project that has been conducted by Prof. Stephanie Moser in Quseir, the Red Sea, in 1999. The project was part of a large-scale excavation of an ancient harbour site known in Roman times as Myos Hormos (now Quseir). This project was the first of its kind in Egypt and aimed to involve the local community in all aspects of the archaeological enterprise, culminating in the creation of a heritage centre that presents the findings from the excavations to the people of Quseir and tourists visiting the area (Moser et al., 2002).

Bahar: the maritime archaeology outreach project

In 2019 the maritime archaeology outreach project (the Bahar Project) was started by the Alexandria Centre for Maritime Archaeology, Alexandria University, and funded by the Honor Frost Foundation. The project's main aim is to raise public awareness of the value of underwater cultural heritage, by following a grass roots approach which works from the bottom up to implement positive change.

The project started with targeting an audience aged from 5 to 12, and later the age range was expanded to include students aged from 5 to 20 years old. Hence, the project objectives are to:

- Create sustainable resources of knowledge for the general audience on underwater cultural heritage.
- Introduce students between 5 and 20 years old to maritime archaeology and marine environment in an age-appropriate way that teaches basic archaeological concepts and generates interest and awareness of the field.
- Disseminate MUCH in different cities around Egypt.

In doing so, a protocol between Alexandria University, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities has been established, and for more dissemination the project is collaborating with various cultural centres such as Bibliotheca Alexandrina.

Therefore, the project has approached schools, museums, cultural centres, and campuses. Using a series of workshop stations to introduce students to maritime archaeology, each workstation provides a student with an experience to better understand the importance of their own cultural heritage. The workstations follow a hands-on and active approach which leads to enthusiastic and active participation, as well as modern presentation of cultural heritage via virtual reality.

Branding

Due to the absence of a maritime museum and unfamiliarity with UCH, it was crucial to give the audience something to relate to; thus, the project has followed a branding strategy to build a connection with the audience beyond the project's activities, by adapting a project mascot (Fig.4) to be a messenger, Bahar, Arabic for seaman, and building up characteristics to be applied to activities. This character has been chosen specially to represent the past from all aspects. The character wears the old diving gear, and the project's logo is part of the character's diving gear, the helmet (Fig.5). Moreover, the project follows a specific colour palette and consistent visuals in order to build a visual identity.



Figure 4 The project mascot, Bahar (the Bahar Project).



Figure 5 The project's logo, (the Bahar Project)

Challenges

One of the main challenges the project's team have faced is how to interact with various age groups. It was very challenging to keep students aged from 5 to 8 years old engaged throughout the workshop. Engagement was very critical to deal with teenagers, who showed defiant behavior most of the time. There was also complexity in evaluating the effectiveness of Bahar's activities due to the diversity of both the audience and the activities involved (Fig.6).

The project's logistics were another obstacle, since we are dealing with students in school or on campuses that need to secure permission from school administrators or campus authorities for each workshop. This involves submitting proposals outlining the workshop, project team IDs, objectives, target audience, and safety protocols.



Figure 6 Introducing deferent age groups to UCH, the Bahar Project

Results

Over the past 4 years the project has organised 38 workshops and reached more than 1500 students aged from 5 to 19 years old, by visiting 5 schools, 4 museums, 2 faculties, 1 NGO, and 3 cultural centres. Moreover, MUCH was disseminated in 4 cities around Egypt. Creating open access outreach resources in Arabic is one of the project's fundamental objectives. In collaboration with Bibliotheca Alexandrina, we have published the first Arabic children's story book about two of the Egyptian underwater cultural heritage sites, and it is available online on the CMAUCH and HFF websites, and it's given a way for free in each workshop to transfer the knowledge to the participants' parents (Fig.7). The project's target audience is known as 'digital natives', and to effectively engage with



Figure 7 The Adventures of Bahar and Nejma, the Bahar Project

them,

the project developed a mobile game app specifically designed for the Android and iOS platforms. The app offers the opportunity to virtually explore underwater archaeological sites. Players use their smartphones to navigate through 3D reconstructions of the sites, and capture shots for archaeological finds to generate 3D models. This interactive process allows them to learn about the principles of photogrammetry, while engaging with various marine creatures (Fig.8).

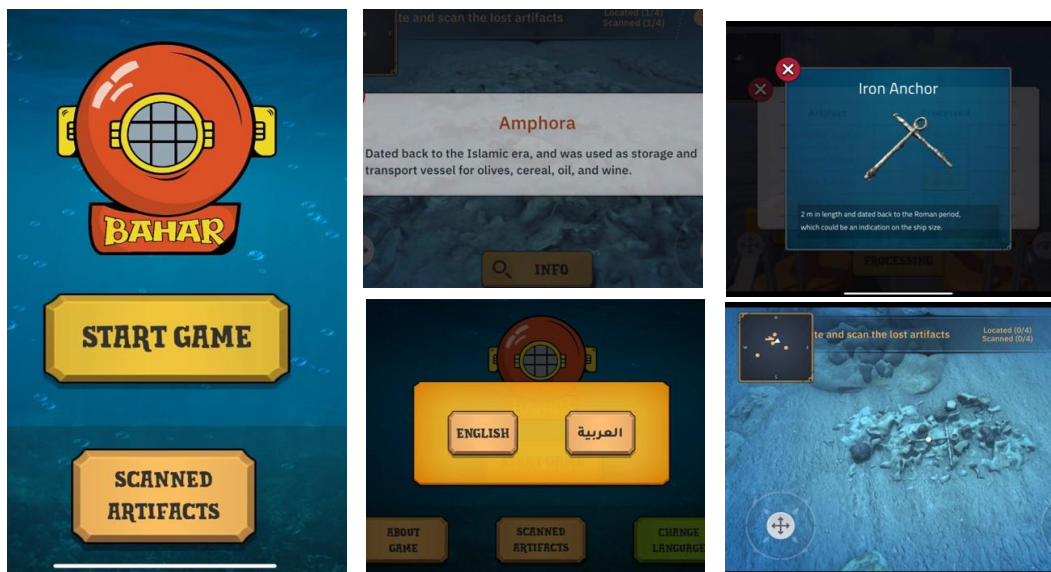


Figure 8 Bahar Mobile Game Application, the Bahar Project.

Ongoing Plan

To enhance the Bahar Project’s impact and visibility, we have established the Bahar UNESCO Club for Heritage, to foster international recognition and collaboration. One of the projects that the club is working on now is creating an animated movie about UCH in Arabic. This movie is funded by UNESCO and will be released in 2024. Moreover, we are developing an activity book for the non-

reading-aged children, complementing the existing storybook designed for children aged 10+. Recognizing the importance of inclusivity, our team has gained experience in delivering workshops for students with disabilities.

We successfully conducted three workshops for 42 students with Down Syndrome, vision impairment, and hearing impairment (Fig.9). Building on this progress, we plan to organise further workshops, expanding accessibility to underwater cultural heritage for all. To reach a broader audience demographically, we are actively planning visits to additional cities across Egypt, focusing on the Red Sea (Hurghada) and Upper Egypt (Minya). These initiatives will allow us to engage with diverse communities and give us some indication about the public perception of MUCH in these areas.



Figure 9 Left: Bahar workshop for students with visual impairments. Left: Models of the stone anchors made by the students, Bahar Project.

Conclusion

While the project is still ongoing, initial observations suggest a higher average knowledge of UCH among students in Alexandria's schools compared to those in Marsa Matrouh, Rasheed, and Cairo. Additionally, the project reveals a potential link between socioeconomic background and student perception of archaeology. Through video recordings of the workshops, we observed that students in public schools are more likely to define archaeological finds based on financial value ('treasure') compared to their counterparts in private schools. Looking ahead, this project has set a strong foundation for public education on UCH in Egypt and the Arab region. By providing all outreach resources and workshops in Arabic, the project fosters greater accessibility and understanding of this important cultural heritage.

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