

ARCHAEOLOGY TODAY

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HALIEIS: An Adventure

in Underwater

Archaeology

Through the efforts of pioneers such as Jacques Cousteau, the potential of underwater archaeology has begun to be recognized in the past two decades. The development of self-contained underwater breathing apparatus (SCUBA) has made scientific excavation of submerged areas a feasible undertaking. This particular aspect of archaeology has now proved its great value for the Mediterranean area.

Geological unrest has always characterized the Mediterranean: an impressive illustration is furnished by the famous Temple of Serapis near Naples. Originally built on dry land, this temple was submerged by a subsidence of the shoreline and remained underwater for many years; today it rests again above the level of the sea. It is no wonder that the local inhabitants of this area have deep fears about the stability of the land on which their houses are built!

Greece also furnishes examples of changing shorelines: recent excavations at Halieis have revealed extensive underwater ruins. In ancient times, Halieis was a port city with a population of about 4000; sometime after 323 B.C. the city was strangely abandoned. In 1962 the University of Pennsylvania began conventional dry-land excavation in the area; it was soon discovered that a large part of ancient Halieis (over 40 acres) now lay beneath the sea in water that ranged from a few inches to ten feet in depth. While all of the mud-brick that once made up the buildings of this area had disintegrated, huge foundation stones could be seen beneath the water on clear, calm days.

Just as conventional archaeology relies on a grid system to excavate areas of land, underwater archaeology employs a submerged grid system of ten-meter squares. The grid system is put in place and divers descend for the actual excavation; at Halieis each diver worked on the excavation for 1 or 2 hours at a time, no more than twice each day. If the work was slow, it was also rewarding: an ancient sanctuary of the god Apollo soon came to light.

The major structure found was an impressive temple, dating back to the 8th century B.C. But other structures also appeared: a large altar for sacrifices and a footrace track. Iron weapons came to light, left once as offerings to Apollo; small wine cups, silver coins, and even a statue of Apollo were successfully recovered. The excavation continues and hopefully more ancient structures will be found, testifying graphically to the importance of the new science of underwater archaeology.