The original discovery of the Roman shipwreck at Xlendi, Gozo

John Wood

'Xlendi Bay in Gozo is an important archaeological site but this was not realised until the 1960s. The reason for this is that its importance is maritime and its potential was only brought to light with the accidental discovery of artefacts on the seabed by British Navy divers. This discovery and subsequent investigation of the site came soon after SCUBA equipment started to become widely available and closely followed the development of the new discipline of underwater archaeology [...] The objects that were raised by these pioneers are now held in the Gozo museum where they attract a lot of interest from members of the public [...]' (Azzopardi 2006, 1)

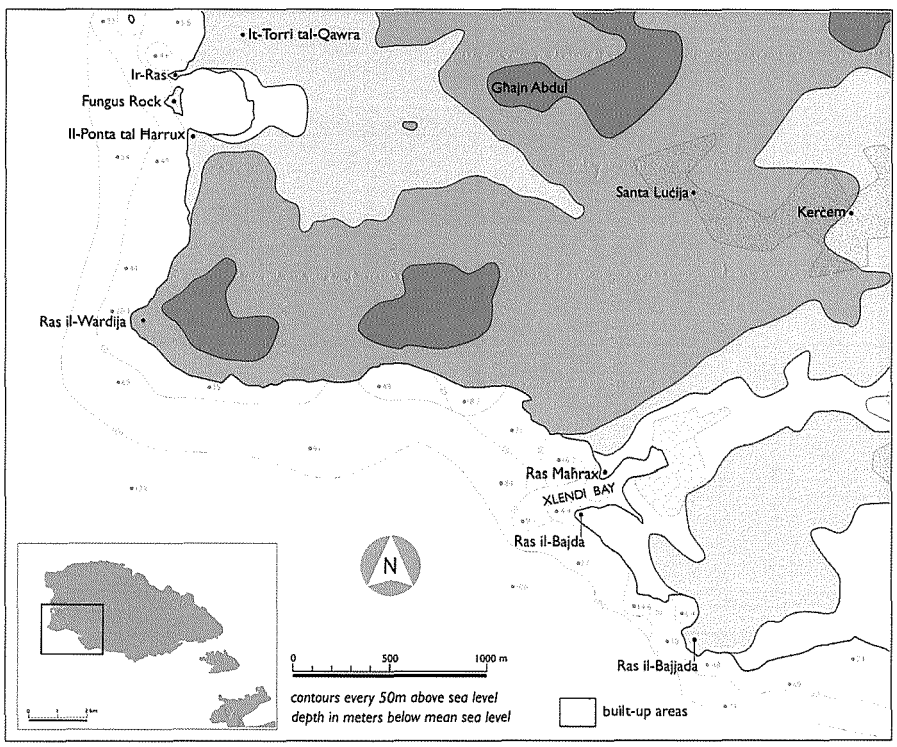

Figure 1. Xlendi Bay in south-west Gozo, Malta (drawn by Maxine Anastasi).

It is not often that one is in the right place at the right time. Those lucky enough to be in Malta with the British Navy in the summer of 1961 found the perfect time and place to learn to dive. Health and safety implications dictated a disciplined approach, both individually as well as on a group basis. Therefore, several like-minded colleagues who wanted to do something with the new skill, formed an Outward Bound Association since SCUBA diving was a recognised qualification.

Under the auspices of the Fleet Recreation Officer at Lascaris, seven divers and three crew from the Royal Naval Air Station, Ħal Far, requisitioned Motor Fishing Vessel 256 for an underwater search for archaeological sites off the Tunisian coast. Application for diplomatic clearance made to Tunisian authorities in February had not been received the day before our proposed departure on 10 June 1961. Captain Sutton, therefore, ordered the crew to proceed to Gozo to search harbours and bays on behalf of the Museums Department (Martins 1961).

Team spirit was welded by the successful raising of the wing of a legendary Spitfire aircraft from a depth of 9.2 metres in Qala Dwejra. Later we were joined by George Masini from the Gozo museum to give direction to our undersea endeavours. At first we explored Ramla Bay, but without success and as consolation sought an octopus for supper in Xlendi Bay. That evening we found our fish supper ... and in the process found amphora sherds in abundance at the foot of the rock awash at Ras Mahrax in the harbour mouth (Fig. 1).

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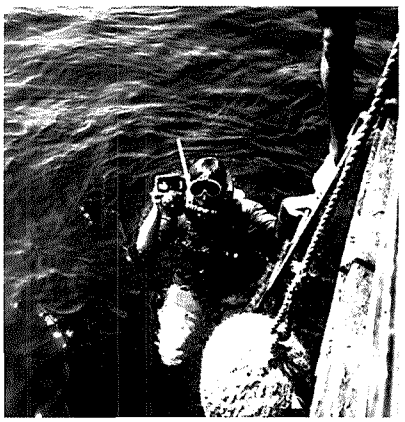

Figure 2. Small pot being brought to the surface (photograph reproduced by courtesy of Chev. J. Scicluna archive).

Figure 3. An amphora is held by Able Seaman Viney watched by (from left to right) Able Seaman Meakin, Leading Airman Mitchell and Petty Officer Wood (photograph reproduced by courtesy of Chev. J. Scicluna archive).

Figure 4. An amphora is held by Able Seaman Meakin watched by (from left to right) Leading Airman Mitchell, Lieutenant Miller and Able Seaman Viney (photograph reproduced by courtesy of Chev. J. Scicluna archive).

These pieces were taken to the otherwise unoccupied Xlendi police cell for safe keeping and Gozo Commissioner Chev. Cassar was duly informed of the discovery. On Monday 19 June 1961 the whole team of divers carried out a sweep across the harbour mouth to Ras il-Bajda, finding more fragments of pottery en route (Martins 1961, 3). There was a concentration of artefacts on the inside of the large reef, the focal point for further exploration. Three dives the next day produced a lead anchor stock, two amphorae and a drinking vessel (Figs 2-5). This precious cargo was shipped to Mġarr for delivery to the Gozo museum.

Word of the discovery soon spread and there were a number of visitors to the site: Dr Tabone (President, Gozo Council), Chev. Cassar, Capt. Charles Zammit (Director, Museums Department), and a TV camera crew from Britain. The following days produced a number of attractive pottery vessels. Touching these artefacts, made with such beauty and functionality, lost so long ago and probably in dire circumstances, fired our imagination. We recovered these treasures albeit without methodically allocating a precise find spot. Smaller objects were manhandled whilst the larger artefacts were tethered to a buoy and later hauled up in a rope cradle, the divers on deck powering the lifting mechanism. This procedure was physically very tiring. Enforced rest after five days of intensive diving provided time for reflection.

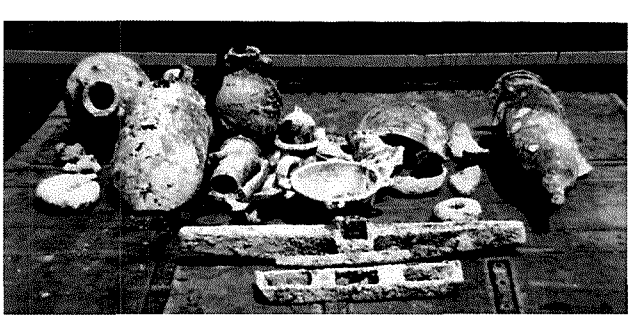

Figure 5. Various pottery vessels, an anchor stock and sleeve recovered from Xlendi (photograph by John Wood).

Since antiquity valuable cargoes have been recovered in salvage operations. In Gozo, we were continuing this tradition. In June 1961 we were very much aware of Jacques Cousteau, the pioneer of free diving, and of the work he and his associates were doing to develop method in the nascent discipline of underwater archaeology. Our venture, believed to be the first by an all-British team in the Mediterranean, was undertaken soon after a successful underwater excavation by an American team on the site of a Bronze Age wreck in Turkey.

As Azzopardi has pointed out, '[...] this thrilling discovery was made mere days before the arrival in Malta of another team of divers, this time from Imperial College, London [... who] had set out with the express intention of [...] developing satisfactory techniques for archaeological excavation under the sea. Their achievements were certainly remarkable as their work in Xlendi was carried out at depths that were twice those that were considered safe at the time' (Azzopardi 2006, 20; see also Woods 1962). This timely and generous contribution with professional skills outside our experience ensured the site was properly recorded for posterity. An account

of the work of this latter expedition was due to be published in book form in 2011 by the team leader, John Woods.

Most recently, in 1993 and in 2000 the approaches to Xlendi Bay were surveyed by remotely operated vehicles revealing many more artefacts in depths beyond the scope of SCUBA divers (Grima 1993; Atauz and McManamon 2000). Work in this area was restarted in 2006 by the AURORA Trust and continues to this day.

In Xlendi, posidonia is found practically everywhere in shallow waters. It is particularly dense under the Ras Mahrax reef and inside the shoal bank. In future the posidonia mattes may well yield the most archaeologically informative material. According to Azzopardi, who has studied the material in the Gozo museum and concluded that it ranges from 2500 BC to possibly the 13th century AD, if any ship remains are ever found it will probably be here (Azzopardi 2006, 103, 154).

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Bionote

John Wood was educated at Saint George's preparatory school and Training Ship Mercury. He joined the Royal Navy in 1958 and qualified as a Shallow Water Diver in 1963 and as Ship Diver in 1965. He was a member of a research team doing experimental work on the underwater thermocline for UK Meteorological Office, Malta 1968-1969. He assisted in the Punic ship excavation and reconstruction in Marsala (Sicily) between 1972-1978. He is the author of a number of publications about *pipi tal-qasba*, Maltese folklore, and Maltese migration in Tunisia.