

**“Seeing something
that hasn’t been seen
or used for thousands
of years gives you a
real connection with
the past”**

A 3D image of a fifth century BC
ancient Greek shipwreck at the
bottom of the Black Sea. Its mast is
lit by a remote operated vehicle

RODRIGO PAC-HECO RUIZ / THE JULIA AND HANS RAUSING TRUST XI, DANIEL RIORDAN XI, MARTIN HARTLEY XI, BARRY MCGILL XI, BRIAN GARE XI

A diver surveys a submerged
coastal landscape in
southern Italy

Farr operates a remote vehicle in the Black
Sea. This is one of the critical pieces of
technology that helps archaeologists study
cultural heritage deep underwater

Maritime Archaeologist

Helen Farr

HOW DID YOU BECOME INVOLVED AND INTERESTED IN MARITIME ARCHAEOLOGY?

I grew up as far from the sea as you can get in the UK, but I always had a love of the ocean. I elected to study archaeology and anthropology at university: it was the breadth of the discipline and combination of arts and sciences which attracted me. At that time I was inspired by [primatologist and anthropologist] Jane Goodall and wanted to study orangutans, but in the end, it was the human past that really fired my imagination. I was aware of maritime archaeology, but it wasn't until I learnt to dive that it dawned on me that I had a way of combining my academic interest and my passion for the sea. After that I never looked back!

HOW DOES YOUR WORK DIFFER TO STANDARD ARCHAEOLOGY?

Archaeology encompasses all aspects of the past – understanding changing landscapes, sites and material artefacts and cultures from the deep past right up to the present. Unlike many historical specialisms, it doesn't only focus on written texts, or the time periods that have these written archives. Maritime archaeology has a wide scope.

So much of human history is tied to the sea. Understanding maritime archaeology in context helps us contribute to a wide range of contemporary issues, too – for example rises in sea levels, ocean plastics, offshore development or the history of slavery and colonialism.

Of course, maritime archaeology includes studying sites that are underwater, such as submerged landscapes and shipwrecks, but it covers so much more – from narratives of coastal change, technology and engineering, naval history, shipping and trade, art, museums and cultural heritage, just to name a few! So, you don't necessarily even have to be a diver to specialise in maritime archaeology; it is much broader than the study of shipwrecks.

WHAT HAS BEEN THE MOST FASCINATING PROJECT YOU'VE WORKED ON?

Recently I have been working on the Black Sea Maritime Archaeology project – the largest maritime archaeological project to have taken place in recent history. The project had a specific remit to understand the changing nature of the



Black Sea through the Holocene epoch (roughly the past 10,000 years) as it reconnected with the Mediterranean after the last Ice Age. But in the process of conducting this work we also recorded 65 amazingly preserved shipwrecks that covered 2,500 years of history in the region.

We used cutting edge technology to reach great depths; guiding a remote operated vehicle 2,000m below sea level to explore the deep sea floor was an incredible experience. The ships we recorded were unique, such as the Venetian medieval 'round ship' of the sort Marco Polo would have been familiar with, or the ancient Greek vessel that was the most intact vessel of this age ever discovered.

WHAT ARE THE BEST AND WORST PARTS OF BEING A MARITIME ARCHAEOLOGIST?

For me, the best part of being a maritime archaeologist is being at sea. When surveying or excavating, there is always a frisson of excitement when you make a discovery; seeing something that hasn't been seen or used for thousands of years gives you a real connection with the past.

The worst part is when you see underwater sites being destroyed by those who want to make a profit. Treasure hunters, looters and salvage companies destroy underwater cultural heritage sites for their own gain. This is deeply distressing.



IS THERE A PARTICULAR SITE YOU'VE ALWAYS WANTED TO WORK ON?

There are so many known sites I would like to work on or visit! But it isn't the really famous shipwreck sites that hold the biggest draw for me. There are many very ancient sites that have been submerged due to rising sea levels; these sites can help us understand some of the questions we still have about human origins and our changing planet.

HOW CAN PEOPLE GET INVOLVED WITH MARITIME ARCHAEOLOGY?

There are various ways people can get involved with maritime archaeology all around the world, from online resources or classes held by organisations such as the Maritime Archaeological Trust (maritimearchaeologytrust.org). Or you can join the Nautical Archaeological Association (nauticalarchaeologysociety.org) and start building your skills, both above and below the water. You can also volunteer with your local CITIZAN (Coastal and Intertidal Zone Archaeological Network) project (citzan.org.uk).

If you are really keen you could even study with us at the Centre for Maritime Archaeology at the University of Southampton. 📍

DR HELEN FARR is Associate Professor in Archaeology at the University of Southampton and co-chair of the UNESCO UNITWIN Network for Underwater Archaeology