

ANNUAL REPORT: UNDERWATER ARCHAEOLOGY AT NESSEBAR, ANCIENT MESAMBRIA (BLACK SEA), BULGARIA 2019

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Student excavating a Late Antique fortification wall with ejector

The field school took place in Nessebar, Bulgaria (ancient Mesambria) on the Black Sea coast from May 24 to June 20, 2019. This was the second season of the project, which is an initiative of the Balkan Heritage Foundation in partnership with the Institute for Field Research (BHF-IFR Joint Program) and the Bulgarian Centre for Underwater Archaeology. The goal of the field school was to provide experience and training in underwater and maritime archaeology through participation in two ongoing research and conservation projects.

The major research project was the investigation of the submerged heritage of Nessebar, ancient Mesambria. The settlement was established by Thracian tribes, but at the end of 6th century Dorian colonizers settled here and founded a Greek colony which grew quickly and became one of the most powerful towns along the western Black Sea Coast in the Classical, Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine era, as well as in the Middle Ages and the Ottoman period.

Underwater studies in the region of Nessebar began in 1960. Sixteen underwater archaeological campaigns were conducted in total (1960-1983 and 2017). During these studies, it was found that significant parts of the ancient town today are below the sea level. Ruins of fortification walls, towers, staircases, gates and other structures from the pre-Roman era, Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, were traced in various sectors around the peninsula. The tracked layout of the fortification walls of Mesambria leads us to conclude that due to sea transgression, landslide

activity, sea abrasion and a series of earthquakes, Nessebar has lost a significant intramural part of its territory. Today it lays underwater at a depth between 1.5 and 5 meters. Unfortunately these important discoveries weren't properly published and communicated. In 2017 the Bulgarian Centre for Underwater Archaeology restarted the regular survey in the aquatory of Nessebar with ultimate goal to (re)explore, document with advanced technologies and to publish the submerged heritage of Nessebar. In 2018 the Balkan Heritage Foundation along with the Institute for Field Research started jointed and supported the project through the field school in underwater and maritime archaeology.

The research in 2019 provided the participants with valuable field work experience. It took part in two areas of town's aquatory (northern and south-eastern) and included several components – excavation of submerged Late Antique fortification walls, cleaning of Classical and Hellenistic period fortification walls, diving field survey, documenting the discovered, cleaned and excavated structures through photogrammetry and technical drawing. The results of the research were rewarding:

- massive block foundations of Classical or Hellenistic fortification walls as well as a column drum and destructions of Byzantine buildings were discovered during the field surveys;
- excavated destructions of Byzantine walls in *opus mixtum* in the northern aquatory of the town;
- the discovered, excavated and cleaned structures were recorded with photography, photogrammetry and technical drawing.
- Discovered and mapped Byzantine walls in *opus mixtum* known from the archives of the earlier expeditions.

The second research project was the epigraphic research of ship graffiti in Medieval churches in Nessebar. This important historical monuments weren't entirely studied and properly published. The field work resulted in documentation of numerous graffiti with RTI technique in St. Stefan church (17th century).

The research projects and the attributed specific field tasks will be continued in the next season. The achieved results will be presented to the public during the annual archaeological reports of the Bulgarian National Institute of Archaeology in March 2020. Articles covering the research project will be published in the annual edition of the Institute – Archaeological Discoveries and Excavations (in 2019). The documented grafitti will be published in catalog(s) about the epigraphic monuments of the Nesebar's churces prepared by the Centre for Underwater Archaeology (CUA) in collaboration with the Balkan Heritage Foundation. Our team is currently working on publications of the submerged heritage of Nesebar and Sozopol.