

BUILDING AN INDIA–GREECE PARTNERSHIP IN UNDERWATER CULTURAL HERITAGE

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The National Maritime Foundation (NMF) is undertaking a series of comparative studies involving countries that have developed advanced legal, institutional, and operational frameworks for the protection and management of underwater cultural heritage (UCH). As India increasingly seeks to reclaim its identity as a maritime civilisation, comparative analysis offers an opportunity to examine how countries with long maritime traditions have integrated archaeology, conservation, legislation, scientific research, and public engagement into coherent systems of heritage governance. Rather than identifying models for direct replication, such studies enable an assessment of institutional approaches that may inform India's own policy priorities and strengthen its evolving underwater heritage ecosystem.

Among the countries being examined under this initiative, Greece offers one of the most relevant comparative cases for India. Its significance lies not only in the richness of its underwater archaeological record but also in the specialised institutions, legal framework, conservation infrastructure, and technological capabilities it has developed over several decades. Together, these elements have enabled Greece to establish a comprehensive and coordinated system for the protection, documentation, conservation, and public interpretation of underwater cultural heritage.

The relevance of the Greek experience becomes clearer when viewed alongside India's own maritime landscape. India possesses a coastline exceeding 11,000 kilometres, nearly 1,300 offshore islands, and a maritime history spanning several millennia. Archaeological investigations at Dwarka, Bet Dwarka, Poompuhar, Mahabalipuram, Lakshadweep, Goa, and several other coastal locations have demonstrated the immense archaeological potential of the Indian seabed. Yet the institutional ecosystem responsible for underwater heritage remains dispersed across the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), scientific organisations, maritime agencies, universities, and state governments. While these institutions perform important and complementary functions, the distribution of responsibilities across multiple agencies continues to constrain long-term documentation, conservation planning, data sharing, and coordinated archaeological management. As highlighted in NMF's earlier study, *Protecting the Past Beneath the Waves: Law, Policy, and the Future of Underwater Archaeology in India*,¹ the country's underwater heritage framework remains at an important stage of institutional evolution.

¹ Suraj Palavalsa, "Protecting the Past Beneath the Waves: Law, Policy, and the Future of Underwater Archaeology in India", *National Maritime Foundation website*, 15 September 2025. <https://maritimeindia.org/protecting-the-past-beneath-the-waves-law-policy-and-the-future-of-underwater-archaeology-in-india/>

For India, the Greek experience illustrates how specialised institutions, scientific capability, conservation infrastructure, and public engagement, can all be integrated within a coherent governance framework that supports wider national objectives relating to maritime consciousness, cultural diplomacy, education, and heritage preservation. These lessons assume great significance as India advances initiatives such as “Maritime India Vision (MIV) 2030”, the “Maritime *Amrit Kaal* Vision (MAKV) 2047”, and “Project MAUSAM”, all of which seek to reconnect the country’s maritime past with its contemporary strategic aspirations. It is also, of course, crucial to note that this India’s maritime policy and its approach are formally encapsulated in the acronym, MAHASAGAR (Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions).

Against this backdrop, this paper examines Greece’s legal and institutional framework for underwater cultural heritage and evaluates its relevance for India. It begins by examining the basis for Greece’s selection as a comparative case, before analysing the existing India-Greece cultural cooperation framework and the institutional architecture underpinning Greece’s leadership in underwater heritage management. Building on this analysis, the paper identifies policy lessons that need to be adapted within the Indian context and proposes practical avenues for strengthening India-Greece cooperation in underwater archaeology, conservation, research, and maritime cultural diplomacy.

Greek Approach to Underwater Heritage

Over several decades, Greece has transformed underwater archaeology from a specialised academic pursuit into an integrated system which encompasses legislation, scientific research, conservation, technological innovation, public education, and heritage tourism. The sea has shaped Greek civilisation for over three millennia. Situated at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and Africa, Greece developed through maritime exchange rather than by territorial isolation. The Aegean, Ionian, and Mediterranean seas served as highways connecting successive civilisations, including the Minoans, Mycenaeans, Classical Greek city-states, the Hellenistic kingdoms, and the Byzantine Empire.² This long maritime history has left behind one of the world’s richest underwater archaeological landscapes, comprising submerged prehistoric settlements, ancient ports, harbour infrastructure, merchant vessels, naval shipwrecks, amphora cargoes, anchors, aircraft wrecks, and extensive cultural landscapes preserved beneath the sea.

Archaeological wealth alone, however, does not explain Greece’s significance. What distinguishes the country is the way it has *institutionalised* the protection and interpretation of this heritage. Successive Greek governments have treated UCH as an integral component of national cultural policy rather than as a peripheral branch of archaeology. This sustained commitment has enabled the development of specialised institutions, conservation infrastructure,

² David Abulafia, *The Great Sea: A Human History of the Mediterranean* (London: Penguin Books, 2011), <https://www.ancientportsantiques.com/wp-content/uploads/Documents/AUTHORS/Abulafia2014-HistoryMediterranean.pdf>.

scientific expertise, and regulatory mechanisms capable of managing archaeological resources across the country's extensive maritime domain. These institutions further perform complementary functions that extend well beyond excavation to include systematic documentation, long-term monitoring, conservation, education, and public interpretation.

Technology has also become a defining feature of this institutional ecosystem. Rather than relying primarily on excavation, Greece increasingly employs remote sensing, high-resolution seabed mapping, photogrammetry, and digital documentation, to investigate submerged sites while minimising physical intervention. *The Remote Sensing for Underwater Cultural Heritage* (RUSH) project—a collaborative multidisciplinary initiative led by the Institute of Heritage Science of the National Heritage Council in Italy—illustrates this approach rather well.³ Operating at archaeological sites around Aegina and Crete, it uses advanced sensing technologies to produce high-resolution records of underwater sites, allowing archaeologists to monitor and interpret fragile contexts without disturbing them.⁴ This shift from excavation-led archaeology to documentation-led site management has enabled Greece to investigate a large number of sites while reducing pressure on vulnerable archaeological remains.

The same emphasis on innovation is reflected in “*the Blue Culture Technology Excellence Hubs*” (BCThubs) programme funded under “Horizon Europe”.⁵ Bringing together universities, public authorities, museums, cultural institutions, research organisations, and technology enterprises across Greece, Malta, Bulgaria, and Italy, the programme supports the development of digital documentation tools, underwater monitoring systems, diver-safety technologies, conservation techniques, and educational platforms.⁶ More importantly, BCThubs demonstrates that underwater cultural heritage can serve as a driver of scientific innovation and cross-sector collaboration, rather than remaining confined to archaeology alone.

This institutional model of integrating heritage management with research and technological development, offers valuable lessons for countries such as India,.

Public engagement constitutes another distinctive feature of the Greek approach. For much of the 20th century, underwater archaeological sites remained accessible only to researchers. Greece gradually moved away from this restrictive model by demonstrating that carefully regulated public access can coexist with archaeological conservation. The “*Alonissos Underwater Museum*”, centred on the 4th century BCE “Peristera shipwreck”,⁷ pioneered this approach by allowing certified divers to visit an archaeological site preserved *in situ*, under strict archaeological supervision. Rather than relocating artefacts to conventional museums, the seabed itself became the exhibition space. This model has since been expanded. In 2026, Greece opened two

³ “Remote sensing of Underwater Cultural Heritage”, United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development, Intergovernmental Oceanic Commission, UNESCO, 10 Jan 2024, <https://oceandecade.org/actions/remote-sensing-of-underwater-cultural-heritage/>.

⁴ Angeliki G Simosi, “Managing Greece’s Underwater Archaeological Heritage”, *Internet Archaeology* 49, 2018, <https://intarch.ac.uk/journal/issue49/4/1.html>.

⁵ Fact Sheet, Horizon Blue “Blue Culture Technology Excellence Hubs in EU Widening Member States”, European Commission, 03 June 2026, <https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/101087146>.

⁶ “Project Description”, BCT Hubs, 2026, <https://bcthubs.eu/about/>.

⁷ “About the Museum”, Alonissos Underwater Museum, Peristera, <https://museum.alonissos.gov.gr/en/about/>.

additional underwater archaeological sites in the Fourni Korseon archipelago, allowing divers to explore ancient shipwrecks through controlled heritage diving programmes.⁸ These initiatives do, however, reflect a pertinent conservation philosophy, in which public access is permitted only if archaeological integrity can be maintained.

Existing India-Greece Cultural and Maritime Cooperation Framework

The specific case for India-Greece cooperation in UCH rests not only on shared civilisational linkages but also on an increasingly substantive bilateral relationship. Over the past decade, both countries have expanded engagement across political, defence, maritime, economic, educational, and cultural domains, creating a favourable environment for collaboration in areas that were previously peripheral to bilateral relations. UCH is one such area.

The relationship between the two civilisations predates modern diplomacy by more than two millennia. Although public memory often associates India-Greece interactions with the territorial conquests of Alexander III of Macedon and the Indo-Greek kingdoms, maritime commerce constituted an equally important dimension of these exchanges. From the 1st century BCE onwards, well-established sea routes connected the Mediterranean with India's western and southern coasts through the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea. "*The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*" describes regular voyages linking Egyptian ports with Indian trading centres such as Barygaza (Bharuch), Muziris, and Nelcynda, facilitating the exchange of pepper, ivory, gemstones, pearls, textiles, metals, wine, and ceramics.⁹ These commercial networks connected merchants, sailors, craftsmen, and coastal communities across two maritime regions, creating enduring cultural and commercial linkages.¹⁰

This shared maritime history also survives beneath the sea. Shipwrecks, anchors, amphorae, harbour structures, cargo assemblages, and submerged ports, preserved in the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean, together constitute an archaeological archive that continues to reveal new evidence of ancient connectivity.¹¹ Targeted collaborative research on these remains would

⁸ "Greek Authorities Unveil New Underwater Archaeological Sites to divers", Dive Magazine, 26 Mar 2026, <https://divemagazine.com/scuba-diving-news/greek-authorities-unveil-new-underwater-archaeological-sites-to-divers>.

⁹ *Periplus Maris Erythraei* (Periplus of the Erythraean Sea), translated by Wilfred H. Schoff (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1912).

See Also:

Eivind Heldaas Seland, "The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea: A Network Approach", *The Asian Review of World Histories*, August 2016, DOI: 10.12773/arwh.2016.4.2.191.

¹⁰ Utkarsh Garg, "India-Greece Relations: Renavigating the Cultural and Civilisational Ties in the 21st Century", Indic Researchers Forum, 02 Aug 2025, <https://indicrf.org/article/geopolitics-and-ir/india-greece-relations-renavigating-the-cultural-and-civilisational-ties-in-the-21st-century>.

¹¹ Andrei Opaiț, Dan Davis, Michael Lee Brennan, *Roman Commerce and Elite Markets in the Eastern Mediterranean: A Case Study of Three 2nd-Century Shipwrecks off Knidos*, Ancient Port Antiquities, 2018, 309, <https://www.ancientportsantiquities.com/wp-content/uploads/Documents/ETUDESarchivees/Navires/Documents/KnidosShipwrecks-Opait2018.pdf>.

See Also:

Elizabeth S Greene, "Shipwrecks as Indices of Archaic Mediterranean Trade Networks." Chapter in *Maritime Networks in the Ancient Mediterranean World*, edited by Justin Leidwanger and Carl Knappett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018): 132-162.

deepen our understanding of trade routes, shipbuilding traditions, navigation, and patterns of cultural interaction that linked the Hellenistic world with the Indian subcontinent. Underwater archaeology, therefore, offers a tangible foundation for contemporary cultural diplomacy by enabling both countries to investigate a shared maritime past through joint scientific research.

Modern cultural cooperation tends to rest most comfortably on an established institutional foundation. Within this context, *“The Agreement Concerning Cultural Relations”* signed in 1961 created the formal framework for cooperation in education, archaeology, museums, literature, the arts, and cultural institutions.¹² Although it was negotiated decades before underwater archaeology emerged as a specialised discipline, the agreement recognised archaeology and heritage as important pillars of bilateral engagement and continues to provide the legal basis for institutional collaboration. This framework was significantly strengthened with the signing of *“The Cultural and Educational Exchange Programme”* (CEEP) for 2022-2026 in March 2022.¹³ The programme identifies archaeology, museums, archives, heritage conservation, education, and academic exchanges among its priority areas.¹⁴ Although underwater cultural heritage is not mentioned explicitly, its principal components fall squarely within the programme’s scope. Consequently, collaborative initiatives involving underwater archaeology, conservation science, museum development, digital documentation, professional training, and expert exchanges can be pursued through an existing bilateral mechanism rather than requiring a separate agreement. This institutional flexibility considerably lowers the administrative threshold for future cooperation.

The political momentum has further reinforced these opportunities. During Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s visit to Athens in August 2023, India and Greece elevated their relationship to a *“Strategic Partnership”*.¹⁵ The subsequent Joint Statement identified maritime affairs, shipping, connectivity, defence, culture, tourism, education, and people-to-people exchanges as important pillars of bilateral cooperation.¹⁶ While the visit’s official documents made no specific mention of UCH, the growing maritime scope of the partnership establishes a promising foundation for future cooperation in maritime archaeology and heritage conservation.

¹² Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs “Agreement Between the Government of India and the Government of Greece Concerning Cultural Relations”, Cultural Agreement, 22 June 1961, <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents?dtl/6710/Cultural+Agreement>.

¹³ Government of India, Ministry of Culture, International Cultural Relations, Cultural Exchange Programme, Greece “Cultural and Educational Exchange Programme Between the Government of the Republic of India and the Government of the Hellenic Republic for the Years 2022-2026”, <https://culture.gov.in/cultural-exchange-programme?title=Greece>.

¹⁴ Government of India, Ministry of Culture, International Cultural Relations, Cultural Exchange Programme, Greece “Cultural and Educational Exchange Programme Between the Government of the Republic of India and the Government of the Hellenic Republic for the Years 2022-2026”,

¹⁵ Press Trust of India (PTI), “PM Modi arrives in Greece on first prime ministerial visit in 40 years”, *The Hindu*, 25 Aug 2023, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/pm-modi-arrives-in-greece-on-first-prime-ministerial-visit-in-40-years/article67233920.ece>.

¹⁶ Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs, “India-Greece Joint Statement”, 25 Aug 2023, https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents?dtl/37043/IndiaGreece_Joint_Statement.

This trajectory continued during the state visit of Prime Minister of Greece, Mr Kyriakos Mitsotakis, to India in February 2024.¹⁷ Both leaders reaffirmed their commitment to strengthening collaboration across strategic, economic, technological, and cultural sectors while emphasising the importance of preserving ancient civilisations and expanding cooperation within UNESCO.¹⁸ These commitments are directly relevant to UCH because maritime archaeology naturally combines scientific research with heritage conservation, museum development, education, and international cultural engagement. The diplomatic framework required to support such collaboration is therefore already in place.

The policy priorities of both countries also display increasing convergence. Greece has long integrated maritime heritage into its national cultural policy, recognising the sea as a defining element of its historical identity. India has begun moving in a similar direction through initiatives such as Project MAUSAM, which seeks to reconnect countries of the Indian Ocean and the broader Indo-Pacific through shared maritime heritage, and the maritime policy acronym, “MAHASAGAR”, which broadens India's maritime engagement across the wider Indo-Pacific and the Global South. Although these policies differ in scope and purpose, both recognise that maritime history can contribute to contemporary diplomacy. UCH offers a practical mechanism through which these broader policy objectives can be translated into collaborative research, institutional partnerships, museum cooperation, and scientific exchanges.

The complementary strengths of both countries further reinforce the case for cooperation. Greece has developed internationally recognised expertise in underwater archaeology, conservation science, underwater museums, and heritage management. India, meanwhile, possesses an extensive coastline and one of the world's least explored underwater archaeological landscapes. The partnership is, therefore, based on complementarity rather than duplication. Greece contributes decades of institutional experience, while India offers opportunities for long-term archaeological research across a vast maritime space.

Viewed together, the historical relationship, existing legal instruments, political commitment, and complementary institutional capabilities provide a strong foundation for expanding bilateral cooperation in UCH. The discussion now turns to the institutional architecture that has enabled Greece to emerge as one of the world's leading practitioners of underwater cultural heritage management.

Greece's Legal and Institutional Framework for UCH

Greece's leadership in UCH is not simply the product of its exceptional archaeological wealth. It is equally the result of a governance framework that combines legal protection, specialised institutions, scientific capability, conservation infrastructure, and sustained public investment. These components have evolved over several decades into an integrated system that governs the

¹⁷ Press Trust of India (PTI), “Greek PM Mitsotakis to visit India on two-day state visit from February 21”, *The Hindu*, 17 Feb 2024, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/greek-pm-mitsotakis-to-visit-india-on-two-day-state-visit-from-february-21/article67857476.ece>.

¹⁸ “India-Greece Joint Statement”, Prime Minister of the Hellenic Republic, 22 Feb 2024, <https://www.primeminister.gr/en/2024/02/22/33735>.

entire lifecycle of underwater heritage, from the discovery of submerged sites to their documentation, conservation, interpretation, and public dissemination. As the previous section argued, it is this institutional maturity, rather than archaeological abundance alone, that makes Greece a valuable comparative case for India.

Greece is not a State Party to the “2001 UNESCO Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage”. Nevertheless, it has developed a comprehensive domestic legal framework for the protection of underwater cultural heritage through “Law 3028/2002 on the Protection of Antiquities and Cultural Heritage in General”.¹⁹ The legislation recognises antiquities as part of Greece’s cultural heritage and places their protection under the responsibility of the State. It applies equally to archaeological remains located on land and beneath the sea, ensuring that submerged heritage receives the same legal protection as terrestrial monuments. Although enacted independently of the UNESCO Convention,²⁰ the law reflects many of its underlying principles, including the preference for *in situ* preservation wherever feasible, scientific investigation under State supervision, and the treatment of UCH as a public resource whose archaeological significance takes precedence over commercial exploitation.

The implementation of these legal principles is entrusted to the “Ephorate of Underwater Antiquities” (EUA), a Special Regional Service within the “Hellenic Ministry of Culture”. Established in 1976, the Ephorate exercises nationwide jurisdiction over underwater heritage across Greek territorial seas and internal waters.²¹ Unlike many countries where responsibilities are dispersed among regional administrations or multiple agencies, Greece has concentrated underwater archaeology governance within a single specialised institution. This arrangement ensured institutional continuity, uniform standards, and the gradual accumulation of specialised expertise over nearly five decades.

The Ephorate’s mandate extends well beyond archaeological excavation. It is responsible for locating, surveying, excavating, documenting, conserving, registering, and monitoring, of submerged cultural heritage throughout Greece. Its jurisdiction encompasses prehistoric settlements, ancient ports, harbour infrastructure, shipwrecks from different historical periods, submerged architectural remains, and aircraft that acquire archaeological significance after fifty years.²² The service also evaluates proposals for underwater research, regulates archaeological investigations undertaken by Greek and foreign institutions, supervises field operations, and reviews development activities that may affect underwater heritage.²³ By combining regulatory

¹⁹ Greece GR228, “Law 3028/2002 on the Protection of Antiquities and Cultural Heritage in General”, World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO), <https://www.wipo.int/wipolex/en/text/187586>.

²⁰ Joel B Gilman “Sarah Dromgoole, Ed. The Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage: National Perspectives in Light of The UNESCO Convention 2001”, *International Journal of Cultural Property* 14, no. 1 (2007): 121–125. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S094073910707004X>.

²¹ Hellenic Republic, Ministry of Culture, Ephorate of Underwater Antiquities, “Description-Responsibilities”, Ministry of Culture, Hellenic Republic, <https://www.culture.gov.gr/en/ministry/SitePages/viewyphresia.aspx?iID=1369>.

²² Hellenic Republic, Ministry of Culture, Ephorate of Underwater Antiquities, “Description-Responsibilities”, Ministry of Culture, Hellenic Republic.

²³ Ephorate of Underwater Antiquities (EUA), “Description – Responsibilities”, Ministry of Culture, Hellenic Republic, <https://www.culture.gov.gr/en/ministry/SitePages/viewyphresia.aspx?iID=1369>.

authority with scientific responsibility, it functions as both Greece's principal archaeological institution for underwater heritage and its central administrative authority.

A defining characteristic of the Greek system is its emphasis on documentation as a management tool rather than merely a record of excavation. Given the scale of archaeological resources preserved beneath Greek waters, comprehensive excavation of every site is neither feasible nor desirable. The Ephorate therefore prioritises systematic surveys, site inventories, condition assessments, and long-term monitoring. Regular surveys help identify previously undocumented sites, evaluate the condition of known sites, and detect threats arising from coastal development, unauthorised diving, looting, erosion, or environmental change. This preventive approach allows archaeological intervention to be guided by conservation priorities rather than by accidental discoveries.

Documentation is supported by a sustained programme of digital archiving. Through its *“Department of Archaeological Work, Documentation, Publication and Archive”*, the Greek Ministry of Culture has digitised excavation reports, survey records, drawings, photographs, and associated archival material accumulated over several decades.²⁴ Digitisation protects fragile records, strengthens institutional memory, facilitates scholarly research, and enables future archaeological work to build upon existing evidence rather than duplicate it. It also ensures that archaeological knowledge remains accessible even when sites cannot be excavated or revisited.

Scientific capability has expanded alongside these documentation efforts. Underwater archaeology requires expertise that extends beyond conventional archaeological practice, including scientific diving, marine surveying, conservation science, remotely operated technologies, and digital recording. While the Ministry of Culture provides institutional leadership, these capabilities have been strengthened through long-term collaboration with Greek universities, foreign archaeological schools, research institutes, and international partners. These partnerships have enabled the continuous adoption of new methodologies while ensuring that archaeological investigations remain grounded in scientific standards.

Sustaining such capacities requires significant financial investment. Underwater archaeology demands research vessels, diving systems, conservation laboratories, specialised equipment, and multidisciplinary teams, making long-term projects particularly resource-intensive. Greece has addressed this challenge through a diversified funding model in which public funding is supplemented by philanthropic foundations, universities, international research organisations, and carefully regulated private sponsorship. Importantly, these partnerships operate within a framework in which the Ministry of Culture retains full archaeological and regulatory control.

The construction of the Ephorate's modern conservation laboratories, with support from the *“Aikaterini Laskaridis Foundation”*,²⁵ illustrates the role of philanthropy in strengthening national conservation capacity. Similarly, the excavation of the Antikythera Shipwreck, undertaken in

²⁴ “History”, National Archive of Monuments, <https://haas.culture.gov.gr/en/history>.

²⁵ “Conservation Lab”, Aikaterini Laskaridis Foundation, <https://www.laskaridisfoundation.org/en/conservation-lab/>.

partnership with the “*Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution*” and supported by several philanthropic and corporate sponsors,²⁶ demonstrates how complex underwater archaeological projects can be sustained through long-term institutional collaboration without compromising scientific independence or State oversight.

Greece also recognises that legal protection alone cannot ensure the long-term survival of underwater heritage. Public understanding forms an equally important pillar of conservation. Alongside exhibitions, educational programmes, and digital platforms, Greece is developing the “*National Museum of Underwater Antiquities*”,²⁷ which will provide a permanent institution dedicated to interpreting the country’s submerged heritage. Rather than functioning solely as a repository of recovered artefacts, the museum seeks to explain the broader maritime history of Greece and the scientific methods through which underwater archaeology reconstructs the past. This emphasis on interpretation reflects a broader institutional philosophy that informed public engagement strengthens long-term heritage protection.²⁸

Taken together, Greece’s experience demonstrates that effective underwater heritage management depends on the interaction of complementary institutions rather than isolated initiatives. Legislation provides legal certainty, the Ephorate ensures administrative continuity and scientific oversight, systematic documentation supports evidence-based management, diversified funding sustains long-term research, and museums connect archaeology with society. The strength of the Greek model, therefore, lies in institutional integration rather than any single policy instrument. For India, this experience reinforces an important lesson. Building a resilient UCH ecosystem requires legal authority, specialised institutions, scientific capability, conservation infrastructure, and public engagement, to function as parts of a single governance architecture rather than as parallel initiatives. This provides the basis for identifying the institutional reforms that are most relevant to India’s own maritime heritage landscape.

Lessons for India

Greece’s experience demonstrates that effective UCH governance is built through institutions rather than individual archaeological discoveries. India’s maritime geography, constitutional structure, and administrative arrangements differ substantially from those of Greece; yet, many of the institutional principles underpinning the Greek system can be adapted to Indian conditions. The objective should not be to replicate the Greek model, but to strengthen India’s

²⁶ “Partners”, Return to Antikythera, <https://antikythera.org/participants/partners/>.

Read Also:

Maya Wei-Haas, “Antikythera Shipwreck Yields New Cache of Ancient Treasures”, *Smithsonian Magazine*, 29 Sep 2015, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/antikythera-shipwreck-yields-new-cache-ancient-treasures-180956775/>.

²⁷ Duncan Howitt-Marshall, “A Maritime Legacy Reborn: Greece’s New Underwater Antiquities Museum”, *Greece Is*, 23 Jan 2025, <https://www.greece-is.com/maritime-legacy-reborn-greeces-new-underwater-antiquities-museum/>.

²⁸ Hellenic Ministry of Culture, Directorate of Studies and Conduction of Technical Works in Museums and Cultural Building, “Building infrastructure: The organization of the Museum of Underwater Antiquities: rehabilitation of the Silo industrial building and construction of new building infrastructures”, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations, <https://sdgs.un.org/partnerships/building-infrastructure-organization-museum-underwater-antiquities-rehabilitation-silo>.

existing institutional architecture by addressing gaps in coordination, regulation, conservation, documentation, and public engagement. Five priorities emerge from this comparison.

1. Reposition the Underwater Archaeology Wing as India's National Nodal Authority for UCH

The most significant institutional lesson concerns governance. At present, responsibility for underwater archaeology in India is dispersed among the “Archaeological Survey of India” (ASI), the “National Institute of Ocean Technology” (NIOT), the “National Institute of Oceanography” (NIO), state archaeology departments, maritime agencies, and other scientific organisations. While this arrangement has generated important discoveries, it has also produced fragmented documentation, inconsistent field methodologies, and overlapping institutional responsibilities.

Rather than establishing a new organisation (which is, anyhow, not feasible), India should strengthen the “Underwater Archaeology Wing” (UAW) of the ASI by formally designating it as the country’s nodal authority for UCH. Its mandate should extend beyond excavation and must include maintaining a “*National Register of Underwater Cultural Heritage*”, issuing technical standards for underwater surveys and documentation, accrediting archaeological diving teams, evaluating research proposals submitted by Indian and foreign institutions, and coordinating archaeological clearances for projects involving seabed intervention.

To support this role, the Ministry of Culture needs to constitute a “National Underwater Cultural Heritage Coordination Committee”, chaired by the Director General of the ASI and comprising representatives from NIOT, NIO, the Indian Navy’s Hydrographic Department, the Indian Coast Guard, the National Maritime Heritage Complex, and selected state archaeology departments. Meeting biannually, the Committee should review ongoing projects, identify priority survey areas, coordinate resource allocation, and establish common operating procedures for underwater archaeological investigations.

2. Introduce Underwater Archaeological Impact Assessments for Maritime Infrastructure Projects

India’s expanding maritime economy is increasing human activity across the seabed through port modernisation, dredging, offshore renewable energy, the installation of submarine cables, the development of coastal infrastructure, and offshore exploration. These activities often take place in areas where archaeological remains may exist, yet underwater heritage rarely features in project planning.

Instead of treating archaeology as a post-discovery exercise, India needs to incorporate “Underwater Archaeological Impact Assessments” (UAIA) into the statutory approval process for projects involving dredging, reclamation, offshore construction, seabed mining, pipeline installation, and submarine cable laying within identified archaeological sensitivity zones.

Rather than creating an independent clearance mechanism, these assessments should be integrated into existing approvals issued under the Coastal Regulation Zone framework and environmental clearance procedures. The ASI should function as the technical authority responsible for reviewing archaeological assessments, while the Indian Navy (the Chief Hydrographer), NIOT, and NIO, provide hydrographic and geophysical support wherever required. This would shift India's approach from rescue archaeology to preventive heritage management.

3. Develop a National Digital Inventory of UCH

One of Greece's greatest institutional strengths lies in treating documentation as a continuous process rather than a by-product of excavation. India possesses four decades of underwater archaeological records generated by the ASI, NIOT, NIO, universities, and state agencies. Much of this information remains dispersed across institutional archives, technical reports, unpublished datasets, and project records.

The ASI needs to establish a "*National Digital Inventory of Underwater Cultural Heritage*" that consolidates archaeological reports, side-scan sonar imagery, multibeam bathymetric data, dive logs, photogrammetric models, conservation records, remotely operated vehicle footage, and archival documentation within a single GIS-enabled platform. Rather than functioning solely as an archival repository, the platform should support site monitoring, heritage risk assessments, maritime spatial planning, and future archaeological research. Access should follow a tiered model, allowing sensitive site coordinates to remain restricted while making non-sensitive datasets available to researchers, universities, and authorised government agencies. Such a platform would preserve institutional memory, reduce duplication of surveys, and support evidence-based decision-making.

4. Build Conservation Capacity and Capability Before Expanding Excavation

Recovering artefacts from the seabed represents only the beginning of the archaeological process. Waterlogged timber, iron, bronze, ceramics, glass, and organic materials require immediate scientific treatment after recovery. Without specialised conservation, excavation can itself accelerate deterioration.

Instead of expanding the number of underwater excavations, India should first strengthen its post-excavation capability by establishing a "*National Centre for Conservation of Underwater Archaeological Materials*" under the ASI. The Centre should include dedicated facilities for desalination, polyethylene glycol treatment of waterlogged timber, electrolytic stabilisation of metallic artefacts, climate-controlled storage, and scientific material analysis.

Beyond conservation, the Centre should function as India's principal training institution for marine conservators, archaeological scientists, and conservation engineers, working in partnership with NIOT, the Indian Navy, the Indian Coast Guard, the Indian Institute of

Science, the National Research Laboratory for Conservation, and university departments specialising in heritage science. Excavation without corresponding conservation infrastructure risks transforming archaeological recovery into archaeological loss.

5. Make Underwater Heritage Visible Through Maritime Consciousness

Perhaps the most important lesson for India from Greece is that underwater archaeology cannot remain confined to specialist institutions. Long-term protection ultimately depends upon public understanding.

India has already invested significantly in maritime heritage through the “National Maritime Heritage Complex” (NMHC) at Lothal and the renewed emphasis on “*cultural connectivity*” under Project MAUSAM. Underwater archaeology should become an integral component of these initiatives rather than being presented as an independent subject.

Instead of immediately pursuing underwater museums, a phased approach would be more appropriate. Existing sites such as Dwarka, Bet Dwarka, Poompuhar, and Goa, should first be equipped with interpretation centres combining archaeological artefacts, high-resolution seabed imagery, three-dimensional reconstructions, virtual dives, and interactive digital displays explaining excavation methods and maritime history. Once site stability, conservation requirements, and visitor safety, have all been comprehensively assessed, selected locations may be considered for controlled underwater heritage trails operated jointly by the ASI, state governments, and certified diving operators. This approach would improve public understanding without compromising archaeological integrity.

Future Areas of India-Greece Cooperation in Underwater Cultural Heritage

India and Greece have already established the diplomatic and institutional foundations required for cooperation in underwater cultural heritage (UCH). As discussed in the previous section, both countries possess complementary strengths. Greece offers decades of experience in underwater archaeology, conservation, and heritage governance, while India provides an extensive and relatively underexplored maritime archaeological landscape. The next phase of cooperation should therefore move beyond diplomatic intent and focus on institution-led collaboration that produces measurable outcomes in research, technology, conservation, capacity building and capability enhancement. Rather than pursuing numerous standalone initiatives, cooperation should be anchored in a few long-term programmes jointly implemented by institutions in both countries. A representative sample follows:

A. Institutional Partnership between the ASI and the EUA

The priority should be the establishment of a formal Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) and Greece's Ephorate of Underwater Antiquities (EUA). Although the “Cultural and Educational Exchange Programme (2022–2026)” already provides an enabling framework, we are already at the end of this stipulated period, and a dedicated institutional agreement would better translate broad diplomatic commitments into operational cooperation.

The MoU should establish annual Director-level consultations between the “Underwater Archaeology Wing” (UAW) of the ASI and the EUA, reciprocal attachment programmes for archaeologists and conservators, joint field training during excavation seasons, and the exchange of technical manuals on excavation, conservation, site monitoring, and archaeological documentation. It should also provide a mechanism for sharing expertise whenever either country undertakes large-scale underwater excavations or conservation projects.

B. Establish an India-Greece Centre of Excellence for Underwater Cultural Heritage Technologies

One of Greece’s most innovative contributions to underwater archaeology has been its ability to integrate heritage research with technological development. India should build on this experience by establishing an *“India-Greece Centre of Excellence for Underwater Cultural Heritage Technologies”* under the next phase of the “Cultural and Educational Exchange Programme”.

The Centre should be jointly coordinated by the ASI and the EUA, with technical participation from the National Institute of Ocean Technology (NIOT), the Hellenic Centre for Marine Research, and partner universities from both countries. Instead of functioning as just another academic institution, it must operate as a collaborative research platform focusing on autonomous underwater vehicles, artificial intelligence-assisted seabed mapping, underwater photogrammetry, digital twins of archaeological sites, conservation technologies, and long-term site monitoring.

Each year, this Centre should identify one pilot project in India and one in Greece, allowing researchers to jointly test and validate new documentation and conservation technologies under different maritime conditions. Such a structure would ensure that collaboration remains project-driven rather than conference-driven.

C. Undertake Joint Research on Indo-Mediterranean Maritime Networks

Much of the maritime interaction between India and the Mediterranean survives beneath the sea. Yet archaeological investigations on either side have largely been conducted independently.

It is high time that this infirmity is remedied. India and Greece must establish a long-term collaborative research programme examining archaeological evidence associated with ancient Indo-Mediterranean trade. Rather than limiting cooperation to comparative studies, multidisciplinary teams should jointly investigate shipwrecks, anchors, harbour infrastructure, amphorae, ballast stones, and cargo assemblages using common recording standards.

The programme should also develop interoperable GIS databases, shared metadata standards, and compatible digital recording protocols, ensuring that archaeological datasets generated in one country can be compared directly with those produced in the other. This would facilitate comparative research on trade routes, maritime technologies, and patterns of cultural exchange across the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean.

D. Develop Museum and Public Outreach Partnerships

Archaeological cooperation must be accompanied by collaboration in public interpretation. Greece's proposed "National Museum of Underwater Antiquities" and India's "National Maritime Heritage Complex" at Lothal provide natural institutional partners for this purpose.

Rather than focusing only on artefact exchanges, both institutions must collaborate on joint exhibitions exploring ancient maritime connections between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. Curator-exchange programmes, bilingual digital exhibitions, travelling exhibitions, and shared educational content, taken in aggregate, would allow archaeological research to reach wider audiences while reinforcing the cultural dimension of the "India-Greece Strategic Partnership".

Digital collaboration must receive particular attention. Jointly developed "virtual exhibitions" and three-dimensional reconstructions of shipwrecks and submerged ports would make underwater heritage accessible to audiences (who may never otherwise be able to visit archaeological sites), while reducing pressure on fragile underwater locations.

Conclusion

UCH has moved beyond being a specialised area of archaeology. It has become an important component of heritage governance, maritime identity, and cultural diplomacy. Greece illustrates how sustained institutional development can transform scattered archaeological resources into a well-managed national asset. The significance of its experience lies not in offering a model to be replicated, but in demonstrating the value of long-term institutional continuity, scientific capability, and interdisciplinary collaboration.

For India, the challenge is no longer one of archaeological potential but of institutional consolidation. Strengthening governance, improving documentation, expanding conservation capacity and capability and integrating underwater heritage into the country's broader maritime agenda will determine how effectively this legacy is preserved for future generations.

The growing India-Greece Strategic Partnership provides an opportunity to advance these objectives through collaborative research, technological innovation, museum partnerships, and professional exchanges. If pursued with sustained institutional commitment, such cooperation can contribute not only to the protection of underwater cultural heritage but also to a deeper understanding of the maritime connections that have linked the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean for centuries.

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