

# Underwater Archaeology Film Track Debuts at 7<sup>th</sup> Annual Arkhaios Cultural Heritage and Archaeology Film Festival in Columbia, South Carolina

By James Spirek

For a world covered in approximately three-quarters of water, it's not surprising that humans have a rich and long relationship with traversing, exploiting, and living alongside the oceans, lakes, and rivers that cover the Earth's surface. Beneath these diverse waterbodies lies several millennia worth of the physical record of humankind preserved in prehistoric and historic shorelines, shipwrecks, inundated cities, harbor works, and other remnants of our past.

The discipline of underwater archaeology focuses on this human connection with the watery domain through the study of these archaeological remains to learn more about past human cultures and behavior. An important aspect of the Maritime Research Division's (MRD) mission is to promote an awareness and appreciation of underwater archaeological sites and therefore agreed to sponsor and organize the inaugural underwater archaeology film track at the 2019 7<sup>th</sup> Annual Arkhaios Cultural Heritage and Archaeology Film Festival in Columbia, SC.

The MRD has worked in the past with Jean Guilleux, founder and director of the film festival, to identify and present films with an underwater archaeology

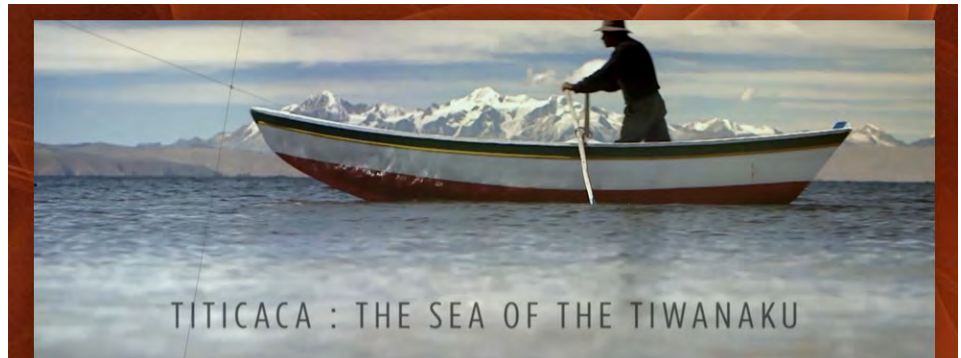


Figure 2: Arkhaios promotional photo for the film, *Titicaca, the Sea of the Tiwanaku*. (Photo courtesy of 7th Arkhaios Cultural Heritage and Archaeology Film Festival)

theme. Past films focused on documenting the remains of an American whaler sunk off the Hawaiian Islands in the early 1800s and recovering the remains of the scuttled ironclad CSS *Georgia* from the Savannah River. Wanting to provide a more sustained underwater archaeology track, Jean suggested joining forces to identify, select, and present several films on this topic. For this initial track, three films were selected for screening that featured two shipwrecks and a pre-Incan civilization in the Andes. Opening night in Columbia was devoted to launching the new Underwater Archaeology Film Track featuring the first two films and the last film showing later in the festival, which unfortunately due to time constraints was

not shown to the audience.

The first film screened was *The Lions of Lissa*, that centered on the remains of the Italian armored battleship *Re d'Italia* that sank during the 1866 naval battle of Lissa in the Adriatic Sea (Figure 1). The battleship was one of the casualties of the world's first armored fleet action that occurred during the process of Italian unification in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The film was a blend of ethnography, archaeology, history, mythology and underwater exploration—all combined to form an imaginative journey of the people and naval history of the region. Despite the limitations of working at a depth of over 380 feet, the film maker and his crew of technical divers managed to create a surreal and evocative underwater landscape centered on the remains of the shipwreck. Before screening the film, a SKYPE interview with the director of the movie, Nicolò Bongiorno, from his home in Italy, provided an opportunity to ask questions about his inspiration for choosing this topic and the challenges, especially on choreographing divers, lights, and cameras, on filming the deep-water shipwreck. The film was also shown at the 2019 Trieste Film Festival and was a Winner at the 2019 Firenze Archeofilm festival.

The second film shown on opening night was entitled, *Titicaca, the Sea of*



Figure 1: Scene of a diver on the wreckage of the *Re d'Italia* from the film *The Lions of Lissa*. (Photo courtesy of 7th Arkhaios Cultural Heritage and Archaeology Film Festival)



Figure 3: Arkhaios promotional photo for the film, *Deep Water Investigations—The Battleship Danton Mystery*. (Photo courtesy of 7th Arkhaios Cultural Heritage and Archaeology Film Festival)

the *Tiwanaku*, that focused on a team of Belgian and Peruvian underwater archaeologists exploring Lake Titicaca, high in the Andes, that straddles the present-day borders of Bolivia and Peru (Figure 2). The underwater archaeologists were interested in shedding light on the Tiwanaku, a civilization that pre-dated the Incas, who held this lake sacred. And while the team was focused on the sacred nature of the lake evidenced through offerings and ceremonial artifacts, they also uncovered aspects of its secular use supported by artifacts revealing daily life alongside the lake. The investigatory techniques shown in the film, of divers and excavation are common practices to uncover evidence lying submerged on the bottom. Interestingly, while the first film highlighted the technical nature of diving due to the depth of the site, the divers encountered in this film must deal with the opposite—height. The setting of the lake high in the Andes presented a different set of problems to solve and address to ensure safe diving. In addition to using traditional techniques to explore this past civilization, they also relied on Computer Graphic Imagery technology to explain the ruins and development of the Tiwanaku alongside the lake. An important aspect to the film was the archaeologists working alongside and showing cultural sensitivity to the local population and their belief system.

The last scheduled film of the Underwater Archaeology trilogy was called, *Deep Water Investigations—The Battleship Danton Mystery*, that focused

on the World War I French battleship *Danton* sunk in the Mediterranean. The battleship was discovered during a submerged cultural resource survey and subsequently investigated by a team of French underwater archaeologists (Figure 3). This investigation required state of the art undersea technology to access the shipwreck at a 3,280-foot depth. The film blended archaeological data with historical information as the underwater archaeologists worked to solve the identity of the shipwreck—identified as the World War I French battleship *Danton* torpedoed by a German U-boat in 1917. Festival attendees were disappointed that, due to time constraints, the film was not shown, but perhaps, it will get a second chance for viewing at the 8<sup>th</sup> Annual film festival in 2020.

The film festival concluded with a live-streaming award ceremony to

recognize those films having special merits as selected by the awards jury and audience (Figure 4). The award for Best Underwater Archaeology Film went to *The Lions of Lissa*, particularly acknowledging its excellent land and underwater cinematography and focus on the ethnography of the maritime heritage of the region. The other two underwater archaeology selections each received Honorable Mentions for Best Underwater Archaeology Films, with, *Deep Water Investigations—The Battleship Danton Mystery*, also receiving an Honorable Mention for Best Archaeology Film.

With this new Underwater Archaeology Track, the MRD and organizers want to provide a sustained effort at the film festival to explore the diversity of topics of study by underwater archaeologists. This inaugural offering featuring three films documenting a shipwreck of a battleship sunk in the late 1860s in the Adriatic Sea, exploring the sacred and secular uses of a lake high in the Andes by a pre-Incan civilization, and investigating a battleship from World War I in the Mediterranean paves the way for other intriguing films exploring the many and varied means humans have coped with our aqueous world. We look forward to arranging next year's slate of films for the festival. For more information about upcoming film festival programs please visit the website: [www.arkhaiosfilmfestival.org](http://www.arkhaiosfilmfestival.org).



Figure 4: Jean Guilleux and James Spirek presenting underwater archaeology track awards. (Photo courtesy of 7th Arkhaios Cultural Heritage and Archaeology Film Festival)