

# SPLASHCOS, a European network on Submerged Prehistory

## Increasing interest in underwater Stone Age

The prehistory of the European continental shelf appears to be a matter of increasing interest and cooperation among European scholars. Two years ago, the pan-European Deukalion group was established under the direction of Nic Flemming from the UK and Dimitris Sakellariou from Greece. The aim of this group is the lobbying for major research funding for the study of submerged sites and landscapes on the European continental shelf. The cross-European interest in submerged Prehistory became even more visible at the meeting of the European Association of Archaeologists in September 2009, where a one-day session dedicated to inundated Prehistory was one of the best attended sessions of the whole meeting.

In November 2009, scholars of Stone Age heritage on the continental shelf established a formal network, funded by the EU. It is set up for the development of international collaboration among prehistorians, underwater archaeologists, marine geophysicists, environmental scientists, heritage agencies, and commercial and industrial organisations operating on the European seafloor. This has become possible thanks to a grant, given via the COST Organization, which promotes

*70 scholars from all parts of Europe assembled in York 2010 for the purpose of presenting for the first time ever a comprehensive status on submerged settlement and landscapes all the way around the coastline of the continent.*  
Photo: Dimitris Sakellariou.



cooperation in science and technology ([http://www.cost.esf.org/domains\\_actions/isch/Actions/TD0902-Submerged-Pre-historic-Archaeology-and-Landscapes-of-the-Continental-Shelf-End-date-May-2013](http://www.cost.esf.org/domains_actions/isch/Actions/TD0902-Submerged-Pre-historic-Archaeology-and-Landscapes-of-the-Continental-Shelf-End-date-May-2013)). The COST Action runs to 30 September 2013. Funds are dedicated to meetings, workshops, conferences, visits to laboratories, training programmes, technical and scientific publications, and dissemination to a wider public. At present, the number of nations participating in the action has reached 19. These are: Belgium, Croatia, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain, and United Kingdom.

### **Focus on Early Prehistory**

The network is concerned with more than one-third of the European continent that was flooded, when the glaciers of the last Ice Age melted. In principle, the whole 1-million year history of human occupation of Europe

is within the scope of the COST action. In practice, we expect to focus primarily on the time range 110,000 to 6000 years ago – i.e. the period of low sea-level in connection with the last Ice Age, spanning parts of the Middle Palaeolithic, the whole of the Upper Palaeolithic and the Mesolithic, and parts of the Neolithic.

It is assumed that the drowned lowlands and shorelines of the present-day European seafloor hosted some of the highest human population concentrations of the continent. These landscapes were bordered by the continent's most productive environments for fishing and shellfish collection, and their generally very fertile soils presented particularly attractive territories to Stone Age hunters, gatherers, and farmers. Since

*The network has a strong focus on involving young researchers. Here chair Geoff Bailey in dialogue with a group of Early Stage Researchers. York, March 2010. Photo: Dimitris Sakellariou.*



transportation by boat was essential at least as far back as the final part of the Upper Palaeolithic (Fischer 1996), these landscapes must also have served as effective corridors for dispersal of populations, information, and trade items (Bailey 2004). Moreover, these regions were probably even more important for human settlement during the Ice Ages than today because the European hinterlands would have been colder, more arid and less attractive to human settlement than is the case under modern climatic conditions.

The archaeological sources on Europe's early Prehistory must, therefore, be considered highly biased and fragmentary as long as large and unique parts of it are still lying unexplored on the continental shelf. The COST action is a first pan-European attempt at changing this situation.

The steadily growing evidence on submerged Mesolithic settlement produced through diving investigations in the western Baltic (e.g. Pedersen *et al.* 1997; Skaarup & Grøn 2004; Lübke 2004; Andersen 2009) has been a fundamental inspiration for the establishment of the network. It is assumed by the organisers of the COST action that similar richness in early prehistoric material is available in many other places on the European continental shelf. Scattered observations in support of this hypothesis do in fact already exist from coastal waters around Europe (Benjamin *et al.* in preparation). One of the aims of the action is to take initiatives in fund-raising for archaeological surveying and testing of hitherto unexplored areas of the continental shelf suspected to have special potential for finding remains of early prehistoric activity.

### **The SPLASHCOS organisation**

At the kick-off meeting in Brussels in November 2009, Geoff Bailey from UK and Dimitris Sakellariou from Greece were elected as chair and vice-chair respectively of the action. In addition, the following four working groups were established (Chair in brackets):

WG1. Archaeological Data and Interpretations (Anders Fischer, Denmark)

WG2. Environmental Data and Reconstructions (Jan Harff, Germany)

WG3. Technology, Technical Resources and Training (Ole Grøn, Denmark)

WG4. Commercial Collaboration and Outreach (Julie Satchell, UK).

### **Activities and application**

Some of the activities of the Work Groups are especially relating to Denmark, the focus area of the present Newsletter. This, for instance, applies to the pan-European digital archive on early prehistoric finds and sites from the seabed for which WG1 is to establish the basis. More than half of the presently known prehistoric sites from the European continental shelf are apparently recorded in the digital archive of the Heritage Agency of Denmark ([www.kulturarv.dk/databaser/fund-og-fortidsminder](http://www.kulturarv.dk/databaser/fund-og-fortidsminder); Fischer 2004). For the purpose of establishing such a pan-European archive, the group will most probably need additional members from countries not yet represented in the network.

WG3 is engaged in organising research and training missions for Early Stage Researchers of the network. Visits to submerged Stone Age habitation sites and relevant archaeological institutions are expected to take place in Denmark, the UK, and possibly Israel in 2010. In addition, the possibility of running an international field school on the practice of underwater Stone Age investigation in Denmark in 2011 is looked into.

Further information can be found at the SPLASHCOS website: <http://php.york.ac.uk/projects/splashcos>. Individuals interested in applying for membership of the working groups can make contact via the website.

*Anders Fischer*



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