

# What are you looking at?



Editors:

Jaime Almansa Sánchez & Elena Papagiannopoulou



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*Online Journal in Public Archaeology*

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## **In Search of Atlantis: Underwater Tourism between Myth and Reality**

Marxiano MELOTTI

### **Abstract**

*In post-modernity, the millenarian search for mythical sites has become a tourist attraction and the process of culturalization of consumption has created and is creating a new global heritage. Places already celebrated for leisure have been reinvented as mythical and archaeological sites. A good example is the Atlantis Hotel on Paradise Island, in the Bahamas. Here, Plato's mythical Atlantis has inspired an underwater pseudo-archaeological reconstruction of a civilization that most likely had never existed. The myth-making force of the sea transforms the false ruins and affects how they are perceived. This is quite consistent with a tourism where authenticity has lost its traditional value and sensory gratifications have replaced it. A more recent Atlantis Hotel in Dubai and another one under construction in China show the vitality of this myth and the strength of the thematization of consumption. Other examples confirm this tendency in even more grotesque ways. At the core of this process there is the body: the tourist's and the consumer's body. The post-modernity has enhanced its use as tool and icon of consumption.*

### **Keywords**

*Atlantis, tourism, diving, archaeology, post-modern society, Bahamas, Bimini, Dubai*

### **The search for mythical sites**

"Welcome to Atlantis!". It must be very gratifying to be greeted with these words while a smiling bellhop hastens to take your luggage. For centuries, humanity has been avidly searching for the lost continent, above and below the sea, from the abysses of the Azores to the volcanic cliffs of Santorini. It is truly rewarding to find it without any trouble, disembarking comfortably from an airplane or a yacht. After all, modernity has some advantages! Myths, even the loveliest ones, like Atlantis, are now commodities that can be sold like any other, without embarrassment or hesitation, and unfortunately often en masse and without imagination. One

can certainly think that selling a trip to Atlantis requires much courage. But voyages in search of mythical sites have long been an important part of tourism (Casson 1974; Leed 1991; Melotti 2007a), from the pilgrimages to the plain of Troy in ancient Greek and Roman times to the Grand Tour of Italy by English and German travellers seeking the rocks of the Sirens or the entrance to Avernus. Atlantean tourism is merely the latest step in a long process of transformation of a myth that has been with us since the times of Plato. Its metamorphoses testify to its vitality and to the tendency of all myths to conform to new cultural contexts. Contemporary society, ever more 'liquid' (Bauman 2000, 2005) in its destructured nature (open as it is to virtuality and digitization and characterized by a profoundly iconized visual culture), feeds on myths, whose immaterial quality seems quite apt to it.

### **A new heritage beyond the glass: The Atlantis Hotel**

The Atlantis Hotel on Paradise Island, in the Bahamas, is a typical example of post-modern culture. Indeed, it is a theme hotel where leisure culture is accompanied by the pleasure of the historical and archaeological reconstruction or, better, since we are dealing with Atlantis, of the pseudo-archaeological invention of a civilization that most likely never existed. But we live in an age when the concept of authenticity has undergone a thorough re-examination and has increasingly become more relative (Knudsen and Waade 2010; Wang 1999). Authenticity and pastness "are constructed in each present" and "they are not properties inherent in any material form" (Holtorf 2005: 130). Media culture and digitalization have contributed to make acceptable new hybrid forms of authenticity and heritage mixing present and past, culture and market, 'real' finds and reconstructions, material objects and immaterial elements, such as lights, sounds and perfumes (Melotti 2011; 2014).

In Western societies, which show a strong blend of consumptions and emotions and suffer a deep loss of historical knowledge, authenticity and heritage seem to acquire a new emotional and experiential character. Paradoxically, objects and relics are no longer necessary, since authenticity and heritage can be based even on mere atmosphere. In such a context the relations between solid,

material, concrete aspects, such as stones and other archaeological elements, and immaterial aspects are more and more 'liquid'. We are facing a new age of easy and fast mythopoeic production where heritage is not only continuously reshaped but becomes a useful instrument of mediation between the needs of the market and those of the individuals. The 'thematization' assures the effectiveness of this process. Thus, one can provide an archaeological foundation to a myth, introducing it into the material world of history. Tourism, like myth, gives life to dreams and illusions (see Strachan 2002 for the Caribbean area). Themed spaces of consumption, such as hotels, complete the process. This way the lost world of Atlantis can come to life with a solid archaeological aspect, which does not imply the presence of any real archaeological object but is able to assure the effectiveness of the experience of leisure and consumption. During your stay, you may consume the atmosphere of the myth and so you directly experience the myth, which acquires reality.



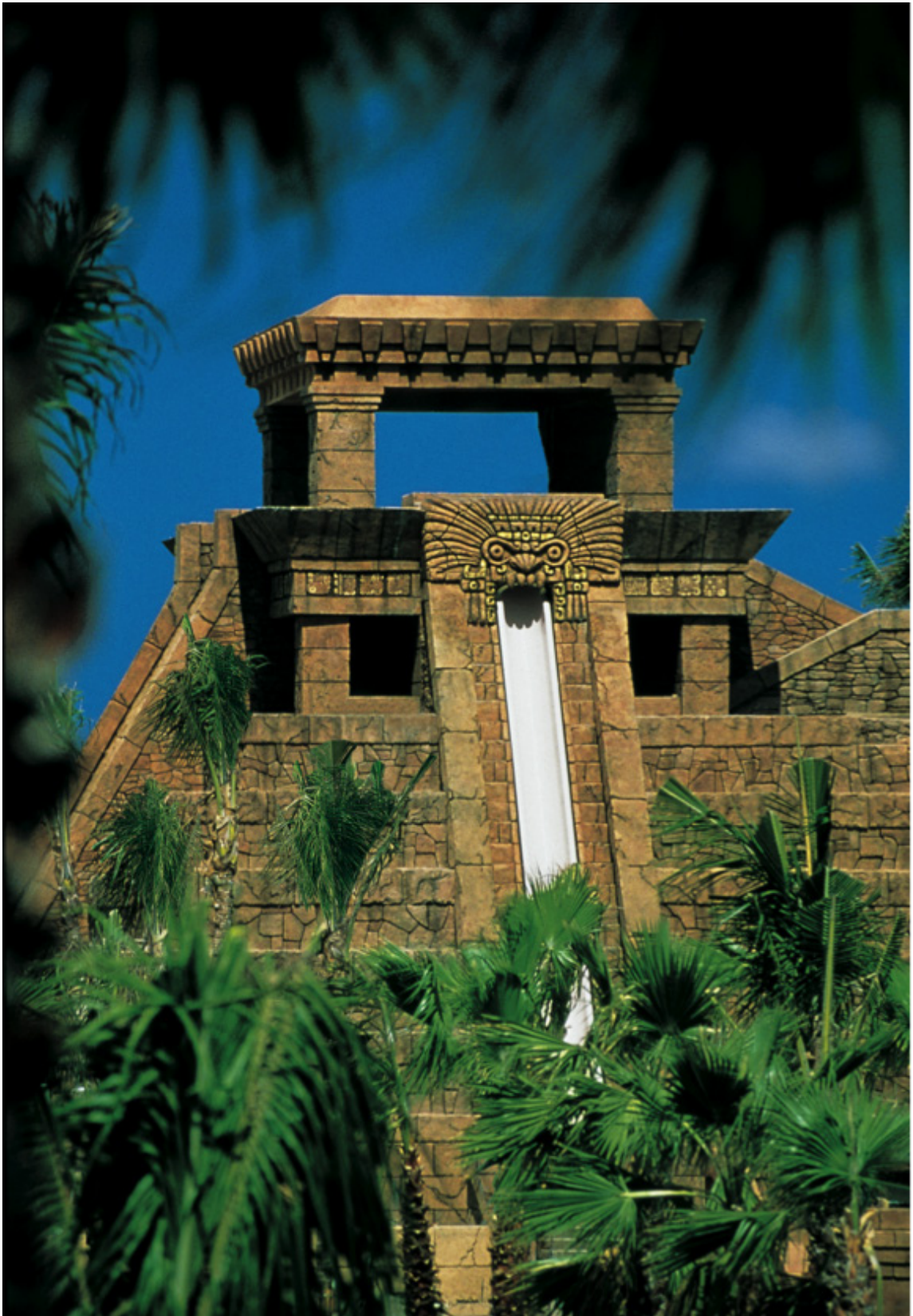
*Figure 1: 'Archaeological finds' in the Aquarium of the Atlantis Hotel, Paradise Island, Bahamas (photo by Jerrye and Roy Klotz MD).*

Consistent with the 'history' of the lost continent, the Atlantis Hotel has a hybrid fantastic nature that goes far beyond the usual barriers. The hotel, opened in 1998, is in some way both above and below the sea: an enormous mass-tourism beehive (with over 2300 rooms) mellowed by reliefs and decorations on the Atlantis theme, with sculptures of seahorses and references to the cult of Poseidon, the Greek god of the sea, as well as a myriad of swimming pools, tanks and underwater corridors with large glass walls allowing views of fishes and tortoises and, above all, archaeological specimens from the ancient lost civilization.

"It's remarkable how they get the artefacts looking right", commented an admiring photographer and traveller, James Hoagland (2006) in his blog. It would be interesting to know why the Atlantean amphorae, statues and other objects that populate the hotel are considered well-made and authentic-looking by the guests. Given that there are no models, since an Atlantean civilization did not exist or at least is quite unknown, there cannot be specimens that are more or less authentic-looking. However (and here we find a clear mark of Western civilization and its way of thinking), when a mythical sign takes on a concrete form and becomes an object (even if in an entertaining leisure context), the new material nature historicizes it and renders it comparable with any other object, in this case with true archaeological specimens. Materialization of the myth is a form of represented authenticity that the user immediately tends to confuse with any other form of staged authenticity in modern culture. A miracle of Father Pius is neither more nor less true than the myth of Atlantis and its archaeological finds. What counts is the iconic force of the experience: the Atlantean world of the Atlantis Hotel is "visually stunning", as noted by the enthusiastic traveller mentioned above.

However, another factor comes into play in this specific context and, with all its symbolic power, contributes efficaciously to this mechanism of tourist myth-making: the sea. This element, which not only surrounds the hotel but, among tunnels, tanks and lagoons, invades and pervades it, acts as a distorting lens: the heavy concrete reality of the hotel, a temple to the excesses of contemporary leisure-construction, is filtered and refined by the waters, and the structure returns to being, like the ancient Atlantis,



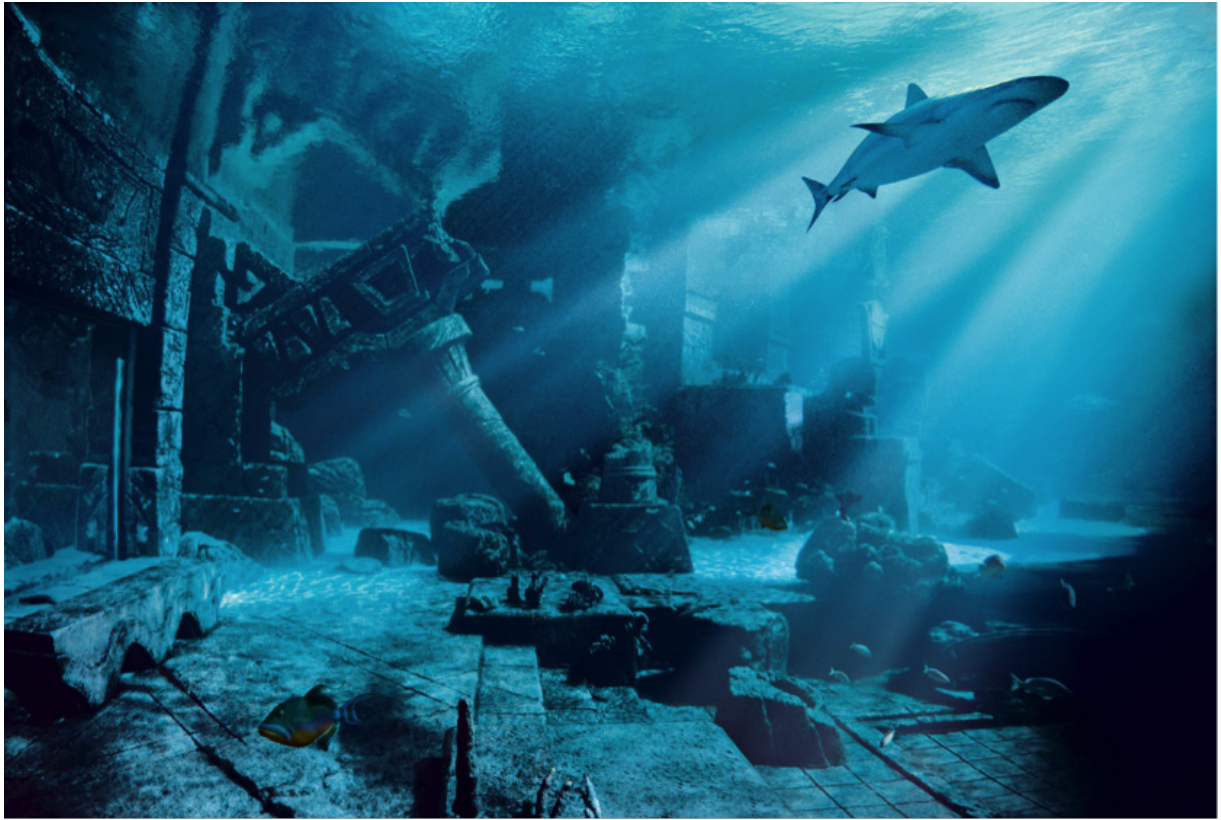


*Figure 2: New ruins with toboggan. The Maya Temple in the Atlantis Hotel (courtesy of Atlantis, Paradise Island).*

the sacred reign of the sea god. In fact, the pseudo-Atlantean artefacts, from the decaying stairway with disquieting sculptures of tauriform creatures to the monuments and anthropomorphic statues in vaguely pre-Columbian style, assume authenticity owing to their inclusion in the marine tanks that enliven the hotel. The museum-like effect of the glass-walled tanks, which indeed resemble museum showcases, is amplified by the water: to the visitors, the objects, immersed in the artificial sea of the tanks, appear to be in another space. The same occurs when the tourists dive with wetsuits and snorkels to swim among fishes and artefacts in a unique experience of underwater archaeological tourism.

The satisfactory results of the Atlantis Hotel in Paradise Island, both for its guests and its owners, have induced its international company to create something similar in Dubai, a country outside the Atlantic area but quite involved in the processes of globalization. Here, on its reclaimed artificial island, you may find the luxurious hotel Atlantis The Palm, a 'mythical' resort opened in 2008. During its construction, according to its official website, a complex series of passages were uncovered, "thought to have been buried for thousands of years by the waters of the Arabian Gulf": "Upon further investigation, an ancient street system was discovered and the theory came into being that these were in fact remains of the Lost City of Atlantis". "Such an exciting discovery", continues the site, "has raised many questions about Atlantean civilization and culture, some of which will never be answered. However, it seems that this network of streets has revealed artefacts from a very civilized people possessing an incredible level of technology". Guests can live out their own "Atlantean adventure" at The Lost Chambers Aquarium, where they can "see the mysterious ruins of Atlantis, lost for thousands of years deep beneath the sea, [...] surrounded by 65,000 marine animals" (Atlantis The Palm 2014).

### **A new archaeological world.**



*Figure 3: The "Lost Chamber Aquarium" in the Atlantis The Palm Hotel, Dubai (courtesy of Atlantis The Palm).*

The bombastic style of this website reveals the touristic character of this activity. In any case, archaeology is now a successful brand (Holtorf 2007) and may be used to culturalize experiences of consumption and to make them more complete and satisfying (Melotti 2011). However, in a global and globalized society, where, especially in the Western countries, the knowledge of history has become increasingly feeble and based on edutainment (Melotti 2013a), the text proposed by Dubai's Atlantis Hotel is a 'narrative' with experiential strength and media appeal, which, as a successful movie, may compete with the 'traditional' history and archaeology. On the other hand, these big hotels, real microcosms of post-modernity, are monuments in themselves and form a sort of self-supporting heritage. Even the fact that the same kind of theme hotel appears in two different parts of the world confirms the new scenario: in a planet largely based on homogeneous models of consumption even the models of culturalization are largely global.



*Figure 4: Ruins in the Aquarium of the Atlantis The Palm, Dubai (photo by Rokaszil)*

Tourism constitutes a new global civilization and, therefore, it needs its own new heritage. The myth of Atlantis, the lost civilization supposed to be at the basis of all civilizations, at least according to modern reception and popular culture, appears particularly effective. The super-national nature of the lost continent is consistent with the global identity of contemporary consumers. Tourists, obsessively embedded in international mobility, are the new inhabitants of this “lost” continent, which, through leisure, tourism and consumption, they may find in any part of the world. At the same time the mythical and liquid identity of the lost continent appears to be a good one for countries, such as the Bahamas and the Emirates, which use tourism to build their heritage and identity.

Not by chance a new Atlantis hotel is under construction in Sanya Island, China, where an international luxury hotel company “has confirmed the discovery of artefacts from the lost civilisation of Atlantis” (Atlantis Sanya, 2014). Here “holidaymakers from across the globe will uncover a mysterious and captivating world as they explore the myth and wonder of Atlantis”. The same narrative for the

same marketing and, probably, the same tourist experience. "The find in the South China Sea has revealed a new understanding of the Atlantean civilisation: the resort's new design combines regional architectural hues and the aquatic theme that is synonymous with the two existing Atlantis Destination Resorts in The Bahamas and Dubai". A new global heritage is under construction, and Atlantis has recovered its ancient super-national identity.

### **Atlantis: otherness and identity**

Atlantis for the ancients, or at least for Plato who invented it, was a space with a strong connotation of alterity, due to its profound link to the world of the sea and its god. Indeed, for Plato, Atlantis was a perfect kingdom, owing not only to the geometric, and thus political, rigour of its inhabited spaces but also to its isolation from the rest of the human world: it was an island separated by the 'otherness' of the ocean. Yet, the insidious symbolic duplicity of the sea also struck down Atlantis: such a space, so strongly incorporated in the fatal and infertile marine world, could only meet a miserable end. Atlantis is the 'other' country par excellence: the enemy whose alterity undermines our culture and our political system. According to Plato, Atlantis waged war on Greece and, we would say today, on the West: a war useful to create a new sense of belonging and a new identity in the victims, as does the modern clash of civilizations (Huntington 1996). Nevertheless, Atlantis, an expression of a perfect political idea but also an incarnation of absolute evil, could not avoid disappearing and Plato had it swallowed by the same sea that had given it life. Atlantis was born to be the 'lost continent', but, paradoxically, its myth implies that it is forever being sought, and its political and cultural efficacy depends on this. Humanity cannot bear perfect utopias and needs to corrupt them by dragging them into immanence and materiality. Or, perhaps, it is only a sign of human weakness that generations and generations have hoped that the dream of Atlantis could be reality.

Throughout the centuries, the myth of Atlantis has assumed an identity value (Ellis 1998; Janni 2004; Jordan 2001; Vidal-Naquet 2005; Hale 2006). Indeed, for Plato it was the first great civilization and a model of political and military organization.

Giving archaeological substance to this myth meant establishing a precise line of descent that, by combining the mythical past with the historical present, could have attributed or justified desired hegemonic roles, from colonial expansionism to the most sophisticated forms of cultural imperialism. The Nazis looked for traces of Atlantis in the cold waters of the Baltic Sea and among the glaciers of Nepal, in search of a common but very Germanic Aryan origin for the civilized West. The French, in their literary and cinematic creations, looked for it in the deserts of Africa, a modern and sought-after space of alterity of their colonial imagery. The Greeks, perhaps wishing to bolster a weakened role of paternity of Western culture, attempted to locate Atlantis in the Aegean Sea, looking for it among the submerged ruins of the ancient Elide and in the waters of the Santorini caldera (Marinatos 1939). More recent reports include that of a Sardinian journalist who, with a touch of local pride, identified it with Sardinia (Frau 2002). It is curious that almost all the Atlantis seekers justify its existence by referring to the authority of Plato, the only ancient source of this myth, but then contradict him and point out his inaccuracies, regarding them as due to a writer of the pre-scientific era, when his story does not agree with their theories. It is by this mechanism that the continent that sank below the Atlantic Ocean is systematically sought among the emerged lands of all continents.

In such a context, the identification of the Bahamas as an extreme end of the ancient continent is not even one of the oddest ideas. The Atlantis Hotel in Paradise Island is an expression of the ironic commercial cynicism of large companies specializing in tourism and entertainment, which has replaced the political and nationalist spirit of the previous Atlantis seekers. Post-modernity, with its potent engines of globalization and consumerism, could not avoid dragging Atlantis into one of the new identity spaces of global mass tourism.

Yet, even this hotel (unknowingly) has its roots in the same self-referential frenzy of traditional nationalism. Atlantis arrived in the Caribbean well before that hotel and mass tourism. One of the most famous Atlantologists, Ignatius L. Donnelly (a member of the Congress of the United States active in the second half of the nineteenth century), situated the lost continent in the centre of

the Atlantic Ocean, halfway between the Old and the New World. According to him, Atlantis was at the origin of both the Egyptian and Peruvian civilizations: a view in sharp contrast with the traditional idea of the old Europe as the epicentre of Western culture (Donnelly 1976 [1882]).

Similarly, on the eve of the Second World War (which was to confirm the new American centrality), Edgar Cayce, a clairvoyant who claimed to operate in a state of hypnotic trance, prophesied that the ruins of Atlantis would resurface between 1968 and 1969 in the area of Bimini, in the Bahamas (Cayce et al. 1988). This seemed to provide a sort of revenge of the American and Anglo-Saxon culture over the European one of Greek and Roman ancestry.

The ways of the myth are endless and astonishing. In the year indicated by Cayce's prophecy, the fateful 1968, two imaginative seekers, Robert Ferro and Michael Grumley (1970), under the effect of marijuana and with the aid of tarot cards, identified the ruins of Atlantis in some underwater rock formations near Bimini. That 'archaeological' discovery had a large echo (Valentine 1976; Zink 1978). Thus the myth became history: Plato's utopian story seemed to assume a concrete archaeological basis. Yet, the Bimini 'submerged road' is proof not of the existence of Atlantis but merely of our perennial need to give substance to dreams and to channel our imagination. Despite the commendable efforts by some heroes of fanta-archaeology and pop-culture, such as Graham Hancock (2002), the Bimini rocks are natural formations. However for decades they have been the focal point of a thriving underwater 'archaeological' tourist industry: the paradoxical result of the unique encounter between the conservative prophetism of the forties, the rebellious spirit of the sixties and the new hedonistic culture of the eighties. As in the glass-walled tanks of the Atlantis Hotel, the sea seems to attribute authenticity to what cannot be authentic. However, the hotel's plastic specimens belong to a hyper-tourist culture that ironically jokes with authenticity and exploits the public's ambiguity, perhaps also its ignorance and certainly its desire for amused complicity.

The Bimini rocks, instead, are sharper and more perilous. Stone is always 'true' and 'ancient', and thus it becomes difficult

to question its authenticity and archaeological appearance. The sea acts as a filter that amplifies the alterity of the submerged objects: underwater, everything is veiled by a magic 'otherness' and paradoxically everything seems truer simply because it has less reason to be there. In underwater diving, we are the extraneous elements, not the things we see: as a result of this psychological process, everything underwater immediately appears true, or at least truer than we are. The Bimini rocks are not an archaeological fraud but true pieces of stone that testify to the concreteness of a dream.

### **The sea between nature and culture**

The archaeological and tourist myth of Bimini is a good example of the myth-making force of the sea and the persistence of the symbolic mechanisms of the ancient Mediterranean world. In the dichotomy between nature and culture, the sea is in a complex and ambiguous position: it is a natural space that by its sterility and dangerousness contrasts culture, but it is also a space of communication and commerce and a ritual initiation instrument, able to ensure and enhance it. In the sea, nature and culture conflict and coexist. The Bimini rocks are proof of this: they are purely natural objects, which, however, can be interpreted as fragments of a past that has formed our historical and cultural identity.

The sea transforms the objects it contains and the way they are observed. Western culture, with its origins in the ancient Mediterranean civilizations and their mythical and symbolic systems, has for centuries viewed the sea as a perilous and contradictory space of alterity: at the same time a bearer of life and death, a source of food and wealth, a place of saline sterility and deadly shipwrecks (Melotti 2007a). It is an infertile space, in strong contrast to the inland waters, which ensure life, and to the lands of agriculture, material basis of all great ancient civilizations. Mythology has crystallized this otherness, rendering the sea an autonomous world, dominated by its god, who assumes the features of the lord of the underworld and becomes confused with him. In fact, the sea is an infernal world that changes the ontological status of whoever submerges in it. The castaways can meet their death



there, abandoning the world of the living; the voyagers discover new worlds and new cultures, potentially dangerous because different; the initiants, with dives, ablutions and crossings, exploit it as a magic and ritual space, which leads them to temporary detachment from the world of culture and allows them to pass through an experience of alterity, from which they eventually return to social life more mature and enriched with new knowledge.

The myth of Ulysses, castaway and eternal initiant, crystallizes this image and this function of the sea. The monsters, often sea creatures that the hero encounters in his trip through the Mediterranean, express all the contradictory forces of the marine space, a refuge of monsters that nonetheless allows him to rediscover his identity. The tourist, a castaway from modernity but also a voyager and initiant in search of experiences and alterity, is merely the last of the many incarnations of the figure of Ulysses.

The modern and technological approach to the underwater world, with masks, cylinders and powerful torches, is only apparently more sophisticated. The mask magnifies what we see underwater and thus provides us a distorted image of reality, while the torch creates colours not existing in the sea: all in the illusion of seeing better and more accurately an underwater reality that is quite different. Underwater tourism feeds on an immersive virtual image of the underwater world via a mythopoeic operation (Melotti 2007b). However, skin and scuba diving conserves the initiatory and alienating value of the ritual bathing of the ancient Mediterranean peoples. The diver seeks a strong sensory experience of alterity via temporary union with a world that is profoundly extraneous to us and that remains extremely dangerous despite the advanced equipment. It is a temporary plunge into the world of death.

From this point of view, underwater archaeological tourism, in all its various forms, has strong sensory value, since it amplifies this intrinsic sense of strong proximity to the world of death. The fascination of death plays an important role in the general tourism experience: skeletons, mummies, places where the worst atrocities were committed (from concentration camps to battlefields) exert an irresistible attraction (Melotti 2013b; Sharpley and Stone

2009). Of course, the presence of death is an essential element in archaeological tourism, nourished by necropoleis and devastated cities (Melotti 2011). Underwater archaeological tourism enhances this feature greatly: the tourists move at their risk in a perilous space, historically imbued with negative connotations, and seek submerged traces of a past that usually belongs to someone who perished at sea. At Bimini and at the Atlantis Hotels this macabre symbolic aspect is only latent but it is predominant in many other underwater tourism experiences.

### **Diving tourism and the morbid fascination of corpses**

Wreck diving is the most obvious example of this: submerged wrecks, more than curious and intriguing tourist spaces, are really places of death. Indeed, this type of tourism is a form of funerary pilgrimage that satisfies our voyeurism. The sea renders this relationship unreal and almost immaterial: the wrecks often lie on the seabed veiled by a strange light or, in Mediterranean waters, emerge from the obscurity taking form almost unexpectedly. The silence and slow-motion atmosphere of the sea bottom create a particular sensory framework. The presence of death is implicit: breaches, signs of an explosion, detached structures suggest the tragedy at the heart of their history. Often, however, the signs of death and violence are explicit, as in the case of wartime wrecks, which are true monuments steeped in death. Yet, the sea succeeds in crystallizing the more macabre effects in a suspended and hedonistic atmosphere of visual and sensory gratification, in which history loses its concreteness, is reduced to image and finally to myth. It is another conquest of post-modernity and hyper-tourism: the 'liquid' society dissolves in the face of death and the sea (it is not a play on words) makes this relationship even more 'liquid'. The culture that invented concepts like surgical bombing and collateral damage or that delights in the plastic models used in television to reconstruct places where atrocious crimes were committed can have nothing but an immaterial, television-like and touristic concept of death. Horror is often exorcized through the archaeological musealization of evil. Thus, the concentration camps and the house of the infanticide in Cogne (Piedmont), which was so long in the spotlight of the Italian

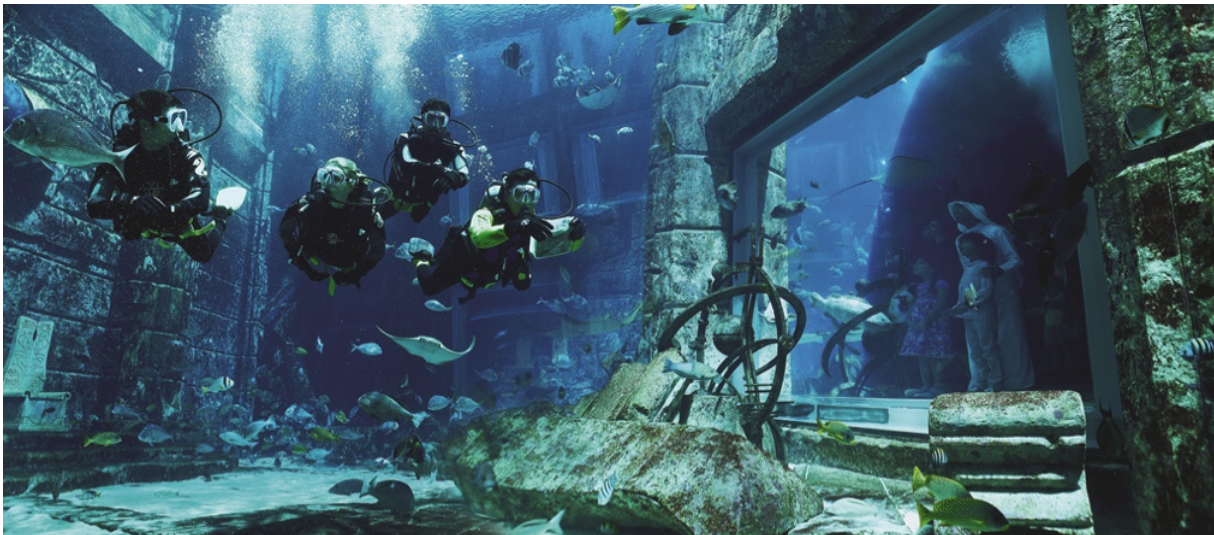
mass media, become archaeological sites to explore via maps and virtual reconstructions. Likewise, the waters of Truk Lagoon in Micronesia, containing 39 sunken battleships and 270 shot-down aircraft, no longer constitute the objective vestige of a massacre but assume the more diffuse and reassuring image of a large fascinating marine archaeological park, where funereal voyeurism takes the form of cultural tourism or a recreational sporting activity.

Once more, however, the myth-making force of sea intervenes. The submerged wrecks quickly become rich and vivacious underwater habitats. The cold aspect of steel or rusted iron, which logically should appear as cultural elements extraneous to the natural seabed, gives way to complex natural concretions. Life and death, culture and nature appear indissolubly bound. In short, the usual distinctions diminish below the sea.

This alteration of traditional symbolic categories can also modify our perception of time. All that the sea swallows, grasping it from our normal experiential space, seems to leave the phenomenal world and enter a new dimension. It is the initiatory power of the sea, well known to the ancients. What is submerged no longer belongs to our world: it abandons the present and becomes part of the past. A wreck, independently of its age, is an archaeological object or, rather, an object perceived as such exactly because it is 'other' with respect to the phenomenal reality of the cultural present. The sea enshrouds it, just as earth covers an archaeological site. It is not necessary to wait a hundred years after the sinking, asset out in international conventions, because a submerged artefact is usually regarded as an ancient and archaeological object.

A wreck resting on the bottom is a piece of history, a piece of the puzzle, albeit an unfortunate one, useful to understand human culture. However, the sea crystallizes it in an atemporal, vaguely past, dimension, which detaches it from any contact with the present: the historical specimen thus becomes a fascinating archaeological object. Yet, modern society reappears with its paradoxes. The wartime wrecks of Truk Lagoon, although less than a century old, effectively constitute an archaeological park where, as at Pompeii, historical value, macabre voyeurism and aesthetic sublimation form an indistinct whole. This is still traditional tourism, in which the sea

decontextualizes the objects from their historical framework and suffuses them with an alienating beauty. Nonetheless, a battleship or an airplane has incontestable material authoritativeness: pieces of history that forcefully impose themselves on our imagination, accustomed to treating tools and weapons with archaeological respect.



*Figure 5: Post-modern archaeo-diving in Dubai (courtesy of Atlantis The Palm).*

### **Towards a post-modern heritage: Toilets, tourism and consumerism**

What about a toilet bowl, however? Does it deserve the same respect? Or, better, could we make a cultural pilgrimage to a toilet and admire it just like an artistic object housed in a museum? When, in 1917, Marcel Duchamp created his urinal, now exhibited in the Centre Pompidou in Paris, he was probably seeking to answer this question, trying to demystify the traditional view of artwork. All the more so, because he was working in the dark days of the First World War: he opposed the rhetoric of war with an ironical exploit. In 1961, Piero Manzoni wished to go further and created his famous *merdes d'artiste*, today highly sought-after by collectors even though they were born from criticism of the art trade and the culture of mass production. In both cases, however, these were intellectual provocations, which often elicit the disdainful reactions of those who feel derided by the evident commercial nature of these supposed criticisms of the system.

The mythopoeic force of the sea has arrived, instead, where those two artists did not manage to arrive. Yolanda Reef, in the marine park of Ras Mohammed on the Red Sea, is well known to underwater tourists on account of its unusual treasures. In 1980, a Cypriot freighter transporting sanitary fixtures and bathtubs sank in that area. The wreck gradually slipped to the seabed and now lies at a depth of over 200 metres. However, its load remained in shallow waters and has become the destination of a vivacious and symptomatic underwater tourist industry. Internet blogs are full of photographs of the Jolanda wreck and its white sanitary fixtures. "Helen Sitting on the Toilet" is the title given by Greg Brock (2006) to one of these photographs.



*Figure 6: Post-modern heritage at the Jolanda wreck, Ras Mohammed Park, Egypt (photo by Greg Brock, courtesy of author).*

The iconic and photographic obsession of post-modern tourism, like its desperate experiential character, leads to paradoxical results. The photograph of the diver sitting on the toilet in the Red Sea is the equivalent of St. James' shell that the faithful used to exhibit as proof of their pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela. The sea, with its mythopoeia and without the rhetoric of Duchamp and Manzoni, has modified the status of these toilets. Merely owing to their inclusion in the special underwater space, they have become true specimens, archaeological signs of modernity to see, consume and photograph. These specimens remind us that most 'true' archaeological finds are nothing more than mass produced objects, if not even refuse. Indeed, archaeology is also based on the garbage of antiquity, although such a constitutive relation between heritage and archaeology is often conflicting when applied to the contemporary society (Burström 2009). 'Garbology', conceived as a study of consumer behaviour, may be thought as an archaeology of the present (Majewski and Schiffer 2001; Rathje 2001). Moreover, these toilets, like the plastic statues of the Atlantis Hotel on Paradise Island, remind us that now tourism can also feed on mass-produced industrial objects. In the consumer society, even toilet bowls can become works of art and objects worthy of tourist attention.

The photograph by Greg Brock is an extraordinary conceptual synthesis of the imagery and practices of contemporary tourism, which can help us to understand some of the underlying mechanisms that govern our society. In the transition from modern to post-modern society an industrial object of intimate everyday use becomes a decorative and aesthetic element of paradoxical kind, totally unrelated to its original function. The consumption itself, even in its most brutal forms of bodily dejection, can become a metaphorical tribute to a society that is based on quick consumption and on the continuous supply of new goods and, therefore, also on the fast elimination of 'old' ones, which become 'archaeological' finds and sometimes objects of tourism.

The sea simplifies, accelerates and consolidates this process, providing experiential and emotional scenery of leisure and mythical fascination, where even the most obvious industrial goods may be re-semanticized as 'natural' or 'cultural' objects. Owing to this

mechanism the pseudo-archaeological finds in the Bimini sea are subtracted from a strong national and identity function and enter into a new 'liquid' post-modern dimension, oriented to leisure in a de-intellectualized way, according to the tourist gaze, which is usually distracted, fast and, at most, edutainment-oriented. The pseudo-objects of Paradise Island are even 'produced' with this character by the post-modern industry of tourism and edutainment, which is based on forms of relative authenticity and 'culturalization' of consumption.

At the core of this process there is the body: the tourist's and the consumer's body. The late post-modernity has exasperated its use as tool and icon of consumption. The body has been rethought as a glocal fact, that is, a hyper-individualist local reality, concentrated in an experiential dimension of consumption and leisure that is increasingly immersed in the process of global homogenization of patterns of behaviour and consumption. The underwater tourists may be seen as an extreme expression of this process: their bodies are totally immersed in an autistic and self-referential practice of hyper-experiential and multisensory consumption. In this context, even the toilet bowls of the Jolanda wreck can become an irresistible attraction for tourists, who, more or less unconsciously, perceive them as existential monuments of our civilization.

The toilets of the Red Sea, as Claude Lévi-Strauss would say, are "good for thinking" about our society and its tourism.

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