

Water, a link to the Mediterranean identity

■ Algeria, Roman aqueduct

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Water heritage in the Mediterranean region reflects the way rural and urban populations coped with the scarcity of water, and how they organised local structures around water management. Today, most of this heritage is unprotected, and recent developments, both societal and economic, threaten its survival. An EU funded regional cooperation project – REMEE – is promoting the preservation of this historical legacy and intensifying public awareness among the citizens. Because water constitutes a living memory of Mediterranean society and its relationship with the environment, as a group of young volunteers in Algeria has just found out.

Text by: **ANSAméd and ENPI Info Centre**

Photos: **REMEE**

ALGER – They came to the campus from the North and the South of the Mediterranean: students and teachers, volunteers and professionals from Tunisia and Hungary, from Romania and Algeria. They came to clear up fountains and cisterns, to study legends, to put up signs.

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It wasn't all about digging or dusting. Once the field experience was over, there was always an issue to be discussed around the table: how can we preserve our water legacy? Which poems and rites are traditionally linked to water? How can water be used to develop tourism?

These people came to Algeria from very different countries with a final, common mission: to create a guide for the rediscovery and promotion of the thermal baths of the old Caesarea, Cherchell, as it is called today, a Roman archeological site 90 kilometers east of Algiers. The two-week campus, set up around the Cherchell site, was organised by the REMEE Euro-Mediterranean regional cooperation project "Rediscovering together the memories of water", in collaboration

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■ Algeria, young volunteers attending the campus



■ Matthieu Guary
the international head of Remee

“Our activities aim at the re-appropriation of the water by the local population and at raising awareness of issues necessary to the preservation of this increasingly scarce resource”

This regional project has organised its Algerian component around the thermal baths of Cherrhell, in the Tipaza area. Other similar activities have been set up by REMEE in Morocco - where an inventory of the fountains and hamams of the medina of Marrakech and activities in the nearby village of Tamesloht have been drawn up - and also in Tunisia, Greece, Turkey. “Our aim is to get groups of young people together to rediscover their area’s heritage,” declares Matthieu Guary, the international head of Remee. At the heart of the project is the memory of the relationship between man and his environment. “Our overall objective,” he adds, “is to make the citizens of the Mediterranean rediscover the importance of their historical heritage linked to the management of water.”

So not only does REMEE aim to repossess the Mediterranean's archaeological, architectural and landscape heritage; it also wants to raise awareness in society of the importance of a commodity as precious as water. As a matter of fact, due to the pressure of development and also to demographic changes, water heritage is risking extinction, both in rural settings and in cities.

Take Algeria for example. Canals, wells and underground drains known as "foggare" - the traditional water system of the M'Zab valley, 500 kilometres south of Algiers - in many cases are forgotten and threatened by the advance of modern society, like the mechanization of agriculture. The same can be said for fountains, hammas, gardens and thermal baths in cities, where rural exodus and unruly urban expansion are threatening this historical treasure.

“We are facing a risk inherent to any project dealing with small scale heritage not protected by law,” continues Guary. “In Marrakech, Morocco, fifty years ago there were more than a hundred fountains; today half have disappeared, or face neglect.”

Local communities can make the difference

In the face of this threat, REMEE is working to sensitise communities through activities that aim to restore and raise awareness. Mobilising local people around the project is the best way of salvaging such

with the local association Area-Ed. The initiative was launched in 2009 and is funded to the tune of €1 million by the European Union as part of the Euro-Med Heritage IV programme.

Digging at the heart of the Mediterranean civilization

The use of water touches at the heart of the Mediterranean civilization, and the participants in the Algerian campus had an objective in mind: to produce a toolkit for schools and an itinerary guide for the rediscovery and preservation of canals, wells, aqueducts and baths, built over the centuries in a region rich in Roman archaeological sites.

“Our aim is to make the citizens of the Mediterranean rediscover the importance of their historical heritage linked to the management of water”

“Mobilising local people around the project is the best way of salvaging such a vital piece of the area’s heritage”



■ Marrakesh, fountain El Bahia

a vital piece of the area's heritage. That is why on the last day of the campus in Chercell, a brochure, a plan for thermal baths tours and a toolkit for schools were presented by the young volunteers to the public, inviting the community to take active part in the safeguard of their own water heritage.

Still in Chercell, last year a team of international volunteers together with local students had cleared the remains of a Roman villa belonging to the site. "These actions," Guary explains, "aim at the re-appropriation of the water by the local population and at raising awareness of issues necessary to the preservation of this increasingly scarce resource."

One thousand young people mobilized for the protection of water heritage

In a period marked by growing water shortages throughout the world, but also in the region, it is necessary "to protect this heritage linked to water, a commodity that brings together the various countries in the Mediterranean area, which are characterised by common climatic conditions and landscapes," Guary adds. "This is also an example for modern practices in water management and for new development projects in the agricultural and tourism sectors."

Up to now, around 1,000 young people from the Mediterranean have been mobilized for the rediscovery and protection of water heritage. A travelling exhibition will be organised upon completion of the projects, which will end in June 2011. An educational DVD will also illustrate the work done in different countries.

EuroMed Heritage IV

www.euromedheritage.net

Contributes to the exchange of experiences on cultural heritage, creates networks and promotes cooperation

Participating countries

Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Occupied Palestinian Territory, Syria, Tunisia

Objective

Based on the objectives defined in the "Strategy for the Development of Euro-Mediterranean Heritage: priorities from Mediterranean Countries (2007-2013)", it focuses on the appropriation by the local populations of their cultural heritage and favours access to education and knowledge of cultural heritage.

Timeframe

2008–2012

It supports a framework for the exchange of experiences, channels for the dissemination of best practices and new perspectives aimed at the development of an institutional cultural environment. A Regional Monitoring and Support Unit provides technical support to 12 projects, one of them is REMEE.

Budget

€ 17 million

Find out more

EuroMed Heritage IV – REMEE project website > <http://www.remee.eu>

EuroMed Heritage IV – REMEE project sheet >

http://www.euromedheritage.net/euroshared/doc/REMEE_EN.pdf

EuroMed Heritage IV fiche > http://www.enpi-info.eu/mainmed.php?id=243&id_type=10

ENPI Info Centre – Culture thematic portal > <http://www.enpi-info.eu/thememed.php?subject=10>

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