Diving into history

Franck Goddio is famous for the discovery of Cleopatra's palace off the coast of Egypt. As a selection of his finds goes on show for the first time in the newly opened National Museum of Alexandria, Miranda Haines speaks to the ambassador for marine archaeology about his obsession with unlocking the secrets of the past.

Smiling and tanned, a lean Franck Goddio formally beckons me into his presidential quarters in Paris's 7th arrondissement. There are few clues that this is the home of the world's most famous living marine explorer; there are no personal objets d'art, no artefacts, maps, family photographs or models of ships. It's clear that beyond his attempts to publicise his discoveries and archaeology in general, Goddio is an extremely private person.

Goddio is best known for discovering and excavating the lost cities of Heracleion and Canopus, as well as what is believed to be Cleopatra's royal quarters at Alexandria, which lie submerged beneath the modern bay of Aboukir. He has also excavated seven Chinese junks dating from the 11th to the 16th centuries, two ships from the East India Company and two 17th-century Spanish galleons.

His most recent treasures, unearthed this January from the site of the sunken city of Heracleion, include ritual vases, cult offerings, busts and bronze statues.

As founder of the European Institute for Underwater Archaeology (IEASM), a non-profit, privately funded organisation, Goddio is working on six excavation projects exclusively with the governments and military of Cuba, the Philippines, France and Egypt. His organisation gives him the sort of freedom and respectability of which most others in his field can only dream.

And now he's intent on bringing his findings out into the open, in an exciting, accessible way, so that the general public can share his passion and follow his adventures. This has led to the publication of a flurry of colourful books on his discoveries and a new set of encyclopaedias. "I saw that most books on archaeology were either extremely basic or academic," he says. "So we thought, why not do books that are both scientific and popular?"

He's obviously been very pleased by the books' remarkable success — many of them have quickly sold out. "The public is very receptive to underwater archaeology and the more interest we can generate, the more funding the archaeologists will get. Look at the space conquest with Kennedy — they were pouring millions of dollars into the mission because of the public interest. If we stay in our little scientific world, no-one will care about our work. And why should they?"

Goddio obviously cares very deeply about marine archaeology, speaking with great earnestness and gravitas on the subject. So when I ask for a little personal history, he looks taken aback. It's with some difficulty or reluctance that he remembers his youth.
"My childhood? I've forgotten my childhood," he jokes with French aplomb. With a little persuasion, however, he begins to open up. "I was born in Morocco and I was always fond of history. I was fanatical about archaeology. Every holiday I would go and see all the sites. But I also loved the sea and to sail. I had a grandfather who was a great sailor and he accomplished lots of expeditions. He built the first catamaran in 1936, wrote several books and did many expeditions. He died at sea during an adventure to demonstrate that you could circumnavigate the Pacific by raft in 1958."

Towards the end of the 1960s, Goddio came to live and study in Paris, attending les Grands Ecoles, the French equivalent of Oxford or Cambridge universities. There he specialised in economics, which led to work as a consultant for the French government and a UN development agency. "I was working in New York and then deployed to the Far East – Bangkok, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia," he says. "Then I was in Saudi Arabia for seven years as advisor to the kingdom."

How, I ask, does his previous life as an economist help the explorer of today? "I was good at statistics, which does help me a lot now because I have developed a statistical programme for my underwater surveys," he replies.

However, economics wasn't offering him the personal fulfilment that he craved. "When I came back from Saudi Arabia in 1985, I wanted to do something totally new," he says. "I decided to take a one-year sabbatical, which was unusual at the time, and I was attracted to underwater archaeology."

During his sabbatical, Goddio travelled around the globe meeting everyone he could who was involved in underwater exploration. "I discovered a world I didn't know – in fact, many worlds. I met prospectors, expeditioners and scientists. Jacques Dumas invited me on his expedition in Egypt on the flagship Bonaparte and I was given many good contacts through my previous work with the government. This gave me access to all departments and archaeologists."

Goddio leans forward as he relates the tale of the major turning point in his life. "Then I saw that something was
missing," he says. "There was not a permanent underwater group devoted to archaeology that could be privately sponsored and work with the French and foreign governments. I noticed that the French government was not doing the work it wanted to do underwater because there was no coherent policy or steady funding. They were dealing with random discoveries."

It was this realisation that led him to set up the IESM. "In France, we differentiate between sponsors who give money in order to sell more of their products or services and a sponsor who has made a lot of money and wants to give something back to society," he says. "The latter will just give the money for the work to be done."

I ask him how this private funding has made a difference to his work. "I wouldn't have been able to do what I have done without it," he replies. "If I'd had public funding, I would have had to work in the public sector and I couldn't have brought anything new to that. I would not have been free to go to the Philippines and work with nuclear technology, for example. I was free to contact the departments for nuclear energy and pick up their best engineer and take the best of the archivists and have very good restorers and scientists to develop specialist equipment."

It's the combination of these skills that has made Goddio's expeditions more successful and significantly faster than most.

Financial freedom and the exclusive relationships that his organisation has with foreign governments give his projects a status and security that few manage to achieve. The autonomy he enjoys allows him to be flexible when it comes to choosing his projects. "Sometimes I do my own research and development," he says, "and other times fishermen come and say, 'Hey, you have to come and see this.' Other times governments ask us to get involved."

His experience has also allowed him to streamline those projects. "I have developed a formulistic process for each expedition," he says. "First, I commission the archive research to be done around the world. Then, when there is a subject that is very important for a country, and when I think I have enough information, I study the archive"
Franck Goddio's CV

1947 Born in Morocco
1970 Graduates from the Ecole Nationale de la Statistique et de l'Administration Economique with a degree in statistics
1973 Military service, followed by employment as an economic consultant for the UN in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos
1974 Consultant to the State of Laos: Ministry for Finances and Economics on behalf of the French Foreign Ministry
1976 Works as a consultant on development finance issues for the Saudi Arabian government
1985 First archaeological excavations: a 16th-century Chinese junk and an 18th-century British East India Company ship, Griffin, both in the Philippines
1986 Founds the European Institute for Underwater Archaeology in Paris
1992 Begins mapping the submerged archaeological remains in Alexandria Bay, Egypt. This project is still in progress
1998 Discovers and excavates a first-century shipwreck in the eastern harbour of Alexandria
1997 Maps the submerged cities of Canopus and Heracleion in the Bay of Aboukir, Egypt
1998 Excavates the remains of three ships from Napoleon's fleet
1999 Exceptional excavation at a depth of 300m of the Royal Captain, an 18th-century British East India Company ship that sank off Palawan Island in the Philippines
2001 Completes inventory of Heracleion and the temple of Héraclès-Khonsou in the Bay of Aboukir. Discovers stela of Herculean and three colossal statues from the Ptolemaic period
2001 Performs rescue excavation in the Philippines of a Chinese junk from the end of the 14th century

and I define the area where the sunken boat will be found. If the area is not too big and not too deep, I do a reconnaissance and then I decide to launch an electronic survey. I go with my boat and specialist equipment, and we do the survey. And if we find it, we do the expedition. If that goes well, then we do the excavation, restoration and finally the exhibition.”

We talk about his work and latest discoveries and he mentions how pleased he is to be working with Oxford University now. Once again, this was the result of Goddio recognising a deficiency in the archaeological community – in this case the fact that there wasn't an academic department for marine archaeology in the UK. In order to rectify this, he helped to set up a new department at Oxford, the Maritime Centre, where university students can study artefacts brought back from his excavations. The centre also gives Goddio another platform from which he can create new collaborative projects with foreign governments.

I asked him for his reaction to recent criticism from Egyptians that he was removing too many important artefacts from the seabed and endangering their plans for an underwater maritime museum. “This is a kind of joke because I was the one to propose the museum,” he says. “But if it is done, it has to be done professionally. You must take advantage of the underwater scenery; the statue of the priest cannot be left standing in the water. After three days you will have mussels growing all over it, after three weeks it will be all white and after three months it will have disintegrated. Each week you would have to clean it with machinery and after a year there would be no statue left to visit. You could bury it, which is what I was doing at the beginning of my dives, but people wanted to see the statue. Thus we decided to make a list of very important artefacts that will be preserved and afterwards we will put back exact replicas on their original site underwater.”

So will it really work, this idea of an underwater museum in Alexandria? “I think so, but it is up to the Egyptians to do it. I can only advise. We are doing the preliminary studies now.”

In the meantime, Goddio will continue his excavations - he seems in no danger of tiring of his new profession any time soon. “I am so absorbed by the work that I forget I am underwater. When I get back on board, I think, ‘Oh my God, I was underwater!”

Alexandria: the Submerged Royal Headquarters, which documents Franck Goddio’s archaeological excavations in the Bay of Alexandria, is available in hardback from Periplus for £120