

Sailors and sanctuaries of the ancient Greek world

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The many small maritime sanctuaries where Greek sailors left offerings to the gods are much less well known than such great cult centres as Delphi and Olympia on the mainland. UCL archaeologists have been contributing to the study of these widely scattered but significant sites for over a century, a tradition that continues today.

Kave, kave Malea is but one nautical warning that has excited my interest in the archaeology of landfall sanctuaries in the ancient Greek world. "Beware Malea" – the cape of the southeastern Peloponnese that lies open, like the more familiar Cape Sounion, to the unpredictable north to northeasterly gales of the Aegean summer (Fig. 1). Once Malea was rounded, it was time to give thanks to the gods. But to which? Poseidon may be the expected reply, but evidence is surprisingly thin for his role in such places; at Sounion he certainly shared the hill with Athena, although his presence is not definitely attested at the site by preserved evidence until the 420s BC.

UCL at anchor

In the Mediterranean world, a cult site reserved (let alone partly reserved) for thanksgiving by sailors is not easily distinguished from any other, given the pervasive role of the sea in communication. Work at these sites has involved UCL for over a century. The first UCL professor of (classical) archaeology, Sir Charles Newton, dug at Classical and Hellenistic Knidos; the third, Ernest Gardner, at Archaic Naukratis (a site in the Nile delta, better known perhaps from Sir Flinders Petrie's work there); the fifth, Martin Robertson, worked at early Greek Al Mina far to the east on the River Orontes in south-eastern Turkey; and the seventh, Nicolas Coldstream, worked at Pithekoussai far to the west on the island of Ischia (Fig. 1).¹ These sites represent a mere smattering of the many landfalls where Phoenicians sailing from the eastern shores of the Mediterranean rubbed shoulders with Etruscans, Illyrians and also Greek-speaking peoples. And at none of them was Poseidon the deity to whom thanks were given.

Excavation by Petrie and Gardner at Naukratis yielded material (now in the British Museum, UCL and many other subscribing institutions) that formed the basis

of my own knowledge of both the pottery and the epigraphy of the sixth and fifth centuries BC. Shipowners and traders (the two are hard to disentangle) brought their merchandise to a divinely protected area and left their gifts for a suitably selected deity: Milesians dedicated to Apollo, Samians to Hera, others to Aphrodite and the Dioskouroi, both of whom possessed a range of marine cults. Aphrodite, as well as providing other services to sailors, had a cult title of Fair Weather (*Euploia*) as at Knidos, home of a famous nude cult statue by Praxiteles.²

Islanders far from home

Our information on cult identity comes largely from the texts scratched, or sometimes painted before firing, on pots (Fig. 2), and matters become more interesting when such names are found at more than one site. We find dedicators at Naukratis depositing similar pieces on the island of Aegina in the Saronic Gulf south of Athens (Figs 1, 3).

Aegina was the first Greek centre to issue coins, in c. 550 BC, and it was said by Herodotus, writing in c. 440 BC, to have been wealthy from trade in the past (certainly before 458 BC).³ A stone anchor with an inscribed dedication to Aphrodite Epilimena, "above the harbour", was found there.⁴

Islands such as Aegina are relatively barren and so are important in the "chain of survivorship" in the Mediterranean world.⁵ It has been my good fortune to see archaeological evidence of these far-flung connections in many areas in recent years, places where often the storm came before the calm (interest rates on shipping loans in the ancient Greek world were not set extremely high by accident). Sailors from Aegina have been traced by their offerings to the gods, mostly of the sixth century, in the Italian peninsula: at two enclaves on the Etruscan coast, at Pyrgi and Gravisca (the ports of Cerveteri and Tarquinii, Fig. 1), at another, Adria, in the Po delta, and a find from Olbia on the Bug estuary on the northwest coast of the Black Sea, is a further probable example.⁶ The ascription of these texts is occasionally clear, as when the dedicator names his home, but usually it is less direct and must be inferred from the character of the script and dialect. At Gravisca, a certain Sostratos dedicated another stone anchor (half of which was found re-used as building material in the excavations) to Aeginetan Apollo (Fig. 4).⁷ Less known is one Lethaios who dedicated clay cups at Gravisca and at a rare cult centre of Poseidon, still called Posidi, on the Pallene peninsula of Chalkidiki in northern Greece (Fig. 1).⁸

Crete

Naukratis was a safe port in the Nile delta. Aegina was scarcely in the midst of raging seas (although the Saronic Gulf can cause some marine nail biting). Other sites are



Figure 1 The eastern Mediterranean showing the location in the area of geographical features and ancient sites mentioned in the text.



Figure 2 Fragments of a large Chian bowl or lid (600–575 BC) with a pre-firing dedicatory inscription of one Thymogethes, found at Naukratis; the joined fragments are in the British Museum and UCL's Classical Archaeology collection.

far more threatening. Most of the south coast of Crete is a forbidding place. Menelaos is said by Homer to have been blown off course on his return from Troy and to have been storm driven onto the coast near the ancient sites of Gortys and Phaistos.⁹ Some of his men may have landed at present-day Kommos (Figs 1, 5), in its day a palatial Minoan centre. Later it became a cult centre that was host to a range of itinerant traders, as excavation has clearly demonstrated. They included Phoenicians in the ninth–eighth centuries BC, curiously identified more by their amphorae than by the usual jugs and plates, and a range of mainland Greeks in the seventh century, including Boeotians, famed otherwise in the Greek world for their stay-at-home Farmer Giles image (Fig. 6).¹⁰ Homer also tells us of the fine line between exchange and piracy, and Crete, especially the south and west coasts, was to become a notorious haven for their activity, until

Pompey rooted them out in the 60s BC. We even have the word *syle* (“booty”) proudly written on some dedications to gods in the sixth century, from the large Ionian Greek sanctuaries on the island of Samos and at nearby Miletos (Fig. 1).¹¹

Kythera and Antikythera

Menelaos' fleet returning from Troy was split in two at Cape Malea; to reach the south coast of Crete, one squadron would have passed through the Kythera–Antikythera island chain (Fig. 1). The latter is famous as the location of a first-century BC wreck that was the source of many bronze statues, recovered by sponge-divers in 1900–1901, but the former has never quite hit the headlines – yet. In the 1960s the British School at Athens conducted excavations under Nicolas Coldstream and George Huxley at the port of Kastri on Kythera,¹² and during the past four years Cyprian Broodbank has led an Institute



Figure 4 Part of a marble anchor stock, 1.15 m long, with a dedication to Aeginetan Apollo by one Sostratos, from the sanctuary and trading post of Gravisca, the port of Etruscan Tarquinia, c. 500 BC.

project that has just completed an intense survey of much of the southern half of this relatively large island,¹³ another of Aphrodite's homes, Work on the results of the survey is under way, and so the significance of the harbour from period to period is not yet fully elucidated; but there is no sign yet that it flourished in the sixth century BC, which has been the centre of our attention thus far.

However, on the tiny (700×250 m) islet of Mikridragonera (Fig. 1) off an island (Dragonera) off an island (Kythera), our Greek government colleague, Aris Tsaravopoulos (a UCL alumnus) has found clear traces of a sailors' sanctuary. Here, together with pottery of the Hellenistic and early Roman periods, which are not well represented on Kythera itself, he has discovered a variety of coins that include pieces from a very far-flung range of mints, from the Black Sea to Ibiza in the western Mediterranean.¹⁴ At the sanctuary on Mikridragonera, many sailors also dedicated their finger rings to a deity not yet named in any known text.

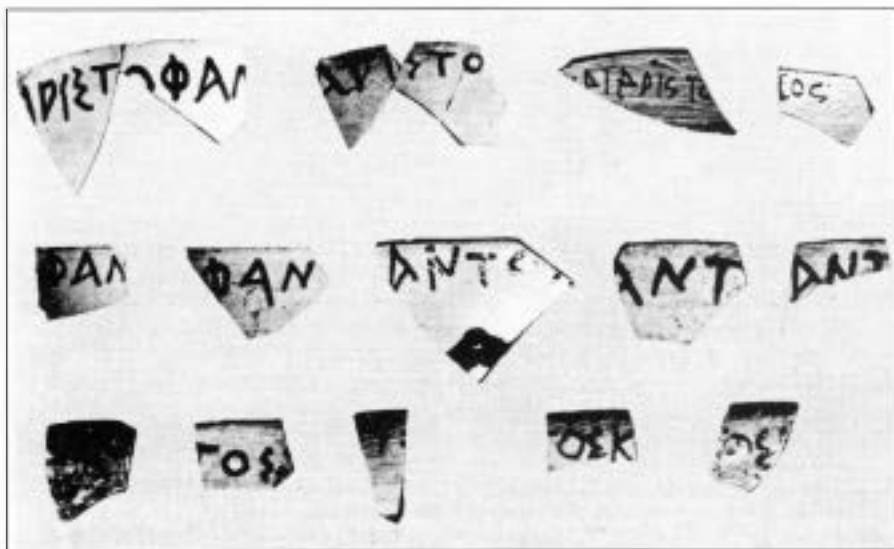


Figure 3 Some of the Chian cups dedicated by the trader Aristophantos at the sanctuary of Aphaia on Aegina, c. 550 BC.



Figure 5 The site of Kommos on the south coast of Crete, seen from the northeast.

Into the Adriatic

To find any comparable set of dedicated material we have to travel far to the north-west. Off the west coast of the Peloponnese we pass Prote, a small offshore islet with shelter, used by an Athenian fleet during the Peloponnesian War and marked by rock-cut inscriptions of Roman date that include a request to the Dioskouroi for fair passage (*euploia*),¹⁵ Northwards, one would expect to find a sailors' sanctuary somewhere in the area of the Gulf of Vlorës in southern Albania, the location of

ancient Oricium; from here it is a short crossing to the heel of Italy at Cape Leuca, where further rock-cut texts trace the southwesterly route,¹⁶ before the open-sea crossing towards the toe makes landfall at Cape Lacinio (Colonna) (Fig. 1). The latter is the site of an important sanctuary of Hera, which was also a political centre, the home of a league of Greek colonies attempting to resist external aggression, where anchors were dedicated alongside statuary.¹⁷

For those sailing northwards up the Adriatic, currents led ships past the island of Palagruza, then up to the exposed Punta Planka (Diomedis), north of Split, before

the trading stations of the Po valley and the head of the Adriatic could be reached (Fig. 1). At both these sites the perspicacity and persistence of Branko Kirigin of the Split Archaeological Museum have reaped rich rewards. Palagruza is close to the centre of the Adriatic, a speck with a lighthouse on it. Yet it has recently yielded to archaeologists in a short excavation season (as well as to passing sailors) a remarkable range of finds: a significant quantity of early Neolithic material, then a gap until the early



Figure 6 Graffito in Boeotian script on a local drinking cup from Kommos, seventh century BC; this is an owner's inscription; similar scraps of text found may be dedications and one is an alphabet row.

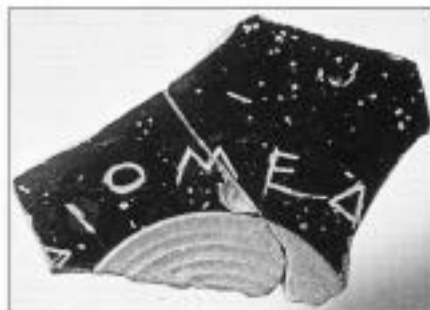


Figure 7 Inscribed fragment (left) of a phiale (libation bowl) found on Palagruza, preserving most of the name of the recipient, Diomedes; it very closely resembles a phiale from a tomb of c. 500 BC at Kamiros on Rhodes (right, diameter 17.7 cm), British Museum (number 1864.10-7.1469).





Figure 8 Dedication on rim of a cup from Punta Planka, width of upper rim c. 10 cm; one of the better preserved texts, with the name of the dedicator, Tritaios, and the recipient, Diomedes; probably second century BC.

Bronze Age, and then silence again until the late sixth century BC. The later material displays a marked similarity to the vastly greater quantity found at the two prime sites on the Po delta, Adria and Spina (Fig. 1), which suggests that the island was a stopping point for boats on the long haul north.¹⁸ Some 50 of the sherds are inscribed, and from two of them we can deduce the name of the dedicatee – not an Olympian, not the Dioskouroi, but the Trojan hero Diomedes (Fig. 7). His “presence” in the area is known from literary sources. The early ones describe how he fled west after his return home from Troy, and the later ones tell of the foundation of towns by the returning hero. The latter have been dismissed as later rationalizing myth, but now we have to reconsider the myth history of the region back into the sixth century.

The Greek material from Palagruza peters out in the third century BC. Some of the latest material is of southern Italian origin, so-called Gnathia ware, and a few texts are in the Doric dialect associated with many Greek settlements in southern Italy and Sicily, in contrast to the earlier material from the Greek mainland. Traditionally the promontory of Punta Planka marks the divide between the north and south Adriatic, and it has yielded similar southern Italian material in its mid-third century phase.¹⁹ The “excavations” there by Kirigin and Čače consisted mainly of prising sherds out of the sea-beaten hollows in the rocks. However, there were also coins, a collection as diverse of that found on Mikridragonera. Few of the pottery fragments could be joined together, but some 300 of the sherds are inscribed and the writing of the visitors is often gauche, which is in itself interesting, but not helpful for interpretive purposes. Most of the sherds are from plainly painted cups that date from c. 300 into perhaps the first

century BC (Fig. 8), spanning the period in which Romans and Illyrian pirates wrestled for control at sea, and the subsequent Roman takeover. Nevertheless, all the texts but one are, or appear to be, in Greek. Work is still in progress on these sherds, but it is already clear that the type of dedicatory formula that is most common – “X and his fellow crew (*synnautai*) to Oiomedes” – is one that is also glimpsed in the latest fragments from Palagruza. If Greek heroes could battle through these rough seas, so too can we, who, many centuries later, try to follow their trail.

Notes

1. See C. T. Newton, *A history of the discoveries at Halicarnassos, Cnidus and Branchidae*, 2 vols (London: Day & Son, 1862–3); W. F. Petrie & E. Gardner, *Naukratis*, vols 1 and 2 (London: Egypt Exploration Fund, 1886, 1888); C. M. Robertson, “Excavations at Al Mina, Soueidia, IV. The early Greek pottery”, *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 60, 2–21, 1940; J. N. Coldstream, “Mixed marriages at the frontiers of the early Greek world”, *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* 12, 89–105, 1993; J. N. Coldstream, “Drinking and eating in Euboean Pithekoussai” in *Euhoica: l’Eubea e la presenza euboica in Calcidica e in Occidente*, M. Bats & B. d’Agostino (eds), 303–310 (Naples: Centre Jean Bérard, 1998).
2. For some thoughts on exchange models, see Astrid Moeller, *Naukratis: trade in archaic Greece* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
3. Herodotus, *The histories*, book 4, chapter 154, p. 293 in A. de Selincourt’s translation (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1954).
4. D. Williams, “Aegina–Aphaia–Tempel, v: the pottery from Chios”, *Archäologische Anzeiger* 155–86, 1983; P. Gianfrotta, “First elements for the dating of stone anchor stocks”, *International Journal of Nautical Archaeology* 6, 285–92, 1977, esp. 289, fig. 6 (Aphrodite) and 290, fig. 8 (Croton).

5. P. Hordern & N. Purcell, *The corrupting sea: a study of Mediterranean history* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), esp. chapter 5, “Connectivity”.
6. A. Johnston, “Aeginetans abroad” *Horos* 7, 131–5, 1989; G. Colonna, “Rivista dell’Epigrafia Etrusca, Pyrgi” *Studi Etruschi* 64, 369–422, 1998.
7. Sostratos is very probably the enormously wealthy man of that name mentioned by Herodotus (see p. 293 in the reference cited in n. 3 above).
8. A. Johnston, “Greek and Latin inscriptions” in *Gravisca: scavi nel santuario greco xv, le iscrizioni*, S. Boldrini & C. Masseria (eds), 13–54 (Bari: Edipuglia, 2000).
9. Homer, *The Odyssey*, book 3, lines 292–300, p. 5 in E. V. Rieu’s translation (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1946).
10. J. W. Shaw & M. Shaw (eds), *Kommos IV: the Greek sanctuary*, esp. P. Bikai, “Phoenician ceramics”, 202–212, and E. Csapo, A. Johnston, D. Geagan, “The Iron Age inscriptions”, 101–184 (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press).
11. For example, dedication number 16 from Samos, pp. 30–31 in R. Meiggs & D. Lewis, *Greek historical inscriptions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).
12. J. N. Coldstream & G. L. Huxley (eds), *Kythera: excavations and studies conducted by the University of Pennsylvania Museum and the British School at Athens* (London: Faber & Faber, 1972).
13. C. Broodbank, “Kythera Survey; preliminary report on the 1998 season”, *Annual of the British School at Athens* 94, 191–214, 1999; see also the article by Cyprian Broodbank in *Archaeology International* 1999/2000, 21–3.
14. The finds are reported by E. Papatsaroucha, “Κύθηρα 1990–2000” in the Greek journal *Corpus* 21, 13–14, November 2000.
15. The scholar who edited and published these inscriptions was forced to abandon his visit in 1904 because of storms: see numbers 1533–58 on pp. 309–311 in G. Kolbe, *Inscriptiones Graecae* v, 1 (Berlin: Reimer, 1913).
16. F. D’Andria (ed.), *Leuca* (Galatina: Congedo, 1978), esp. C. Pagliara, “Le iscrizioni”, 177–221.
17. See R. Spadea (ed.) *Il Tesoro di Hera: scoperte nel santuario di Hera Lacinia a Capo Colonna di Crotona* (Milan: Edizioni ET, 1996), and n. 4 above.
18. B. Kirigin & S. Čače, “Archaeological evidence for the cult of Oiomedes in the Adriatic”, *Hesperia* 9, 63–110, 1999; G. Colonna, “Pelagosa, Oiomedes e le rotte dell’Adriatico”, *Archeologia Classica* 50, 363–78, 1998; R. Parker, “The islands of Diomedes: an archaeological sensation”, *Omnibus* 38, 1–3, 1999.
19. See pp. 72–4 in Kirigin & Čače (n. 18) for a preliminary report.