

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF HONOR FROST

The life and legacy of a pioneer in maritime archaeology

edited by

LUCY BLUE





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The life and legacy of a pioneer in maritime archaeology

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Published by Sidestone Press, Leiden

www.sidestone.com

Lay-out & cover design: Sidestone Press

Photograph cover: Honor Frost Archive, Hartley Library

Southampton University

ISBN 978-90-8890-830-9 (softcover)

ISBN 978-90-8890-831-6 (hardcover)

ISBN 978-90-8890-832-3 (PDF e-book)

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The Second Life of a Phoenix

Honor Frost's unpublished chronicles
of a Punic ship in Sicily

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How many times can a phoenix rise? The creature of which I tell emerged from waves not flames, resuming its shape only to face another, perhaps final threat of destruction. [...] You will have guessed that beneath this word-play lurks the Punic Warship and 'Phoenix' alludes not only to its resurrections, but to its lineage as well. (Honor Frost, Phoenix ms, p. 1)

These are the words with which Honor Frost begins her account of the Punic Ship Project in an unpublished book manuscript that we discovered in 2013 among her archive papers, then temporarily stored in London. To the community of archaeologists and ancient historians, the Punic Ship Project is familiar as a mid-3rd-century-BC longship found in 1971 off the western coast of Sicily near Marsala, by a team led by Frost; a wreck that was fully excavated, conserved and made ready for museum display by Frost during the 1970s and early 1980s (Frost, 1971; Frost *et al.* 1981). As illustrated so beautifully in Pietro Alagna's paper included in this volume, the success of the project could not have been accomplished without an array of serendipitous encounters and dovetailing coincidences, of people and places. And, as Rossella Giglio recounts in her paper (see Giglio, this volume), the vessel's surviving remains can be visited today in a newly revamped exhibition at the Museo Archeologico Regionale Lilibeo-Baglio Anselmi, the archaeological museum of ancient Lilybaeum (modern Marsala). Nevertheless, the story of this ancient vessel and its recovery, and the people involved in its care and preservation to the present day, is decades-long and complex.

Now, just over 40 years since Frost completed the final excavation report in 1976, we see that the phoenix-boat rises yet again in the form of a popular book that she began writing entitled *The Second Life of a Phoenix. Portrait of a Punic Ship Resurrected in a Sicilian Town* (hereafter: *Phoenix*).

To come across a manuscript of Frost's, one that was apparently kept closely under wraps for many years, is an important event for scholarship and for researchers interested in the history of archaeology. As we also hope to show, it is particularly valuable as a source of insight about Frost, her community of friends and colleagues, and the respect and affection that she inspired among the people who knew and worked with her most closely in western Sicily.

In this paper we present preliminary research, conducted under the auspices of the Honor Frost Foundation, on Frost's unpublished and unfinished manuscript about the Punic Ship Project and its environs. We offer a snapshot of the manuscript's contents, and an outline of how we would like to place the story in its historical and cultural context. And we share some discoveries from our related oral history research, which has taken us from Marsala to London and beyond, reaching out to project participants in order to collect their particular and unique perspectives on the experience and its meanings over time. The challenge now is to untangle the history of the manuscript and to determine how this previously unknown work of Frost's would best be valorized and showcased, as she herself would have wanted.

The rediscovery of the *Phoenix* manuscript

Elena Flavia and I found the manuscript in March 2013 while on a quick stopover in London following a research trip to Marsala, as part of our first historiographical project on the Punic Ship (funded by the Honor Frost Foundation; Castagnino & Calcagno, 2013). We had travelled to Sicily and Rome to review several archives, and to begin collecting videotaped testimonies from research project participants. During our visit to Marsala, thanks to the generosity of the Alagna family, we were able to host a day-long reunion and seminar with former members of the excavation project at the Cantine Pellegrino, with the aim of sharing and collecting stories, memories, and mementoes of the Punic Ship Project. A few days later in London the Honor Frost Foundation kindly gave us access to a selection of materials related to the Punic Ship Project, at its offices in the British Academy.

Among all the boxes and binders that we perused, many with handmade labels decorated with Frost's own distinctive sketches, there was one green box mysteriously labelled 'PHOENIX'. It contained a three-ring binder of typed pages; the very first words, reproduced at the beginning of this paper, immediately revealed what the find was about. It is hard to describe the thrill that we felt: a deep connection to Frost who was reaching out to a broad audience. And it would seem that we were among the first – certainly in a long time – to read her words.

The PHOENIX box also contained several folders of research notes, text revisions, additional chapter outlines, lists and copies of illustrations, bibliographies, and correspondence with potential publishers. It was a collection of papers relating to a publishing project that clearly covered several years of Frost's life. In May 2017 we were once again granted access to the Frost archives to expand on our first, brief read-

through. By this time the collection had been professionally catalogued to archival standards – a great gift to scholarship for future generations, accomplished thanks to the vision and generosity of the Honor Frost Foundation – and was being stored at the RESTORE warehouse facilities in Upper Heyford, Oxfordshire. Since June 2018, the Honor Frost Archive Collection is permanently stored at the University of Southampton Special Collections, Hartley Library (Honor Frost Archive MS 439).

The manuscript

The binder comprised the first seven chapters of Frost's book in 139 pages. These covered the project from Frost's very first visit to western Sicily in the summer of 1969, at the invitation of her friend and colleague Gerhard Kapitän, through to the end of the third archaeological fieldwork season, in 1973. The chapters appear to be almost completed drafts, with occasional handwritten corrections and amendments that at times become fairly dense. Apparently Frost stopped writing before she had tackled the last excavation season, which took place in 1974.

In this book draft, Frost provides context for ancient Lilybaeum's place in the central Mediterranean world, from its Phoenician connections to its environmental surroundings, which directly impacted the nature and process of shipwreck discovery in the area. In addition to her account of the project's evolution and the people who made vital contributions over the years, she also writes about the history of archaeology in the region, including the enduring English connections to western Sicily, both in archaeology and in the wine industry. Once survey-finds recovered during fieldwork begin to point to a possible link to the sea battles of the Punic Wars, which had taken place nearby, among the Egadi Islands, Frost provides a scholarly review of the evidence to date.

While anyone can read a chronology of events in the official *Lilybaeum* excavation report, published by the Accademia dei Lincei in the *Notizie degli scavi di antichità* series in 1981, the *Phoenix* manuscript goes into detail of how serendipitous Frost's arrival in Sicily – let alone the discovery of the famous Punic Ship – actually was. She had initially planned to conduct anchor research in Crete during the summer of 1969, but a change of plans led her to accept Gerhard Kapitän's invitation to visit Mothya and its *kothon*, an ancient artificial basin of enigmatic function. While somewhat curious about Mothya, as she confesses, Frost had little interest in the western branch of the Phoenician seafarers: her heart belonged to the Levant. Frost recounts that it was during this visit to Marsala that the dredger captain Diego Bonini and Edoardo Lipari, the bailiff at Mothya, approached Kapitän and her with the news that ancient ship timbers had been found in shifting sands near Marsala. After recognizing that there were the remains of several vessels of interest, including a Roman ship carrying a cargo of tiles, Kapitän and Frost returned with permits in 1970 to conduct their first underwater field survey. In fact, that tile cargo was never found again – re-hidden beneath the shallow shifting sands (or perhaps falling prey to local thieves). They proceeded to conduct surveys of the area, coming across several artefacts that pointed to possible Punic connections, but little that seemed substantial. It was only towards the end of the second field season, during a line survey in August 1971, that the team photographer, David Singmaster, went off course to retrieve a lost marker, and discovered the stern of the Punic Ship jutting up from the



Figure 1. Honor Frost with Punic Ship Project team members including David Singmaster (with black beard) (Summer 1971). (Source: Honor Frost Foundation, original Frost archive slide collection, accessed 2013).

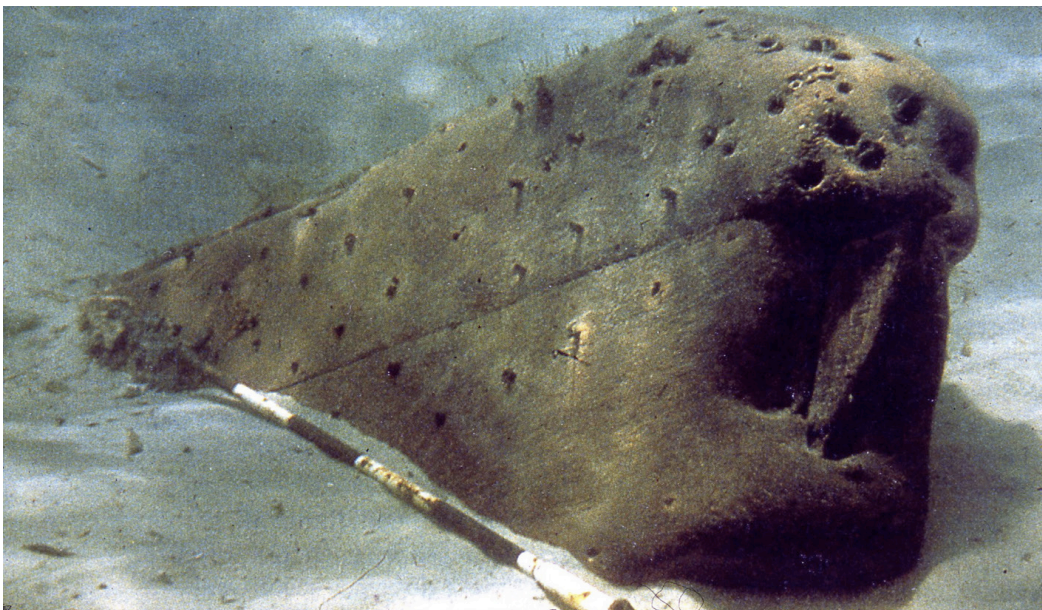


Figure 2. One of the first views of the Punic shipwreck jutting up from the sandy seabed, as found in August 1971. (Source: Honor Frost Foundation, original Frost archive slide collection, accessed 2013).

sandy bottom (Figs 1-2). This is all written up in the *Lilybaeum* excavation report – but in the *Second Life of a Phoenix* it is described much more picaresquely.

In fact, as part of our oral history project, we had the good fortune to track down David Singmaster to hear his own account of what that initial moment of discovery was like (Figs 3-4). We were the first archaeologists to have contacted him since 1971; he kindly agreed to an interview, which will soon become part of the Honor Frost

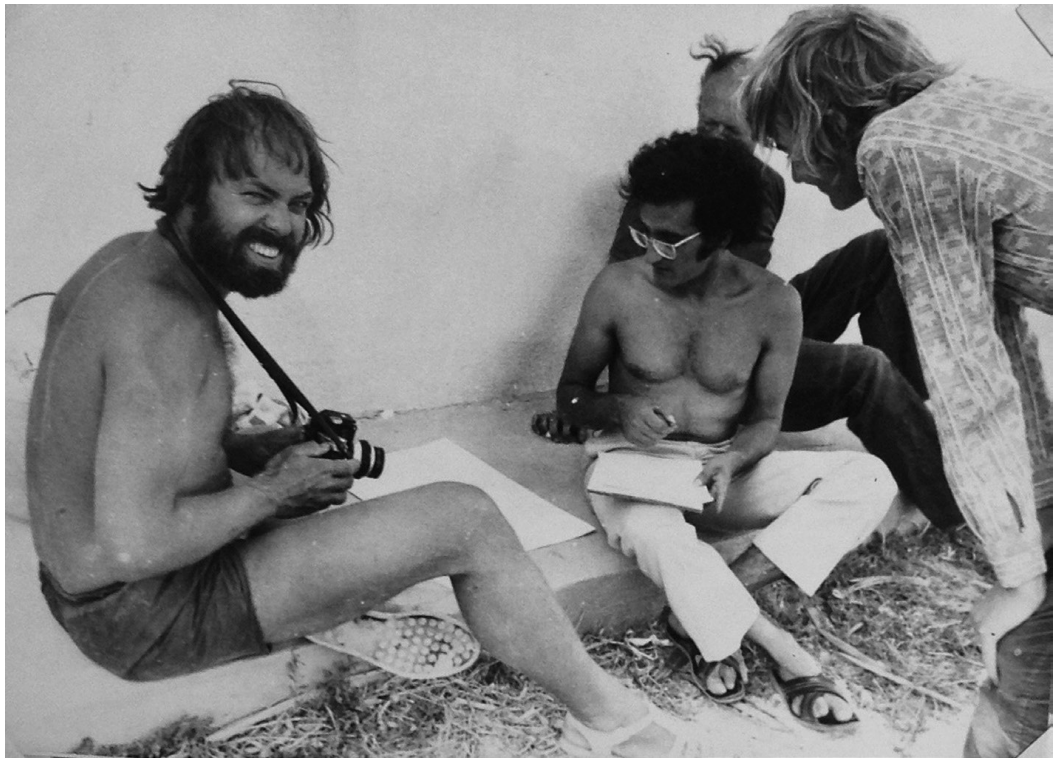


Figure 3. David Singmaster photographing the recovered artefacts at the campsite during the 1971 archaeological field season. From a binder of project snapshots. (Source: Honor Frost Foundation, original Frost archive, accessed 2013).

Foundation *Soundings Project* collection of oral histories, maintained with her archive collection at the University of Southampton (Calcagno & Blue, 2017). Today Singmaster is a retired mathematics professor; he is renowned in maths-puzzle circles for having provided the first correct mathematical analysis of the Rubik's Cube, as well as one of the first published solutions.

Among Frost's notes, in addition to the binder, we came across draft tables of contents, with detailed chapter summaries. These also include outlines for subsequent chapters that hint at what Frost may have intended to cover beyond the first seven chapters. Topics not yet written about include the last field season in 1974, and the discovery of the 'ram' of the so-called 'sister ship'; the several years of conservation lab work up through 1977; the requisition of the Baglio Anselmi building for a museum space in 1978; and concerted efforts by the local Marsalesi to prevent the ship's remains from being removed from their city. By that time, as Frost writes in cursory notes intended for future chapters, the ship had become a totem, likened by locals to 'the Saviour's cross'.

Also, by that time Pietro Alagna had been awarded the Order of the British Empire by Queen Elizabeth II (thanks to Frost's strong endorsement), in recognition of his decades of crucial support of the British research project in Sicily. And, around that same time, Frost had been elected Honorary Citizen of Marsala, for her tireless efforts to valorize the city's ancient heritage and protect it in place. In each case, a foreigner was honoured for making a unique contribution to national cultural heritage in the arts and sciences.

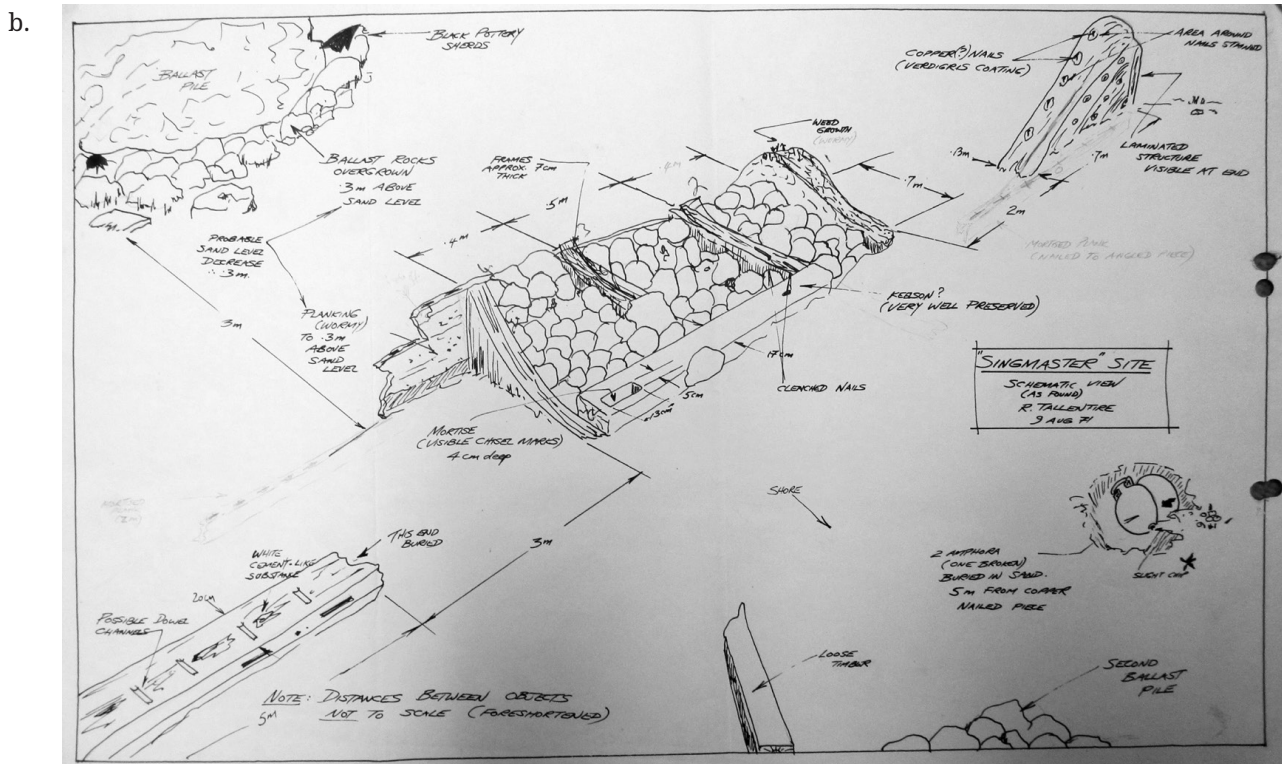
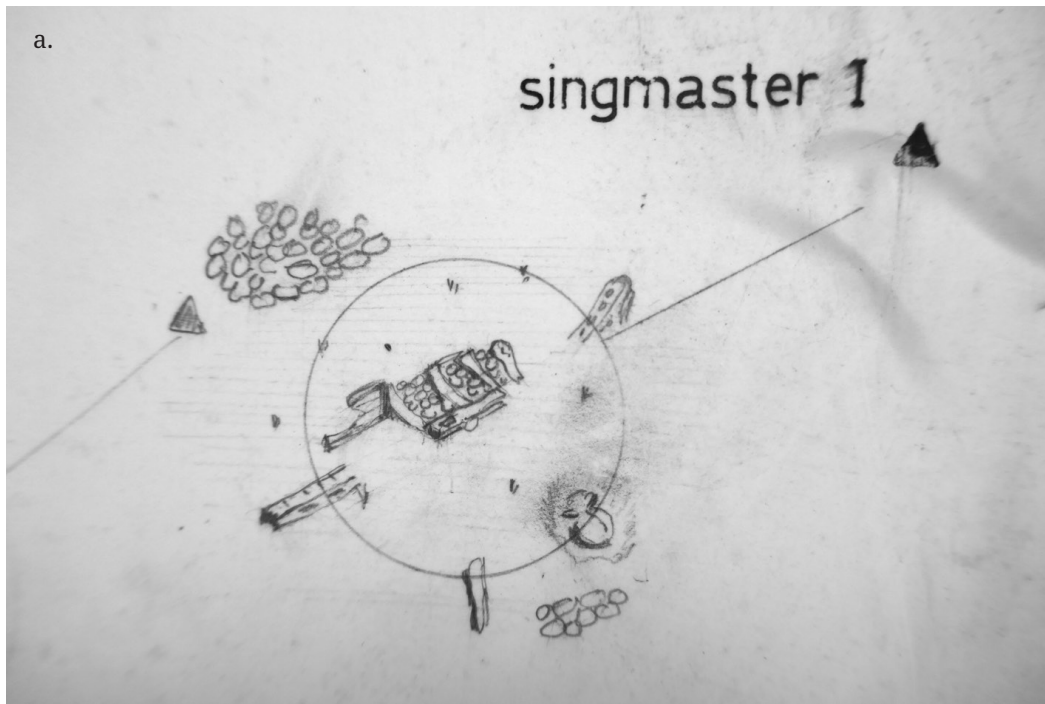


Figure 4. a) Sketch-plan of the so-called 'Singmaster site' as found on 7 August 1971; b) more detailed plan of the site by project draughtsman Roger Tallentire. (Source: Hartley Library, University of Southampton MS 439 [HFA/1.11.10.9]).

The text of the *Second Phoenix*

Anyone who has had the pleasure of reading Frost's 1963 book *Under the Mediterranean* will be familiar with her style, wit, and erudition. Her manuscript of *The Second Life of a Phoenix* is written in the same vein, clearly intended for a broad and interested



Figure 5. Project handyman and seaman Stefano Passalacqua of Marsala mans the dive boat; behind him is an experimental instrument for underwater profiling designed by Honor Frost. (Source: Honor Frost Foundation, original Frost archive slide collection, accessed 2013).

audience. Each chapter is headed with an apposite epigraph, ranging from Cicero to T.S. Eliot, and from Polybius to Alphonse Daudet, which sets the stage for what the chapter will cover. The writing is both scholarly – citing sources in footnotes for whomever might wish to follow a lead – and personal, as Frost shares the trajectory of her own learning curve, as a newcomer to Sicily and as an archaeological director adapting and innovating fieldwork techniques with the limited resources available in challenging circumstances (Fig. 5). In a more pragmatic vein, she shares the perpetual struggle to raise funds, and acknowledges that the often-*ad hoc* procedures used gave her the freedom and independence so necessary in pioneering ventures.

The following story is an amusing and illuminating example of the practical struggles Frost and her team had to contend with. Frost writes about how she needed to ensure that fieldwork photographs of the day's work be processed immediately, to make sure proper records existed before finds were raised from the seabed; here, she describes how Edoardo Lipari, who had become the local point-man for the foreign team, managed to provide essential and creative assistance.

Lipari had brought us a huge generator that had once lit all of Favignana, the largest of the Egadi Islands [a few n.m. NW of Marsala]. This was another 'bestia' [beast] of truculent disposition which, when coaxed into action nearly beggared us by its gargantuan appetite for expensive oil. Exhausted by that struggle, we got ourselves wired to the generator of the hospitable campsite nearby, switching on for a few hours per day to power the machines and by night living by candle light. (Honor Frost, *Phoenix* ms, p. 64)

Frost also provides insights into her intellectual philosophies and priorities, citing on the second page of her manuscript the dictum she attributes to her mentor Kathleen Kenyon, that ‘excavation without publication is destruction’. With all that she was challenged by the Academy for her eclectic and non-traditional education in archaeology, Frost’s actions proved that her scientific standards were well above those of a significant number of academically trained archaeologists who even today neglect to publish what they destroy in the process of excavation.

As a scholar Frost maintained the highest academic standards: regular season reports on the Marsala work were published in various academic journals in both English and Italian, starting with her first season report in the inaugural issue of the *International Journal of Nautical Archaeology* (Frost, 1972 a), and in the *Notizie degli scavi di antichità* (Frost, 1972 b). She also made sure that project news was made available through the popular press and regular lectures in both languages, over the years. Her ‘Final Report’, submitted in 1976 and published in the *Accademia dei Lincei* in 1981, remains a standard in the field (Frost *et al.*, 1981).

Frost was particularly keen to ensure that her team’s work and progress was shared directly with the local population of Marsala. The public exhibition she set up in the local middle-school, Scuola Vincenzo Pipitone, which she dubbed the ‘Mini-Museum’, featured project photographs and the 1:1 plaster casts of the ship timbers that Pietro Alagna had made possible by providing both technical expertise and funding (Fig. 6).



Figure 6. Honor Frost with local dignitaries, including Pietro Alagna to her right, at the Punic Ship Exhibition displayed at the local middle-school Scuola Vincenzo Pipitone in Marsala, in 1974. The ‘mini-museum’ exhibition featured 1:1 plaster casts of the ship timbers and photographs of the excavation seasons. (From a photograph in a binder of project snapshots. Source: Hartley Library, University of Southampton MS 439 [HFA / 1.11.6.3.2]).

These events took place in the mid 1970s, and certainly represented a novelty in that region at the time by committing to public engagement.

This leads us to consider another very important find among the archive papers: a copy of the first chapter of the *Phoenix* manuscript translated into Italian by a Sicilian friend. This discovery makes it quite clear that Frost herself intended to make her book available to her Sicilian and other Italian friends and colleagues as well as to the English-speaking community. Over the 30-plus years that she visited Sicily on one mission or another, she was often hosted at the homes of her former staff members and labourers – from shipwrights to boat captains, from local mechanics to doctors and photographers. It is intriguing to envision Frost navigating such a different social environment in that era and region – but this was one of her particular skills – to move unfettered by language or traditional cultural boundaries and find ways to communicate with people.

The chronology of the *Phoenix* book project

Much like the mythical bird that Frost chose to symbolize the entire project (Fig. 7), the history of her *Phoenix* manuscript reflects the vicissitudes of the ancient ship itself. It soon became clear, as we sifted through her notes and outlines, that we needed to determine, if possible, how Frost's intentions for the book may have shifted over time.

From our initial study of the manuscript and its related papers it appears that there are two main chronological phases of Frost's *Phoenix* book project. The first phase, likely begun in the early 1980s, comprises the first seven chapters and covers the project events up to and including 1973. It seems that Frost abandoned her book project, after essentially completing those chapters, in 1986 – a date which coincides with her resignation as director of the project through the British School at Rome. She appears to have resurrected the book roughly a decade later, at a time when there was renewed interest and indications of financial commitment for the care of the ancient vessel. But then it seems she abandoned the book a second time, very shortly afterwards. Further careful study is required to properly determine the chronology of the book project, as is planned for a later phase of this research project.

In addition to the difficulties of managing a complex archaeological project in a region with relatively modest amenities at the time, Frost had to contend with an increasingly intractable combination of local



Figure 7. Sketch by Honor Frost of a phoenix rising from the waves, intended as a possible cover illustration for her book The Second Life of a Phoenix. Portrait of a Punic Ship Resurrected in a Sicilian Town. (Source: Hartley Library, University of Southampton MS 439 [HFA / 1.11.9.4.9]).

and national bureaucratic hurdles, over the course of several decades. But the later travails of this unique ancient artefact are public – we only have to read Lucien Basch’s factual and eloquent article titled ‘The Punic Ship: an obituary’ published in the *IJNA* (Basch, 1997) to understand the impassioned stance of the international community. Contemporary local and national newspapers document over the years the extent to which the people of Marsala fought to protect what had become for them an evocative and precious artefact.

Conclusion

Frost intended to share her experience of discovering a unique Punic vessel beyond the academic realm. *The Second Life of a Phoenix. Portrait of a Punic Ship Resurrected in a Sicilian Town* was only her second archaeology book intended for an educated, popular audience, after *Under the Mediterranean* was published in 1963. Our discovery of the unpublished manuscript in 2013 was both a shock and a marvellous revelation. We have tried to determine who, if anyone, knew about its existence; it has been unnerving that no one seems to recall conversations or references to the manuscript over the years – neither Frost’s former colleagues, nor her friends. The discretion, not to say secrecy, in itself becomes part of the broader narrative. Clearly Frost had been in touch with publishers in London as she prepared the first iteration of her book in the 1980s, sending draft outlines and having the first chapter translated into Italian for future publication. Her second attempt to make progress with her book in the late 1990s remained at the level of notes, and there does not seem to be evidence that these notes were shared.



Figure 8. Honor Frost in the laboratory building during the 1976 conservation season, with John Wood and another unidentified project volunteer. (Source: Honor Frost Foundation, original Frost archive slide collection, accessed 2013).

Why does it matter to relate the community stories and individual contributions to an archaeological project like the Punic Ship Project, as Frost intended to do in her book? It matters because discoveries and innovations in our field are closely intertwined with cultural, economic, and even political influences, often at the individual level. As explorers of the past we aim to reach an understanding of how people lived and worked, and perhaps how they thought; and we do well to acknowledge how our contemporary perspectives and personal experiences, even during the processes of discovery and recording, can affect our interpretations as well. The true maturity of a discipline is revealed by the existence of a critical historiography about its origins and evolution. Maritime archaeology can surely benefit from further self-reflection in this realm.

The story of the Punic Ship of Marsala is deeply – in fact, viscerally – connected to the development of maritime archaeology in the Mediterranean region. Consider that the PEG wax used to conserve the Marsala ship timbers was the very same PEG that had previously been used to conserve the Kyrenia ship in Cyprus (Katzev, 1969, 1974). Frost had appealed to the ship’s excavator Michael Katzev, of the American Institute of Nautical Archaeology (AINA), for advice on how to treat and conserve waterlogged ship timbers (Figs 8-9), based on his team’s experimental efforts. Katzev collected the leftover PEG supply that had been used in the Kyrenia timbers and sent it on to Sicily to be recycled in the timbers of the Punic longship. When the conservation treatment was completed, Frost sent what remained of that PEG, and related conservation equipment, by truck from Sicily to Bodrum in Turkey to the AINA conservation lab there. Who knows what other ancient Mediterranean vessels subsequently excavated by AINA have been so intimately connected, on a cellular level, with the wax that helped preserve the Kyrenia and Marsala ships?

Ever the erudite writer, Frost quotes Voltaire’s definition of history as ‘a myth that is generally accepted’ and asserts that indeed ‘it rings very true in this antique land [of Sicily]’ (*Phoenix* ms., p. 8). Let us see if the mythical phoenix of ancient Lilybaeum can be made to rise once again.



Figure 9. Honor Frost discusses the conservation treatment of the Punic Ship timbers, during which she employed recycled PEG previously used in the Kyrenia Ship timbers conservation process conducted by Michael Katzev. (Feb. 14, 1974) (Photo M. Katzev). Source: Honor Frost Foundation, original Frost archive slide collection, accessed 2013).

Postscript: In Honor's Footsteps

How did it happen that we traced Honor's footsteps back to the town of Marsala and the Punic Ship Project in the first place? Both maritime archaeologists with research interests focused on the central Mediterranean region, we had encountered Honor individually many years ago. We came to be engaged in the historiography of the Punic Ship Project from different perspectives, and feel privileged to offer contributions to Honor's legacy.

Claire writes:

As an aspiring archaeologist and experienced diver, I had visited the Punic Ship museum in Marsala, not far from my family's summer residence on the island of Favignana in the late 1980s; although it was hidden by a protective tent inside the Baglio Anselmi at the time, the vessel's story intrigued me. I also came across Honor's book *Under the Mediterranean*. So I wrote to Honor in the summer of 1988, enquiring if she might be able to offer advice on how to go about entering the field of maritime archaeology. I was thrilled when Honor responded immediately with a long, handwritten letter in which she encouraged me above all to build up archaeological fieldwork experience, and pointed to useful literature. I eventually embarked on postgraduate studies in the UK and the US; we exchanged occasional correspondence over the years that followed, and crossed paths at conferences. I will always remember with gratitude the generosity with which Honor shared her time and thoughts with me when I was a wide-eyed novice. And, in recent years, having become very familiar with Honor's work-life and community of colleagues and friends, through her own writings and others' testimonies, I am also grateful today for the opportunity to participate in the Honor Frost Foundation's mission to make her multifaceted achievements – in archaeology, as well as in art and dance – accessible, to inspire many others as well.

Elena Flavia writes:

I feel privileged to have first met Honor in the summer of 1996 while diving off the tiny Sicilian island of Ustica, and since then to have had the privilege of sharing a friendship with her over many years. And finally, to discover, along with Claire, the hand-typed *Phoenix* manuscript written by such an extraordinary woman: Honor remained forever a firm mentor for me, a reference point both professionally and socially. When I was a PhD student at Bristol University in the UK, I often used to consult her outstanding library at her elegant Georgian house on Welbeck Street in Marylebone, London. She was always very welcoming, motivating, and encouraging. When knocking at the door using her distinctive 17th-century dolphin-shaped bronze knocker, one immediately sensed that Honor's home was going to be unique (Fig. 10). Archaeological conversations and fabulous parties were a frequent highlight of being invited to Honor's home, where close friends would gather in one of the grand bow-windowed rooms, or in the gorgeous library filled with memories and records which drew together books, photos, and drawings from archaeological sites all around the Mediterranean Sea.

Honor taught me about hard work and self-respect, about persistence, and about how to be independent. She was a great role model of strength and character. We've laughed together; her humour and friendly irony allowed me to laugh, and lightened my perspective, forever. Indeed, the discovery of the mysterious green box labelled

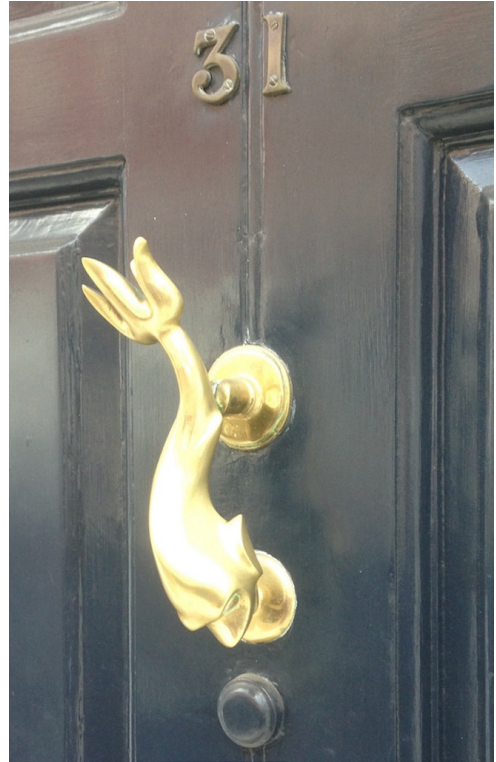


Figure 10. The brass dolphin door-knocker at 31 Welbeck Street, Honor Frost's home in London. (Photo E.F. Castagnino Berlinghieri).

'PHOENIX' was like a little gem for me, an exceptional gift left behind by Honor, a secret treasure recounting little-known facets of the history behind the scenes of the Punic Ship Project. We had the serendipitous good fortune to uncover this treasure, and feel a deep commitment, with the support of the Foundation, to facilitating Honor's wishes in sharing her Sicilian story with a wide audience. For all of this, I cannot thank Honor enough. I am forever grateful. Thank you Honor!

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the Trustees of the Honor Frost Foundation for their continued support and for the opportunity to present our current research. We also wish to thank Pietro Romano Alagna and his family, whose invitation to study the family archives related to the Punic Ship Project first brought us to Marsala. Our gratitude extends to the local community of Marsala and the international community of maritime archaeologists: over several decades they have persevered with their efforts towards the preservation and valorization of the Punic Ship, which remains to this day a unique artefact from the ancient world. And finally, we wish to thank and congratulate Lucy Blue and Stella Demesticha for the phenomenally successful and inspirational conference that they organized in Nicosia in October 2017 to celebrate the centenary of Honor's birth.

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