



Excavations on the *Mentor* Shipwreck

by Dr Dimitris Kourkoumelis and Alexandros Tourtas

Portable compass found on *Mentor*. Image: Ephorate of Underwater Antiquities of the Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports – Petros Vezyrtzis

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Dr Dimitris Kourkoumelis and Alexandros Tourtas

Translated from Greek by Panagiota Markoulaki

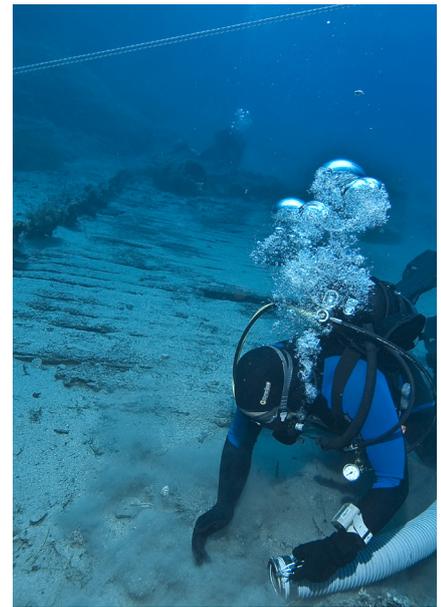
Dimitris is a maritime archaeologist of the Ephorate of Underwater Antiquities of the Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports (EUA) and director of the underwater archaeological excavations on the Mentor wreck in the south of Greece. Alexandros is a maritime archaeologist and a PhD candidate at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. He has been a member of the Mentor excavation team since 2011. Here they provide us with an insight into the results of their excavations on this interesting historic wreck.

The brig *Mentor*, owned by Lord Elgin, was used under the command of Captain William Eglen to transport from Piraeus to England (via Malta) a collection of antiquities (17 crates in total) including the detached architectural parts of a number of Athenian monuments including the Parthenon. In addition to Captain Eglen, other crew members, who were most probably on board *Mentor* during this scheduled voyage include the accountant or boatswain John Macpharlan (or Macfarlan), the navigator Manolis Konstadinos Malis, an anonymous sailor from Gibraltar, and the crew-member John Wigton, while other passengers include Lord Elgin's secretary William Richard Hamilton, the topographer and archaeologist Captain William Leake, the officer of artillery Lieutenant John Squire, and three more individuals, who seem to have been the passengers' servants.

On 17 September 1802, *Mentor* sank off the small port of Avlemonas on

the island of Kythera. Due to bad weather, an effort was made to moor the ship with two anchors off the port. The anchors, however, could not hold the vessel, which hit rocks on the starboard side and quickly sank at a depth of about 21 m. All passengers and crew were rescued. Immediately after the incident, Captain Eglen and Hamilton started to organize, under the orders of Lord Elgin, the salvage of the ship's load, which is characterized – in the correspondence to the vice consul of Great Britain on Kythera – as 'some stones of no value'. After two years of salvage operations, the divers retrieved the entire load of the ship, including the Parthenon marbles. The salvaged cargo was then shipped to Malta and on to the United Kingdom.

In the 19th and 21st centuries, there were several underwater investigations on the wreck, which aimed at discovering further marbles,



Above: Excavating the hull of *Mentor*. Image: John Fardoulis
Below: Photomosaic of *Mentor's* excavated hull. Image: Alexandros Tourtas

Mentor Shipwreck Project 2012
Avlemonas, Kythera, Greece

Wreck 'Mentor'
depth: approx. 21m



photographed by Alexandros Tourtas
photomosaic by Alexandros Tourtas

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Ephorate of Underwater Antiquities



Above: Several of the personal belongings found on *Mentor*: pipe, watch, ring, seal, ancient coins, portable ink-pot.

Images: EUA - Petros Vezyrtzis

which, according to rumours, should remain on the site of *Mentor*. The most recent underwater investigations were undertaken by the EUA with the support of the Stavros Niarchos Foundation, the John S. Latsis Public Benefit Foundation, and John Fardoulis with the Kytherian Research Group Inc., a non-profit incorporated association.

During the three seasons of excavation (2011-2013), we discovered a large section of the surviving hull, which was largely destroyed by the 1802 salvage operations. In total, the section of the hull that has been excavated measures 10.5 x 5.75 m and

includes part of the prow and part of the keel that constitutes almost a quarter of the whole vessel. Some of these parts are well preserved providing evidence for the construction of the frames, at close intervals, and the shell. At the stern of the ship, we also excavated an area, about 3 x 3.5 m, of stones that most probably constitute the ballast of the ship. Among these stones we recovered many personal belongings of the passengers. On that basis, this part of the hull has been interpreted as the ship's accommodation spaces for both the officers and passengers.

Overall, the assemblage of artefacts discovered so far can be classified into five categories: 1. objects

that are related to the navigation and equipment of the ship; 2. objects that are related to the life on board and ornamentation of the ship; 3. armament of the ship and passengers; 4. personal belongings of the passengers and crew; and 5. objects that possibly relate to the cargo.

The first category includes the ship's compass, part of an hourglass, and calipers that were all used in navigation. The second category includes a large amount of glassware (vessels, drinking cups, and bottles), porcelain vessels that were used by both the passengers and crew, along with glass decorations for chandeliers. The ship's cannon were not found, and were likely retrieved during the 1802 salvage. We did find, however, iron

cannon shot, three pistols, and a large number of lead bullets and flints for the weapons that constitute the third category of finds. The fact that the cargo ship *Mentor* did not only carry bulky loads but also heavy armament indicates the political instability in the eastern Mediterranean during the period in question.

The finds of the particularly interesting fourth category include a portable ink-pot that could belong to either Hamilton or Leake; a seal depicting a cannon on wheels, the most probable owner of which seems to have been the officer of artillery, Squire; a number of coins of both Ottoman and western European origin, such as a gold coin that dates to 1788 from Utrecht in the Netherlands and one Spanish gold coin that dates to 1755 (Ferdinand VI); and some ancient coins, of which the most interesting are two silver coins (one Boeotian and one Athenian) – the hole in the Athenian coin may indicate that the object was used as a charm.

All these finds provide us with new insights into not only the organisation and life on board the ships of the period, but also the personalities of both the passengers and crew of *Mentor* and their involvement in the stripping and transportation of the Parthenon marbles. As far as the cargo-related objects are concerned, very little seems to survive. In 2009, we found nine slates with embedded fossil that seem to have been part of the cargo, while two fragments of Egyptian reliefs that were found in 2013 may have also been part of the cargo. These may indicate that, in addition to the marbles, other types of antiquities were also being carried, but we cannot confirm whether these were part of Elgin's collection.

After our excavations the exposed hull remains were covered by a special geotextile in order to minimise destruction by natural site-formation. Our findings indicate that although the hull suffered destruction during salvage, the quarter of the hull that survives is well-preserved, while it is necessary to conduct future excavations on the prow of the ship. This project would not have been successful without the efforts of all participants, the EUA and the Kytherian Research Group Inc.: John Fardoulis, Cosmos Coroneos, Dimitris J. Dimitriou, Scott Leimroth, Louis Mercenier, Petros Tsampourakis, Manolis Tzefronis, Themistocles Troupakis, Angellos Tsopanidis, Manouel Kourkoumelis. ♦



Above: Navigational instruments found on *Mentor*: hourglass, caliper, viewfinder.

Below: Fragment of Pharaonic statue that dates to the New Kingdom period (1570-1070 BC).

Images: EUA - Petros Vezyrtzis



Lost Beneath the Waves 1914-1918

Divers remembering the loss of life at sea during World War I

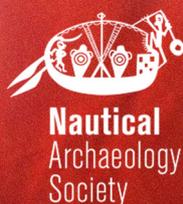


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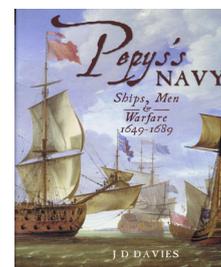
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Tel/fax (023) 92 818 419



Registered Office:

Fort Cumberland,
Fort Cumberland Road,
Eastney, Portsmouth,
PO4 9LD