

## Obituary

### Honor Frost, 28 October 1917 to 12 September 2010



The spontaneous reaction when people learnt of the death of Honor Frost was ‘the end of an era!’ She represented the heroic period of aqualung diving, and was the first person to apply it to archaeology under water—a double pioneer. But she was more than that. She was the first to promote underwater archaeology as a serious discipline and to introduce it to the Anglo-American world. She saw aqualung-diving and archaeological system as a necessary balance and was fond of quoting ‘*si le plongeur savait—si l’archeologue pouvait ...*’ and in herself combined the two in style.

Through recognising, in 1958, the significance of some copper ingots raised by diver-journalist Peter Throckmorton from a shipwreck off South Turkey, they together stirred the academic world sufficiently to put together a team of all talents which carried out the first sea-bed excavation to accepted land-archaeological standards. The excavation of the Cape Gelidonya Bronze Age wreck was a triumph; its results profound. It stands in the records as the definitive tipping-point. The value and methodology of marine archaeology was now endorsed, and Honor’s place within it assured. Her fluency at drawing, her experience

of land archaeology and her familiarity with aqualung diving enabled her to make a major contribution to the Cape Gelidonya project. Most importantly, through her French connections, she brought in Frederic ‘Didi’ Dumas, associate of Cousteau and president of the Confédération Mondiale des Activités Subaquatiques (CMAS), whose ability in finding underwater engineering solutions was vital for progress in the field, not only at Cape Gelidonya but at many other sites.

Honor’s upbringing could be described as bizarre; living abroad in troubled times, and with early loss of both parents, must have left her emotionally tough, and probably contributed to her supreme self-confidence. ‘It is perhaps pointless to get the last word’, she wrote, ‘but the habit is ingrained’. Her grandfather was a grandee but in Turkey (where he was adviser to the Sultan). Her parents married in Turkey but left after the fall of the Sultan (1911) and moved to Cyprus. Honor was born in Nicosia and brought up in Cyprus despite being orphaned as a young girl and coming under the care of a guardian, Wilfred Evill, who stayed in London with his prestigious law practice. They had a ‘close but stormy’ relationship, but he left her his estate and fine London house. She went to school in Switzerland, becoming bilingual in French. 1938 found her in London studying art at the Central School, where Lucien Freud was a contemporary, and then at the Ruskin which had evacuated to Oxford. War experience included driving an ambulance—or was it a fire-engine?—and a very brief marriage. There followed a flirtation with ballet—Ninette de Valois staged two of her creations at Saddlers Wells—and fringe jobs in the art world. Her draughtsmanship stood her in good stead throughout her life and was her entrée to field archaeology. She became hooked on diving after having the luck to try it out in a 25-foot-deep ‘diving-pit’ (with kit supplied) at the Wimbledon home of Kazimierz Bobak, who was developing a demand-valve (letter, S. Bobak, *Guardian*, 1 Nov. 2010). A colourful version of this has become a legend involving a ‘well’ and a ‘garden hose’ and appeared in Honor’s memoir *Under the Mediterranean* (p.4) and has stuck.

True apprenticeship in aqualung-diving arose when she was convalescing on the Riviera and frequented the Cannes divers’ club where Frederic Dumas, D. Rebikoff, G. Barnait and others who had helped Cousteau develop the aqualung were to be found. She always praised this training—not least the prompt cigarette on surfacing—moreover the French divers introduced her to the many ancient wrecks ‘under the



Mediterranean'. This was to be the title of her best-known book (1963).

In 1957 she gained archaeological experience through a land dig. Kathleen Kenyon was completing a 4-year excavation of Jericho and Honor joined the expedition as technical draughtsman for the final season. Thereafter she often repeated the Kenyon *mantra*—'excavation, however well executed, without adequate publication is wanton destruction'. Honor always stuck firmly to this creed and apart from books and official reports there was a steady flow of papers and notes after each project. There are over 70 entries in John Illsley's 1996 bibliography.

The Jericho experience led on to underwater surveys of the ancient ports and anchorages along the shelterless Levantine coast and round the corner to Alexandria. She had observed that, while numerous scholars were fascinated by the remains of ancient coastal struc-

tures, interest stopped at the water's edge. What an opportunity. It was not the diving that was challenging but making sense of the tumbled masonry in the shallows. Her new-found skills in plotting, mapping and drawing three-dimensional ruins were put to good use. Overall she investigated 11 sites, Byblos to Alexandria (as described in her chapter in *Underwater Archaeology—A Nascent Discipline*, a guide she co-ordinated for UNESCO in 1973 and was widely influential, being translated into the five UNESCO languages).

A change in the political landscape forced her to shift her researches from the East Mediterranean, initially to Malta. There she undertook a survey and partial excavation of a 'rocks-awash' site which proved to be a Roman ship. This she rapidly and informatively published in the monograph *The Mortar Wreck in Meliaha Bay* (1969). All her documentation and field-notes were lodged with the National Museum of Archaeology, Valletta, where they are still cherished. She now had a settled campaign strategy. This was to seek out and work with the relevant local authorities (museum, university or department of antiquities), and learned visitors, and at the end of the investigation to leave her yield with the appropriate institution as a local resource. This approach greatly recommended Honor and her work to the newly-fledged United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) which was keeping a watching brief on developments, and eased her way round the undersea Mediterranean.

While working in Sicily information reached her that sand dredging off the west coast had brought up ancient timbers in an area close to the Carthaginian site of Motya and the scene of a sea-battle. With the backing of the British Academy she organised her own expedition and in August 1971 came across an astonishingly-well-preserved hull that fitted contemporary descriptions of 3rd-century-BC Punic war-galleys; it appeared to be almost new at sinking and was only 3 m deep. Disturbance of the sand that had kept it buried and intact for 2500 years had partially uncovered it. No such physical evidence had previously been found—accounted for by the light construction, lack of cargo, and ramming in battle. The result was, without doubt, Honor's most important academic publication, 'Marsala. The Punic Ship' (supplement, *Notizie degli Scavi* 30, 1976). Allied with detailed field-records was a range of specialist reports, both scientific and archaeological. The ship was raised, and its subsequent housing and conservation at Marsala became issues of some difficulty, and a breakdown of her established strategy of working exclusively through the local authorities. This caused Honor, like much of the archaeological world, great concern. This should not detract from her achievement in securing the methodical excavation and analysis of an ancient galley, the first to be found and studied in this way.

It is perhaps not widely known that Honor played an essential role in getting this *Journal* started. Three of us met weekly—David Blackman completed the trio—in her elegant London flat in spring 1971 to plan the journal and the contents of the first issue. She also found a sympathetic publisher with a good design-team (Seminar Press). *IJNA* volume 1 (248 pp.) duly appeared in spring 1972 to a good press, but without benefit of its formal editor. Joan du Plat Taylor had spent most of the intervening months on a dig in Italy. It is fitting that this, the 40th annual volume of the *IJNA*, includes a note Honor wrote for us not long before she died.

The *IJNA* initiative was no exception. Even in her 80s she was actively engaged in public promotion of marine archaeology (and how not to do it). She was part of the Council for Nautical Archaeology, established in 1963, the busy focus-group which, after a spate of wreck-looting scandals, generated the government Wreck Committee, leading after a bumpy ride to the Protection of Wrecks Act (1973) (see *Bloomsbury Pharos*, Institute of Archaeology Bulletin 24, 1987). For years she was on the council of the Society for Nautical Research, the body which had saved HMS *Victory* and established the National Maritime Museum. The 1973 UNESCO guide she co-ordinated was highly influential, while the very different *Under the Mediterranean* (apocryphally sub-titled *Travels with a Bottle*), with an often-hilarious account of the art and craft of her archaeological diving, remains an addictive read. For instance there is her prescription for successful travel in faraway places: ‘good clothes, fair hair, an ability to read, write and tell the time’. Friend and colleague Peter Throckmorton adds, ‘Honor was treated as a member of whatever sex she happened to be with’. Her tips for divers were equally pragmatic: she found she could judge her depth by the the colour of her nail varnish. She warned that excavating divers become ‘emotionally involved with their big hole’. Also, ‘when there is a job to be done ... the mind does not work normally below 20 m, at 30 m it becomes like [that of] a child of six. The dulled mind cannot formulate questions: at the surface questions pose themselves’.

Apart from her writings, which inspired aspirants, officials and academics alike, she was always travelling and speaking and visiting projects. Her communication skills were formidable.<sup>1</sup> She was the showman no academic subject can well do without. In 1998 Honor was invited back to Lebanon by the Department of Antiquities. Things had settled down enough from the civil war and near-destruction of the

National Museum to resume archaeological work and particularly in the marine zone, Honor’s speciality. In 2004 the National Museum, Beirut, published an impressive, colour-illustrated volume *A Decade of Archaeology and History in the Lebanon (1995–2004)* to mark the re-opening of the Museum and a UNESCO initiative to make Byblos a World Heritage Site: this to include the offshore facilities and functions of Antiquity now masked by various environmental and other developments. In her chapter ‘Byblos and the Sea’, Honor outlines the extraordinarily rich maritime role of Byblos in Antiquity, much of which she had helped to unravel over her many years’ acquaintance. Her personal recollections of key archaeologists and intimate knowledge of the mythical context, oceanography, and archaeology and of the submerged shoreline enabled her to make sense of topographical complexities and to integrate earlier underwater surveys with evidence on land. She was able to put to rest years of doubt over the location of the 3rd millennium-BC Tower Temple and see it as a candidate for a proto-lighthouse. The votive stone anchors and the (now-missing) copper-alloy boat-models could be understood in the context of large merchant ships and perhaps cedar-log transports anchoring offshore in the Bronze Age and of the ship-to-shore lighters and small boats which serviced them. She was still engaged in underwater survey of a probable big-ship anchorage 2 km offshore some years after *Decade* was published.

Although Honor Frost’s great and incomparable achievements were almost legendary, and her energy seemed boundless, she always felt something of an outsider. She was deeply proud of being made a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries in 1969, sponsored by leading luminaries headed by Sir Mortimer Wheeler. Yet she was very conscious of not having a university degree, of not perhaps ‘belonging’. Her wide circle of friends was spread around the Mediterranean world, and she was comfortable in a number of languages, but dyslexic in those she wrote in. In *Under the Mediterranean* (1963) she writes, ‘my roots are in the Mediterranean and Levant’. In a letter very recently, ‘I am now back where I belong, marine surveying off Byblos’. What a pity she did not have a little longer to indulge her heritage. Preparing for yet another trip abroad she was hit by seven simultaneous injections and died on 12 September. We shall not see her like again.

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## Note

1. There is every hope that Honor Frost’s substantial archive of papers and visual material will be ‘saved for the nation’—that is, curated and made available for research.