

## **“Conversation Piece”**

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### **Transcript:**

“. . . now ‘Conversation Piece’. Sue MacGregor’s guest this afternoon is the marine archaeologist Honor Frost . . . ”

**Sue MacGregor:** Honor Frost I suppose the skill or the science of marine archaeology has only been possible to follow since it’s been possible for man to stay - or woman, indeed, in your case - to stay under water for any great length of time. I mean it’s a pretty new discipline, isn’t it?

**Honor Frost:** Oh yes, it came in not with hard-hat diving where you wear a full suit, but after the War [WWII] after the scuba - the self-contained [underwater] breathing apparatus - which means that you’re quite independent and you carry the air on a bottle on your back and you get it - what you want - according to the depth, through a demand valve. And so that gives you absolute freedom and at that point you can work on any discipline you like underwater.

**Sue MacGregor:** But when you first started were people still trying out the equipment?

**Honor Frost:** Oh yes! Because I belonged to the first civilian diving club in the world. Because the equipment was really developed during the War [WWII] in France by various young officers of the French Navy who had nothing to do at that time and were around Toulon and . . .

**Sue MacGregor:** ! . . . would one call them ‘frogmen’ - or not quite?

**Honor Frost:** . . . yes, why not? Yes, yes all the naval divers were called frogmen then. But some of them of course worked with oxygen where you can’t go very deep and these people mainly . . . not . . . they weren’t at war because France was not at war in the south . . . but they were looking for food and the sea was there and so they shot fish and, in order to get nearer to the fish and be more efficient, they started developing masks and fins. And then two or three of them - Commandant Le Prieur, and then Cousteau and then Gagnon - they all worked on perfecting the aqualung, or the self-contained [underwater] breathing apparatus, which we now all know. But in those days we didn’t know very much about the medical side - diving physiology - and certainly not about the apparatus, because it was being invented and people were just starting to produce it commercially. So the problem was always improving the designs and I was very fortunate because I never had to buy anything, I was always given it to test out like everyone else.

**Sue MacGregor:** And it was this equipment that eventually led you to discover your famous ship which is the Punic Ship from about 250BC which is, I think, the only Phoenician warship of its kind that’s ever been found?

**Honor Frost:** It's the only warship of the Classical Period; that's to say, in the Greek texts they make the distinction of 'round ships' which are rather slow and have a square sail and are used for cargo, and 'long ships' which have oars and are warships.

**Sue MacGregor:** And this ship is now - what's left of it, and it's an astonishing site - is viewable, people can go and see it, in Marsala in Southern Sicily.

**Honor Frost:** Yes, and I hope there will be a proper museum which explains the remains to the general public; at the moment the remains are not very clean and they're not arranged for public display and they're underneath a tent - really in order to protect them from the dust.

**Sue MacGregor:** Well, we'll come to that fascinating find in more detail in a moment, because you found it just over 20 years ago - but the Mediterranean really was your very early stamping ground, I think, because you were born in Cyprus.

**Honor Frost:** Yes, I was born in Cyprus and so like any other Middle Eastern child I was brought up on archaeology. That's to say when you were going out - walks - you would be taught to keep your eyes on the ground and pick up potsherds, and then ask very politely whether they were Phoenician or Roman or what or Ottoman.

**Sue MacGregor:** Who told you? Who gave you the answer?

**Honor Frost:** Oh well, my father or his friends or anyone, almost everyone, took it as a hobby, and they still do.

**Sue MacGregor:** He wasn't an archaeologist?

**Honor Frost:** No, no, no - no, no - but this was the period of amateur archaeologists; you did it as a matter of research, you didn't necessarily have to have a degree in archaeology; and in any case in those days most people were taught Greek and Latin so they had a Classical background.

**Sue MacGregor:** Were you fascinated by early things you saw when you were quite small?

**Honor Frost:** No, not at all; I was quite . . . I was quite fascinated by tombs but I was extremely bored by potsherds and by architectural ruins and I really didn't like getting dust onto my fingers. I thought it very boring.

**Sue MacGregor:** What about tombs - what was it about tombs that fascinated you?

**Honor Frost:** But well, at least there was a sort of coherent whole; you didn't have somebody telling you that that stone represented the oldest fortification wall, and that architecturally it was so interesting, when all you could see was one stone. At least in a tomb you saw a skeleton with some jewellery and some pots and, it was comprehensible.

**Sue MacGregor:** So, you didn't train as an archaeologist?

**Honor Frost:** Oh no. No, I trained in the visual arts and art history.

**Sue MacGregor:** What did you want to be?

**Honor Frost:** Painter, illustrator, designer - all of which, at various times, I have been.

**Sue MacGregor:** So you trained in this country, did you?

**Honor Frost:** Yes, because I was here during the War [WWII]; I was at school in Switzerland but, when I was a student, I was at the Central School in London and then, because of the War, went to the Slade and Ruskin in Oxford.

**Sue MacGregor:** And did that lead to a profession in the arts of some kind?

**Honor Frost:** I did design for a ballet, yes; but I gave that up when my choreographers went abroad and then, I don't know, then I gradually . . . I turned over to this other interest.

**Sue MacGregor:** Now, you said that you joined the first civilian diving club in the world, was that 'cause you met them by chance?

**Honor Frost:** Yes, that was about a year after I had given up, or rather ballet gave me up - but the first time I dived, to be completely accurate was after late night rehearsals at the Mercury Theatre and I was invited by a Polish engineer to whom I shall always be very grateful - Kazimierz Bobak- to go out to an experimental well in Wimbledon where he had just invented a pump that coupled up with a complete diving suit - it wasn't a self-contained breathing apparatus - and he said that I could try it and as I always considered that any time spent on the surface was a waste of time I was very, very thrilled by this and I remember it was snowing and we brought lights out from the house and the suit of course was quite warm and they gave me a torch and so I got into the well and sat on the bottom for some time and I remember there were dried leaves and I shone the torch onto leaves and shone it through the leaves so you could see the skeleton and then eventually I suppose I thought 'Oh dear, they must be pumping away' because they had to pump for every breath of air that I took.

**Sue MacGregor:** But you weren't frightened?

**Honor Frost:** No . . . no . . . I suppose one should be, but I've never been properly . . . I have a respect for the sea, but I've never been properly frightened of water.

**Sue MacGregor:** So you decided you could cope with being underwater for some period of time?

**Honor Frost:** Oh yes, the more the merrier, I mean yes [laughter]

**Sue MacGregor:** And then you met these proper divers or proper amateur divers?

**Honor Frost:** Oh, well, that was later - when I was in Cannes - I suppose a few months later, I don't know; and there was a group of people, they were all engineers, and I was fortunate enough to, you know . . . you know, become part of that group.

**Sue MacGregor:** And they said 'Come and dive with us'?

**Honor Frost:** Yes.

**Sue MacGregor:** What was the equipment like?

**Honor Frost:** Well, it was very uncomfortable, by present day standards, in a certain way, because you had to suck very hard for every breath of air - whereas now you just breathe normally. And then, of course, this was in the month of March and the Mediterranean at 30 metres deep - and we used to dive deep - is very, very cold and in those days they didn't make diving suits - at least not to fit me.

**Sue MacGregor:** You're rather petite.

**Honor Frost:** Yes, and there were very rigid large homemade suits that the men wore and once one of them passed me one of these things but it was so enormous and so buoyant and it so swamped me that I sort of blew up like a balloon and had to be fished out; having what they used to say 'elle a bu une tasse', which is 'drink a cup of water' which indeed I had [laughter] and, yes, the apparatus . . . otherwise, one went down in sort of woollen combinations, men's woollen combinations, over ballet tights, jerseys, and anything else one could lay hands on.

**Sue MacGregor:** Were you looking at a wreck?

**Honor Frost:** Well, the first big dive I did, curiously enough, was on a wreck it was on a first-century Roman wreck off Agay - just called Antheor 1, I think - and I was very, very fascinated by it, but when I saw all my colleagues - having had this training as a child, then later more disciplined training with Dame Kathleen Kenyon, I was very, very shocked when I saw them picking up amphorae and moving things around and kicking around on quite delicate material and not really minding very much about wood, and so on, it wasn't that they were stupid or anything, it was that they were unprofessional; they were mostly, they were professional men - architects, solicitors, and so on - and of course wrecks don't just arrive on the bottom upright and remain like that for a couple of millennia - they're just like temples on land, they fall down and they become buried; but in a rather different way and in order to excavate them properly you've got to know how a wreck forms and that is where the French really had a head start over anyone else in the world because they were the first to have come across Roman wrecks where you would be swimming along over a sandy bottom and there'd be a mound and you'd see a sort of pot sticking out of it; so being a curious diver, you'd go and pull out that pot and you'd find there was another one underneath, and another one underneath, and when they discovered this they got large sort-of vacuum-cleaner-like pumps and they found there were several layers of

jars and underneath that there would be bits of waterlogged wood and this was a surprise.

**Sue MacGregor:** Where did you learn the proper skills of archaeology - on land, I take it, because that's where people were sharpening their skills?

**Honor Frost:** Well, I'm not a professional archaeologist - I'm not an archaeologist, I didn't learn any formal way. But having, with my Middle Eastern childhood, I got the opportunity - shortly after I learned to dive in France - to do the drawing, the technical drawing, for Dame Kathleen Kenyon when she was on her last season of excavation at Jericho; and I was given the tombs, which were away from the old town she was digging . . .

**Sue MacGregor:** . . . which you enjoyed?

**Honor Frost:** . . . I enjoyed them thoroughly because they were really the same sort of problem as a wreck, and then I learnt how she wanted these things planned and it then came to me very forcibly that this is how wrecks should be excavated.

**Sue MacGregor:** You have to do it in layers?

**Honor Frost:** You do it in layers - it very much depends on the wreck - but what with what I'd learnt in France about wreck-formations, about how you get a tumulus and then how the wood flattens out, the hull flattens out underneath the weight of the cargo - assuming the cargo is heavy - and then the whole lot becomes buried, you have to dig down it in a certain way from the top to the bottom, and at every layer you have to make a plan so that you know exactly, you can then reconstruct, put it all together again and see what the ship was like. But in, on, land you date by your stratigraphy like if you don't answer your letters and you chuck them into a basket on your desk; you know the one at the bottom is going to be the earliest and it's as simple as that and they dig through these layers and they can see the different layers and then, if they get an object of known date like something with the name of an Egyptian king written on it then they can work out the other layers, that that was such and such a date and other layers were before and after and so on.

**Sue MacGregor:** Your great fascination I think in general terms is the navigators of the Bronze Age, now that's a lot further back than your Phoenician ship.

**Honor Frost:** Yes, but of course it's the ancestors, the navigators, where I worked because after Jericho I was invited - another invitation I shall be always grateful for - to the French Institute of the Middle East in Beirut by its very great Director Henri Seyrig and I spent seven years off and on there being the sort of eyes for the various people who were the great archaeologists who were digging on land and were the great sites of Tyre and Sidon and Byblos.

**Sue MacGregor:** Now, if you're fascinated by Bronze Age navigation - and they went right through the Mediterranean, these sailors - there's not much left for you to be able to deduce what they were like and where they went . . . is there?

**Honor Frost:** . . . there wasn't then, we hadn't . . . well as a matter of fact we very soon did get one Bronze Age wreck, but it's what I would call a dispersed cargo, there wasn't any hull there - but what lead me on to the Bronze Age navigation was the anchors because, if you come to think of it, if you're on a boat and you're being blown towards the shore there's only one thing between you and death and that's the anchor - if it doesn't hold, you've had it and so has the boat. And so anchors are always considered sacred; they still are the emblem of hope in the Christian religion and the more inefficient the boat you are in, and the more inefficient the anchor, obviously the more sacred it was.

**Sue MacGregor:** Now, the anchor was stone?

**Honor Frost:** So, in the Bronze Age they just, yes, the anchor they used was a stone with a hole in it; and not to say that their boats weren't big, they can be very big. But these anchors were put in temples and so the big temples of the Middle East I suddenly, to my surprise, saw these stones with holes in them which had not been called anchors - they called them 'phallic objects', 'pierced stones', er, you know, you give them a name. But I was seeing the same things underwater and, very often I was in primitive fisherman's boats, or local Arabic diving boats, where they were still using them.

**Sue MacGregor:** Now, your Phoenician ship - the Punic warship - the one that you can now see in Marsala in Sicily, do you know how it went down? Can you tell from the wreck? Could you tell?

**Honor Frost:** You don't, no, I don't know how it went down but it could well have been chased after the Battle of the Egadi Islands where we know a lot of Punic ships fought at that particular time . . . and, it may not be from that battle - but circumstantial, evidence suggests that it was, and a few of the ships, obviously, tried to get away and would have tried to get down to the nearest Punic settlement that was still in Punic, rather than Roman, hands and that was Marsala; or the old name was Lilybaeum. A lot of these wrecks in the sandbank just before you get there . . . where they . . . for some reason or other they were chased, they ran ashore, or they tried to escape onto their own territory. I don't know.

**Sue MacGregor:** Now, you found it in, what, 1971?

**Honor Frost:** I had been told that there were wrecks there and asked to go and look at them when I first visited the place in 1969. But then, for various reasons, I went back again in '71, with a team - surveying as much as anything else - and we came across this very remarkable bit of wood sticking out of the bottom . . . and I hadn't seen anything like it before and so it interested me.

**Sue MacGregor:** How deep was it?

**Honor Frost:** Oh, it was the height of this room, about two and a half metres, very

shallow - which is very unpleasant. Twenty metres is the ideal depth because then you're not bothered by wind and waves. But near the shore at that depth you're bothered the whole time.

**Sue MacGregor:** But isn't it extraordinary, therefore, that a bit of . . . some bits of wood remained?

**Honor Frost:** It is extraordinary. I didn't understand it. And, when I went back to France, none of the sort-of pioneers who had seen the first wrecks and had studied wreck formation, they almost didn't believe me - except that I showed them the photographs and the evidence. Now, I think I do understand it, but this is another part of the whole subject of wreck-formation . . . but, to put it simply, if you remember when you were a child ever standing on a sandy beach with your feet in the sand and you looked down at your feet, you would see the waves lapping around and gradually your feet would disappear under the sand; that is to say, in shallow water sand moves, greater amounts of sand move, than moves across the bottom in deep water; and once something has been buried it's stabilized; nature regains, sort of, stability of the bottom and it remains . . . it's buried very quickly, which is why the wood is so well preserved, and sufficiently deeply to keep it safe for . . . and, er, lots of people, there have been lots and lots of these shallow-water wrecks found recently; but to begin with we didn't believe it was possible.

**Sue MacGregor:** But an extraordinary find it was, over 2,200 years old . . .

**Honor Frost:** Yes, well, that of course didn't make it very extraordinary to me because I'd seen others of the same sort of period - what was extraordinary was that it had writing on it done with a pen, I mean with a, not a pen - a brush. Quite small, the letters were about one or two centimetres high and they were Punic letters, which is why one knows it's a Punic ship. When the epigraphist, Dr. William Johnston, from Semitic Studies in Aberdeen - he's now a Professor - when he came down and studied the thing, it took him two years to work out the relationship of these signs to the plan of the wood and then we found quite a lot of interesting things like for instance there was one word of the Phoenicia/Punic alphabet - the 'waw' - which was repeated over and over again and sometimes there were two 'waw' or 'waweem' together, which makes a word 'cause they don't have consonants, and this word means 'nails'; and there's apparently a bit of Biblical scholarship, which is rather odd, about the building of a temple in Jerusalem when one version of the Bible says that the great curtain across the temple was fixed up with 'waweem' and, since ever Biblical scholarship started, people have been wondering what 'waweem' were. Well, we've got it written on this ship and 'cause, I mean, you know, the curtain could've been hung on a rod with rings, or rached, or anything - I don't know. But, in point of fact, the Bible said silver 'waweem' and we got it seven times, always written by nails; the carpenters were simply saying - or the shipwrights or the architects or whatever they were - were simply saying 'you put that nail in there'. So that solved that little thing.

**Sue MacGregor:** And from the other bits and detritus that you found there - you found bits of rope, you found bits of wood . . .

**Honor Frost:** Yes, we also did find from the other lettering - and I will say that this is not the work so much of the architects and the archaeologists and the engineers, but of the epigrapher, because he related all these signs to the architecture of the ship. It then became apparent that a lot of them were directions of where you fitted things in, and it then became apparent that the thing had been pre-conceived and, therefore - warships had to be built quickly - it was a form of pre-fabrication.

**Sue MacGregor:** Could you tell how many oarsmen there were? What they ate? That sort of thing?

**Honor Frost:** We could tell what they ate. Oh dear, you ask me how many there were . . . I think it was, we worked it out at thirty-two. I may be wrong on that. What they ate yes certainly, because they spat it out and all the remains came down over the keel in, the sort of bottom of the ship. They ate a lot of meat - butcher-cut chops. One man appears; he must've been wounded and got stuck there on the ballast when the ship went down because there was a bit of a human skeleton there, and the bones of a little dog. But, apart from that, yes - we certainly found that they ate sheep or goat, in chops, they also, um, beef, ah, can't remember all the bones off-hand, but they ate a hell of a lot of meat - which does go in with what the texts say about the Carthaginians.

**Sue MacGregor:** And you found some other, rather interesting, vegetable matter?

**Honor Frost:** We found olive pips, hazelnuts - which goes in again with the time of the sinking, I mean you gather them in autumn, and yes, the most interesting thing . . . because all of these things are taken up and then brought back to a laboratory for plant anatomical identification and we were very, very fortunate to have the help of Kew. The wreck took four years to excavate and on the first year I saw, among the food, a great many little yellow, what looked like stems of grass. And so I picked them up and put them into little plastic containers and took them back with the samples to Kew; but we were getting so many samples of plants that Kew simply did what they could and a lot didn't get analysed and so in the second or third year I was determined, I found a basket of these things, and so I extracted samples again and sent them back, actually by the Reverend Professor William Johnston, to Kew so that they . . . you know . . . 'please, please do these - don't pass them over' and the identification came out as Cannabis Sativa.

**Sue MacGregor:** Pot, in other words.

**Honor Frost:** Pot.

**Sue MacGregor:** So they'd been chewing pot?

**Honor Frost:** Chewing it, because you see the best pot is made from the upper leaves and the small leaves and pollen, but, er, they may've made tea out of it - it's quite possible - out of the lower part that doesn't have so much drug in it.

**Sue MacGregor:** And was, do you think that kept them going as they were rowing?

**Honor Frost:** Oh yes, I mean in homeopathic medicine small doses of Cannabis Sativa or Cannabis Indica - just the same thing, but comes from another part of the world - is recommended against fatigue; and in all sorts of countries they smoke a mild amount of pot to keep them going when they're doing physical labour.

**Sue MacGregor:** Was it an eerie feeling for you, discovering all this about these men who died more than a couple of thousand years ago?

**Honor Frost:** Sometimes, sometimes, yes sometimes . . .

**Sue MacGregor:** Did you almost feel you could reach out and touch them?

**Honor Frost:** In certain parts of the wreck yes, one did have that feeling. It was mostly just hard slog, but it is a feeling that did occur to me once or twice over the years, mmm . . .

**Sue MacGregor:** What's the most exciting find you've ever made? Was it something to do with that wreck?

**Honor Frost:** Well, it's axiomatic that at the end of a long excavation you always, on the last day, find the most interesting thing. The very last day of the Punic Ship excavation, when my colleagues had left, when one boat packed up and went away, when the vacuum-cleaner-like pumps had all been dismantled and taken away, I went out there alone on a boat with one local sailor and, er, I'd been too busy to stray very much before that, I swam about 40 metres to the south of the Punic Ship, where we'd only had the stern - and, after four years, we certainly knew that thing very well - and sticking out of the sand 40 metres away was the prow of a ship of the same period; it was nothing to do with ours . . .

**Sue MacGregor:** Good heavens!

**Honor Frost:** . . . but it was, for me, the missing bit of information because it had that same strange Punic character, the 'waw', written on it - over a nail, of course - and it was a wooden ram, a prow with a wooden ram attached to it, half-buried. I was so amazed that I spent a week there, digging it out by hand - digging one side of it out by hand.

**Sue MacGregor:** This was a ram in the sense of a ram that 'rams into' something?

**Honor Frost:** Yes. We now know that it was a weapon of war, er, ships rammed each other. I photographed it, drew it, measured it, took samples, took one of its two wooden tusks - which of course had been covered with cloth, and outside that there had been a metal casing - and took them up as samples and photographed the thing and then very carefully sandbagged it so that the rest of it is still there for posterity.

**Sue MacGregor:** You're still diving?

**Honor Frost:** Yes.

**Sue MacGregor:** What are you doing this summer?

**Honor Frost:** Well, I would be very interested - if I'm invited again, but I don't want to be a burden to them - to go and see a very beautiful wreck, fifth-century before Christ, at 30 metres, off the northern Sporades, which the Greek government are excavating. I saw the beginning of that excavation last year and I wouldn't mind seeing the second year of it.

**Sue MacGregor:** It's obviously still a very exciting prospect for you, diving?

**Honor Frost:** Oh yes, oh well, er, yes. I still feel that time on the surface is a waste of time. And I don't mind even if there isn't a beautiful wreck - I mean I'd prefer there to be a beautiful wreck, but I don't mind just sort of swimming around - I'm not very keen on walking, but I do like diving.

**Sue MacGregor:** Honor Frost, thank you very much. [28:55] [END]

**Transcript prepared for The Honor Frost Foundation by Isabel Holroyd; Checked for the BBC by Hilary Bishop.**

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