Honor Frost Under the Mediterranean: From Maritime to Nautical Archaeology

Patrice Pomey (Emeritus Research Director, Aix-Marseille University – CNRS)

In 1954, Honor Frost dives for the first time on an ancient Mediterranean shipwreck, the Chrétienne A, and discovers archaeology underwater. A few years later, in 1957, she participates in the excavations of the necropolis of Jericho. Synthesizing this dual experience, she is one of the first to realize that underwater archaeology opens the door to a new discipline: Maritime Archaeology.

Her activity is tireless. She is interested in ancient ports of the Syro-Lebanese coast (Rouad, Arwad, Tyr, Sidon, Byblos), in the lighthouse of Alexandria and in the ancient anchors from Phoenicia (Byblos, Ugarit or Kition) and Egypt (Alexandria, Wadi Gawasis), without forgetting the shipwrecks. After having assessed the Cape Gelidonyia wreck with Peter Throckmorton, she participates in 1960 in the excavation directed by G. F. Bass, which was the first underwater excavation conducted by archaeological divers. Next, in 1967, the excavation of the Mellieha Bay shipwreck off the island of Malta, and from 1970, the excavation of the Marsala shipwrecks in Sicily.

By bringing together in the same activity, the study of ports, anchors and shipwrecks with their cargoes and hulls remains, without neglecting neither iconographic data nor textual sources, encompassing the breadth of human activities on the sea, is the aim of her study. That is to say the definition of Maritime Archaeology, as it later became known.

But the excavation of the Punic wrecks of Marsala, from the first campaign in 1970 to the final publication in 1976, remains the great enterprise of his life. Leading the search with method and meticulousness, she will highlight the construction marks in the Punic alphabet painted on the hull. From the letters, she will deduce with subtlety the process of the ship construction. This discovery, which remains unique to this day, is one of the main achievements of naval archaeological studies, and the excavation remains an exceptional model.

Thus, after taking part in the birth of maritime archaeology, Honor Frost has also contributed to establishing nautical archaeology as a discipline in its own right.