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The Antidragonera Wreck (Kythera, end of 4th century BC)

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Abstract

Since 1994 the Hellenic Institute of Marine Archaeology has started an underwater excavation at a wreck near the north coast of an uninhabited islet called Antidragonera at the south-east coast of Kythera. Nine pyramidal stone anchors have been located in two separated groups. They all belong to the same type of stone anchors which were found for the first time on a shipwreck in Greece. The first group consisted of five anchors, delimits the area of the wreck from north-east near the east cape of the islet. The wreck is dated at the end of the 4th century BC from the finds excavated and raised to the surface from the trenches under the anchors. The pottery assemblage includes two large storage pithoi, some transport amphoras and some coarse wear (saltcellars, fish-plates, plates and lamps). Of particular interest are some objects of lead probably from the ship's rigging. It seems more likely that the ship was carrying perishable commodities, such as wheat, from Sicily or Italy to Athens.

During the course of an underwater investigation of the south-east coast of Kythera¹ (fig. 1), a team of divers from the Hellenic Institute of Marine Archaeology under the direction of the writer located a total of nine stone pyramidal anchors (fig. 2) off the north shore of the islet of Antidragonera. This is the more northerly of the two islets which lie close to the south-east coast of Kythera and a relatively short distance from Cape Malia, which is notorious among sailors for its dangerous seas.

The anchors were found in two groups (fig. 3), the first one of four anchors at a shallow depth (8–9 m) in an

indentation of the bay, and the second of five anchors close to the north-eastern point of the islet at a depth of 12 to 18 m. The investigation focused on the second group, where the largest concentration of pottery occurred. Four of the five anchors were raised and two trenches were excavated, confirming the existence of a wreck in that place. The rocky bottom in the area rendered the preservation of even a small part of the wrecked vessel impossible, and most of the evidence for the wreck therefore comes from the recovery of the different moveable finds.

The nine anchors are all of the same type, and petrolo-

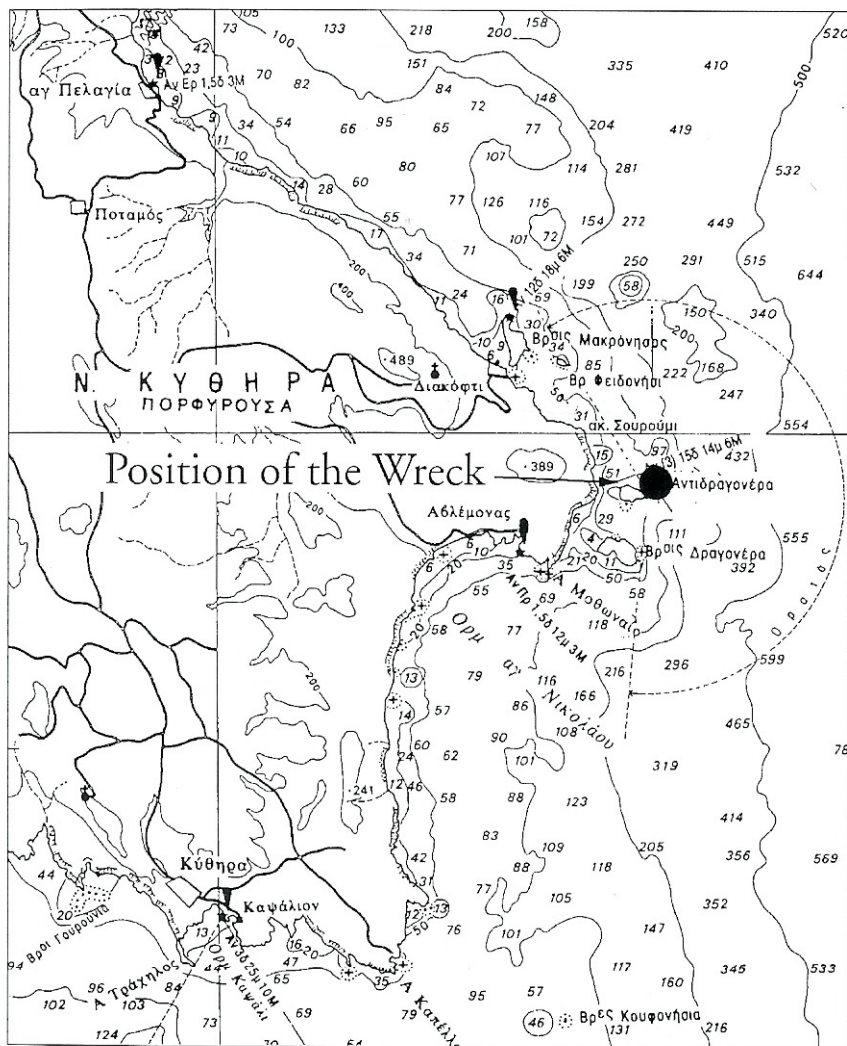


Fig. 1: Map of eastern Kythera.

gical analyses have shown that they were all made from the same volcanic rock (rhyolite to dacite), which occurs in many parts of the Aegean. However, the most likely provenance of the rock is the quarries on either Aigina or Poros. All the anchors have a large horizontal perforation through the top of the truncated pyramid, connected by a vertical perforation to the small top surface of the pyramid. This second perforation in all the

anchors is filled with lead and has one or two holes in it, probably for the attachment of a ring. The differences between the anchors are in their weights (some 250 kg for the largest and 80 for the smallest) and in the fact that some of them have a piri-form shape. The larger ones are over 80 cm high and 60 cm wide at the base. The smaller anchors were the ones that were found in the indentation of the bay, and they seem to have been used to anchor the ship. The other, larger ones remained for some reason on the ship and sank with it. Up to now 13 similar anchors have been found in the harbour of Zea (Piraeus), the ancient naval harbour of Athens, the precise finds' spots of which, however, are not known since they were found in the course of works to deepen the harbour. The case of the anchor recovered from the harbour at Volos is similar. Only four similar anchors have been found on wrecks: three at La Madonnina² near Taranto, and one at the Ognina³ in Sicily. The importance of the nine Antidragonera anchors is thus apparent, since they form the largest group of anchors so far discovered *in situ*.

Anchors of this type are considered earlier than the type with a stock. Both types, however, appear to have been in use on ships contemporaneously, four stock anchors have been found on wrecks of the 1st half of the 5th century BC, and on the three wrecks where pyramidal anchors were found they date to the 2nd half of the 4th cen-

¹ The results of the survey of the Antidragonera wreck are published in the periodical „Enalia“ of the Hellenic Institute of Marine Archaeology: D. KOURKOUVELIS, Underwater Survey in the Avlemonas Region of Eastern Kythera (1993 season). *Enalia* 4, 1992 (1996), 32–36; D. KOURKOUVELIS, Excavation at the Islet of Antidragonera I (1994 to 1995). *Enalia* 5 (in print); D. KOURKOUVELIS, Excavation at the Islet of Antidragonera II (1996 season). *Enalia* 5 (in print).

² A. M. McCANN, A Fourth Century B. C. Shipwreck Near Taranto. *Archaeology* 25, 3, 1972, 181–187.

³ G. KAPITAN/F. NAGLSCHMID, A 4th century B. C. dispersed amphora cargo on the secca di Capo Ognina, Siracusa, Sicily (site Ognina 4). In: J. BLANCHARD/J. MAIR/T. MORISSON (Hrsg.), Proceedings of the 6th International Science Symposium CMAS (Edinburgh 1982) 229–239.

ture BC. But what is surprising is the large number of anchors found on the site of the Antidragonera wreck. In the case of the two other wrecks with similar anchors, one of them had one anchor and the other three. If we accept that ships using this type of anchor carried at least three, then at least three ships must have anchored in the northern bay of Antidragonera. It is true that if all three vessels had sunk, the finds would have been much bigger in amount. The most likely explanation is that one of them sank and the others succeeded in saving themselves. It seems as though the ship or ships which found themselves in this particular place were attempting for some reason, probably the weather, to take shelter in the northern bay of the islet, dropping four of the anchors as close to the shore as they could, and that one of them was driven against the steep rocks of the promontory, where it sank.

From the two trenches so far been excavated⁴ (fig. 3), in addition to the pottery, which is especially important for dating the wreck and anchors, a considerable number of lead objects has been recovered, probably from the ship's equipment, as well as bronze objects, such as the handle of a bronze bucket and three nails, which must have come from the hull of the ship. Rounded stones of the same material as that of the anchors have also been found, most likely from the ship's ballast.

The pottery (fig. 4) recovered from the area of the two trenches consists chiefly of vases for everyday use, while transport containers were fewer. The fragments were found of at least two large storage pithoi and some ten pointed-base amphoras (chiefly 4th century BC from Cos). Out of the total vases for everyday use, three clay lamps should be mentioned to have a special characteri-

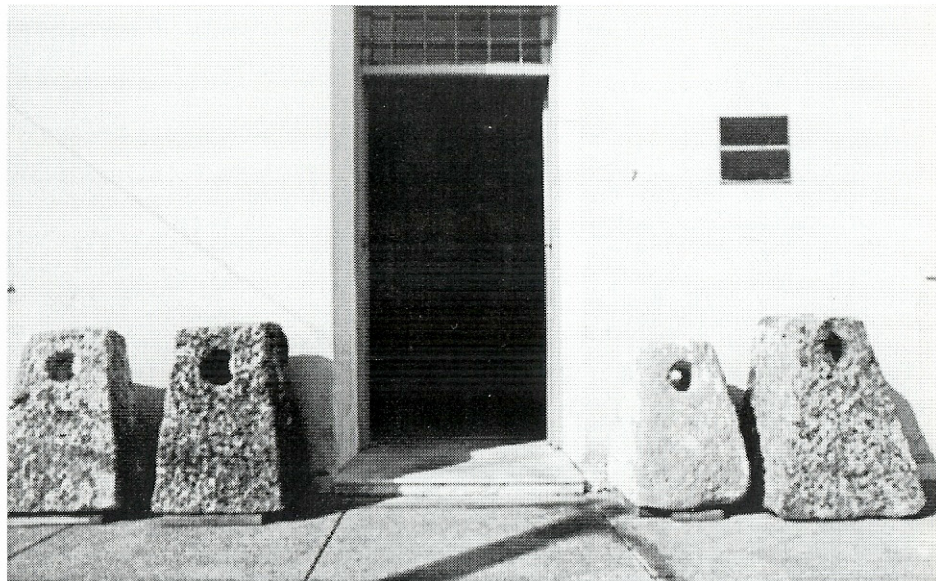
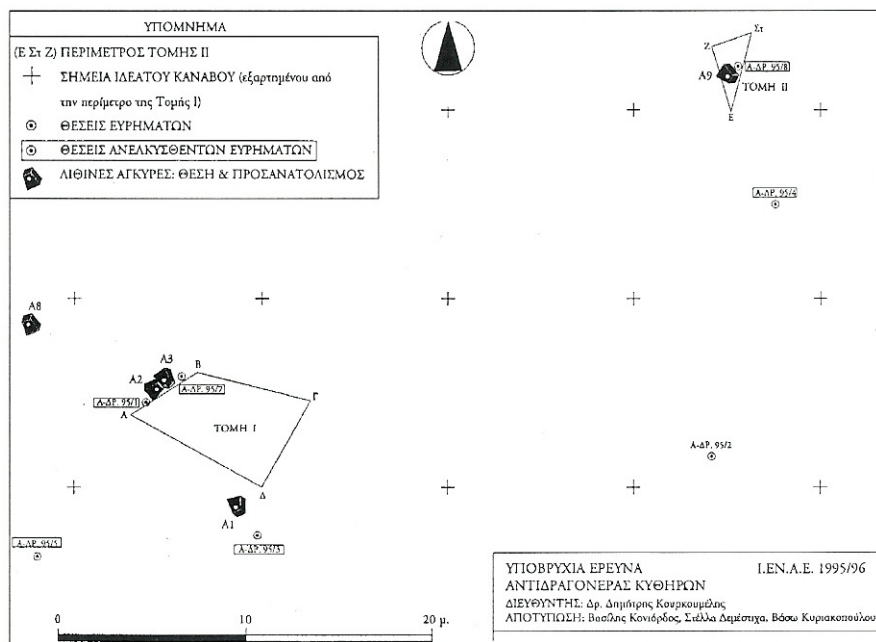


Fig. 2: Pyramidal anchors from the wreck.

Fig. 3: Plan of the second group of anchors.



⁴ In the case of the Antidragonera wreck, the excavated trenches were laid out in the place where anchors were found, as that was where the biggest concentration of pottery. The excavation was limited to the area between the rocks where there was sand, and particularly around and beneath the anchors after it had been raised.

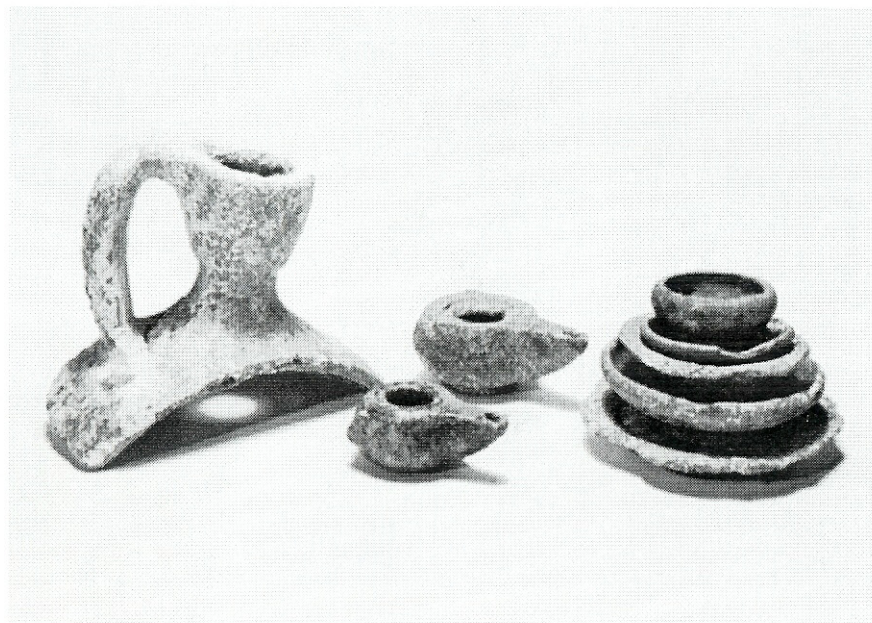


Fig. 4: Pottery from the wreck.

stic, at a first estimation belong two of them to type 15 A (269) and 25 B (308) of R. H. Howland's⁵ typology and date to the middle of the 4th century BC, as well as the handleless miniature bowls (saltcellars), like the complete black-painted example with a monogram on the base, dating to the middle of the 4th century BC⁶ (fig. 5), an amphoriskos (fig. 6) dating to the end of the 4th century BC⁷, plates, cooking pots, basins and others. Although some types of vases can be dated to the middle of the 4th century BC, it would seem that a *terminus post quem* for the date of the wreck is the last decade of the 4th century BC.

What gives the Antidragonera wreck its special interest is the nature of the cargo. The wreck does not present the known picture of a merchant vessel with many transport amphoras. Although at least two large storage pithoi and transport amphoras⁸ were found, most of the pottery recovered from the wreck is largely pottery for everyday use, in other words vases that cannot be categorized as trade wares. Even the quantity and quality of the pottery recovered is not such as to suggest a trade in

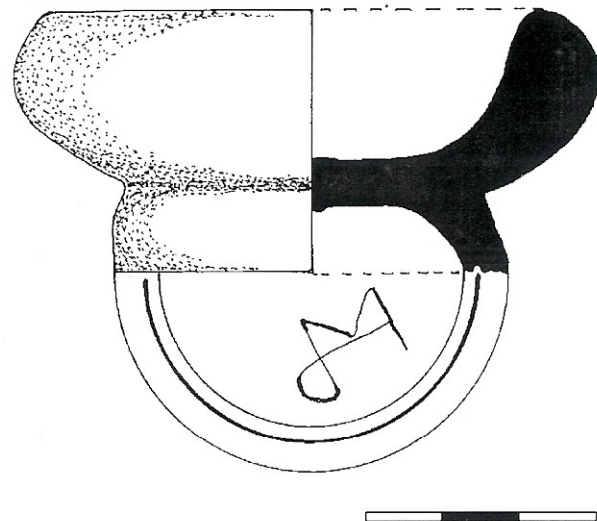


Fig. 5: Black painted saltcellar.

particular vases. Moreover the wreck would not have been looted in modern times, for one reason because it

⁵ R. H. HOWLAND, *The Athenian Agora IV. Greek Lamps and their Survivals* (Princeton 1959).

⁶ B. A. SPARKES/L. TALCOTT, *The Athenian Agora XII. Black and Plain Pottery of the 6th, 5th and 4th centuries BC* (Princeton 1970) nos. 944 and 946 (375–350 BC and ca. 350 BC). See p. 137 for a reference to the ring feet of the saltcellars: „The late series with ring feet (no. 942–950) is concentrated mainly in the second and third quarters of the 4th century.“; S. I. ROTROFF, *The Athenian Agora XXIX. Hellenistic Pottery. Athenian and Imported Wheel-made table ware* (Princeton 1977) no. 1076 (350–325 BC).

⁷ SPARKES/TALCOTT (Anm. 6), no. 1466 (340–310 BC).

⁸ The transport amphoras from the wreck fall within the broad type of Solocha, whose precise provenance remains uncertain, but which probably came from Cos or Peparethos (A. DOULGERI-INDESILOGLOU/Y. GARLAN, *Vin et amphores de Peparethos et d'Ikos*, *Bull. Corr. Hellénique* 114, 1990, 361–398), and also CH. KANTZIA, „Ένα κεραμεικό εργαστήριο αμφορέων του πρώτου μισού του 4ου αι. π.Χ. στην Κω“, *1^η Επιστημονική Συνάντηση για την Ελληνιστική Κεραμεική, Χρονολογημένα συνολα–Εργαστήρια, Βιβλιοθήκη της εν Αθηναις Αρχαιολογικής Εταιρείας* no. 137 (Athens 1994) 335 ff.). Parallels can also be found in the „Spina type“ of „Greek-Italian“ amphoras.

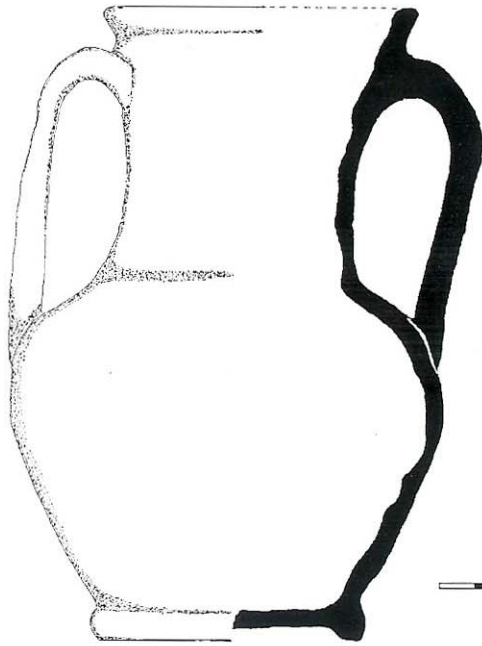


Fig. 6: Complete amphoriskos.

was not known to the fishermen in the area, and for another because the rocky bottom only allows the use of vertical nets, which cause minimal damage to wrecks. It is therefore more probable that these were vases used by the ship's crew for their personal needs. The fact that transport vessels were not found in huge numbers or fine quality vases of other types, which would have been suitable for trade, leads us to the hypothesis that the ship which sank at Antidragonera, if it were a merchantman, was carrying perishable commodities, like wheat, which was not necessary to store in vases to be transported. It is known from written sources that Athens in the 4th century BC had huge need of food supply and especially wheat, something which obliged her to impose virtually a trade monopoly. On the other hand piracy was creating so many problems for safe transportation that merchantmen were now escorted by

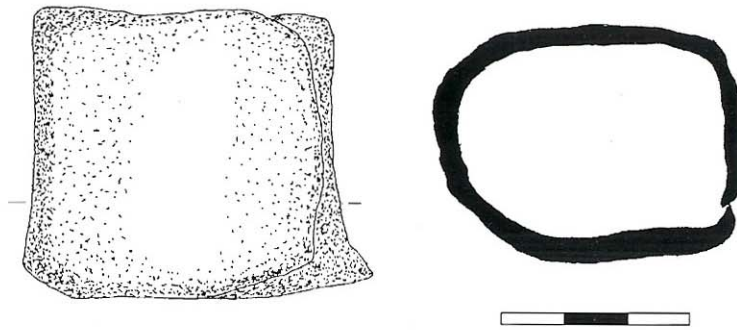


Fig. 7: Tubular lead object.

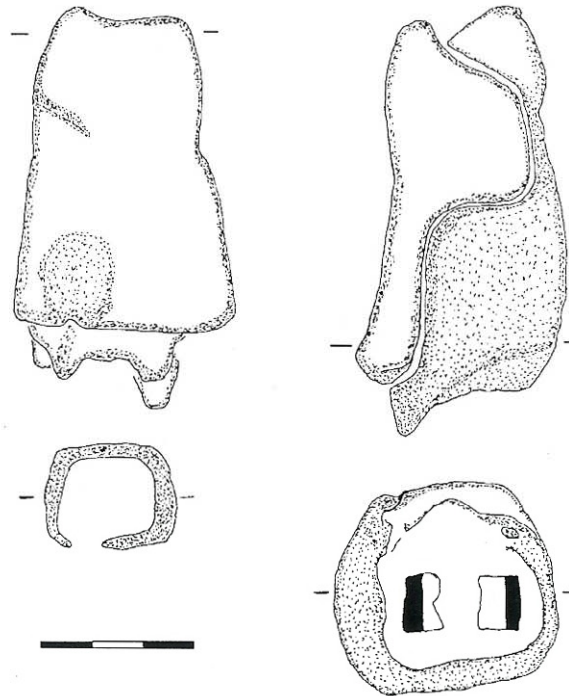



Fig. 8: Lead object.

warships in order to ensure the arrival of the merchandise in Athens. The two regions from which Athens procured wheat were to a large extent the Black Sea and Sicily. It is thus probable that the ship, which for some

reason was forced to halt its voyage at Antidragonera, formed part of a convoy carrying wheat from Sicily to Athens.

Especially interesting is the mass of lead objects found in Trench 1 (fig. 3). They are most likely to be connected to the ship's gear. Examples of these are two tubular shaped lead sheets (fig. 7), which may have served to hold some object inside another, and also an oblong lead object perforated length-wise, one end of which is divided into two parts (fig. 8). It could have been used to join two dissimilar objects such as a shaft and a point. The exact use of these objects is difficult to ascertain, for many reasons. To begin with, we do not know in which part of the ship they were found, since as has been said no part of the hull was discovered, and the very little evidence from other metal objects found in other wrecks does not allow comparisons and parallels.

Certainly the Antidragonera wreck is a special case. The large number of anchors found on the site might suggest that it was a permanent anchorage. However, this appears most unlikely because of the positions of the anchors in a bay particularly exposed to the strong north winds in the area, and especially because the approach to the islet mainly from the north coast is almost impossible. This theory has to be rejected. 

The excavation and the study of the finds have not been completed, and perhaps as the work progresses it may be possible to answer some of the queries concerning the Antidragonera wreck. It is nevertheless sure that however as far as the investigation advances, unanswered questions will always remain, because it is generally recognized as a fact that for every thousand wrecks discovered, there are a thousand reasons that could have caused them.