

Ancient Gythion, the Port of Sparta: History and Survey of the Submerged Remnants

The history of Gythion certainly goes back at least to the Bronze Age and continues to the present. The many changes in the landscape over the years are due to several strong earthquakes and to human factors as well. Visible remains scattered in the harbour and along the northwestern coastline of the Gulf of Laconia suggested the need for further investigation. Indeed, the rapid changes in the landscape that have taken place in recent years emphasized the need for a detailed survey to preserve at least a record of the underwater remains disappearing day by day in the area of the public beach and the new stadium site being reclaimed from the sea.

Much marshland was reclaimed in 1922 to provide housing for the refugees who came from Asia Minor. As the town itself was built between a high hill to the west and the sea to the east it could not expand easily¹(Fig. 1). Therefore a new area was created by filling in the sea to the northeast just below the acropolis and near the theater of ancient Gythion. The fill-covered house and other remains submerged in the earthquakes which have struck the city at various times.

During the 1960's more land was reclaimed from the sea to build a large playing field and stadium over the ancient remains which extend down from the acropolis into the sea. This caused the disappearance of submerged structures that were sighted in the last century by members of the French survey led by A. Blouet, by the Germans led by E. Curtius² and by the Greek archaeologist A. Skias who also excavated the Roman theater (Fig. 2) and other remains on the slopes of the acropolis. Skias noted many submerged walls along the shore and included a map showing the presumed ancient coastline with a dotted line³ (Fig. 3).

In more recent years the work of N.C. Flemming of the National Institute of Oceanography in England has once again drawn archaeologists' attention to submerged sites. In his study of changes in sea level along the coastline of the Laconic Gulf he discovered and surveyed remains of a Mycenaean town submerged between Elaphonneses and the mainland; then in 1968 he mapped Plitra and outlined the stadium area at Gythion where there were several large and interesting structures.

Once again it seemed important to document what submerged building remains were still visible and to prepare an accurate map of the whole area showing the reclamation of the land and the shifting of the riverbed. In addition to the sunken buildings of the Greek and Roman town we wanted to find the position of the coastline as well as the location of the ancient harbour often mentioned in the literature⁴.

Gythion, located on the northwestern shore of the Laconic Gulf, served as a harbour of Sparta. According to Homer⁵, Helen and Paris spent their first night together on the island of Kranai and set sail from there on the long journey to Troy. Trading vessels also sailed these waters during the Bronze age when lapis Lacedaemonius was exported to Crete. This distinctive dark green porphyry quarried at nearby Krokeai and Psephi was found in unworked blocks in the Lapidary's storeroom at Knossos⁶ as well as at Mycenae near the Tsountas house⁷, and continued as an important export item in Roman times when it was used to embellish their baths and gardens. Gythion also appears to have been a center of the Phoenician trade in purple dye as witnessed by a large number of murex shells reportedly found around the island of

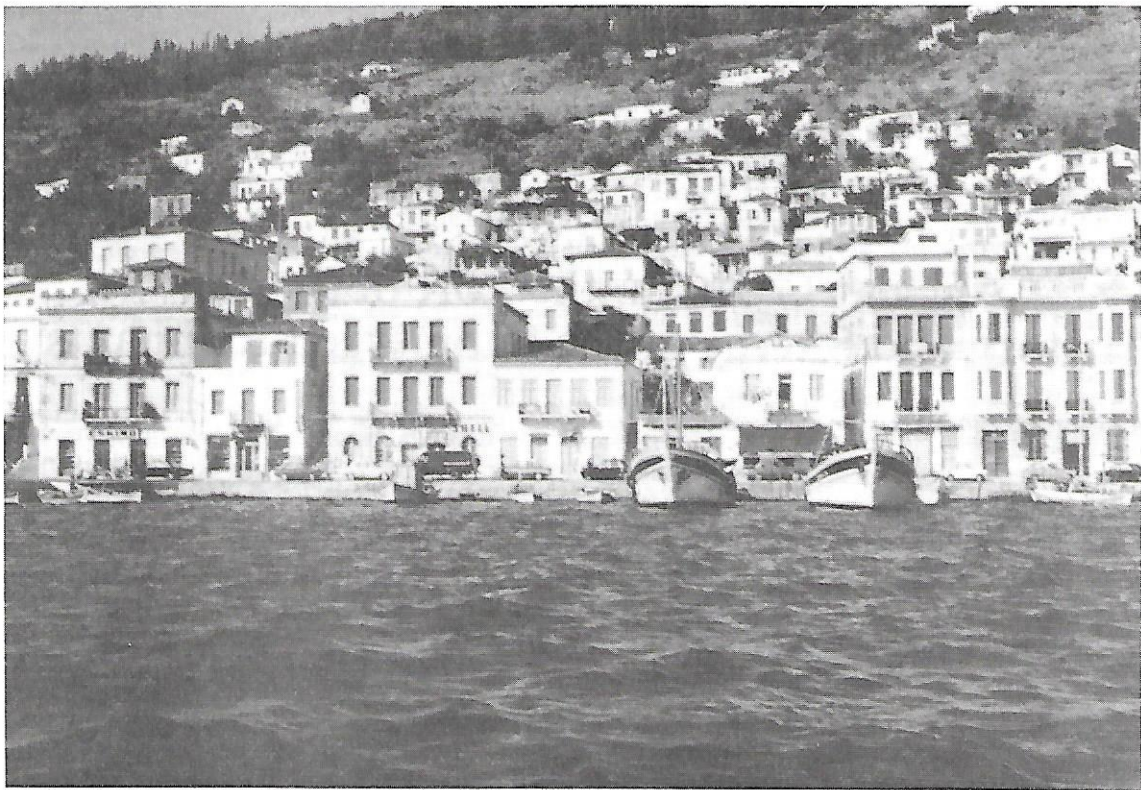


Fig. 1. Modern Gythion.



Fig. 2. Ancient theater of Gythion.

Kranae. We found two murex of the type *brandarius* which produces the dye. In these early times there were no harbour installations; sailors pulled their ships ashore and beached them on the sand⁸.

During the second half of the 8th century B.C. Argos ruled the area surrounding Sparta, including the eastern Peloponnese, Kythera, and the land west of Cape Malea. Sparta then needed an outlet, and took over Helos as a port during the reign of Alkamenes, and later went on to Gythion and Las. Helos is the obvious place for a port since it would have been at the mouth of the Eurotas River which could provide easier transport of goods than the overland route from Gythion to Sparta. Professor John Kraft has studied the Eurotas river delta complex in his geological reconnaissance of sandy coastal areas. He considers it quite probable that the Laconic Bay washed the shores of Helos during classical times, while earlier, during the Bronze Age, it went further inland to Skala⁹(Fig. 4).

By the beginning of the 6th century B.C. the increasing trade in Laconian pottery to the islands and abroad suggests an active harbour at Gythion. In discussing Laconian III and IV pottery, R.M. Cook goes one step further: "Those who do not like the idea that a commercial industry could flourish in Sparta itself may prefer to find the workshops in Gythion, the port of Laconia and a town not of Spartiates but Perioeci: Gythion has not been excavated"¹⁰.

Herodotus writes that the Spartan fleet was based at Las and at Gythion¹¹. Thus the port suffered many attacks. In 456 B.C. the Athenian Admiral Tolomides burned the Spartan ship-sheds in a display of Athenian naval power¹². Again in 424 B.C. during the campaign of the Peloponnesian war the Athenian General Nicias captured the Spartan outposts on Kythera and, leaving a garrison there, ravaged the coast of south Laconia including Gythion. With the Spartan victory over Athens at the end of the war, Gythion must have been strongly fortified because later, in 370 B.C., when Epaminodas besieged the town, he was unsuccessful in his raid on the Spartan shipyards. Again in 215 B.C. Gythion was attacked by Philip V of Macedon who was subsequently defeated by Quintus Flaminius in the second Macedonian War and sent back to Macedon. Meanwhile, the new tyrant in Sparta, Nabis, not only built walls around Sparta but also restored Gythion as a great arsenal and a well-fortified and populous town. As Nabis' arsenal and the basis of his naval power, Gythion was attacked by the Romans under Flaminius and finally taken. According to an inscription found here, the people of Gythion worshipped Flaminius as their saviour in 196 B.C. when he proclaimed Rome's gift of freedom to the Greeks.

The commercial harbour itself, according to Strabo¹³, was not natural, but formed by digging and dredging; it was sheltered by Kranae and so must have been in the same area as the present-day port (see Fig. 3a). When Gythion was granted her independence from Spartan domination, she flowered again as a commercial port providing a stop-over on the route from Athens to Rome. Amphoras of many shapes and sizes have been found by local fishermen in the waters beyond the town and are dated roughly between the first centuries B.C. and A.D. (Figs. 5a, b, c, d). They indicated the existence of various wrecks along the trade route to Gythion which should be located and described.

Although several earthquakes shook the town in the 6th and 5th centuries B.C. the worst one came in 374-375 A.D. when a considerable part of the town was covered by the sea. Various artifacts have since been found in the water, e.g. the terracotta model of a ship now in the Sparta museum; others are still in situ.

SURVEY OF SUBMERGED REMAINS

Part of a stone mosaic with a red border (Fig. 6) is all that remains of a large structure whose foundations and walls extend from the beach into the water. It has been called traditionally the "Baths of Paleologos" but in fact dates to the Roman period. This and other foundations covered over by sand along the shore led us to begin our search right along the public beach. An early morning start was quite important to avoid the enthusiastic bathers who arrived by 9 AM. Base-lines of 150 m length were used as guides for the divers who searched the area and as

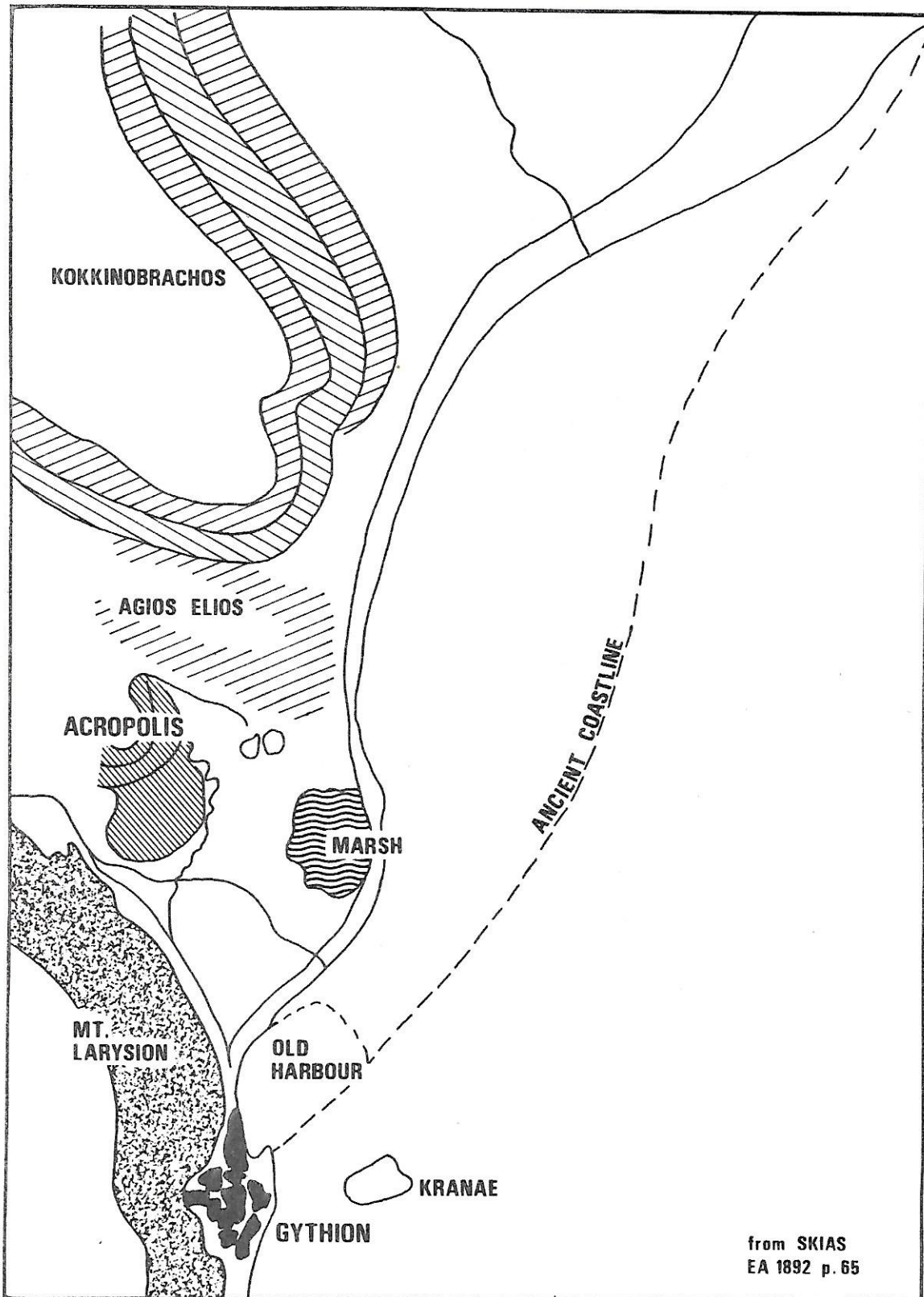


Fig. 3. Old map of Gythion area showing ancient coastline.

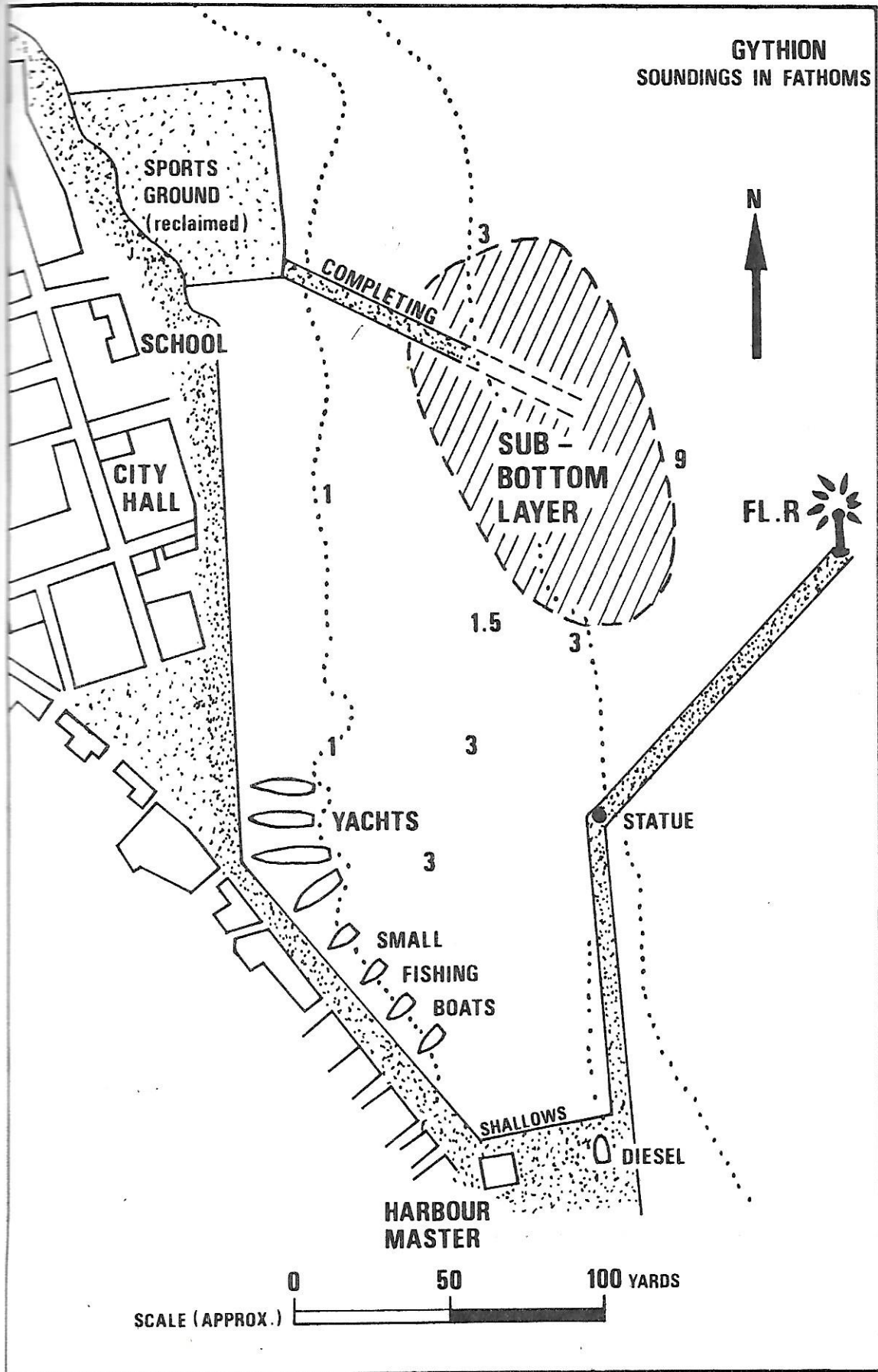


Fig. 3a. A general plan of the working areas A, B.

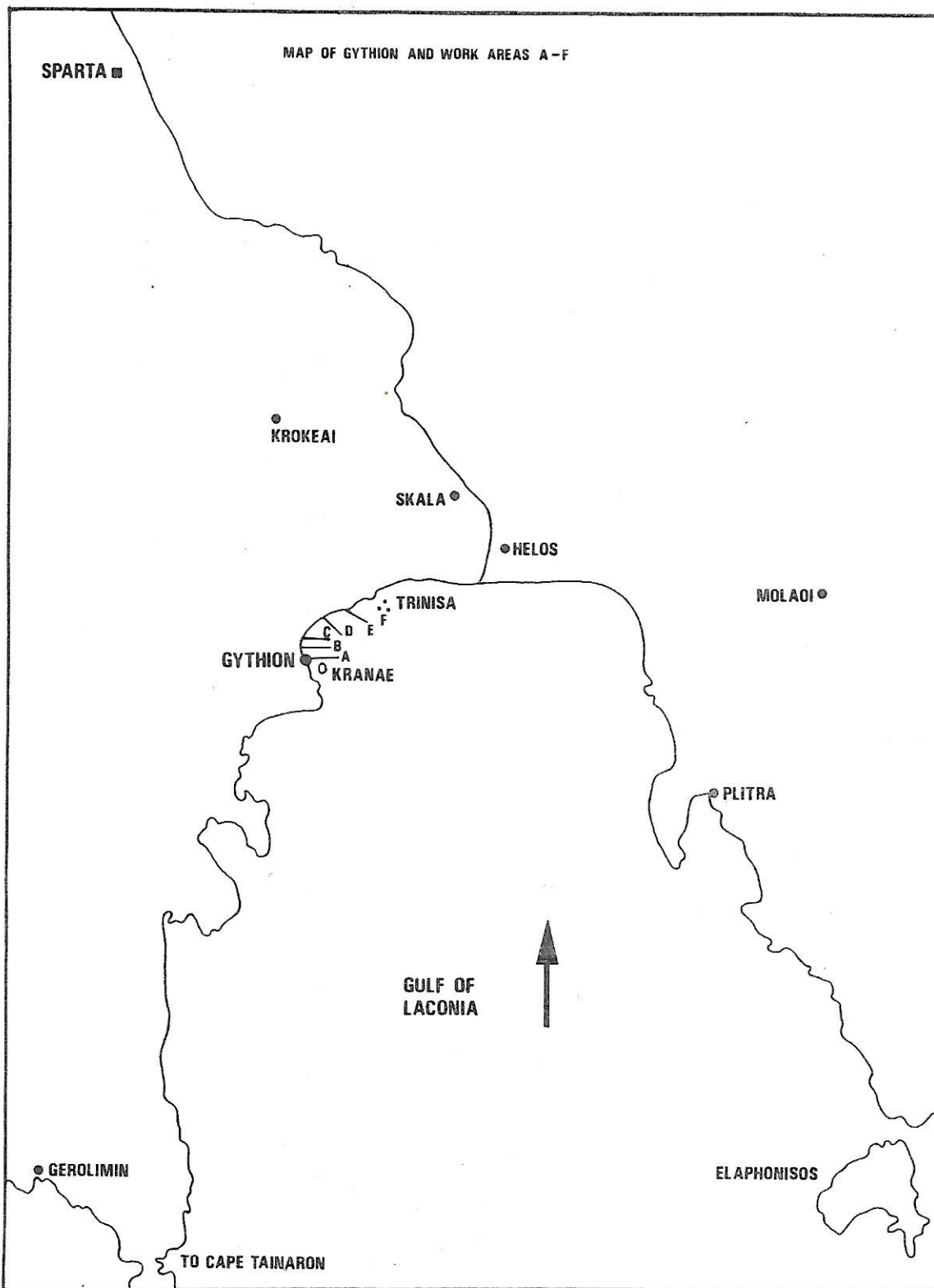


Fig. 4. Map of Gythion and working areas A-F.

reference points for triangulation. They were placed at 10 m intervals along the 200 m length of the beach with the help of a surveyor's transit. Divers and snorkelers swam along these covering an area 5 meters wide and noting various blocks or structural remains along the sandy bottom. Occasionally, a large section of Roman wall built with brick was found (Figs. 7, 8).

Everything was triangulated from the base-line marked at 5 m intervals and the information was transferred to a working map on shore. Large structures in shallow water were easily and accurately mapped with an alidade on shore and the results were double checked with the help of aerial photos.

Mr. Julian Whittlesey, who joined us with his team, proved of invaluable assistance. From a series of photographs, taken by a Hasselblad camera suspended from a balloon and triggered by electronic signals, we got views of the whole area from the harbour northward. This area extended past the beach and stadium all the way to Selinita, the sandy shore along the north side of the bay. These photos overlap to form a photomosaic from which an accurate overall map was drawn to scale. Other photos taken from only 50 m height revealed more details for the mapping of each section.

The stadium area was of particular interest. A long, well-built wall of ashlar blocks extended from the corner of the new stadium northward. Several rooms were attached to it and the remains were clearly distinguished among the tall poseidonia grass, although the lines of wall were difficult to follow in shallow depths of 3-4 m (Fig. 10, 10a). In the same area, piles of rubble with concrete were also found. Since we also probed beneath the sand and hit hard spots, we have indicated these sub-surface remains with dotted lines. As we proceeded north of the stadium we found earth fill continually piled up and deposited in the shallow waters covering over ruins of the submerged town.

The silt and mud were a hindrance to the work, but again the aerial photos directed our attention to the major structures which were measured and transferred to drawings. A sandy stream further north seemed empty of rubble and blocks until tell-tale mounds appeared with sections of walls emerging from the sides. These were in shallow waters (2-5 m) which continued out from shore. Large blocks of stone were also found 100-150 m from shore suggesting more ruined structures submerged by the earthquake. Few artifacts are visible along the bottom; among them are broken necks of amphoras and sherds (Fig. 11).

Most of the ruins have been covered by shifting sands and are hidden from view although they cover an extensive area. In trying to determine how far out the coastline extended and what was beyond, we enlisted the help of Dr. H.E. Edgerton of M.I.T. and his sonar equipment. A kaiki run by George Peregoris, a local fisherman, was rented and the equipment, along with many buoys, was hoisted aboard. Once Sonar records started pouring forth the divers were able to check out various targets at depths of 12-30 m.

One target especially held our attention. It is 5 m beneath the sand and defines an area 198 m long (parallel to shore) by 68 m wide (Fig. 9). It is located just beyond and eastward of the area searched at the public beach and is in 5-9 m of water. Excavation is needed to determine whether it is Pleistocene rock or a quay or structure of the ancient harbour of Gythion.

In our brief survey we covered an area of 7 acres or more in the immediate vicinity of Gythion and quickly looked at the long, straight sandy beach which now lines the northern shore of the Laconic Gulf. Long walls emerge from beneath the sand dunes and extend into the shallow waters. They are of Roman construction (Fig. 12). More remains lie in shallow waters and in deeper areas around Trinisa, the three islands where more amphora sherds were sighted and where one may look for the Spartan arsenal following Strabo who located it nearby. Further east lie the now inland villages of Helos and Skala mentioned above, where magnetometer survey may provide further evidence for their role in antiquity.

A systematic survey of submerged harbour sites (and wreck sites as well) is urgently needed in Greece to establish a list of priorities for further exploration, excavation and preservation of ancient remains. The importance of such underwater sites must be determined by two factors,

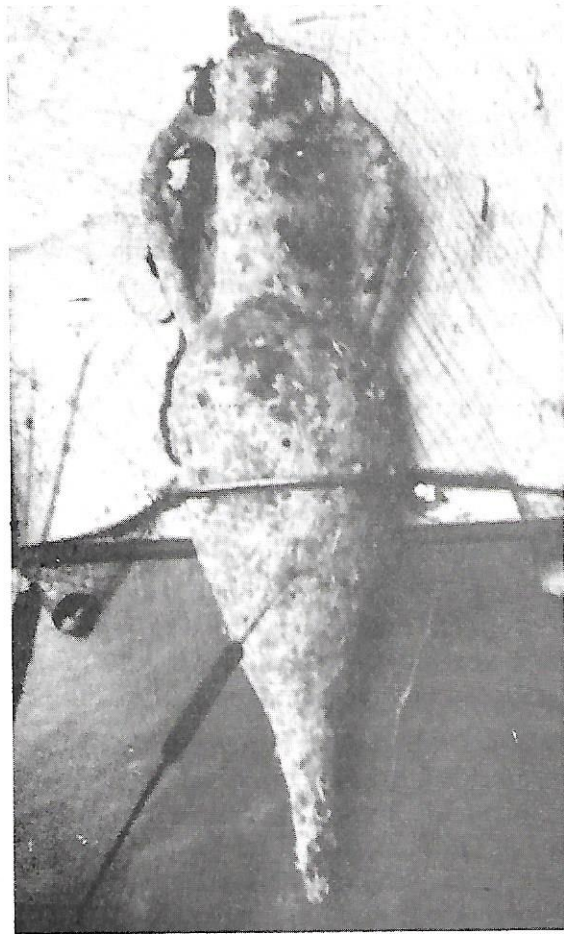
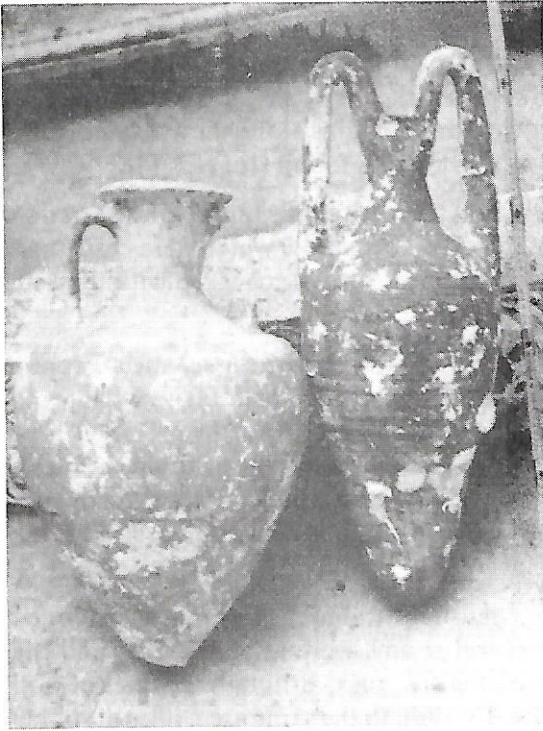


Fig. 5. Amphoras found by fishermen off Gythion, now in the local museum.



Fig. 6. Stone mosaic on the beach, part of the baths of Paleologs



Fig. 7. Submerged roman brickwall.

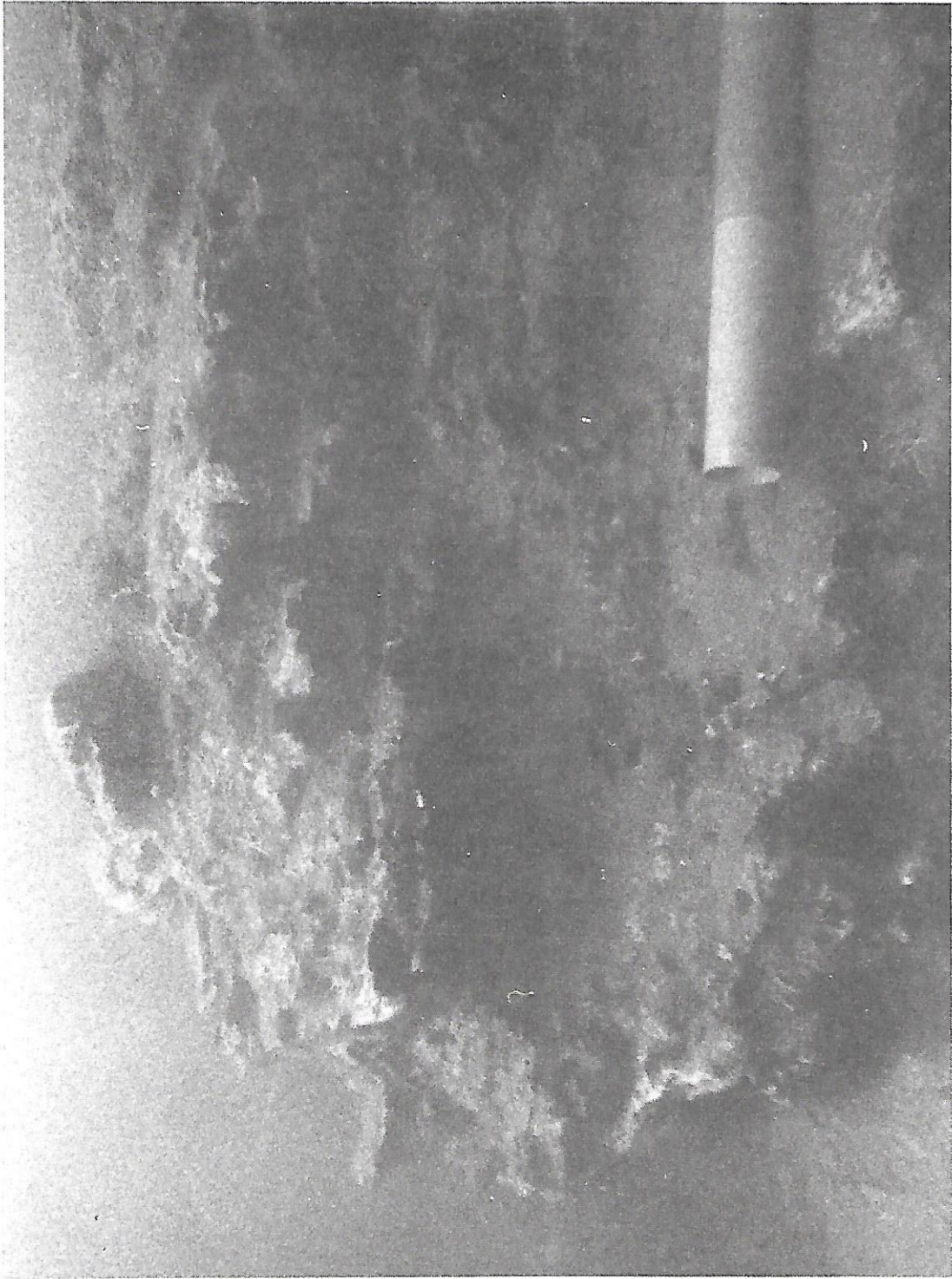


Fig. 8. Roman wall excavated and exposed on the sea bottom.

or in terms of what is ideal and what is practical. Some sites are historically and archaeologically promising and warrant detailed scientific investigation. Other sites need preservation or simply documentation before the evidence is destroyed either by natural forces or human progress and expansion. This could be made possible by the participation and cooperation of an interdisciplinary team of people who contribute to and share knowledge in unravelling and piecing together the past, the puzzle of archaeology.

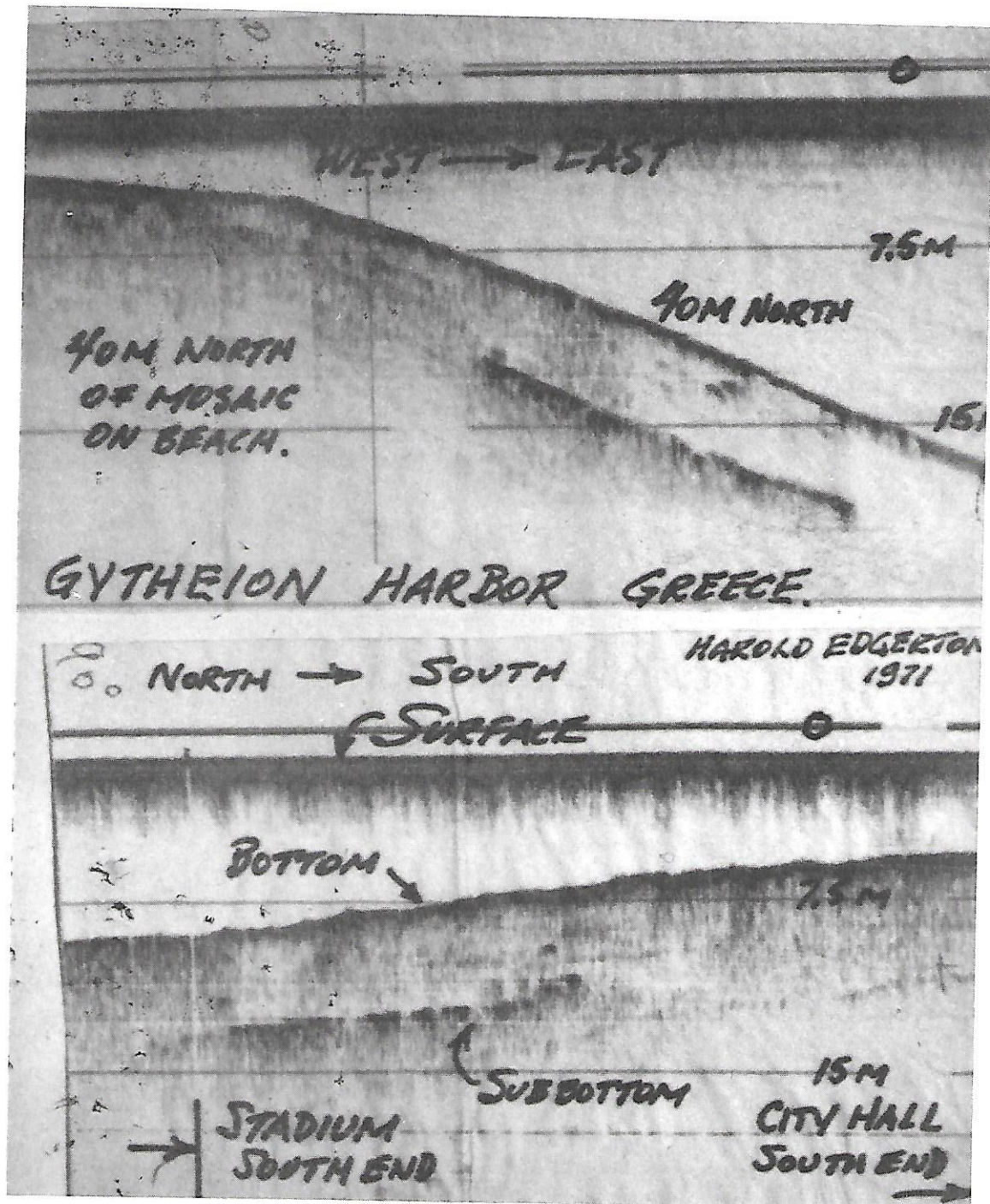


Fig. 9. H. Edgerton's sonar record of a sub-bottom structure off the beach area.

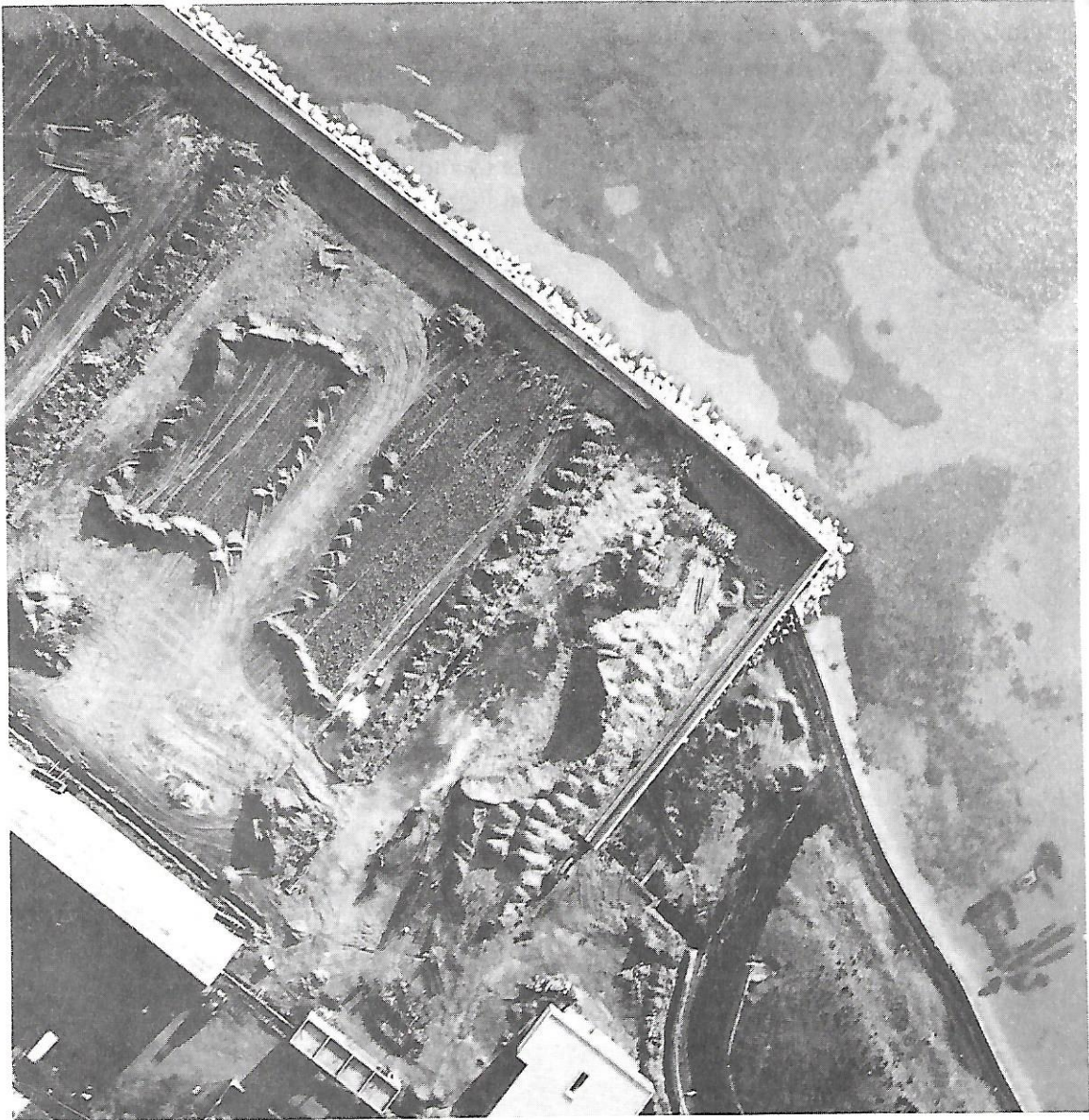


Fig. 10. Aerial view of the beach at the site of the baths of Paleologos (up left corner) and submerged walls of the stadium area (10 a).





Fig. 11. Vase caught beneath a submerged structure north of the stadium area.



Fig. 12. A roman wall on the beach north of Gythion.

NOTES

1. A. Blouet, *Expeditions Scientifiques II*, P. 171-172.
2. E. Curtius, *Peloponnesos II*, Gotha, 1852, p. 267-272.
3. A. Skias in *Praktika tis Archaeologikis Etairias*, 1891, pp. 27-34; *Ephemeris Archaeologike*, 1892, p. 60-64, 185-204. Submerged ruins here were first seen and reported by A. Blastos in PAE, 1971-2, p. 14.
4. Beginning with Homer, we have references in the historians Herodotus, Thucydides, Diodorus Siculus; and Strabo and Pausanias. See below.
5. Homer, *The Iliad*, Book 3, 441-446.
6. This material dates to LM II, 15th century B.C. BSA 8 (1901-2) 78 and Evans, *Palace of Minos III*, 269ff. and IV 898.
7. BSA L (1955) 182, Pl. 23a-c.
8. There is a short, vivid description of the Phaeacian's twin harbour in Homer's *Odyssey* (6, 262-269).
9. J. Kraft, *A Reconnaissance of the Geology of the Sandy Coastal Area of Eastern Greece and the Peloponnese*, July 1972, College of Marine Studies, University of Delaware, Newark, 1971, pp. 97-102.
10. R.M. Cook, *Greek Painted Pottery*, 1966, p. 99.
11. Herodotus, *History*, 8.1; 8.43.
12. Thucydides, 1.108.5 and Diodorus Siculus XI.84.6.
13. Strabo, *Geography*, Book 8.5.2.

See also report in IJNA 4.1 (1975) 103-116 "Underwater Survey of Ancient Gythion 1972" by N.C. Scoufopoulos and J.G. McKernan.