

A ROCK ENGRAVING IN LEMNOS

(Preliminary study)

“Next they reached the slopes of Pallene, beyond the headland of Canastra, running all night with the wind. And at dawn before them as they journeyed rose Athos, the Thracian mountain, which with its topmost peak overshadows Lemnos, even as far as Myrina, though it lies as far off as the space that a well-trimmed merchantship would traverse up to mid-day¹. For them on that day, till darkness fell, the breeze blew exceedingly fresh, and the sails of the ship strained to it. But with the setting of the sun the wind left them, and it was by the oars that they reached Lemnos, the Sintian isle ... nor yet at dawn did they loose the ship’s hawsers to the breath of the north wind”².

“It was dark when we rounded Cape Mourtzephlo, the north-western point of Lemnos, and an hour before midnight we caught sight of the glimmering lights of Kastro, the chief town, which is situated near the middle of its western side. As soon as our vessel had cast anchor in the little harbour, and we were rowed ashore, we obtained practical evidence that Lemnos is but little visited, for we could hear of no inn, and a long-debate ensued among the officials at the landing-place as to where we could pass the night”³.

This is how Apollonius of Rhodes and Henry Fanshawe Tozer described arriving at the port of Myrina⁴ (Fig. 1), as it is known by its ancient and present name, or Stalimene, the Italian version⁵, or Kastro, as it was still called in the last

century, because of the fortified enclosure of its medieval castle. This is built on a rocky peninsula “which projects westward into the sea from the recesses of a bay, and rises steeply in its centre to a height of 400 feet. On either side of the narrow istmus which joins it to the mainland there is a rather exposed harbour⁶, and that which lies towards the north is flanked by the Greek, that towards the south by the Turkish, quarter...”⁷.

This rocky peninsula is probably Homer’s “well built town of Lemnos”⁸ where Apollonius’s Argonauts entered as guests of the Lemnian women and their queen Hypsipyle. In the XVIth century when Belon visited the island, Turkish guardians kept watching from the top of the castle in order to catch sight of approaching pirates in good time and prevent any Greek revolt⁹. Even in Tozer’s time “the approach to the fortifications was very striking, for the granite rocks of which the peninsula is composed rise steeply and stand out in the most fantastic forms, and in many places are stained bright yellow by patches of lichen... The isthmus between the two harbours forms a ridge where it abuts against the rocks, and at the back of this there is a conspicuous knoll, which falls abruptly on its eastern side toward the level ground where the Greek and Turkish quarters meet one another. Close to this ridge, and not far from the entrance gate (of the medieval walls), stand the only remains of the ancient city of Myrina - a splendid piece of cyclopean masonry, occupying a steep position on the hillside¹⁰.

Tozer did not notice that on the same side of the peninsula the rock has been carved in several places forming steps, concavities and right-angles (cf. Figs 4-5). A local historian, Pantelidis, described them in 1876. He also spoke about the port, situated on the south side of the peninsula, still called Emporio at this time and where there was also the bazar¹¹. Belon had already noticed that in both bays the wind blows and boats are not secured¹².

From this exact spot you can see on one of the rocks a kind of engraved drawing (Figs 2, 3). Unfortunately some meters higher someone has recently painted the initials of a football team on it. Beside the same rock is also carved on the rear side to form one of the right-angled structures mentioned above (Figs 4, 5). The face on which the drawing is engraved (Figs 6, 7) has a height of approximately 102 cms and a width of 190 cms. The surface is quite eroded and it is very difficult to tell which part of the incisions is artificial and which is not. However, it seems that its maximum visible length is 165 cm and its maximum height at least 70 cm. Underneath the drawing, about 23 cm from the last horizontal groove, the surface of the rock projects to form a kind of step. On the upper part

of the rock surface, at a distance of about 20 cm from the top of the upper visible incisions and at a distance of 19 cm between them, you can see two square cuttings¹³ of 8 and 9 cm; another one is situated to the right¹⁴. It is not known whether these cuttings are related to the rest of the engraving. The horizontal grooves which compose the drawing have been set with a distance of 4,5-6 cm between them. There are at least eight horizontal grooves and ten oblique ones on the lower part. The horizontal grooves curve upwards towards the right. It seems that on two or three from the bottom, there is a ripple before the curve.

At least three of the oblique grooves reach further up than the lower horizontal incision; At least two reach the third and one reaches the second parallel line. One of the horizontal incisions is only visible on the right half of the drawing and two of the oblique lines are not parallel with the others. There are more grooves and cavities but it is not sure yet whether they are accidental or not.

It is very tempting to interpret this sketch as an oared ship, stern and steering oar to the right. The horizontal grooves would represent the planking and the oars could suggest an oared boat, we could even imagine that they belong to a trieres. However there are a lot of problems which do not allow us to be dogmatic. First of all, the bad state of preservation of the rock surface¹⁵. Second, there are very serious problems concerning dates. The peninsula has never been investigated properly. Surface finds on the south side of it show an occupation from the geometric times up to Roman times¹⁶ and the entrance to the ancient acropolis is situated higher up to the same side of the peninsula, the medieval ones being on the northern and eastern sides. On the other hand, the nature of the representation, primitive as it is, could be compared either to some Delos ship graffiti or to XVIth century ones (church of Prophet Avvakoum in Paradissi, Rhodes)¹⁷.

Considering the various carvings on the rocks of the Myrina peninsula as a whole, despite the fact that as yet there is no proof that they are connected, it is possible to find possible parallels on similar heights, for instance in Syros¹⁸, a rocky acropolis in the bay of Galissas; or on several fairly inaccessible hills in the region of Western Thrace, at Roussa¹⁹, Monastiri Lofos, Aghios Georgios of Maronia, Aghios Georgios of Petrota²⁰. In all these cases however the rock engraving represent humans, animals and abstract "symbols". Similarities are found with the other indications of human action, that is cavities, "niches" and steps carved in the rock. Further rock engravings with human or animal representations do exist on the Pangaion Mount²¹, in Naxos, Euboia or Delphi and Crete²² as well as in the Bulgarian part of Thrace²³, in Albania, in Yougoslavia²⁴ and of course in

Italy or the Alps, to mention the more well-known examples. Some of them have been identified as ship representations²⁵. In most of these cases, the problem of dates remains unresolved for the moment, as scholars hesitate somewhere between the 12th century BC and the medieval period. All the same, in most places in Western Thrace the surface finds or small soundings have revealed Iron Age sherds²⁶.

It is true that Lemnos as an island has always been related to ships and sea travel: the Argonauts, Philoctetes, the Athenian expedition and conquest by Miltiades, even the Cabeirian mysteries: a ship had to go and bring back the holy flame once a year²⁷. The Cabeiroi were sea gods. The religious nautical community of the Lemniastai under the protection of the Lemnos and Samothrace gods, protectors from the dangers of the sea, existed up until the time of Christ. Venetians, Turks and Greeks or Russians have sieged the island many times and they came by ship. In any case, this actual port of Myrina was most probably the archaic, classic, roman and medieval one²⁸. A more ancient bronze age occupation is attested at another site in the surrounding area, near another peninsula separating two bays. It is therefore more probable that the ship engraving belonged to one of the occupations following the geometric age. It could be pre medieval occupation, since the latter is attested by surface finds as well as constructions (walls and buildings) on the other (the northern) side of the rocky peninsula.

Regardless of the problem of dates, ship graffiti on walls, particularly on sanctuary walls and house walls are well known: Malta Tarxien²⁹, Kition in Cyprus³⁰ and Delos³¹ but also several kinds of ship ex-votos from all periods need no further comment. It is true that the position of the Myrina engraving in the port, some meters higher than the spot where ships still moored at the beginning of the 20th century (Figs 8-10) and in a conspicuous position for people in the port, but not really visible from a great distance when you arrive or sail away (Fig. 11), could also indicate a kind of prayer or exhortation to non-human powers for protection against the dangers of the sea³², naufrages, pirates, etc. It seems that the original position of these structures and drawings might have been nearer to sea-level. A tectonic uplifting could be involved³³.

In any case, it is necessary to proceed with further investigations on this quite promising site, make an inventory³⁴ and drawings of all the engravings and structures and if possible trial soundings. A geological study is also needed. This would be the only way of acquiring more satisfactory results.

Finally, leaving the port of Myrina, where so many oared ships cast anchor through the centuries, we could recall, like Hypsipyle recalls the song she sang as mistress of the house at Lemnos *κερκίδος ίστοτόνου παραμύθια Λήμνια*³⁵, the Argonauts' departure from the port of Lemnos: "He (Jason) spoke and mounted the ship first of all; and so the rest of the chiefs followed, and, sitting in order, seized the oars; and Argus loosed for them the hawsers from under the sea-beaten rock. Whereupon they mightily smote the water with their long oars".³⁶

As the local saying goes in Lemnos: one experiences sorrow twice upon arrival and upon departure³⁷.

Christina Marangou
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NOTES

1. Cf. Belon 1578:58-59. Cf. Delage 1930:292 about geographical errors in the Apollonius's *Argonautica*.
2. Apollonius of Rhodes *Argonautica* A, 598-608, 651-652 (translation: Seaton 1921 2).
3. Tozer 1890:240. The description is of a trip to Lemnos in the spring of 1889.
4. Lemnos island, north-east Aegean. Some decades ago one still had to be rowed ashore, because of the shallowness of the water.
5. Belon 1578:57
6. Cf. Belon 1578:58
7. Tozer 1890:241
8. Homer θ283: "...Λήμνον, εύκτίμενον πτολιεθρον..."
9. Belon 1578:57
10. Tozer 1890:246
11. Pantelidis 1876:37
12. 120.1578:58
13. Width 3 and depth 4,5 and 5 cm. length 5, width 2, and depth 1 cm.
14. In any case it will anyway be necessary to carry further studies of all the grooves and marks. The architect of the K' Ephorate of Antiquities, Mrs. Meropi Frangou, is currently preparing a sketch of the engraving.
15. Oral information by Mr. Chr. Boulotis.
16. I am grateful to Mr. L. Basch (letter 2.7 1989) for suggesting these parallels: Delos: Basch 1987:376, nos 32. 34-36; 377, no 41; 378, no 45. Pr. Avvakoum: Karakatsani 1972, fig. 155.
17. Manthos 1979:39-40.

18. Triandaphyllos 1973, 1987.
19. Idem 1985.
20. Moutsopoulos 1969, Papoutsakis 1977.
21. Papoutsakis 1972 and 1977.
22. Ibidem:374. Cf. Dumas 1990, Mikov 1928/29.
23. Ibidem.
24. Crete, Asfendou (Sfakia); Papoutsakis 1972:113-114. Cf. ibidem n.32 on p. 114 about Spanish examples.
25. Triandaphyllos 1985:135, 137; Manthos 1979:42.
26. Cf. Moschidis 1907:115, 117, according to Philostratos, Her. 740.
27. Professor L. Basch, oral information (summer 1989).
28. Woolner 1957.
29. Basch and Artzy 1986.
30. Basch 1973.
31. Basch 1981.
32. Oral communication by Mrs. Olga Psychoyos.
33. There are several pictures of the engravings and other structures taken by Tr. Marangos between 1958 and 1980. He also made some sketches of the peninsula indicating their location and published several articles about the castle in the local newspaper "Η Λήμνος" and in "Καθημερινή"; in one of them he published the picture in fig. 7.
34. Euripides frgt. 11-13, Bond 1963.
35. Apollonius Arg. A,910-914, translation: Seaton 1921.
36. I am grateful to Mrs. Aglaia Archontidou, Ephor of Antiquities and to the Council of Monuments of the islands for kindly permitting me to publish this engraving, as well as to Miss. Honor Frost and Olga Psychoyos and Mss Lucien Basch, Luigi Beschi and Christos Boulotis for their invaluable help and advice. And finally, to Tryphon Marangos who identified a ship in this sketch more than thirty years ago.

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ILLUSTRATIONS

- Fig. 1 The actual port of Myrina in the early seventies (photo Tr. Marangos).
- Fig. 2 & 3 The rock engraving from the actual road (1989).
- Fig. 4 & 5 The engraving and connected(?) right-angled carvings (photo Tr. Marangos).
- Fig. 6 The rock engraving in 1989.
- Fig. 7 The rock engraving in the late fifties (photo Tr. Marangos).
- Fig. 8-10 View of the spot in the first decades of the 20th century (photo from the Tr. Marangos archive). Photo no 10: enlargement of no 9.
- Fig. 11 Actual view of the spot from the port (1989).

(photos by the author, except if otherwise stated)

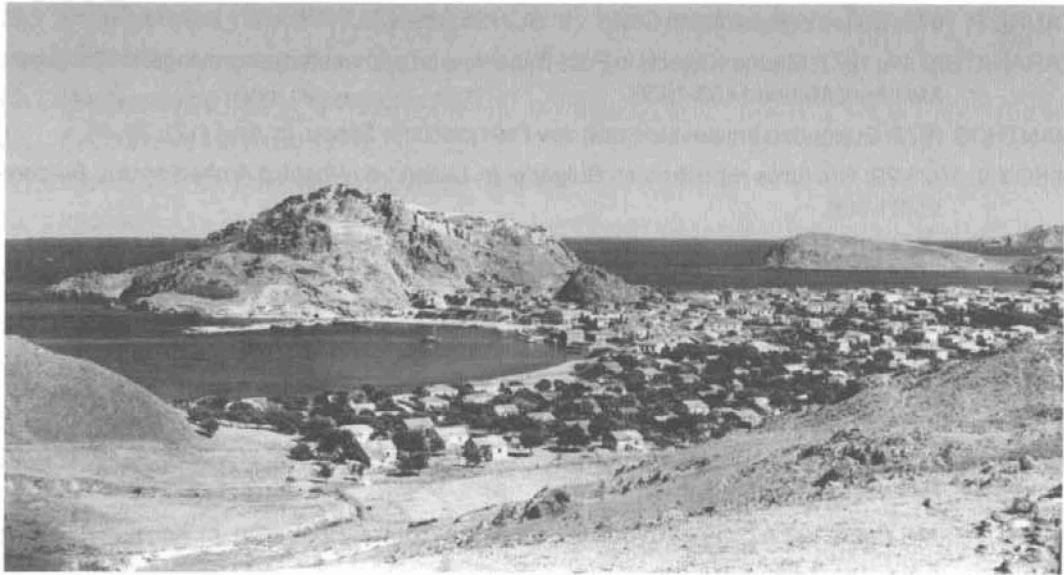


Fig. 1

Fig.2



Fig. 3



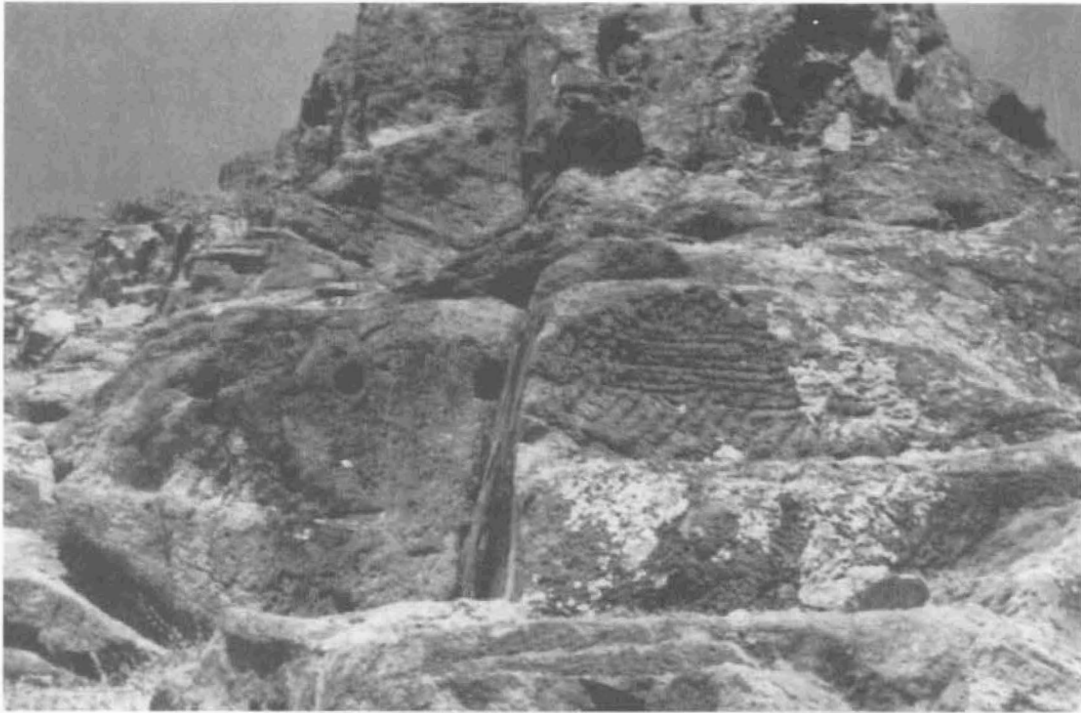


Fig. 4



Fig. 5

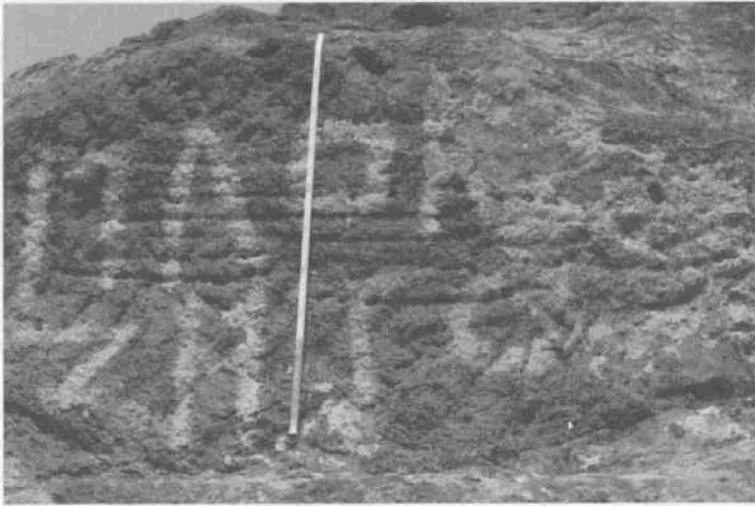


Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9

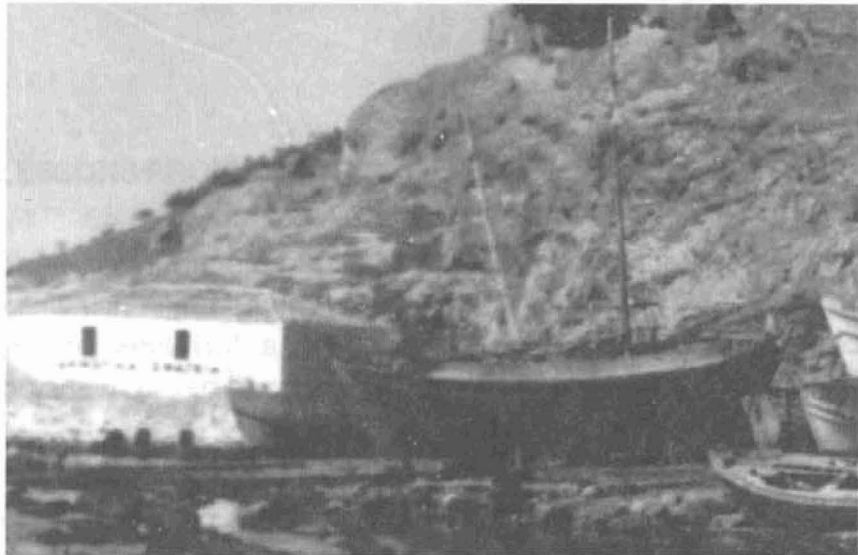


Fig. 10

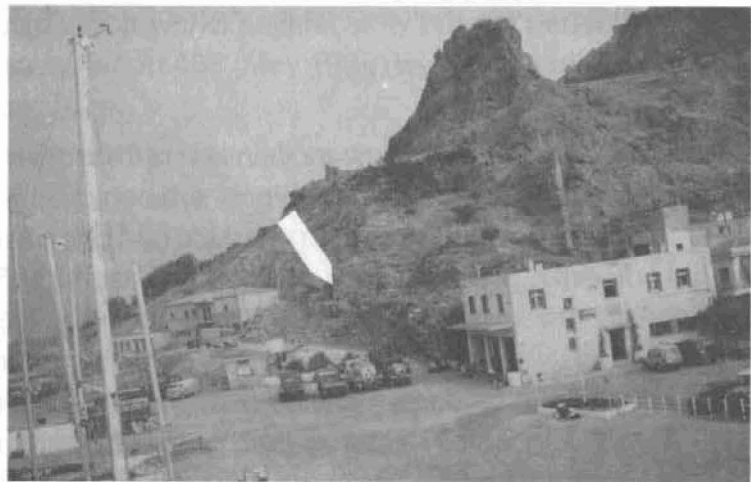


Fig. 11

