

# The Maritime Transport of Sculptures in the Ancient Mediterranean

Katerina Velentza

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Cover: A drawing by Brandon Braun representing fishermen dragging a sculpture out of the sea. This drawing is directly inspired by the votive relief dedicated by C. Fulvius Salvis, found close to the temple of Hercules in Ostia (Ostia Archaeological Museum Inv.No.157).

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## List of Abbreviations

D.B.	Database Entry
Inv.No.	Invention Number
SCUBA	Self-Contained Underwater Breathing Apparatus
H.	Height
W.	Width
L.	Length
D.	Diameter
Th.	Thickness
P.H.	Preserved Height
P.W.	Preserved Width
P.L.	Preserved Length
P.D.	Preserved Diameter
P.Th.	Preserved Thickness

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### **Ancient sculptures lost at sea**

The waters of the Mediterranean Sea, similarly to the land around it, have been depositories of material remains of the human civilizations inhabiting this region for several thousand years. Submerged port and harbour structures, sunken settlements, shipwrecks of seagoing vessels with their cargoes and jettisoned objects are some examples of the Mediterranean underwater archaeological record preserved from the periods of ancient Greek and Roman Antiquity, also known as Classical Antiquity, a historical period during which the Mediterranean Sea was interconnected through extensive and complex maritime networks (Horden and Purcell 2000; Parker 1992).

Ancient Greek and Roman sculptures found under water have been amongst the most evocative and engaging maritime archaeological remains of that time period. From the 16th century until today, hundreds of ancient sculptural artefacts, of various dates, types, sizes and materials, have been retrieved from the Mediterranean seabed by early underwater explorers, archaeologists, or simply by fishermen, sponge divers and recreational scuba divers (Arata 2005; Bass 1966; Diolé 1957; Koutsouflakis 2017; Mattusch 1997; Parker 1992; Tzalas 2007). The fascinating idea of discovering and recovering ancient sculptural works of art from the water has attracted over the years the attention of both academia and the press, while it has always stimulated local enthusiasm and pride (Bellingham 2014; Petriaggi 2005; Queyrel 2012; Rackl 1978; Stenuit 2002). More recently, the romanticism accompanying underwater sculptural finds has inspired modern artists, who choose to display their sculptural creations under water or use the idea of discovering ancient sculptures under water as part of their artistic narrative.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the large number of Mediterranean underwater sculptural finds, as well as their early discovery, long period of study and popularity, it has still been hard for scholars to determine with certainty the exact area, era, reasons and circumstances of their maritime transportation and consequent underwater deposition. Hence, ancient sculptures from underwater have yet to reach their potential as a dataset of artefacts.

### **Interpreting the maritime transport and underwater deposition of ancient sculptures in the Mediterranean Sea**

The plethora of ancient sculptures found under water indicates that, under specific circumstances, these objects had been carried on ships sailing around the Mediterranean. However, the inaccessibility of the seabed to most of the academic community at least until the middle of the 20th century, as well as the insufficient recording of underwater archaeological contexts, where sculptures have been discovered, have restricted over the years the contextual archaeological information available for these artefacts. Therefore, scholarly research has turned to different methods of studying and interpreting the maritime transport and underwater deposition of ancient sculptures in the Mediterranean Sea.

First of all, since the earliest underwater sculptural discoveries, scholars based their interpretations on relevant references preserved in ancient literary sources. The best recorded textual evidence on the maritime transport of sculptures in the ancient Mediterranean comes from Hellenistic and Roman authors, and refers to maritime activities taking place during the last two centuries BC or in

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<sup>1</sup> Some recent examples are: Damien Hirst's exhibition and film on 'The Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable', presented at Palazzo Grassi in Venice, Italy (Greene and Leidwanger 2017: 2-11; Hirst 2017a, 2017b); the underwater museum of art 'Museo Subacuático de Arte' in Cancún, Mexico; and the film *Call Me By Your Name* (2017) by Luca Guadagnino (Melnikova 2020: 387; Stevens 2018).

the 1st century AD. This time coincides with the expansion of Rome in the eastern Mediterranean and the consequent destruction of several Greek cities, including Corinth, Athens and Delos. According to ancient authors, the devastation of these cities involved the plunder of many works of art including sculptures, which were then transported to Italy on ships that sometimes wrecked or lost parts of their cargo in the sea (Dio Chrysostom, *The Corinthian Oration* 37.42; Lucian, *Zeuxis* 3; Polybius, *Histories* 39.2.1-2; Velleius Paterculus 1.13). In addition, a few ancient authors record the maritime transport of sculptures as part of an art collection market that developed in the same time period by wealthy elites, who ordered sculptural pieces for the decoration of their private houses and villas (Cicero, *Letters to Atticus* 1.8.2; Cicero, *Against Verres*, act. 2.4.126).

Influenced by these ancient literary sources, scholars have considered the maritime transport and underwater deposition of ancient sculptures in the Mediterranean Sea as a result of looting or art-collecting activities taking place in the Mediterranean world in the concise historical period described above (Koutsouflakis and Simosi 2015; Rackl 1978: 15- 36; Tzalas 2007: 342-363; Wirth 1994). This idea of transporting sculptures by sea during and after the expansion of Rome in the Mediterranean has been further reinforced by various art historical examinations of well-known sculptural artefacts from under water (Fuchs 1963; Hemingway 2004; Mattusch 1997; Ridgway 1967: 329-334). This second methodological approach has brought to light stylistic features and sculptural details that could generally match the dates and areas of movement described in the ancient literary sources. Therefore, for years, any ancient sculpture found in the waters of the Mediterranean Sea, in or out of archaeological context, has been straightforwardly interpreted as being transported for looting or art-collecting purposes during the late Hellenistic or Roman times, without necessarily pursuing confirmation in the archaeological site or the contextual data of the sculptural discovery (Boardman 1985: 53; Neer 2010: 86; Spivey 1996: 134-136, 219-221; Spivey 2013: 187-188; Stewart 1990: 228-229).

Recent archaeological evidence, though, has revealed that the previously mentioned ancient sources and scholarly theories represent only a small fraction of a far wider maritime activity not yet fully explored (Bartoli 2008; Beckmann 2016; Lapatin 2018; Russell 2013a; Velentza 2016). The focus of previous scholars on the art historical and stylistic details of the sculptures rather than their archaeological context, as well as the interpretation of their maritime transportation and underwater deposition through possible speculations, based on ancient literary references, rather than actual archaeological data, have led to the repetition of early hypothetical theories and the obstruction of new academic results. The separate development of the disciplines of classical and maritime archaeology and the dividing lines that still exist between scholars of each field, combined with the wide geographical spread of the relevant archaeological evidence and the unique research traditions and socio-political circumstances of each area, have led to a selective understanding of the maritime transport and underwater deposition of sculptures in the ancient Mediterranean world. Therefore, up until now, there has not been an overall scholarly documentation, interpretation and understanding of where, when, why and how ancient Greek and Roman sculptures were carried on board ancient seagoing vessels in different periods of Classical Antiquity.

### **Aims, objectives and research questions of the project**

The present research, through the lenses of both classical and maritime archaeology, attempts to move a step forward from the already existing academic scholarship and adopt a new scholarly approach in the examination of the maritime transport of sculptures in the ancient Mediterranean. This involves the research of ancient sculptures from under water as a group of transported artefacts, which had a specific function within their maritime setting. Similarly to other studies researching transported amphorae, stone cargo, glass or ceramics found in underwater deposits, the present research, with a focus on the underwater archaeological context of the sculptures, attempts to comprehend the reasons and the circumstances for sculptures of different types and materials being carried on board ancient seagoing vessels.

The main research question addressed is: where, when, why and how were sculptures transported by sea in the ancient Mediterranean? To answer this question, the first aim is to collect and bring together all the existing underwater archaeological evidence about the maritime transport of sculptures in the ancient Mediterranean. This has been carried out with a macro-scale research and the creation of a Mediterranean-wide database (Appendix 1) recording any known examples of ancient sculptures that have been lost under water in the sea, probably while in transit during Classical Antiquity.

The sculptures for which this research is concerned are those, which were made as freestanding entities, namely sculptures carved in three dimensions, from small-scale figurines to over life-size statues, but also independently standing sculptural reliefs. All of the above types of sculptural artefacts were commissioned in Classical Antiquity for religious, funerary, honorific and, in some contexts, decorative purposes. The independently standing nature and the function of these artefacts make them different from architectural sculptures, sculpted sarcophagi and sculptural appliques, which constituted parts of larger entities, buildings or objects, and have been only found in distinct underwater deposits with well-understood functions in their maritime setting. Therefore, they have been excluded from the main focus of this research but they are still mentioned as contextual artefacts when they have been discovered in deposits with freestanding sculptures.

The geographical extent that the research covers spreads throughout the Mediterranean world, including the whole Mediterranean Sea and its neighbouring regions, such as the area of Cadiz, at the west of the Strait of Gibraltar, and the Black Sea, at the north east of the Mediterranean, connected through the Strait of the Dardanelles, the sea of Marmara and Bosphorus. It is important to note, though, that for the purposes of this research only sea deposits with sculptures have been examined and not underwater depositions of ancient sculptures in other aquatic environments, such as rivers.<sup>2</sup>

The chronology of the underwater material record examined for this research ranges from the Archaic period of Greek Antiquity, starting approximately in the 7th century BC, to the end of the Late Roman period and Late Antiquity, approximately in the 7th century AD. Thus, this research attempts to bring together all of the existing underwater archaeological data, from any geographical and chronological dimension of Classical Antiquity, in order to interpret as accurately as possible the overall maritime transport of freestanding sculptural objects in the Mediterranean.

After the macro-scale research and the recording of any known examples of ancient sculptures that have been lost under water, the second aim of this study has been to conduct a micro-scale research and analyse closely specific shipwreck case studies with well-preserved underwater archaeological contexts. For this part of the research the Porticello (D.B.88), Favaritx (D.B.38) and Mahdia (D.B.67) shipwrecks have been examined. Through this study some more specific questions are addressed, clarifying, thus, details of the main research question. These are: What types of sculptures were transported and for what reasons? What types of ships were carrying the sculptures? Were the sculptures transported alone or were they part of a wider cargo? How were the sculptures packed and situated within the ship? From the existing archaeological record, are there any trading networks and/or shipping routes detected? Through this second level of research, this project attempts, first of all, to highlight the importance of archaeological context for the accurate interpretation of sculptures retrieved from under water. Additionally, it searches for evidence that prove how 'special' or common the maritime transport of sculptural artefacts was in Classical Antiquity and how incorporated this shipping activity was in the wider and already known Mediterranean maritime networks.

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<sup>2</sup> Two examples of ancient sculptures discovered in rivers are: the bronze head of the emperor Hadrian, discovered isolated in the river Thames, in London, UK (British Museum 2020); and the lead model sculptures of small temples, found in the first-century BC Comacchio shipwreck, discovered during maintenance of drainage canals in the outskirts of Comacchio, in the Valle Ponti, Italy (Berti 1990).

## Structure of this book

In order to explain all of the conducted research and disseminate in a comprehensive way the results of this project, this book has been organised in nine chapters. Following the present introduction of Chapter 1, Chapter 2 commences with an outline of the available primary sources, literary and archaeological, as well as a review of the older academic approaches adopted for the study of ancient sculptures from under water. Through this review chapter the present research gets contextualized archaeologically and scholarly, while its original contribution is highlighted and explained.

Subsequently, the methodology used to address the archaeological record and answer the set research questions is explained in Chapter 3. In this chapter, the importance of underwater archaeological contexts for the study and interpretation of sculptures from the waters of the Mediterranean Sea is explained, as well as the methods of macro-scale and micro-scale research, which have been used for the collection, processing and interpretation of the respective data.

Following that, Chapter 4 presents the results of the macro-scale research, which has been materialised through the creation of the database for the maritime transport of sculptures in the ancient Mediterranean. In this chapter observations regarding the general extent, frequency, nature and circumstances of the maritime transport of sculptures in the ancient Mediterranean are presented through the quantitative and qualitative analysis of the documented deposits and the studied underwater archaeological record.

In Chapters 5, 6 and 7 the micro-scale research of three specific shipwreck case studies is presented. Chapter 5 revisits the data of the Porticello shipwreck (D.B.88) and its maritime transport of bronze sculptures. Chapter 6 explores the Favaritx shipwreck (D.B.38) and the maritime transport of bronze sculptures as scrap. Finally, Chapter 7 examines anew the Mahdia shipwreck (D.B.67) in an attempt to produce new observations and conclusions through the reconsideration of already retrieved and analysed shipwreck data.

Following the examination of the three shipwreck case studies, Chapter 8 comprises a discussion that answers collectively the main research question of the research, namely where, when, why and how were sculptures transported by sea in the ancient Mediterranean. This discussion brings together the conclusions of both the macro- and micro-scale research generating, thus, a broader interpretation and understanding of the maritime transport of sculptures in the ancient Mediterranean.

This leads to the conclusion of Chapter 9, which presents the results of this research, as well as possible future directions that could be undertaken on the subject.

Overall, this scholarly research examines and enquires for the first time ancient sculptures from under water as a coherent dataset of transported artefacts that were deposited in the Mediterranean Sea. By merging approaches from the disciplines of classical and maritime archaeology, this research studies comparatively any published or unpublished information available in order to interpret the different reasons and circumstances of the maritime transport of sculptures in the ancient Mediterranean. This scholarly approach does not aim at discarding any previous academic work. On the contrary, it attempts to complement, re-organise and update the previous research in order to understand better these artefacts as archaeological objects with specific contexts and functions in the deposits that they were found in. Finally, this work aims at raising awareness among archaeologists working in the Mediterranean, in order to preserve the underwater archaeological data and eliminate the retrieval of sculptures with no underwater information, a fact that has been encouraging the illicit trade of such antiquities.