

The artifact that continues to intrigue me is the Egyptian-type stone anchor from Byblos, which still seems to lead a life of its own. Between its discovery and its arrival in the National Museum several mishaps befell it, then during the recent disasters it stated to gain more significance from new archaeological research. It bears a good-luck sign: the paddle-shaped hieroglyph *NFR* which Lefebure reads as “*parfait, bon, beau et divers*.”¹ All anchors are symbolic, because their function is to immobilise vessels so preventing them from being wrecked. It follows that lives and fortunes depend on their “hold.” In Christian “Emblem Books” anchors represent hope, but their symbolism varies with period and place, while its importance fluctuates according to how much a particular vessel (or type of vessel) has to depend on its anchors. In Lebanon, as recently as the last century, sentiments equivalent to those expressed in Northern European Emblem Books were inscribed in Arabic on the anchors used by sponge divers (in this case, designed to save the men’s breath by carrying them quickly to the bottom). Dr L. Lortet in *La Syrie d’aujourd’hui, 1875-1880* illustrates two such anchor-stones: the Moslem example bears the inscription “in the name of the living God” (surmounted by a crescent), “we belong to God and we return to him.” The other (surmounted by a cross) reads “I place myself in God’s keeping.” Nothing eliminates the perils of the sea, but man is always making shipping safer by designing better sails, introducing rudders, changing to propulsion by engines, using radar etc. Each improvement reduces danger to some degree and in so doing lessens the importance of anchors and consequently the symbolic value accorded to them.

Bronze Age Levantine vessels were very dependant on the pierced-stones that immobilised them because their square sails forced them to ride out storms on the nearest shallows (or wherever the cables of their inefficient anchors were long enough to reach the bottom). This manoeuvre was so dangerous that ropes often had to be cut and anchors abandoned, which is why divers find so many ancient specimens near dangerous rocks and other places that modern ships avoid. The same reasons also explain why, on land, so many anchors are excavated in sacred contexts, wherein the way they had been deliberately positioned suggests variations in votive intent, reflecting the hopes of Bronze Age seafarers: A safe passage in this life (temples) and in the next (tombs), the need for fresh water (wells) etc. All such contexts are illustrated in the great temple sites at Byblos, Ugarit, and Kition. In ancient Egypt, although the culture was basically riverine (making anchors inessential, since river-boats tie up to banks) similar ideas are echoed by occasional sea-going anchors (both foreign and indigenous) found in such places as Karnak Abydos and elsewhere in the Nile Valley. It is, however, at a Pharaonic outlet on the Red Sea where the most securely dated

and typologically closest parallels to the Byblian anchor have been found. In contrast to Mediterranean *ex-votos* these Red Sea anchors are, however, used as monuments; sometimes commemorating specific achievements (see below).

What befell this handsome Byblian anchor as a result of the Second World War, adds a modern twist to its symbolism. Maurice Dunand took over from Pierre Montet in 1925. Excavating near the Holy Well associated with Isis “The Lady of Byblos,” at the very heart of the ancient town, he found a group of anchors including the one in question. They stood 30 metres from the Well; outside the entrance to the *Enceinte Sacrée* (one of the three most important and enduring of the Byblian temples), built on the low-ground, surrounding the large natural hole down which flights of steps led to the actual well-head. At first, Dunand placed little importance on such pierced stones; although he soon learned that they were anchors and – exceptionally-registered them as such on his record-cards. Nevertheless, he neither questioned their presence in sacred contexts, nor (since there were a great many of them) bothered to register every rough-cut or broken example.

Ever generous to researchers, Dunand repeatedly helped me (during the 1960s) to find the original positions of anchors by looking up his card-index, but the group in front of the *Enceinte Sacrée* had been discovered in the very early days of his excavation, so only three of the anchors in it had been recorded on his cards (nos: 1444, 1445 and 14395) while the *NFR* anchor, because of its inscription, had immediately been set apart from the rest. Confusion ensued when the Second World War stopped excavation and finds had to be hastily stored. The *NFR* anchor became a ‘war casualty’ so that by the time cataloguing was resumed it was erroneously published as number “7027” in *Fouilles de Byblos II*. But its shape being unique at Byblos; it can still be easily recognized in the photograph: Plate XIV (*Fouilles de Byblos II*), which shows it *in situ* behind the two circular column bases in front of the *Enceinte Sacrée*. When I showed this to Maurice Dunand, his memory of finding the anchor there “on a 23rd century B.C. level” returned to him. He told me to mention the mistake in the article I was writing for a publication that was being prepared in his honour; I duly did so in a footnote.²

Dunand died in 1987 while Lebanon was still in a state of war. Meanwhile, Dr Muntaha Saghieh had been synthesizing his records, extracting therefrom the stratigraphy of Byblos during the Third Millennium B.C., i.e. the Early Bronze Age. Her convincing and much-needed study ends with the finding that the two column bases outside the *Enceinte Sacrée* (consequently the *NFR* anchor as well) post-date the 3rd Millennium, and fall beyond the limits she had set herself.³ This conclusion is

Islamic and Christian inscriptions on the 19th century A.D. sponge-divers anchors, L. Lortet, La Syrie d'aujourd'hui, 1875-1880 (Paris) 661.



The anchor in the Beirut National Museum; note the paddle-shaped hieroglyph NFR; the scratches and the chip on the right, are the result of fortuitous damage caused after excavation.



The courtyard in front of the Enceinte sacrée, 30m from the "Holy Well," where Maurice Dunand found the group of anchors; the one in question can still be found in situ behind two column bases, Fouilles de Byblos II (1950) pl. XIV.



now borne out by typological comparison with anchors from the shore of the Red Sea.

The “NFR” anchor which stands 82cm high is made from a 24 cm thick slab of fine textured light coloured limestone weighing 188.5 kg ; its apex is domed; the main rope-hole is chisel-finished, leaving it tubular in section; it is surmounted by a groove (to keep the rope from slipping from side to side); there is an L-shaped piercing through one corner of the base (for a secondary rope to free the anchor if caught on the bottom). The anchor is un-used bearing brand new marks left by a flat chisel some 2cm wide (much narrower than the average Byblian chisel). All this contrasts with other anchors on the site, and with the one shape that emerges as characteristically Byblian: a tall isosceles triangle, proportionally less thick in section than the “NFR anchor” and with marks of a bow-drill still showing in the piercings. Some Byblian-type anchors have apical grooves, but no non-Egyptian anchor has an L-shaped lateral piercing at the base, probably because when caught up by Red Sea coral, a sharp tug will snap the brittle growth where as to free an anchor caught among Mediterranean rocks a tug would probably snap off the corner weakened by the L-shaped piercing.

In examining evidence suggesting that this type of Egyptian anchor is later than the third Millennium it is worth bearing in mind that before modern technology hastened the pace of change, and given that seafarers are very conservative; anchors of a certain shape might well remain in use for centuries. Nevertheless no Third Millennium parallels have yet been found to corroborate Dunand’s 23rd century date for the NFR anchor. At Ugarit a slightly smaller example of the shape in the Temple of Baal is attributed by C.F.A. Schaeffer to the Middle Bronze Age on the grounds that other *ex-votos* in the Temple bore inscriptions of the period of Sesostri II and Amenemhat III and IV who reigned between 1900 and 1780 B.C.” The stratigraphy of the Temple of Baal is, however, lacking and cannot be reconstructed from records in the same way as the Byblian temples.

The securely dated and typologically closest comparisons emerged in 1976 from Professor Abd el Monem A. H. Sayed’s excavations ⁴ of mounds containing anchors on the headland running along one side of the Red Sea the creek called Mersa El Gawasis (16 anchors are now on record and there may be more).⁵ Two inscribed monuments involve anchors: one of them commemorates an order from Sesostri I (1972-1928) to his Chamberlain Ankhaw to prepare an expedition to Punt. The other states the role of his Vizier Antifoker in getting ships and men for the same purpose. The base of the Antifoker monument is made out of a single anchor of this Egyptian family, whereas Ankhaw’s monument is entirely built of anchors almost identical in shape and size to the Byblian (they weigh in the order of 200 kg

each). Two pairs are laid one above the other as a base on which the three inscribed speci-mens stand upright. The latter have had their tops cut off below the rope-holes, but at the base the characteristic L-shaped lateral piercings survive.

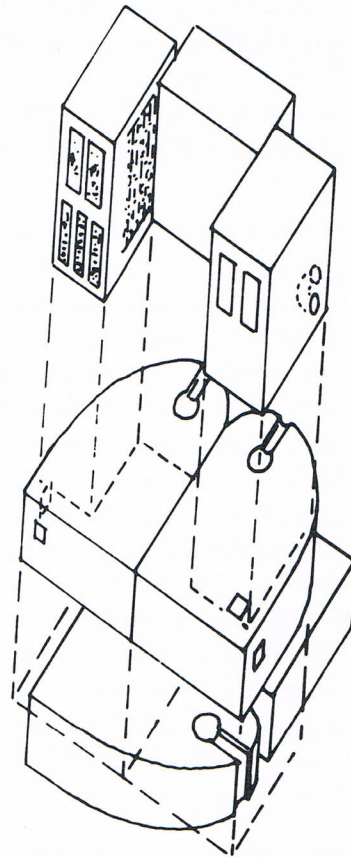
In addition: an anchor of this same family is illustrated among the Middle Kingdom memorial stones in the Abydos cemetery,⁶ while A. VILA illustrates similar anchors in a Nubian fort at Mirgissa, containing weapons belonging to the XIII Dynasty (1736-1633); these anchors had, incidentally, been put to a secondary use. It is noteworthy that the lime and sandstones from which they are made were imported into this otherwise granitic region⁷ for the kind of stone an anchor is made from, is of great interest in the reconstruction of ancient trade-routes.

All the information that has accumulated since the 1960s points to anchors, whether of local or foreign pattern, having been expressly made as *ex-votos* either near, or within the precincts of the temples in which they were to be offered.⁸ This does not preclude the occasional example of imported stone. In the case of an anchor found on the sea-floor, the geological provenance of its stone gives a clue to the “nationality” of the ship that lost it. On land-sites, even a layman is struck by, for instance the presence of basalt anchors at Ugarit and their absence at Byblos. Lithologists can go further in identifying and comparing the commoner stones; Professor Georges Mascle has set a standard for this through his work on the Ugaritic and Kition groups, but unfortunately the Byblian anchors have not as yet been systematically identified. It would be interesting to compare the limestone of the “NFR anchor” with local quarry-stone; with samples from similar anchors in Egypt and indeed with the fine white limestones of Egyptian quarries.

I like to think that the anchor in the Beirut Museum symbolizes hope; its recent history certainly makes it the epitome of continuity, since archaeological meaning has never stopped accumulating around it.

Notes

- ¹ *Grammaire de l'Égyptien Classique*, 395, no. 35, Cairo 1955.
- ² H. Frost, "The Stone Anchors of Byblos," *Mélanges de l'Université Saint Joseph XLV*, 26 (1969): 425-442.
- ³ M. Saghieh, *Byblos in the Third Millennium B.C.* (Warminster, 1983) 35.
- ⁴ A. M. A. H. Sayed, "Discovery of the site of the 12th Dynasty port at Wadi Gawasis on the Red Sea shore," *Revue d'Égyptologie* 29 (1977): 139-178.
- ⁵ H. Frost, "Ports, Cairns and Anchors: a Pharaonic Outlet on the Red Sea" [forthcoming].
- ⁶ H. O. Lang and H. Schaffer, *Grab-und Denkstein des Mittleren Reiches* (Berlin 1902-1925) 358-9.
- ⁷ A. Vila, "L'armement de la forteresse de Mirgissa-Iken," *Revue d'Égyptologie* 22 (1970): 189.
- ⁸ H. Frost, "The Kition Anchors", Appendix I, *Excavations at Kition V, I* (Nicosie, 1985) 281-321, pl. A-N; "Anchors Sacred and Profane: the Ugarit-Ras Shamra Anchors Revised and Compared," *Ras Shamra-Ougarit VI, I* (Paris, 1991) 355-410.



Isometric drawing showing the structure of the Ankhaw Monument made out of comparable anchors, at Gawasis on the Egyptian Red Sea coast (after information supplied by A. M. A. H. Sayed)