Naval horns between cult and practical functions
Francesca Oliveri

***

Sometimes the discovery of a wreck includes among the most common objects of the cargo and those belonging to the crew, even the rarest and most unusual finds.

The most singular find is the lead horn-shaped object, which can fall into the category of objects with apotropaic function. In fact, the many mortal dangers that navigation entailed for sailors and the constant need to resort to divine help have given rise to a deep religiousness in the seafaring environment, sometimes very close to superstition. It is known that certain practices to ensure the success of navigation and the benevolence of the gods of the sea already began in the shipyard before the ship was launched. The vessel was given the name of the god under whose protection it was entrusted; images of gods were placed both at bow and stern, both painted and sculpted in relief on metal plates presumably placed on the bow.

Apotropaic meaning also had the custom, still in use today among Mediterranean fishermen, of fixing horns in the bow area. An interesting comparison is given by various finds both on wrecks and sporadic.

These can be ox horns (or of other large animals) covered with lead or bronze, presumably in order to be more easily nailed to the structure of the ship's deck.

Considering that ships and navigation techniques all over the ancient world are substantially those described in Homeric poems and that for centuries that seafaring has not undergone great changes, it is necessary to remember an epithet that Homer often uses to describe an evident characteristic of ships: orthòkrairos, that is "with erect horns".

The question of the function of the naval horns in essence has never been entirely addressed, but by proceeding to indicate their location on iconographic and terminological bases, it can be possible to recognize their practical use in some particular circumstances that could be determined frequently during ancient navigation (and in certain conditions and places up to the present day).

The great anthropological relevance of the horns, generalized and still current with other allusive meanings, against the evil eye, expressed truthfully or with reproductions or with the scaramantici gesture of bent fingers of the hand, except the index finger and little finger, or in other forms, authorizes to think that the saving potential attributed to it probably originates from distant protective applications at the top, both at sea that on earth, in the face of terrifying natural phenomena.

Lead was essential for its specific electrical resistivity property which, in some circumstances, could prevent right at the ends of the antennas risk of serious damage, that could have been produced by the accumulation of atmospheric electricity. Clearly visible at night, the phenomenon, later known in the Mediterranean navigation as "fires of St. Elmo", could occur before the storms on the mast and the lines of force of the electric charge could result in a particular corona effect around the at the antenna tips, leaving the sailors trembling for their lives.