Evidence of sailors’ religious conscious derived from ancient anchor finds

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There are few tools that so well embody the virtues of religion such as faith, security and prosperity as do ship’s anchors. It is therefore not surprising to find aspects of sailors’ religious conscious imprinted upon anchor finds themselves as well as interpolable significance from sacred terrestrial contexts. These therefore serve as indispensable theological documents for periods where little written evidence is extant and otherwise since seafarers for commerce have largely been overlooked as a base social class.

The earliest direct evidence from anchors may be symbols chiseled on stone anchors reminiscent of those known to be sacred elsewhere such as the ankh, scarab and double-axe and other potentially apotropaic imagery. Contextually, in the Levantine and Cypriot Bronze Age, stone-based anchors are often found in the vicinity of sacred areas dedicated to weather gods. In historical periods, dedicating anchors in temples is also well represent in textual and archaeological evidence although the materials used and changes in form now have less propensity for contextual preservation. A practice of miniature anchor production for dedication is also diachronically evident in the eastern Mediterranean and Black Sea. The likely common prehistoric dedication of anchors to Ba’al shows continuity into the Roman period where lead stocks were stamped with the Greek homologue, Zeus, and his epithet Soter (savior). Greco-Roman lead stocks prove to be a particularly fecund source of relevant information since their molds were malleable and could be pre-stamped. It is therefore possible to recognize that, by this time, the weather god was supercedeed in popularity by Venus/Aphrodite being ubiquitously represented by both inscriptions and iconography. Venus, having been born in the sea, would share much of the protecting characteristics of Zeus, inherent with her commonly attributed and stamped epithet of Soteria (savioress), but she also carried other significance connected with her prostitution cult. There are also traces of other gods including Egyptian and Punic while, of course, there remains considerable symbolism on lead stocks whose meaning has not been resolved.
With the decline of the use of stone and wood in anchors in favor of, and leading to, iron stock-anchor dominance, by the 3rd century AD, there is naturally a lacuna in inscriptive and iconographic evidence. Rather a reflection of the religious conscious of sailors may be found in the unique form of the most ubiquitous anchors dating through the 13th century AD. Specifically, the anchors take a surprising form from a practical standpoint. The arms change orientation from upward ‘V’ or lunar to perpendicular. This, in conjunction with an increase in length of the crown stub and adoption of a wood stock gives the anchor’s superstructure (excluding the stock) largely the appearance of an iron crucifix. Since the form appears in the late Roman period and continues through much of the Byzantine, several authors have suggested that a specifically Christian significance can be applied to it. While it is feasible that sailors had broadly accepted Christianity by this time, the hypothesis raises numerous questions such as those regarding early Christian symbolism, and why in the 10th century eastern Mediterranean the ubiquitous orientation of the arms drop further producing an inverted ‘Y’ form. Could this be response to the rising influence of Islamic seafaring? However, also pertinent are questions of anchor functionality and potential decline in efficiency resulting from theological demands. Discussion of the latter will be supplemented by report of full-scale experimentation with these anchor designs.