

# The Submersible *Asherah* Resurfaces

Gordon Bass

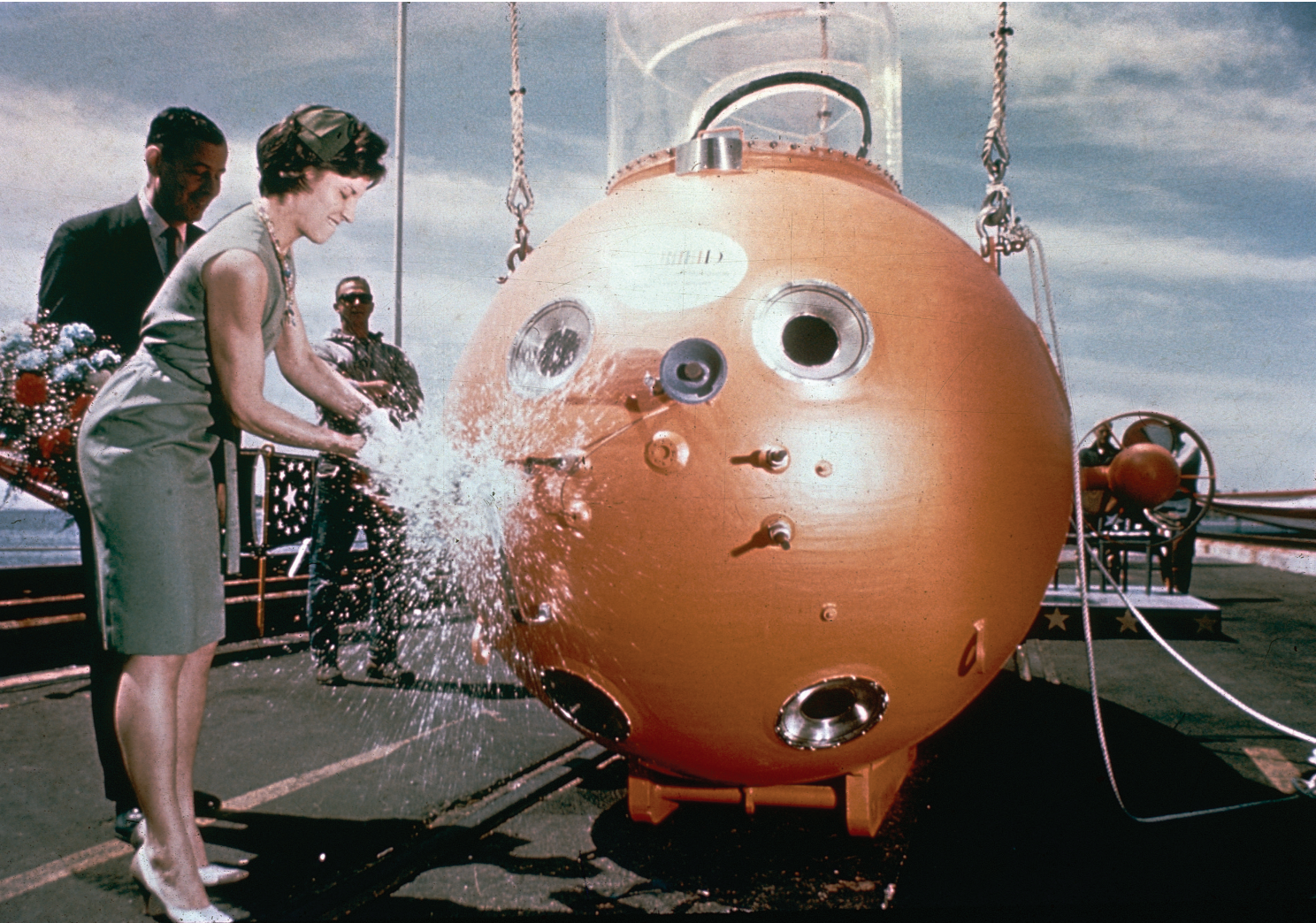


Figure 1. Ann Bass christening *Asherah* in 1964. © Institute of Nautical Archaeology

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In 1964, a small orange submersible splashed into history as America's first research sub built for private use. Five years later, it simply vanished, a sixteen-foot mystery that would remain unsolved for decades.

The story began four years earlier, when my father, George F. Bass, led the first ever scientific excavation of an ancient shipwreck, off the southern coast of Turkey.<sup>1</sup> A Bronze Age ship had ripped itself open on submerged rocks around 1200 BC, and its excavation in the summer of 1960 marked the beginning of true underwater archaeology. Sponsored by the University Museum of the University of Pennsylvania, where my father had just begun working toward his PhD, it was the first excavation carried out on the seabed, the first that met the same rigorous standards as land sites.

Scuba gear made the work possible but came with limitations. Over the next few seasons and thousands of dives in the Aegean, my father discovered that he and his team spent more time diving back and forth from surface to seabed than doing actual excavating. And they couldn't work much below one hundred feet, so deeper sites remained out of reach.

Until 1963. Frustrated by the report of a promising yet inaccessible shipwreck in three hundred feet of water, my father came to the obvious conclusion: He needed a submarine.

### Engineering the Impossible

The idea of a graduate student shopping for submarines should have seemed absurd. Yet my father was convinced that in a sub, archaeologists could go deeper, explore wider areas, work longer. They could search for wrecks, map them, photograph them. They could direct entire underwater excavations!

My father soon found himself discussing technical details over martinis with Electric Boat, the division of General Dynamics that built nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines. They

sketched out specifications that were ambitious yet practical. The sub would carry a two-person crew—a pilot and an observer. It would have an operating depth of six hundred feet and life support for at least twelve hours. It would travel at up to three knots. And it would be highly maneuverable, able to hover in place like a helicopter. Structurally, it would consist of a spherical steel pressure hull, five feet in diameter, surrounded by a streamlined fiberglass fairing containing batteries, ballast, and other equipment.<sup>2</sup> Technically, like *Trieste*, *Alvin*, and Cousteau's diving saucer *Denise*, it would be a submersible rather than a submarine. (The former typically has limited power and range and is often launched from a support vessel; the latter is self-sufficient.)

Even small subs aren't cheap. My father revised specs, eliminated nonessential equipment, got Electric Boat to absorb half the cost from its R&D budget, and negotiated a final price of \$50,000 to the University Museum, which would make the purchase.<sup>3</sup> Construction began in January 1964 at Electric Boat's shipyard in Groton, Connecticut.

On the windy morning of May 28, 1964, the small sub, looking like a pudgy orange tadpole, was unveiled to a crowd of two hundred. It was the 339th sub built by General Dynamics—and by far the smallest.<sup>4</sup> My father said a few words about its potential to shape the emerging field of underwater archaeology. A chaplain gave an invocation. It was time for the christening.<sup>5</sup>

My mother had practiced her swing with a wooden bottle; now she hefted a bottle of G. H. Mumm champagne and smashed it expertly across the submersible's bow. It exploded with an impressive spray, and she declared, "I christen thee *Asherah!*"

### Adventure Begins

The University Museum shipped *Asherah*, named for the Phoenician goddess of the sea, to Turkey. A fishing boat towed it to Yassiada, a small, sun-

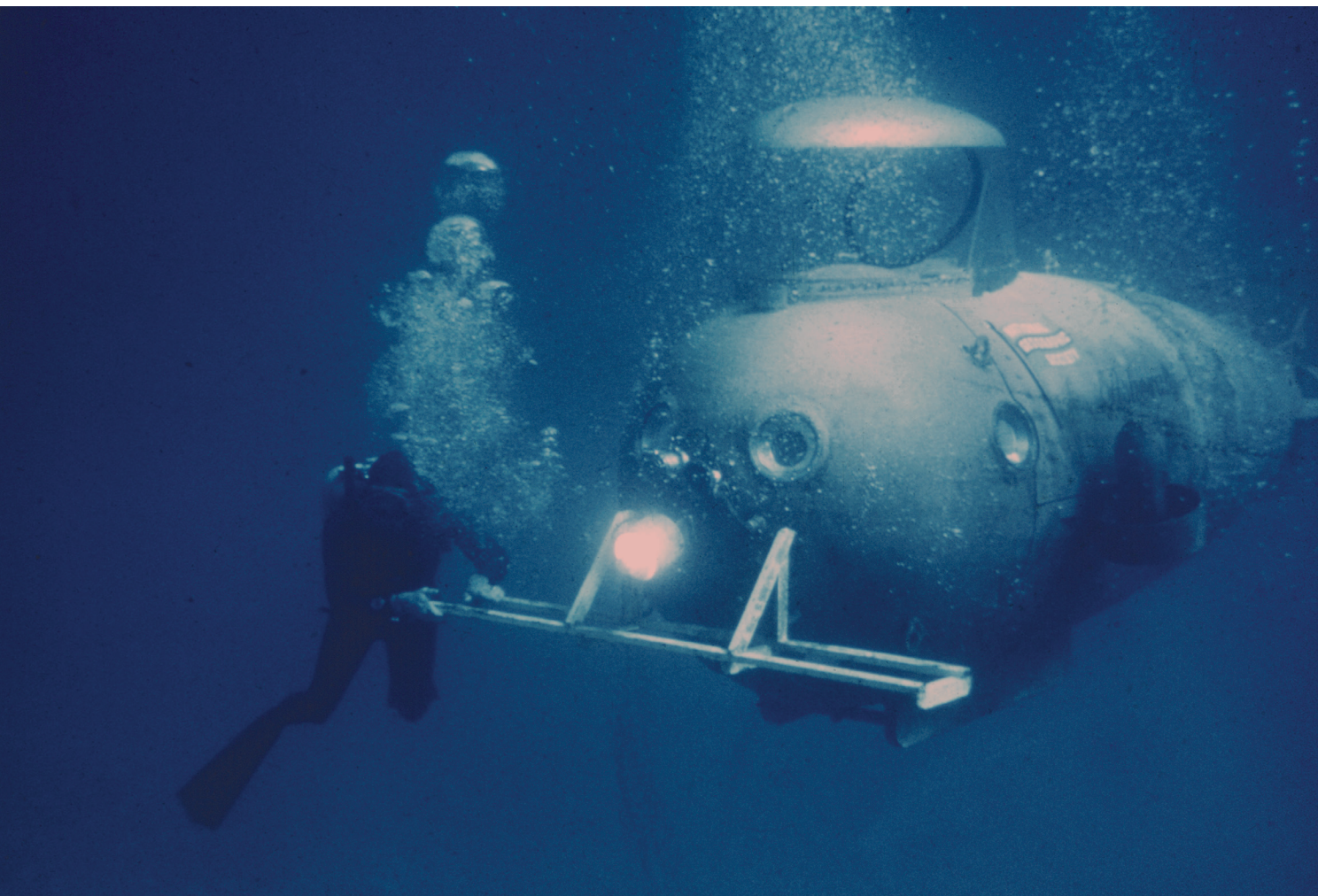


Figure 2. *Asherah* dives off the coast of Turkey. © Institute of Nautical Archaeology

baked island off the southwestern coast where my father was now excavating a seventh-century Byzantine shipwreck laden with hundreds of wine amphorae.<sup>6</sup>

Electric Boat engineer Bill Beran took my father for his first dive. My father lowered himself through *Asherah*'s hatch into her pressure hull. He found it cold, damp, and cramped, stuffed with wiring, instrument panels, and controls. A red handle at his feet would release a half ton of ballast in an emergency.

With Beran at the controls and my father perched on the observer's seat, *Asherah* made a few passes over the wreck site. It was hard to see much through the six small viewports, and the twin two-horsepower electric motors struggled against the current.

What happened next must have been slightly terrifying, no matter how coolly my father would later recount the event. As *Asherah* ascended, a surge caught the sub, overpowered it, and slammed it into a reef—ironically, the one responsible for the

Byzantine shipwreck it had just visited. The blow directly struck one of its three-inch-thick Plexiglas ports, cracking it all the way through. Seawater seeped in and pooled in the hull.<sup>7</sup> But the port held. My father kept it as a souvenir of that first dive, and as a kid I used to run my fingers over its deep gouge, still embedded with pulverized reef material.

For the next few years, the University Museum leased *Asherah* for non-archaeological missions to help cover its costs. It was used to survey fish off Hawai'i and make sound recordings of aquatic life.<sup>8</sup> It dove with ambassador Clare Boothe Luce aboard to demonstrate American technological ingenuity.<sup>9</sup> It inspected an undersea cable in the Pacific Northwest.<sup>10</sup>

*Asherah* even took part in at least one classified mission. In 1966, the navy loaded *Asherah* onto a C-130 at San Diego's Lindbergh Field and flew it to the Caribbean, where it successfully located a practice weapon that had landed short of its target on Vieques, Puerto Rico.<sup>11</sup>

In 1967, *Asherah* returned to Turkey. During a busy summer it helped locate a wreck in nearly three hundred feet of water, demonstrated the effectiveness of side-scan sonar, and recorded stereoscopic images of wreck sites.<sup>12</sup> But this second season in the Mediterranean was its last.

### The End of an Era

Despite early promise and my father's eternal optimism, it had become impossible to ignore *Asherah*'s shortcomings. The small sub lacked adequate navigational equipment. Its control system exhausted a pilot after two hours. It was once swept out to sea and had to be retrieved by a surface vessel.

The final blow came when the University Museum, acting out of prudence, decided it couldn't operate the small sub without a \$5 million liability policy. *Asherah*'s archaeological career was over.<sup>13</sup>

*Asherah* was sold in 1969 to a New York company called Technoceans, which planned to lease

it for underwater oil pipeline inspections.<sup>14</sup> It's unclear if anything came of the venture. A relative of the company's founder recalls a vague story about *Asherah* working in Peru, but any second act must have been short-lived; a handwritten note taped to one of the sub's pressure gauges more than half a century ago shows it was last calibrated on August 7, 1969.<sup>15</sup>

And then—nothing. *Asherah* seemed to vanish. No more press coverage, no academic citations, no public appearances. For a vessel launched to fanfare just five years earlier, it was a strange fate.

Years later, with *Asherah* still missing and spy movies priming my imagination, I couldn't help wondering if it had been secretly requisitioned for more classified missions. I'd seen the clues: The Office of Naval Research had funded tests of *Asherah*'s stereo-camera systems in 1967,<sup>16</sup> and more intriguingly, my father had worked closely with University Museum director Froelich Rainey, a former US State Department employee who maintained close ties to the CIA. Notably, Rainey was keenly interested in field testing archaeological technologies that just happened to have military and intelligence applications.<sup>17</sup>

Like *Asherah*.

But the reality was more mundane.

### The Long Search

Through the 1970s and 1980s, my father fielded secondhand reports that *Asherah* had changed hands a few times, was possibly abandoned in a Florida parking lot surrounded by weeds, might have been scrapped. The sub had become a teardrop-shaped ghost, listed inconclusively as "inactive" in a 1976 US Navy compendium of known submarine vehicles.<sup>18</sup>

Yet *Asherah* proved more resilient than rumor suggested. Sometime in the 1990s it resurfaced in Boston and came to the attention of Wally Lesynski, a navy veteran, boatbuilder, and marina owner. Lesynski arranged to buy it, but when he arrived

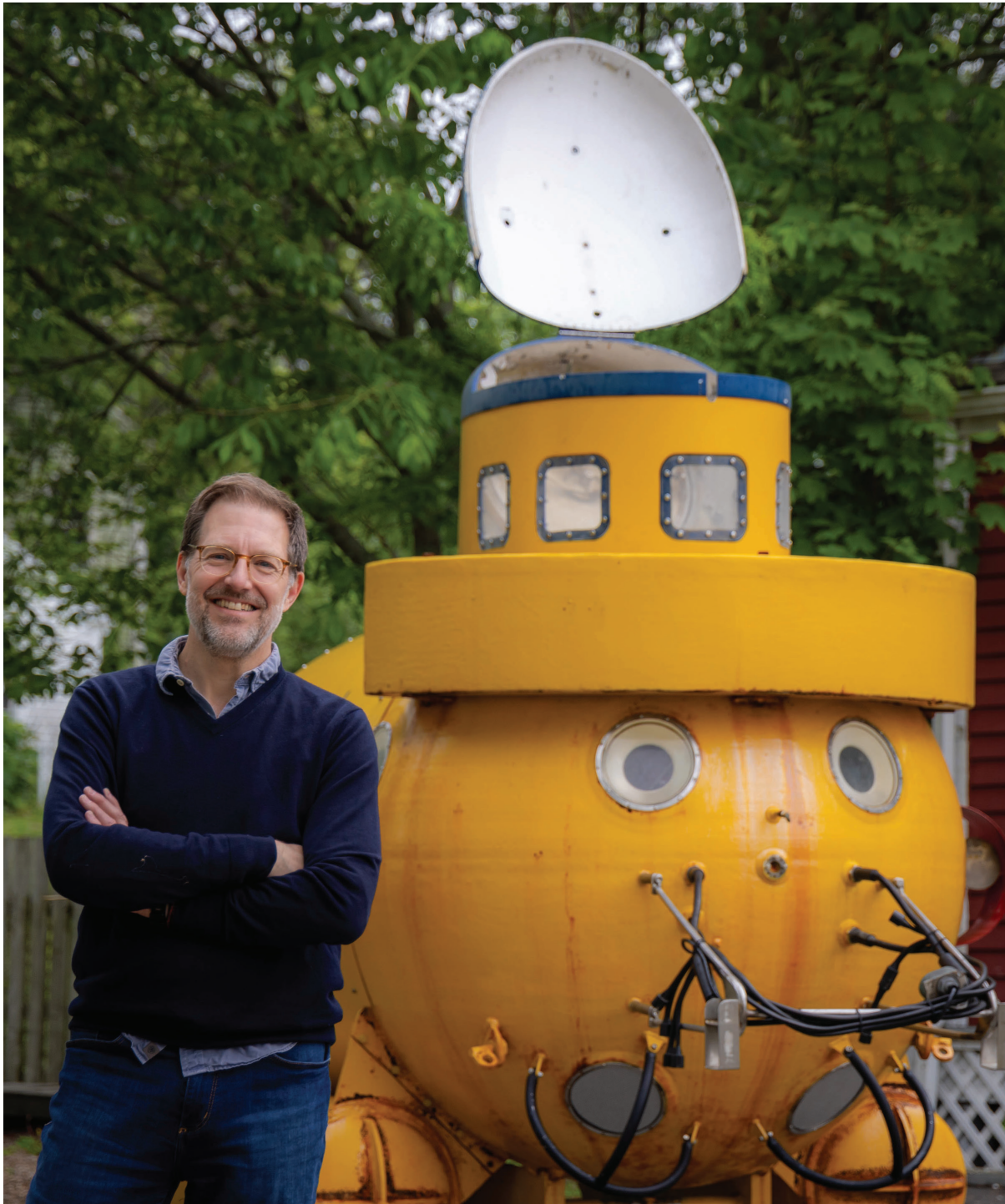


Figure 3. The author with *Asherah*, at Mystic Seaport Museum. Photo by Joe Michael, courtesy Mystic Seaport Museum

to pick it up in a borrowed dump truck, he found it in pieces.

Lesynski got as far as repainting *Asherah* a bright yellow, but other priorities intervened, and it sat in storage for another two decades. When he died in 2011, his family decided it was time for the historic sub to find a permanent new home.<sup>19</sup>

### A Homecoming

Submarines sailed through my father's life from the start. In high school, he and his brother tried building one out of wood, planning to explore the Severn River near their Annapolis home. Their parents wisely discouraged the effort. After *Asherah* was sold, he scratched the itch by building a replica from fifty-five-gallon cardboard barrels, creating a bright red play submersible for my brother and me. Years later, he urged the Institute of Nautical Archaeology, which he'd founded in 1973, to acquire a vastly more modern SEAmag-

ine submersible, one with a clear acrylic pressure hull that made it a far better platform for shipwreck surveys.<sup>20</sup>

But *Asherah* remained his first submersible love.

My father was thrilled to hear late in his life about *Asherah*'s miraculous reappearance, and I think he'd be pleased to see it now, at home in a fleet of historic vessels, just a few miles from where it was built and launched. Today *Asherah* may look more like a wide-eyed emoji than a history-making vessel, but it still conveys a spirit of outsize adventure and exploration.

Of course, the small sub has always made a big impression. I asked my mom if she remembers much about *Asherah*'s 1964 launch.

"Gordon," she said, "how many people get to christen a submarine?"<sup>21</sup> After years of correspondence and discussions, *Asherah* was donated to Mystic Seaport Museum in 2023.

### Endnotes

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- 6 "Yassiada Byzantine Shipwreck Excavation," Institute of Nautical Archaeology, accessed June 29, 2025, <https://nauticalarch.org/projects/yassiada-byzantine-shipwreck-excavation/>.
- 7 Bass, *Archaeology Beneath the Sea*, 119-22.
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- 15 Steve Egan, email message to author, June 30, 2025; author visit to *Asherah*, May 30, 2025.
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- 17 Lynn Meskell and Sarah LaPorte, "'Your Mysterious Instruments': American Devices and Imperial Designs in Cold War Archaeology," *Journal of Field Archaeology* 47, no. 4 (2022): 212-27.
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- 19 Jay Lesynski, conversation with author, June 2025.
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