

From the Editors



Asherah at Mystic Seaport Museum. Photograph by Joe Michael

In 2023, Mystic Seaport Museum acquired a small submarine called *Asherah*. It immediately won the hearts of staff and visitors and became a social media star. More than once, I have walked around our grounds and heard someone spontaneously singing the Beatles' "Yellow Submarine." Tasked with writing a sign for it, and as an archaeologist of the terrestrial sort, I was amazed to learn that we had just acquired a key piece of maritime archaeology history—one of the earliest research submarines. *Asherah* was among the inspirations for this issue's topic, but it was our issue editors, Kroum Batchvarov and Fred Hocker, who focused us in on the specific theme of Challenges in Maritime Archaeology.

Archaeology is the study of the human past using material remains. The goal, ideally, is to learn about *people* in the past, not just about the objects they left behind, but that task is riddled with difficulty. At the sites I've studied in the American Southwest, people very intentionally left their

homes and migrated elsewhere, and in general archaeologists find only what they left behind. And of course, not all those discards make it into our archaeological record, as textiles and wood and foods generally disappear over centuries. A site like Pompeii, where daily life was frozen in place and preserved, is extremely rare on land.

But many shipwrecks are exactly that—a spotlight of a moment in time, with cargo still in place, dishware still ready for a shipboard luncheon, and sometimes even food remnants preserved in a low-oxygen environment. This is not the entirety of maritime archaeology, however. Maritime archaeology includes rivers and lakes, and it also includes sites of maritime activity on land, such as shipyards or ports. Increasingly it also encompasses the study of sunken landscapes, like the vast Doggerland region off of the UK, or the offshore regions that may be sites of early settlement and migration in North America. Archaeologists still face the kinds of challenges that *Asherah* was meant

to overcome—such as poor visibility, underwater photography, and the logistics of directing an excavation or mapping a site when no one can stay below for very long. They also face new challenges today, including coastal erosion, increasing development of shorelines, and the growing problem of cultural heritage protection in deeper waters.

This issue of *Mainsheet* is a globetrotting exploration of maritime archaeology and its difficulties. It begins with Dmytro Kobaliia's powerful Perspective article addressing an age-old question—the threat of war to cultural heritage. Ukraine's rich underwater archaeology faces environmental disaster, as Russia's destruction of the Kakhovka dam leads to an array of different effects on river flow and cultural heritage. Next, Brad Duncan and his colleagues are on the search for a missing ship, and finding it involves an incredibly interdisciplinary process that takes us from the archives of nineteenth-century Australia to the technicalities of river hydrography. Carolyn Kennedy and Megan Crutcher compare the logistical intricacies of nautical archaeology in Liberia and Quebec, challenging accepted notions about doing this work in African settings. Sara A. Rich takes us into the rivers of South Carolina's Lowcountry to explore the lumber that built America's ships and its entanglements with colonial processes.

Feature articles, book reviews, and an exhibition review consider some of the other questions of modern maritime archaeology—digital archaeology, repatriation of Indigenous cultural heritage, identification of shipwrecks, salvage archaeology, and the exploding popularity of the practice of mudlarking on London's River Thames. To round things out, we also have a wonderful essay about *Asherah*, written by the son of archaeologist George Bass, who originally commissioned and used the sub.

The challenge of identifying art and poetry to match the theme of this issue has also been significant. Our editorial staff has done a deep dive

into the history of shipwrecks in art and literature, from Caspar David Friedrich's view of the sublime power of nature in his Arctic scene, to Thomas Hardy's spooky gothic vision of the *Titanic* meeting its fate, to Adrienne Rich's entanglement of shipwreck and feminist manifesto, and leading us to Allison Bianco's bright contemporary depiction of disaster on our covers.

Michelle I. Turner, PhD
Managing Editor

From the Museum

N.B. We're saddened to share that due to financial circumstances, this will be the last issue of *Mainsheet* in print or digital form. Our thanks to all the editors, authors, reviewers, artists, poets, advisors, designers, and subscribers who contributed to making each issue such an intellectual and visual feast. During its short run, *Mainsheet* garnered an Award of Merit from the Connecticut League of Museums and an Award of Excellence from the American Association for State and Local History. We hope its impact continues long into the future.



Asherah with the whaleship Charles W. Morgan in the background. Photograph by Joe Michael