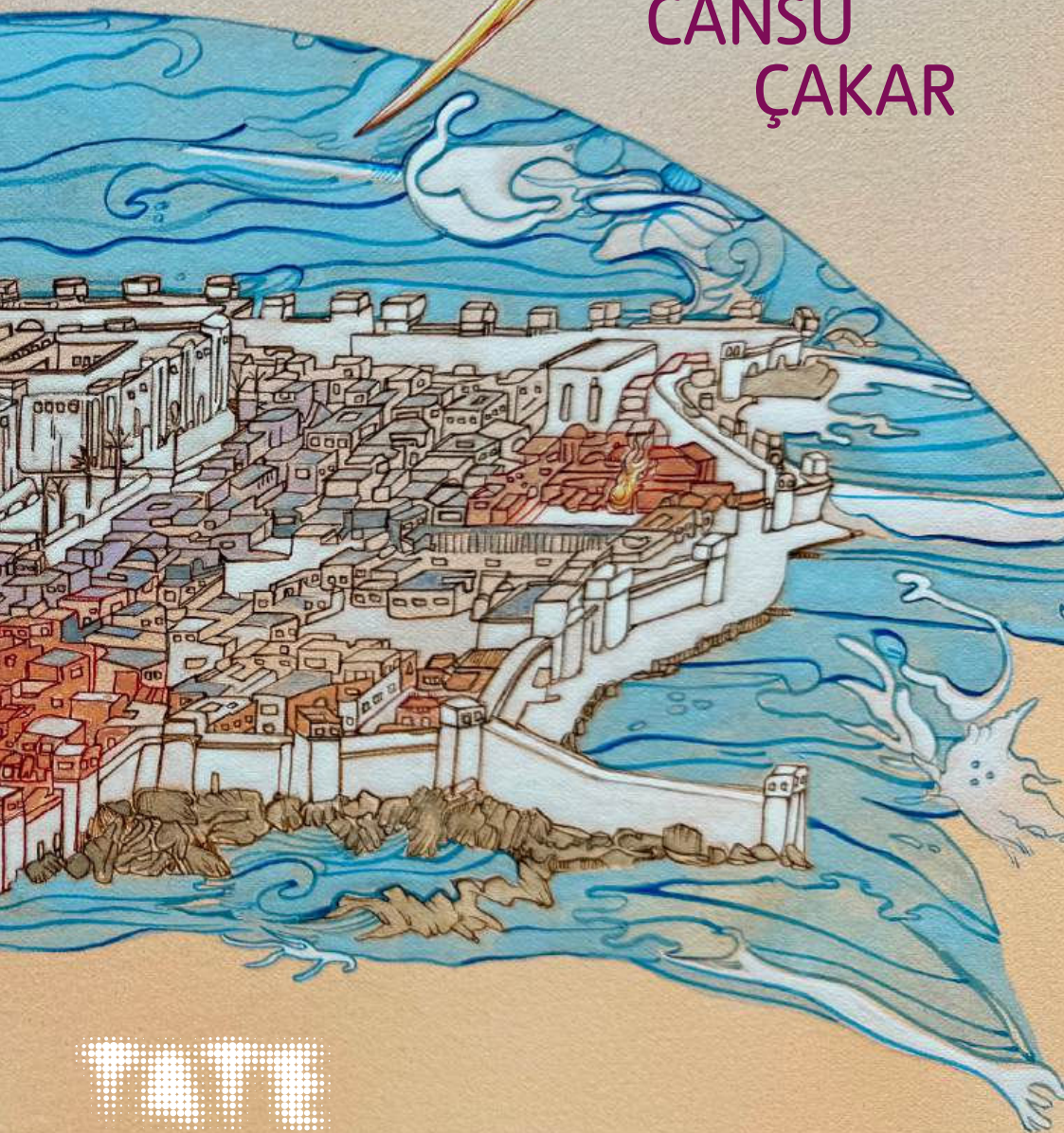
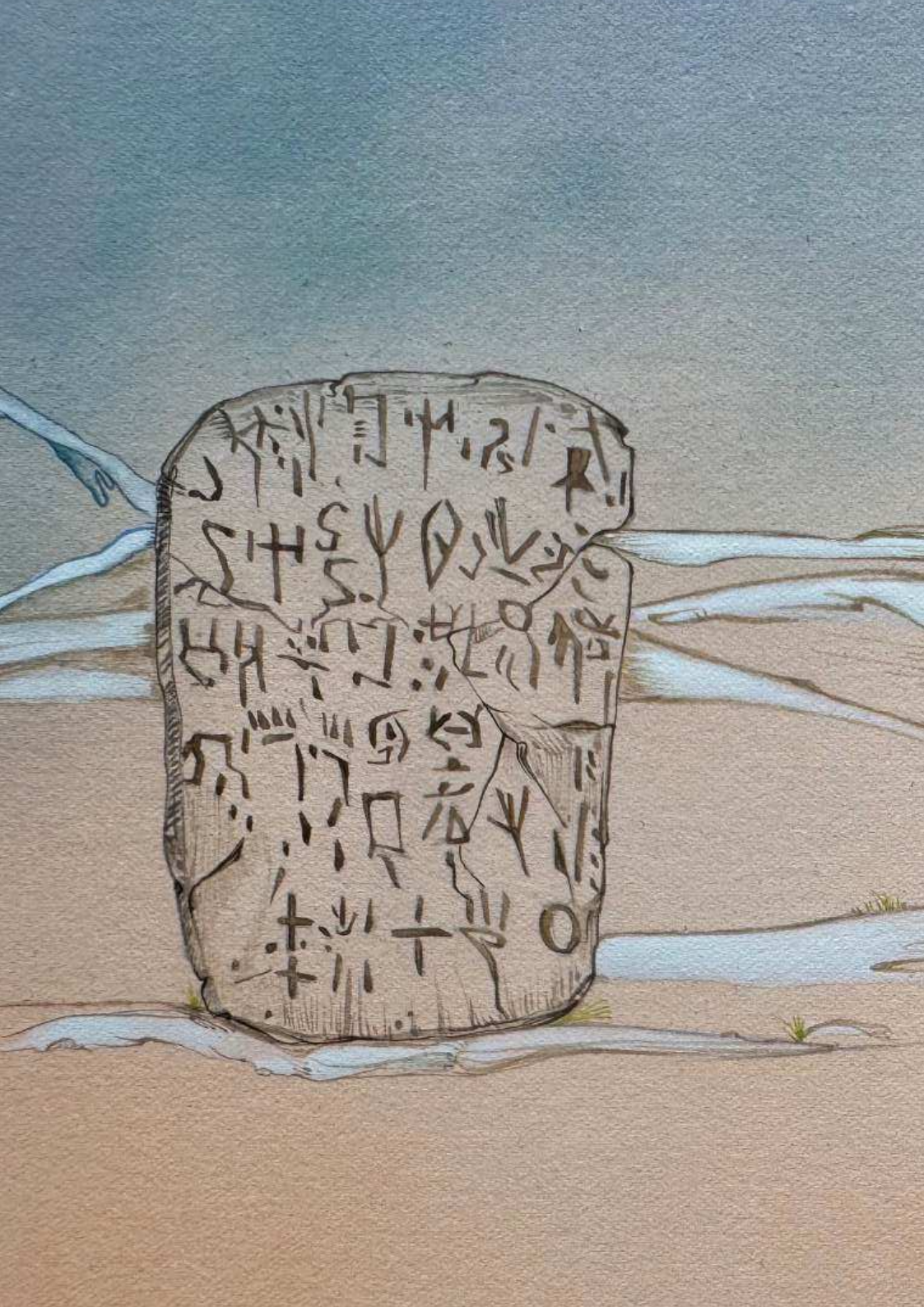


NEW
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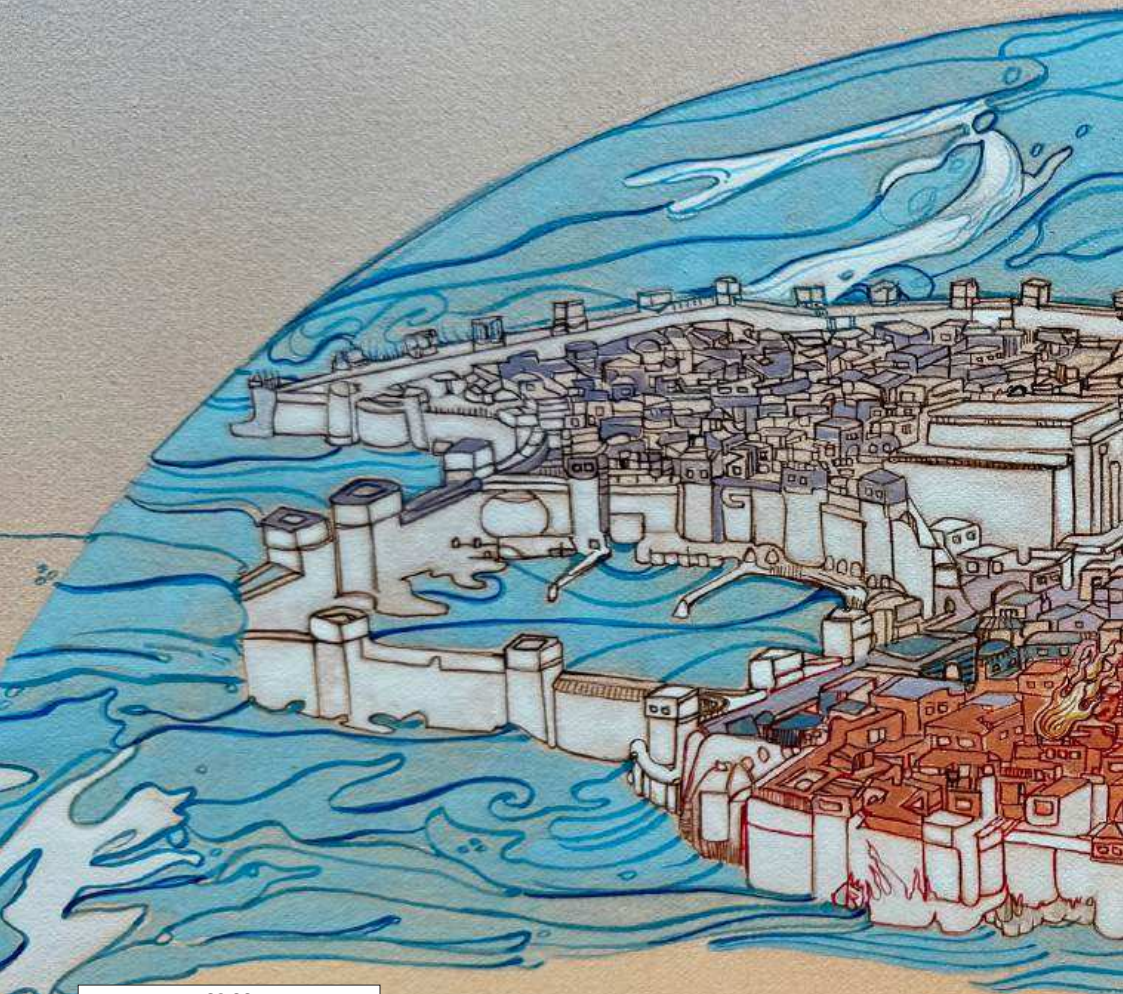


CANSU
ÇAKAR









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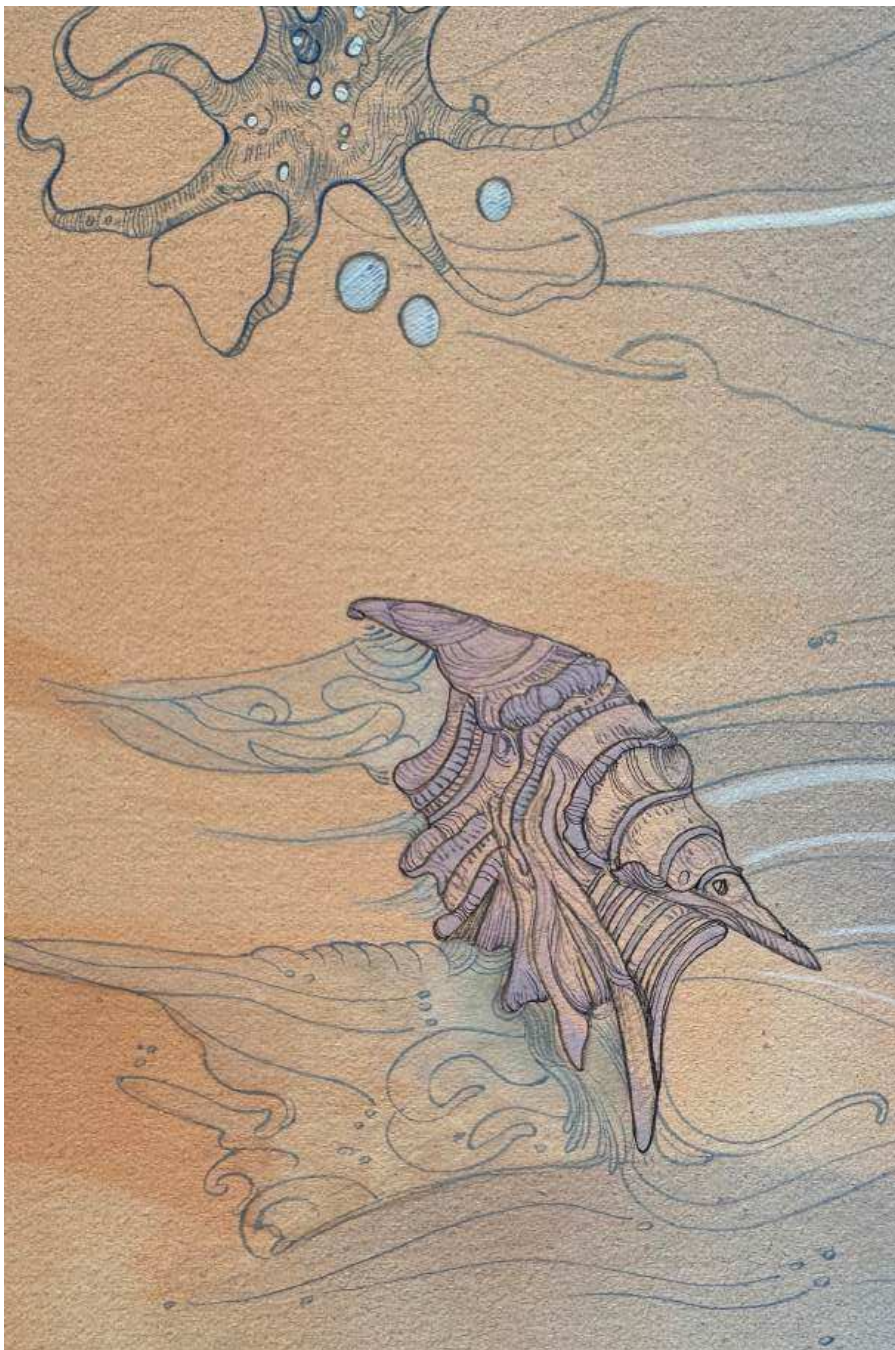
New Rarities:

Tracing Purple Across Time and Place

Cansu Çakar

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Foreword

New Rarities, a miniaturist-inspired painting suspended in the Rotunda at Tate St Ives, poignantly expresses Cansu Çakar's unique artistic process and mode of storytelling. Taking the form of an Archimedean spiral, it 'maps' speculative journeys connecting the Mediterranean and Cornwall, moving fluidly across geographies and time periods.

Its narratives encompass the natural world, neolithic structures, ancient myths, deities and symbols of the cosmos, as well as industries that developed around shipping, trading and mining. The work also touches on a legend, still debated despite a lack of evidence to support it, that the Phoenicians sailed to Cornwall in search of tin. For Çakar, it matters less whether this journey is fact or fiction, more that it exists in the space of our imagination.

Çakar developed her skills in miniaturist painting and the art of illumination (the decoration of manuscripts through the application of gold or silver) as part of her studies at Dokuz Eylül University of Fine Arts in İzmir. Informed by a feminist perspective, she revives and reimagines these traditional art practices in her work, often using them to express contemporary social and political issues relating to capitalist economies, patriarchal structures and stereotypical depictions of cultural identity. Gentle and exquisite as they are in their formal qualities, the narratives within *New Rarities* similarly contain visual 'codes' and references that speak to Çakar's larger interests.

During her residency at Porthmeor Studios in St Ives, Çakar became fascinated by the forms of shells, seeing them as both a 'home and a grave'. For Çakar, these structures called to mind the murex sea snail and the creation of Tyrian purple. Named after the Phoenician city of Tyre, this precious dye was derived from the mucous of these sea snails, thousands of which were needed to produce just one gram of Tyrian purple. The brutal harvesting process involved crushing or cutting into these creatures in order to release the substance, which the Roman architect and engineer Vitruvius described as flowing from the snails like 'tears'.¹

In her text in this edition, Çakar connects the violence of these extractive methods with the scarring effects of the mining of gold, a commodity also associated with wealth, status and power. She reflects on her decision to cease

using gold in her work – despite its importance to the art of illumination – as an act of critique in terms of the connections between such ‘rarities’ and human greed, and the ethics around how value is determined, by whom, and at what cost.

Elements within Çakar’s beautifully illustrated Glossary allude to societal advancement, such as the development of language, creative expression, and belief systems, and the growth of cities, seafaring, trading and mining. Alongside, drawings of trees, mussels and seaweed suggest both the resilience and fragility of nature and its ecosystems. Here, Çakar subtly addresses the notion of ‘progress’ in relation to the labour that supports it, and the at times negative impacts that it can have on humans and the environment. Looking forward, and with the story of Tyrian purple in her mind, Çakar advocates for new ways of thinking in terms of what we prioritise and value in our lives.

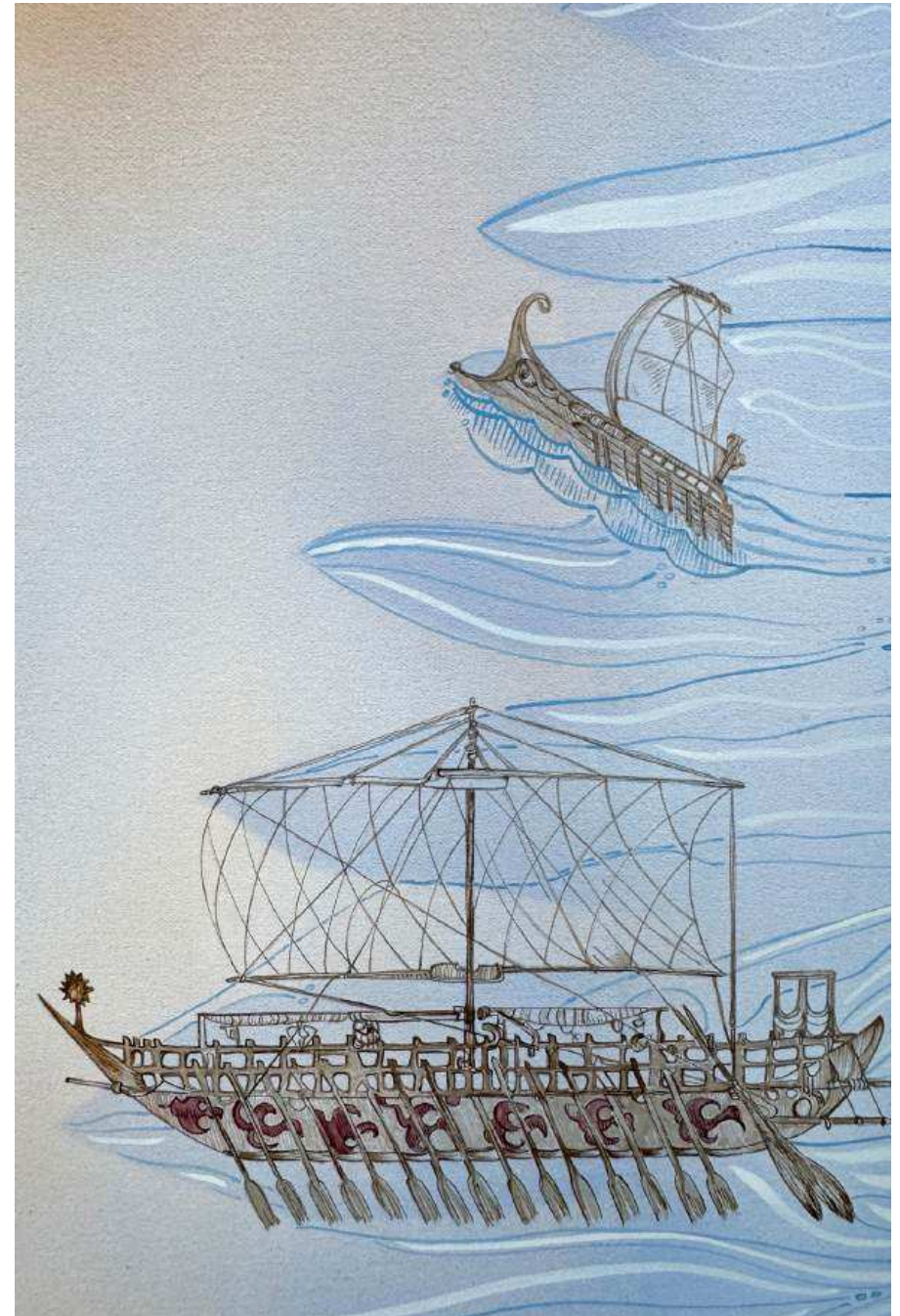
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Cansu Çakar was commissioned to make new work for the Rotunda at Tate St Ives as part of a two-month artist residency supported by SAHA. This residency marks the third and final artist residency of the three-year collaboration with SAHA from 2022–24.

– Anne Barlow, Director, Tate St Ives

Notes

1. Marcus Vitruvius Pollio, *Ten Books on Architecture*, Book VII, Chapter 13





New Rarities: Tracing Purple Across Time and Place

Cansu Çakar

Mount Ida, where legends meet the harsh realities of today, is nestled between the provinces of Çanakkale and Balıkesir in the north of the Edremit Gulf in Anatolia. It has a deep-rooted history intertwined with mythological narratives. Homer, in the *Iliad*, referred to it as the 'mother of wild animals with abundant springs', and it was here that the infamous beauty contest involving Hera, Aphrodite and Athena took place, igniting the Trojan War. Yet, as I stood on its slopes, it wasn't the echoes of these ancient stories that dominated my thoughts, but the scars left by gold mining, which has stripped the mountain of its olive-green splendour. This juxtaposition of myth and modern exploitation sparked a shift in my artistic practice, leading me to abandon gold in my work.

Heraclitus once remarked, 'donkeys prefer straw to gold', a sentiment that echoed in my mind as I held the last bowl of mashed gold in my hands. The value of this precious metal, once revered as a symbol of the sacred, had become tainted by the destructive consequences of human greed. I questioned whether the true value of my art lay in the gold itself or in the message it conveyed. Could I, as an artist using traditional techniques, relinquish this element that had long been associated with power and wealth, and instead highlight what the sacred had become at this uneasy point in history? The answer came in the form of a decision to paint Mount Ida, my last use of gold, as a tribute to its once pristine beauty, now marred by exploitation. And with that, I bid farewell to gold, not out of disdain for its material worth, but as a statement against the hollow pursuit of wealth that it had come to represent.

This decision made me curious to explore alternative materials, seeking new ways to critique representations of power. My journey took an unexpected turn when I found myself in St Ives, gazing at the ocean from Studio 9 at Porthmeor Studios. Clichés of seashells kept recurring in my thoughts, but instead of dismissing them, I found myself drawn to their symbolism. Shells, lonely remnants of life, seemed to embody the justice of the sea. This image took me back to the murex sea snail, the source of the once most precious

colour, Tyrian purple. Also known as imperial purple, it was more valuable than gold in ancient times, produced by the Phoenicians from the murex species of sea snails. This dye was a marker of royalty and power, its rich hue a symbol of wealth and status. The production of Tyrian purple came at a high cost, not just in terms of the vast quantities of snails needed but in the labour and environmental impact it entailed. The irony of extracting beauty through such a destructive process was not lost on me, and I began to see parallels between this ancient practice and the modern exploitation of natural resources. Could my abandonment of gold evolve into yet another abandoning – this time, of this deep purple?

The Phoenicians, who traded Tyrian purple across the Mediterranean, may have even reached Cornwall and the western coasts of Great Britain, where traces of Phoenician purple have been found. This connection between the ancient Mediterranean and Cornwall, though debated by historians, fuelled my imagination. This ambiguity of historical records became a metaphor for our overvaluation of property and commodities over our perception of natural relationships. The archaeological presence of Cornish tin in the Near East suggests a maritime trade route, and whether Cornwall was indeed Ictis – a tin trading island described by the Sicilian-Greek historian Diodorus Siculus – is less important than what this narrative represents.

Could the use of dark red, purple and silver in ancient literature to describe the sky and sea, instead of blue, offer a new way of conceptualising colour? How does one murex sea snail, lonely in its shell – a combination of home and grave – symbolise an empire's justice?

Indeed, it might be more precise to describe it as a 'back-end' story, considering that the famed purple dye was derived from a gland located just behind the rectum of a snail. The secretions of thousands of snails yielded only a few drops of this precious dye. This laborious and malodorous process, which necessitated situating dye vats outside city walls, raises profound questions about the nature of value and rarity. Even the garments dyed with this colour retained a lingering scent of fish and urine.

This narrative of Tyrian purple is not just a historical curiosity; it is a reflection of the ways we continue to exploit labour and natural resources. The history of dyes like Tyrian purple and indigo reminds us of the often-forgotten people and labour behind the products we use every day. In fact, until we value modern miners, farmers and dyers for their workmanship as we value fine artists for their art, this cycle will persist. In ancient times, Tyrian purple was not just a symbol of wealth and power but also of imperial authority, reinforcing hierarchies and power structures. Today, these symbols resonate in the

dynamics of global capitalism and neo-colonial practices, where rarity is often manufactured or exploited to sustain economic inequalities.

If wealth and consumption define worth, how do humans prioritise the planet over profit? How does a reimagined world look where resources are respected and shared fairly?

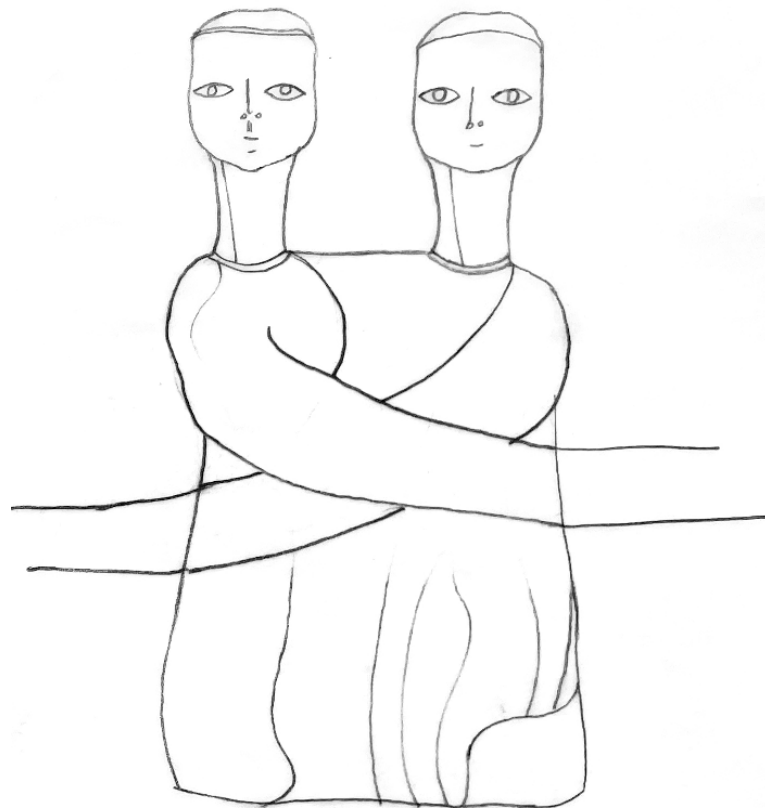
My installation at Tate St Ives reexamines concepts of value, rarity and cultural heritage by speculatively tracing ancient trade routes. Following the historical narrative of Tyrian purple, I delve into its role in shaping cultural narratives throughout antiquity.

My work is mainly inspired by traditional miniaturist painting, a practice that often focuses on precious materials like gold to represent the sacred. Does rarity alone define value, or could our truest values lie within our connection to the Earth?

A long paper roll, suspended from the ceiling in the shape of an Archimedean spiral resembling a seashell, invites a person to step inside and immerse themselves in an unfolding visual narrative: a Phoenician sea route from the port of Tyre to various Phoenician settlements and concluding in Cornwall. Illustrated with motifs from various mythologies and legends, it is a visual exploration of physical and metaphorical paths. Each port along the route is represented by specific artistic styles or artefacts, symbolising cultural interactions and influence across the Mediterranean and beyond.

Through this synthesis of historical symbols and mythological themes, the artwork creates a tapestry of cultural narratives that transcend time and space. It brings the ancient world into dialogue with contemporary imagination.



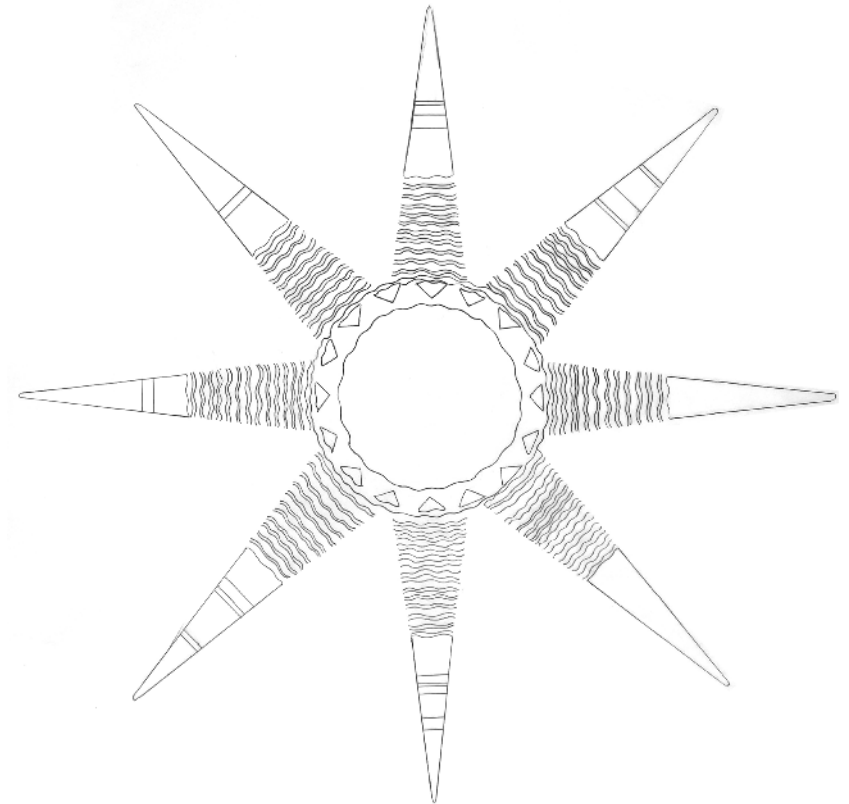


Ain Ghazal

This timeless witness from around 8,000 BCE, cradled in the sands of Jordan, from the ancient hands that carved in stone and clay, reflects the advanced artistic and cultural practices of its people, who were among the first to transition from nomadic lifestyles to settled communities.

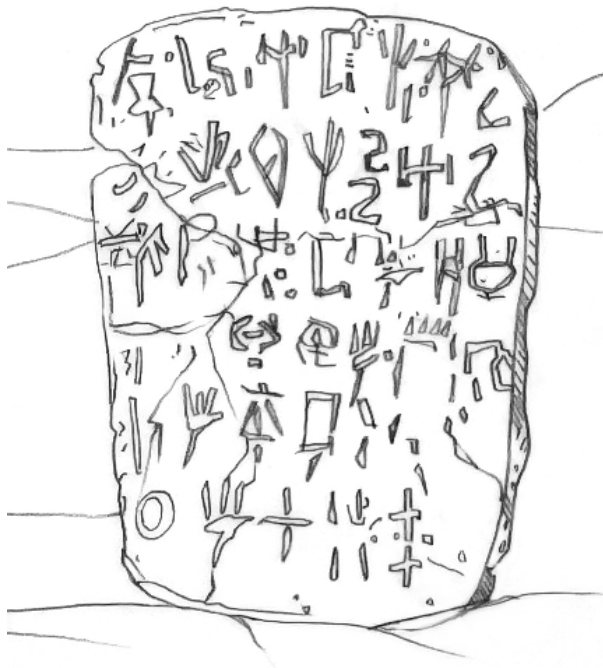
The Ghassulian Star

Carved in stone and clay around 4,000 BCE, the Ghassulian Star represents the profound cosmic cycles of life and death, embodying the perpetual rhythms of the sun, the moon, and the seasons. Located in the Jordan Valley, the star offers a glimpse into the spiritual and cultural depth of an early Chalcolithic society, illustrating their transition from a rudimentary agricultural culture to one built on a sophisticated network of societal and religious beliefs.



Phoenician Inscription

Carved around 1,000 BCE, this tablet showcases one of the first alphabets ever created. With its 22 consonant characters, the Phoenician script didn't just streamline trade communication – it helped spread the Phoenicians' influence across the Mediterranean, one cleverly inscribed stone at a time.



Standing Stones

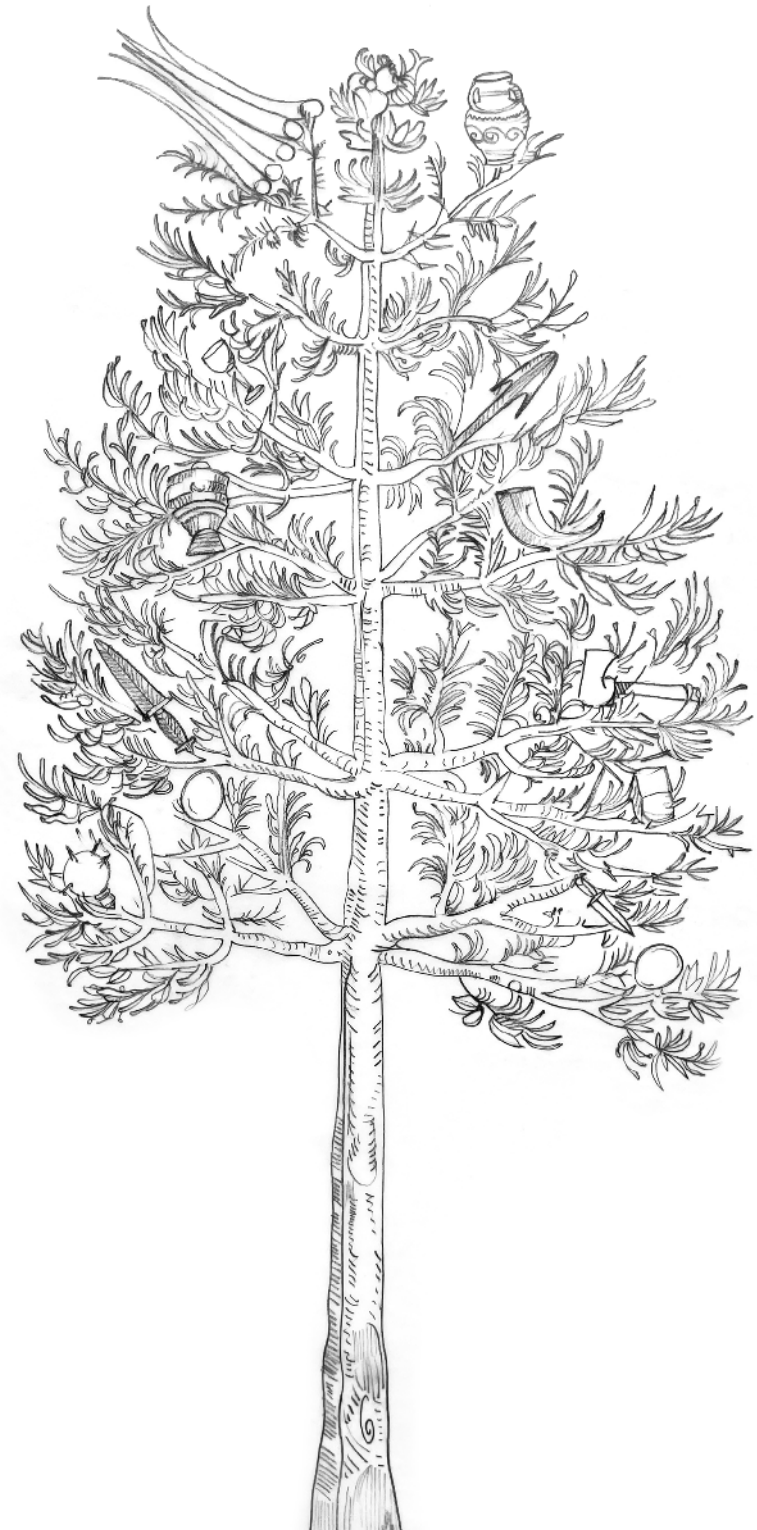
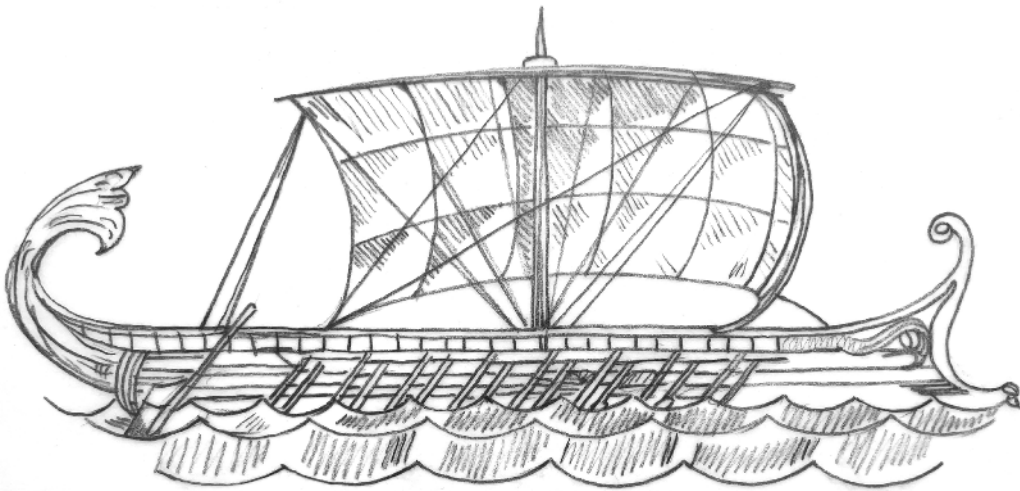
Standing stones are silent witnesses from the Neolithic era, marking the landscapes of Cornwall and beyond with their timeless presence. These stones, some over 4,000 years old, were likely set up for rituals or as cosmic indicators. Today, they stand as enigmatic relics, revealing glimpses into ancient practices and the mysterious allure of a bygone era.

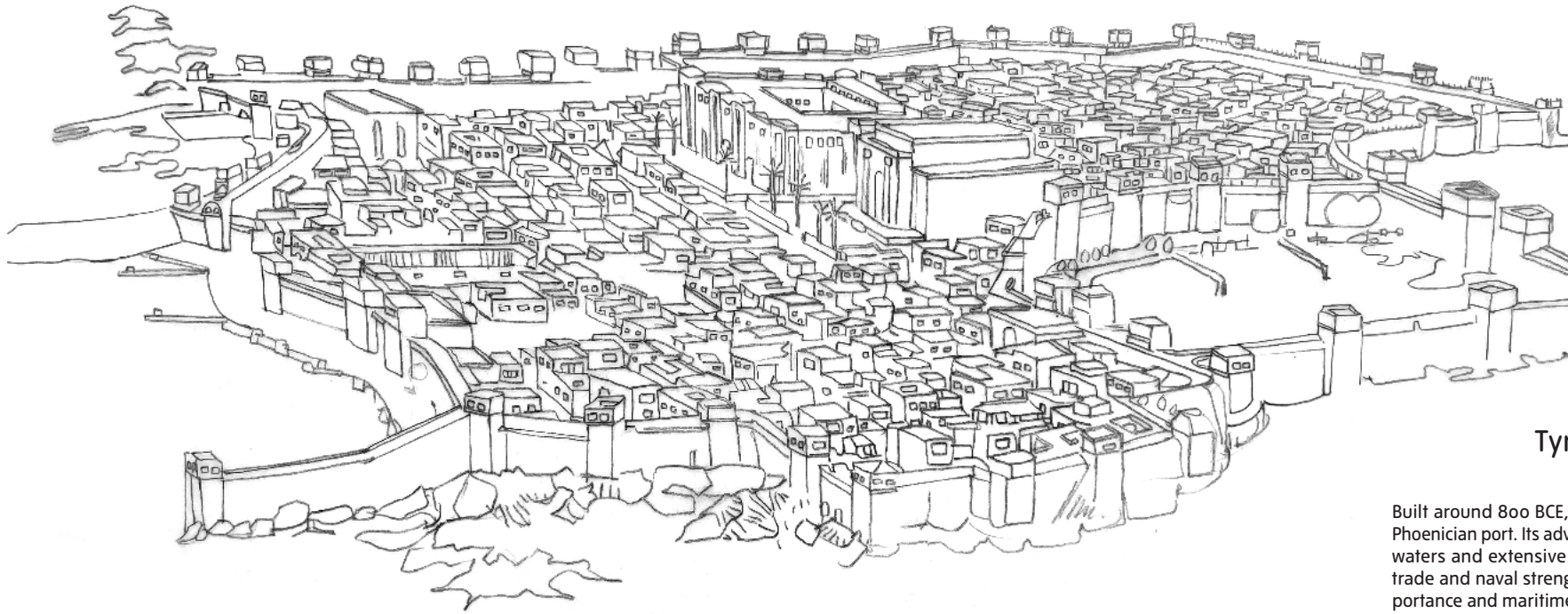
Uluburun Shipwreck

Seductive as ancient tales, the cedar tree stood as the 'golden timber' of the ancients, its wood prized for its durability, strength and rich, aromatic scent. Phoenician ships were crafted from cedar, providing longevity essential for their legendary maritime dominance. Discovered off Turkey's coast, the Uluburun shipwreck reveals a trove of ancient treasures: copper ingots, Canaanite jars, ivory tusks, and glass beads. This Phoenician vessel's cargo reflects a rich tapestry of trade and cultural exchange in the Bronze Age, offering a glimpse into the sophisticated maritime networks of the time.

Phoenician Ships

Marvels of ancient naval engineering, their sleek biremes, with twin rows of oars, were designed for speed and agility, while their robust merchant vessels were built for durability and cargo capacity. Each ship served as a symbol of Phoenician innovation, shaping Mediterranean trade and exploration.



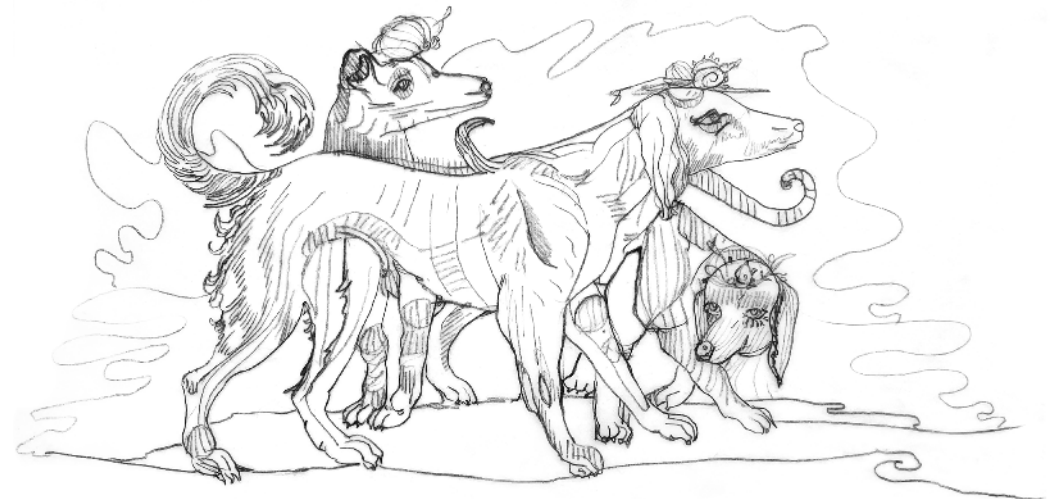


Tyre Harbour

Built around 800 BCE, the harbour at Tyre was a pivotal Phoenician port. Its advanced design, with protective breakwaters and extensive docks, was key to Mediterranean trade and naval strength, showcasing Tyre's strategic importance and maritime innovation.

Heracles's Dog

Roman mythographer Julius Pollux (2nd century AD) claims it wasn't Heracles of Tyre who discovered the purple dye that symbolised authority and luxury in ancient times, but rather his dog, whose mouth turned purple after chewing on snails along the shore. This simple act unearthed Tyrian purple, a colour that would go on to define the garments of emperors, linking nature's secret to the heights of power. Later, Rubens reimagined this tale, connecting it to the wealth the Habsburgs gained from conquering Peru, with Heracles morphing into Hercules.



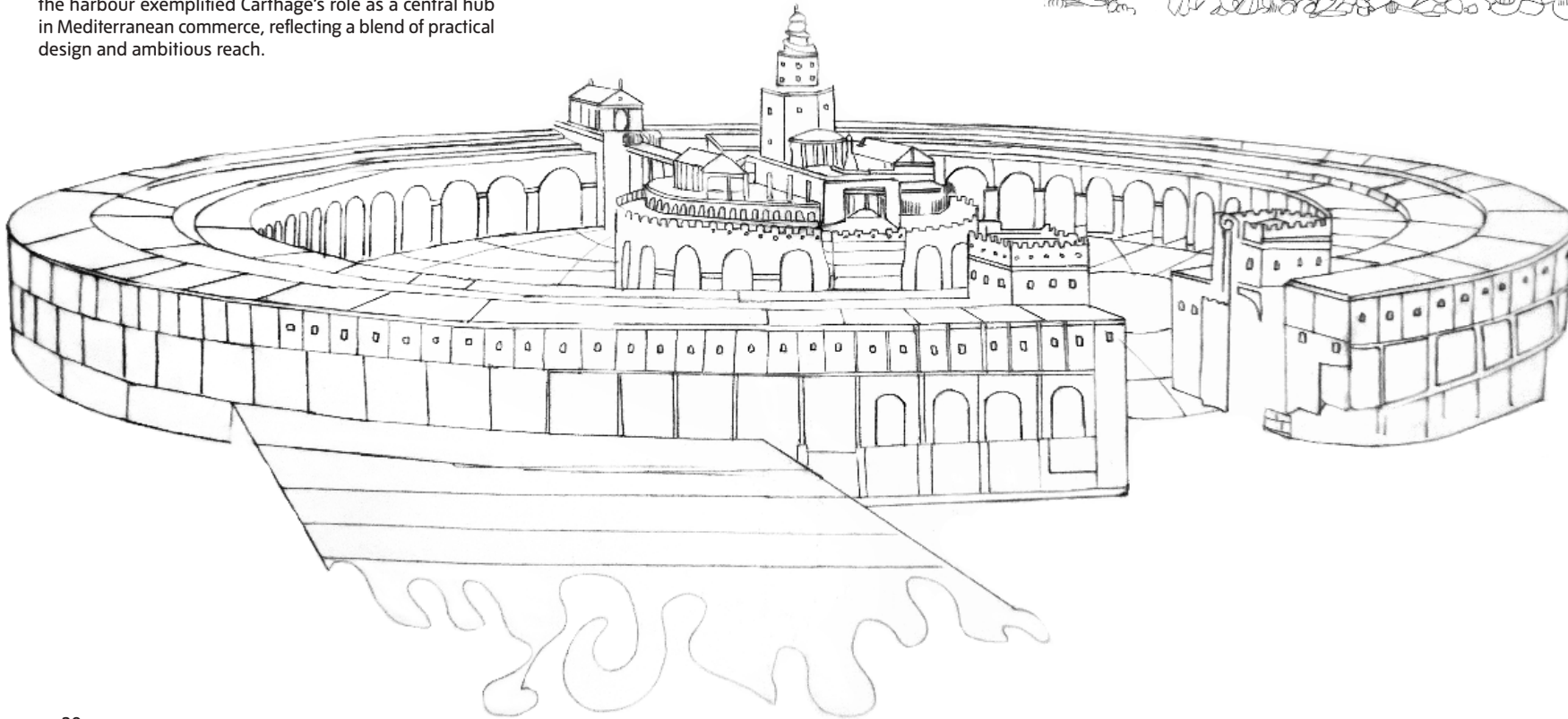
Barbary Lions and Argan Trees

Along the North African coast, where the land meets the sea in a delicate balance, lies a unique ecosystem teeming with life found nowhere else. The rare Barbary lion, once a proud symbol of these lands, has now vanished, but its legacy remains in the rugged terrain. The argan trees, native only to this region, bear fruit that sustains both wildlife and local communities, their roots digging deep into the arid soil. Here, nature's resilience is evident in every branch and hoof, crafting a story of survival and adaptation that is as ancient as the land itself.



Carthage Punic Port

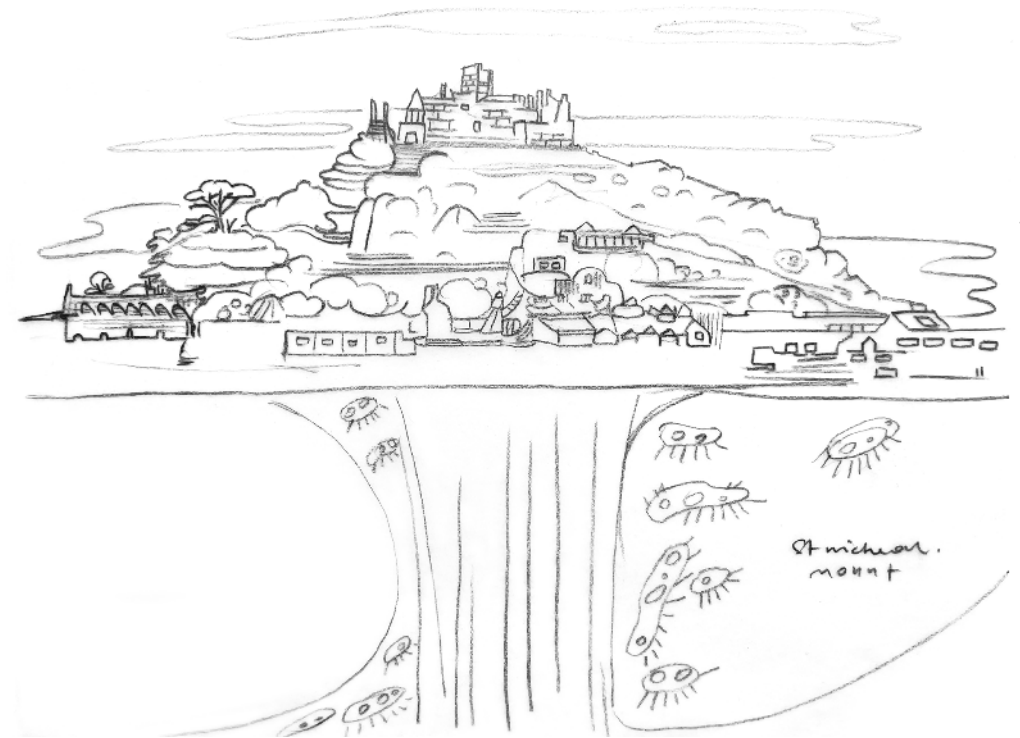
This harbour at Carthage, constructed around the same time as that of Tyre, was a cornerstone of Phoenician maritime prowess. Its meticulously designed structures facilitated extensive trade and naval dominance. Situated in modern-day Tunisia, at a crossroads of ancient sea routes, the harbour exemplified Carthage's role as a central hub in Mediterranean commerce, reflecting a blend of practical design and ambitious reach.





St Michael's Mount

In prehistoric times, St Michael's Mount may have served as a port for the tin trade. Some historians have argued that it could be identified with the ancient 'tin port' Ictis/Ictin mentioned by Posidonius, highlighting its historical significance as a key maritime trading hub.

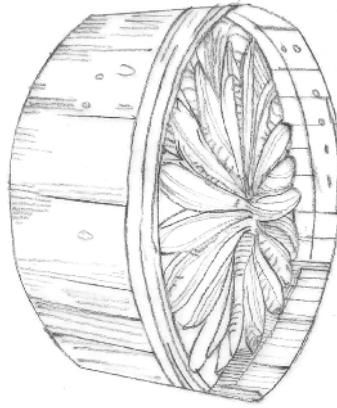


Mining

The pursuit of the Earth's hidden riches often leads us to unearth not just precious metals but also the deep scars we inflict upon our world. In our quest for gleaming treasures, we may find ourselves left with a landscape marred by our own avarice.

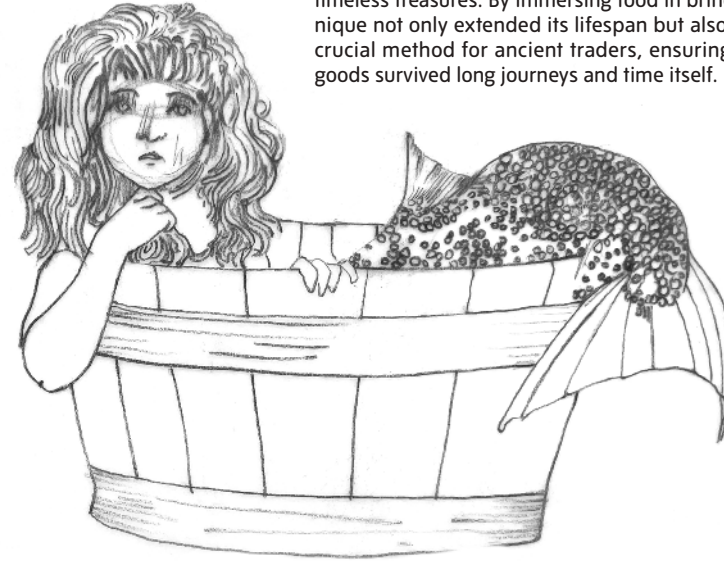
Atargatis

A revered deity of ancient Mesopotamia and Phoenicia, deeply entwined with symbolism of the sea and fertility. Her half-human, half-fish form reflects the ancient tale recounted by Diodorus Siculus, citing Ctesius of Cnidus. According to legend, the goddess Atargatis, or Derceto, fell in love with a youth, Simios, also known as Ichthys or 'fish'. Out of shame for this forbidden love, she cast herself into a lake near Ashkelon, transforming into a fish while retaining her human head. Her daughter from this union, abandoned to the desert, was raised by doves and grew into Semiramis, the legendary Assyrian queen. Atargatis, thus, embodies not only the divine guardianship of the seas but also poignant stories of transformation and legacy that ripple through ancient mythologies.



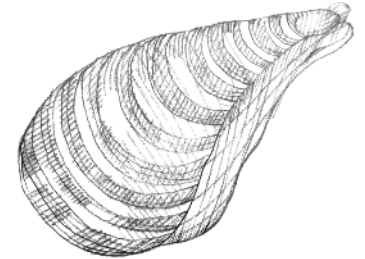
Salting

This ancient art of preservation turned perishables into timeless treasures. By immersing food in brine, this technique not only extended its lifespan but also became a crucial method for ancient traders, ensuring that their goods survived long journeys and time itself.



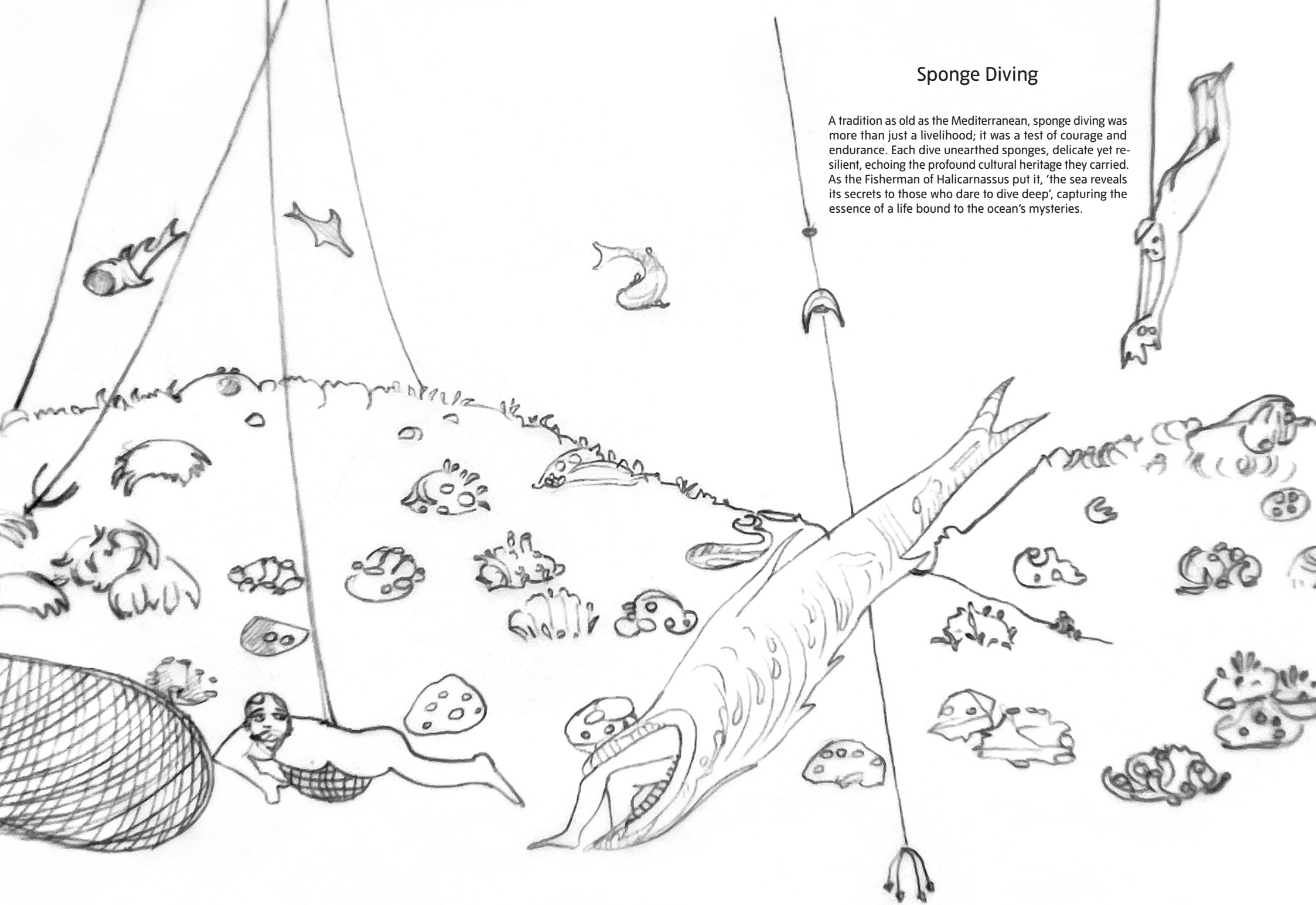
Mussels and Seaweed

Mussels: nature's filtration system, purifying the water while offering sanctuary to a bustling community. Seaweed: a generous provider, offering sustenance and shelter, enriching the environment with life-giving oxygen. Together, they weave a delicate tapestry of interdependence, proving that even the smallest players can have a profound impact on the grand scheme of life. Just as mussels find strength in their clustered formations, communities maintain their distinct cultural identities amidst larger societal currents. Meanwhile, seaweed, flourishing in the ebb and flow of underwater currents, represents the adaptability and vital role of marginalised communities, harmonising with the ever-changing rhythms of surrounding environments.



Sponge Diving

A tradition as old as the Mediterranean, sponge diving was more than just a livelihood; it was a test of courage and endurance. Each dive unearthed sponges, delicate yet resilient, echoing the profound cultural heritage they carried. As the Fisherman of Halicarnassus put it, 'the sea reveals its secrets to those who dare to dive deep', capturing the essence of a life bound to the ocean's mysteries.



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Tate St Ives
From 19 October 2024

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Cansu Çakar (b. 1988, İstanbul, Turkey) is based in İzmir.
Her projects and exhibitions include *NATURE AND STATE*,
Staatliche Kunsthalle Baden-Baden (Baden-Baden, 2022);
Fore-Edge Painting, MACRO – Museo d'Arte Contemporanea
di Roma and Bibliotheca Hertziana Bibliotheca Hertziana
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