

THE VALUE OF SPONGES FOR ANCIENT HUMAN COMMUNITIES



FIGURES 1 AND 2. Aegean sponges in the market of Kalymnos Island. September 2005 (photos by Eleni Voultziadou).

Sponges, also called Porifera (from *poros*=passage and *fero*=to bear), are ancient multicellular animals being among the most ecologically highly successful life forms that have ever existed. History shows some members of this group have attracted human attention very early, due to their spongy nature and their capacity to keep great quantities of water in their canals and expel it when compressed. A detailed research of sponge knowledge in Greek antiquity showed that ancient Greeks not only knew that sponges were animals (most of the biological information on sponges was given by Aristotle in his zoological works), but also they widely exploited them.

The sponge *spongos* or *spongia* in antiquity was definitely a member of the order Dictyoceratida, which currently includes the commercial bath sponges. Sponge gathering was a common activity in ancient coastal Greek communities carried out by highly qualified divers.

Besides having been used for household and personal hygiene purposes, sponges seem to have played a principal role in the medical practice in ancient Greece. The first works on medicine are those by Hippocrates, in which sponges appear as a basic tool in the treatment of various health problems and diseases. Sponges applied to the human body brought relief and therapy. Thus,

squeezed out of hot water or soaked in honey they were put on various parts of the head to stop the pain, inside the ears for the treatment of otorrhoea, or in the mouth to cure tongue or palate inflammations and swellings. A nose polypus was once removed with a small sponge twisted to have a spiral shape, driven inside the nostril and pulled out from the mouth. Sponges were also used for cleansing and drying sores before applying the proper medicine or before applying a bandage on a wound. Soaked in oil they were applied to sear sores or scars after performing an operation.

The treatment of various diseases of the digestive system such as haemorrhoids, anorectal fistulae, rectal procidentia, as well as clyster therapy involved sponges used in different ways. They were also very useful in gynaecological diseases and conditions, from simple cases of restraining intense blood flow and cleaning the genitals to more complicated cases, such as the treatment of uterine prolapse or when a woman carried a dead fetus.



FIGURES 4 AND 5. The high quality sponge *Spongia officinalis* used for cleansing and medical purposes in the time of Hippocrates and Aristotle. Crete Island, 15–20 m. July 2006 (photos by Thanos Dailianis).

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Drugs produced from toasted and then ground sponge tissue mixed with seaweeds, seal fat or wine are mentioned for their therapeutic properties in the Hippocratic medicine: they were taken as drinks or used to fumigate the genitals in certain gynaecological conditions.

Besides medicine and cleansing however, sponges were used by the ancient Greeks for shoe polishing, noise absorption, prevention of heat-stroke (on the head before exposure to the sun), in military enterprises either to protect various war machines from catching alight or for lining helmets for protection by deadening the noise of blows on them. They were also valuable in gold mining and in painting both as painting tools and as artistic objects.

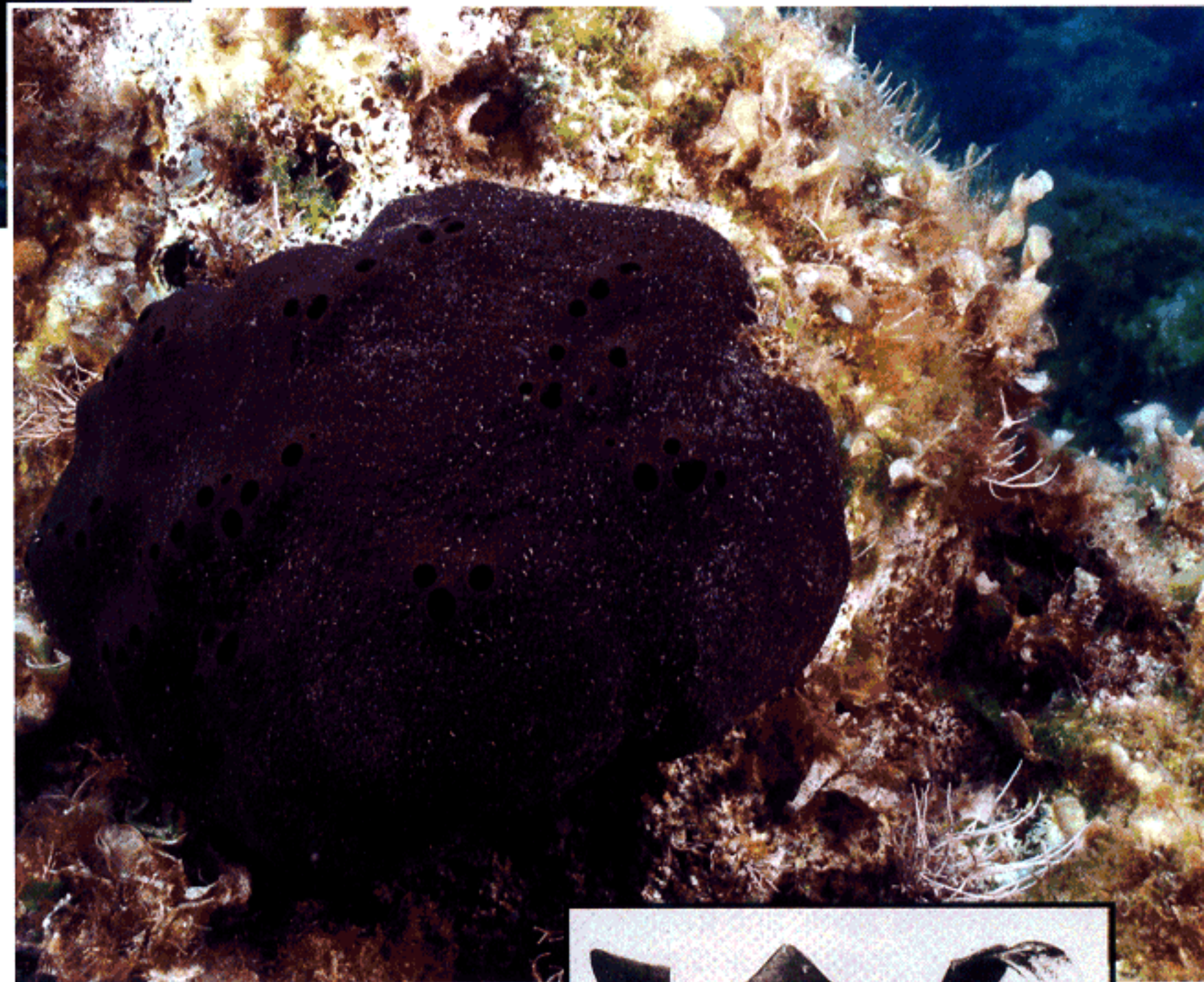


FIGURE 3. Cup with sponge decoration, 1500 BC, found during excavations in Knossos, Crete Island. The series of white imprints on the black ground was evidently made by a small sponge on the end of a stick (from Evans, 1930. *The Palace of Minos at Knossos*, London: Macmillan).

FIGURE 6. The Aegean coastal waters where sponges are collected and have been exploited since antiquity. September 2005 (photo by Eleni Voultsiadou).