

## Athena and Phrontis at Ancient Sounion

In the *Odyssey* (3.278-285) just as Menelaus' ship rounds Cape Sounion, Apollo killed the helmsman Phrontis, the knowing one, better than anyone else at guiding a ship through storms. Menelaus went ashore at *Sounion ieron* to give Phrontis a proper burial, and then resumed his journey, now blown off course by Zeus. This episode has encouraged scholars to assume that a hero cult already existed at Sounion in the late eighth century B.C.E. and also to identify an *heroon* among the surviving monuments. Votives from both the Athena and Poseidon sanctuaries at Sounion include late Geometric objects, some of which suggest an early hero cult, but no inscribed dedications to Phrontis have been found. Minature shields and female protomes have been connected with early worship of Athena. The Athena precinct is considerably earlier than the one for Poseidon. At its north end, an oval structure dated at least to the eighth century B.C.E. was later embraced by a precinct wall constructed in the Classical period. This monument, encircled by stones, has been tentatively identified as a hero shrine for Phrontis, but so has the small classical building just north of the Athena temple. The oval structure would have been the only built feature contemporary with Homer, along with a fourteen-meter deep votive pit on the east side of the site. It is possible that the helmsman/hero Phrontis was associated with an early manifestation of Athena at this precinct. More evidence for Phrontis' connection with Athena at Sounion may be revealed by some of her Homeric disguises. As Mentēs (one who stirs up and reminds) in the *Odyssey* she encouraged Telemachos to grow up. And appearing as Mentor, an old family friend charged with taking care of Odysseus' family, Athena urged Telemachos to focus on a plan of action against the suitors installed at his father's house. Cults of Poseidon and Athena both dominated Sounion, one god embodying the power of the winds and

seas, the other controlling these dangerous powers with *metis*, ships, and skill. Even in the eighth century B.C.E., Athena's presence as a civilizing monitor of the elements made Sounion, and perhaps her sanctuary, an appropriate site for the heroon of the helmsman Phrontis.