

INTRODUCTION

The Sponges Conference that we organised in Hydra, Greece, in May 2018, was a continuation of eight years of successful animal conferences at SOAS, covering a variety of themes. Donkeys, and Mules, and Camels, and Elephants, and War Horses...¹

In tackling sponges, we were taking a sideways step, away from quadrupeds. Our **Hydra Sponges Conference** was a natural follow-up to our earlier conferences, since SOAS already has a working relationship with Hydra (mule and donkey conferences, and a series of music conferences). Our initial aim in establishing the sponges conference was to address the working lives of the people of the Greek islands, and also to address social, historical and ecological matters related to the Mediterranean. But sponges and their associated industries are an international phenomenon, so it came as no surprise to find that we also had contributors from the Far East and the USA.

All the conference proceedings were filmed and audio-recorded and have been posted on our conference website.² But in our view there is nothing better than a printed book. So, with the collaboration of our sponge researcher colleagues, we have gathered the conference papers into the volume that you have in your hands. We have added additional material from the conference, notably the contributions of Hydra residents Kostas Argitis, Yiannis Karamitsos and Manolis Tsakiris; of our *Karaghiozis* (shadow theatre) player Jason Melissinos; and of Spiros Ampelas, who has given us permission to publish extracts from his uncle's sponge-fishing memoir from 1903.

Our next conference on sponges will be held in Tunisia in 2020. You are invited to join us. If you would like to present a paper, please write and inform us.

We are further pleased to announce that June 2018 saw the founding meeting of the **Interdisciplinary Animal Studies Initiative @ SOAS**. This project has unofficial support from the Department of History, Religions, and Philosophies at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, and we are seeking to place it on a firmer institutional basis. The meeting opened the way to a consolidation of our work for the years to come. The plan is to create an organisational hub – “Animal Studies @ SOAS” – able to service an international cross-disciplinary network of colleagues working in the field of Animal Studies.

For details regarding future conferences, write to ed.emery@soas.ac.uk

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[Conference chair]

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1. SOAS Interdisciplinary Animal Studies conferences:
<https://www.soas.ac.uk/history/conferences/>

2. 2018 Hydra Sponges Conference:
<http://www.geocities.ws/soasspongesconference2018/>



Figure: Dimitrios Harissiadis, *Departure of sponge fishing boat from Kalymnos*, 1950 [Source: Benaki Museum]