A World Without Years

Mission Designation: OPV-Aletheia / Survey A-50217
Vessel: DSV *Aerlon* (Deep Survey Vehicle, Long-Range)
Platform: Observation Platform *Aletheia* (deployed in high orbit)
Crew Complement: 14 (rotating)
Mission Duration: 161 days (Earth standard)
System: Binary K-class / M-class, undesignated
Subject: Circumbinary planet, inhabited, pre-industrial civilisation
Purpose: Observation, documentation, and cultural assessment
Classification: General release, pending review

Summary

This document constitutes the final mission report for Survey A-50217, compiled from observational data, crew logs, and translated field interviews conducted during a 161-day deployment to an inhabited circumbinary world. The report documents the civilisation's relationship to time in the absence of stable periodic cycles, and the subsequent effects on crew perception and behaviour.

Findings are presented in narrative form at the recommendation of the mission psychologist, who noted that standard reporting formats failed to convey the phenomenological dimensions of the observations.

From a distance, the system appears cooperative.

Two suns dominate the inner region: a hot white primary and a smaller red-gold companion. Their shared centre of mass traces a stable, calculable dance, and the planet moves around them in a wide figure-of-eight trajectory, looping one star, then the other, never quite retracing its path. The mathematics is elegant. Simulations converge. Nothing about the system suggests danger.

Binary systems are rare, but not unknown. This one does not look hostile.

Only later does it become clear that stability is not the same as repetition.

As Observation Platform *Aletheia* settles into long-term orbit, the crew begin to notice that the suns do not behave like a pair. They behave like rivals. Sometimes the white star dominates, bleaching the land below and carving the surface into hard contrast. Evaporation accelerates. Thermal gradients steepen. At other times the red-gold star rules alone, softening edges, deepening colour, slowing the pace of surface change. Oceans steam gently rather than boil. Clouds linger.

Crucially, dominance does not alternate cleanly.

Sometimes one star holds the sky for extended intervals. Sometimes both share it. Sometimes neither commands the heavens at all, and the planet rests in a prolonged amber half-light that resists classification as day or night. The variability is noted, modelled, and filed away.

No one is particularly concerned.

Time, after all, is assumed.

Crew Log
Mission Elapsed Time: 0 days

Two suns, but they don't behave like a pair.
They behave like rivals who take turns rewriting the sky.

Closer observation reveals two moons. One is small, bright, and fast, its orbit visibly precessing even over short windows. It casts sharp, restless shadows and produces frequent but shallow tides. The other is massive, distant, and slow. Its presence is felt more than seen. When it moves, oceans respond. Crustal stresses accumulate. Fault lines awaken.

Their periods refuse to resolve into a neat ratio. Alignments recur, but never precisely. Each convergence resembles the last without ever matching it. At first this is treated as a nuisance for modelling.

Only later does the crew understand that the moons are the only reason the inhabitants below possess anything resembling a shared past.

The first hint of unease arrives quietly.

After several planetary rotations—if that is the right word—the crew begin to disagree about whether a "day" has actually ended. Illumination does not correlate cleanly with orbital position.

Shadows do not behave. Night does not arrive decisively. Circadian lighting aboard the platform compensates, but only partially.

Nothing feels wrong.

Yet nothing lines up.

Crew Log
Mission Elapsed Time: 4 days, 11 hours

We began with clocks.
That felt reasonable.

The first surface landing occurs during a prolonged interval when neither sun commands the sky. From the ground, light has no clear direction. Shadows exist, but refuse to point anywhere useful. The air is warm, cooling unevenly, as if the land itself cannot agree that illumination has ended.

The inhabitants are already there.

They are not assembled. They are not signalling. They are simply present, watching without visible surprise. Later translation suggests the arrival had been anticipated *since the last long thinning of light after the western waters withdrew*. At the time, this is logged as poetic phrasing.

Only later is it understood as a timestamp.

When asked how they know when a day ends, the inhabitants hesitate—not because the question is difficult, but because it seems oddly framed.

Eventually, one answers: a turning ends when the ground finishes cooling.

The crew assume this refers to nightfall.

It does not.

Thermal sensors confirm what the inhabitants already know. Heat lingers unpredictably, trapped in stone, soil, and shallow seas. Some regions remain warm long after both suns have sunk low. Others cool abruptly. The inhabitants wait. Only when the last stored warmth drains away do certain activities begin—food preparation that requires stable cooling, communal gatherings, the telling of long stories.

A turning is not an interval.

It is a completed process.

As human routines begin to fray—sleep cycles drifting, schedules slipping—a more formal interview is conducted during a lean-light interval along the coast. Questions are asked slowly, with long pauses, to avoid imposing assumptions that are no longer trusted.

Interview Transcript
Lean-Light Interval, Coastal Settlement 3

The observer asks whether they have days.

The reply comes after a pause.

We have turnings.

Is that the same thing?

No. A turning ends when the ground forgets the suns. Sometimes this takes longer. Sometimes less. If the stone still remembers, the turning is not complete.

Is a turning always the same length?

The alien shows visible confusion.

Why would it be?

Do they have dates? Specific points—the third day of something?

We have marks.

The sea reached here.
The cliffs broke there.
The long shadow crossed twice before the tide returned.

The alien gestures toward a scar etched into coastal rock.

That mark is still here. Why would we replace it with a number?

Months? Based on the moons?

Which moon?

Years?

No.

Nothing like a repeating long cycle?

The sky does not repeat. Sometimes the elder sun burns the land. Sometimes the younger one softens it. Sometimes neither rules and the air grows thin. If this is a year, it does not come back the same.

Seasons?

No. Growth follows floods. Rest follows exhaustion. Both arrive when they arrive. We listen.

How do they know how old someone is?

Old compared to what?

Compared to when they were born.

They were born after the Second Great Tide. Before the last long crossing. After the ground broke near the southern flats. This is sufficient.

How do they plan for the future?

We prepare for conditions, not distances.

Distances?

The number of turnings you seem to care about.

Do they think about time the way humans do?

You carry time with you.
We watch it happen.

What is time, to them?

There is a long pause.

Time is the part of the world that does not heal.

After the interview, no one speaks for a while.

Crew Log
Mission Elapsed Time: 19 days

We've stopped agreeing on when to sleep.
Someone said they feel "awake inside a sunset."
A biologist asked if it's still the same week.
No one answered.

Attempts to define a year fail entirely. The planet's orbit never returns it to the same physical configuration. Weather erupts without seasonal precedent. Growth accelerates, then stalls. The inhabitants do not ask when conditions will change. They ask which sky is coming.

When the moons finally align, the ocean surges inland violently. Shorelines redraw themselves in hours. Salt plains flood. Channels carve new paths through old ground. From orbit, the destruction is unmistakable.

On the surface, it is met without panic. Structures are dismantled and moved inland as if rehearsed. They expected this.

When asked how long it has been since the last such convergence, the reply is simple.

Since the western stones failed to dry.

The logs say seventeen Earth days.

It does not feel like that long.

History, the crew realises, is not stored in numbers here. It is stored in damage. In coastlines that never retreat. In stone that does not forget.

Human friction follows.

Crew Log
Mission Elapsed Time: 46 days

Two engineers argued we were "behind."
Behind what?
No one could say.

A clock is introduced—visual, audible, carefully explained. Seconds. Minutes. Hours. The inhabitants listen politely. After several ticks, one asks what the ticking changes.

It marks passage, the crew explain.

They wait.

Nothing has passed.

The clock is returned.

Crew Log
Mission Elapsed Time: 94 days

Time feels thinner here.
Not slower. Not faster.
Less substantial.
Moments smear instead of stacking.

During a prolonged lean-light phase coinciding with a partial dual eclipse, the planet dims for eleven measured Earth hours. Below, the inhabitants gather silently. No celebration. No fear.

One anthropologist whispers, without thinking:

They're not waiting for it to end.
They're letting it finish.

By the time Earth-standard timekeeping is formally abandoned, the decision feels inevitable. Logs shift to environmental states: sun dominance, moon alignment, thermal phase, tidal stress.

Morale improves. Arguments fade. Tasks occur when conditions are right. Sleep comes when it comes.

Final Crew Log

I don't know what time it is anymore.
But I know exactly what's happening.

The crew did not lose track of time.

They lost the assumption that time must be carried independently of the world.

On this planet, time is not a backdrop.
It is not a line.
It is not a resource.

It is the accumulation of irreversible change.

The world changes again.

Everyone knows it.

Return

The transition back to Earth is supposed to feel familiar.

Mission clocks resume their authority. Day and night alternate cleanly. Seasons behave. The sun rises where it is expected to rise, sets where it always has. Schedules slot back into place with comforting precision.

At first, this feels like relief.

Then it begins to feel strange.

We realised that what we had been calling ‘time’ was not something the planet possessed, but something our instruments had been supplying.

Several crew members report an unexpected disorientation during the first weeks back. Not jet lag. Not fatigue. Something subtler. The days arrive too neatly. Endings feel premature. Events conclude before anything meaningful has finished happening.

One navigator writes that Earth time feels thin in a different way—oversegmented, overcounted.

"Everything ends on schedule now, whether it's done or not."

The mission psychologists note a pattern. Crew members no longer ask how long something will take. They ask what needs to change for it to be complete. Meetings stretch when they matter and end early when they do not. Meals are taken when hunger arrives, not when clocks insist. Sleep comes unevenly, but deeply.

Calendars begin to feel decorative.

During a final debrief, someone asks the question that would once have seemed trivial:

What did you learn about time?

There is a long pause.

Eventually, one of the anthropologists answers—slowly, choosing each word with care.

Time was never the thing we were measuring.

It was what appeared when the world failed to return to what it was before.

On Earth, change is gentle. Cycles repeat. Damage is repaired. The world forgets easily. Clocks are necessary here because the environment does not insist on memory.

On that planet, the world remembered for them.

Time did not flow there.

It accumulated.

The crew did not return having discovered a new unit of time, or a better clock, or a superior calendar.

They returned having lost the belief that time exists independently of change.

Time, they realised, is not a background against which events unfold.

It is the trace events leave behind when they cannot be undone.

And once that is understood, it is impossible to look at a clock in quite the same way again.

End of Report

Filed by: Dr. E. Okonkwo, Mission Lead (Xenology)
Reviewed by: Mission Psychology Division
Status: Complete
Recommendation: No follow-up survey advised. Findings are observational. Subject civilisation remains undisturbed.

Addendum: Three crew members have requested reassignment to long-duration postings. Two have declined to wear timepieces since returning. One has submitted a formal request that future mission reports include state-based timestamps alongside Earth-standard notation.

These requests are under review.