Marzamemi Maritime Heritage Project 2014

Conducted as a partnership between Stanford University and the Soprintendenza del Mare - Regione Siciliana, the Marzamemi Maritime Heritage Project combines excavation, survey, and heritage management of the maritime landscape and seaborne communication off southeast Sicily. The concentration of accessible sites and their location at the intersection of the eastern and western Mediterranean facilitates inquiry into long-term structures of regional and interregional maritime exchange from the early Roman era (3rd/2nd c. BC) through Late Antiquity (6th/7th c. AD).

Beginning in 2013 and continuing through the 2014 season, efforts have focused on survey and excavation of the famous Marzamemi II "church wreck", a site discovered and initially investigated primarily through the pioneering efforts of Gerhard Kapitän in the 1960s. This vessel sank while carrying prefabricated architectural elements most likely for the construction or renovation of an early Byzantine church during the 6th c. AD. Beyond its marble, the ship's additional cargo, personal items, and hull remains can offer unique insight into the mechanisms behind such ambitious ventures, including the roles of high commerce, mundane exchange, local patronage, and even imperial ideology in tying together the Mediterranean during this final twilight of ancient maritime connectivity. Equally important to this excavation, the project revisits earlier unpublished work and situates maritime archaeology within a broader dialog on responsible collaborative natural and cultural heritage practices.

2014 Field Season

June and July 2014 saw the second field season on the Marzamemi wreck. Situated at only 7 m in and around a sandy depression within the reef, the site presents a dense cluster of architectural materials and other finds along with a peripheral scatter extending over an area of about 65 m in length (Fig. 1). Following a successful first season of surface survey and mapping in 2013, we initiated excavation in a more promising area over the course of six weeks during June and July 2014.
The dynamic nature of the site is immediately apparent, and sand has shifted regularly over the centuries—and even between seasons—to expose and cover archaeological material. Aside from environmental disturbance, the site is also subject to illicit intervention by looters, with various materials having been recovered by local authorities or discovered at some distance from the site. The immediate and systematic documentation of these remains is therefore of paramount importance for the long-term survival of the site for all parties. Excavation over four 4 × 4-m units sought to explore a particularly promising area of deeper sand that offered a higher chance of preservation. To date, all mapping and recording were utilized both well-tested direct survey measurement as well as more advanced photogrammetry including Photoscan, which allowed the creation of a three-dimensional plan of the site and complex surrounding topography. Similar approaches were utilized to create rapid 3d models of each excavation unit at routine intervals as an easy digital record of excavation.

**Finds**

Columns and capitals of a distinctive light grey-streaked marble were visible on the seabed and additional—generally fragmentary—architectural elements were located resting below the surface remains (Fig. 2). Thanks to a new partnership with Willamette University, Scott Pike has
joined our team to undertake a comprehensive program of stone analysis. Preliminary results from marble fragments recovered from the wreck lend additional support to the suggestion that the major columns, capitals and bases are likely of Proconnesian origin, though tantalizing clues may indicate different sources for other light-colored marble materials within the assemblage. Several fragments appear to belong to chancel screen panels based on their distinctive decoration—a christogram with garlands and Latin crosses (Figs 3-4)—while others of a green breccia almost certainly derive from the massive ambo partially recovered and famously published by Kapitän.

Aside from these fine stone architectural fragments, a quantity of varied ceramic sherds and other finds were recovered over the course of excavation. The amphoras assemblage exhibited far more diversity than anticipated, with diagnostic sherds of Aegean and northeast Mediterranean jars along with intriguing fragments most likely from the southern Levant. Pieces of cooking pots, common wares, and fine wares provide additional insights into the crew and its daily life en route, while a particularly intriguing find of simple pinched lids or stoppers, perhaps for amphoras, point to jars that may have served as provisions or additional cargo. Other noteworthy finds include a number of nail concretions—some preserving fragmentary wood remains—that while modest, may offer crucial clues about the construction and features of the large ship that cannot be expected to survive in such a shallow and dynamic environment. All artifacts raised were brought for conservation, study, storage and eventual display to the Palmento di Rudini, which serves as the nascent local museum and has been adapted to serve as a laboratory and work space for the project (Figs 5-6).

**Preliminary Thoughts & Future Plans**

Although the Marzamemi project remains in its early stages, our investigations are already shedding new light on this well-known site. The ship’s origin, route and destination remain critical questions for understanding the socioeconomic context in which the vessel and individuals behind the shipment were involved. The sources of individual marble components provide compelling evidence for one or more stops in the northern Aegean and Sea of Marmara, though previously unreported small finds seem to indicate farther flung—albeit perhaps indirect—connections scattered about the Aegean and coastal Levant. Continued
compositional analysis of diagnostic architectural pieces is critical to
understanding how such an assemblage may have been brought together. If the
many amphora sherds signal an additional cargo, the ship provides an intriguing
context of distribution where high-end architecture could travel alongside
mundane staples, perhaps both as commercial goods. The primary cargo
may have been atypical for the age, but the vessel nonetheless could reflect the
complex maritime networks that crisscrossed the late antique Mediterranean and allowed for both
routine and more specialized transport.

Fieldwork at the site of the “church wreck” is planned for 2015 and further seasons. Among the
more ambitious new aims includes the full three-dimensional documentation of all intact and
fragmentary marble architectural and decorative elements, whether excavated by Kapitän or
more recently or still resting on the seabed. The adverse effects of the shallow-water
environment are most evident in the bits of marble that have eroded or pitted off the
architectural surfaces and trickled down into the sand. Three-dimensional imaging will facilitate
the reconstruction and extrapolation of original “quarry state” finish as well as the virtual
reassembly and research on the entire cargo, in particular those elements belonging to similar
architectural features like the ambo and chancel screen, which often reside in different
locations. For those newly excavated fragments, this technology should allow us to appreciate
more clearly their current condition and to plan more effectively for their long-term
conservation and restoration. Even beyond this evident research and preservation potential,
scaled replicas and a complete digital archive offer new possibilities as an interactive
centerpiece for virtual display of materials in the museum and online. Test runs of simple
photogrammetry showed potential, though in many cases additional levels of data acquisition
will be required to capture the details of semi-finished carving and relief. To this end, a new
digital recording initiative has been established as a partnership with Suor Orsola Benincasa
University of Naples for summer 2015.

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2014 Field & Research Team

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Additional Information

For additional information as well as images, please explore our project website and blog at http://marzamemi.stanford.edu.

More detail on the fieldwork and finds can be found in published annual summaries available online: