

Contextualizing the Late Antique Stone Trade: The Marzamemi “Church Wreck” Reconsidered

Justin Leidwanger

Since 2013, investigations of the famous Marzamemi “church wreck” have aimed to shed new light on this unusual 6th-cent. AD assemblage off southeast Sicily, a site initially brought to scholarly attention in the 1960s through survey and limited excavation by Gerhard Kapitän.¹ With a load of 100 tons of prefabricated religious and decorative architectural elements, the vessel has long been associated with the monumental building program described by Procopius (*Aed.*) in the wake of Justinian’s brief re-conquest of the Roman West.² Viewed through this lens, the wreck has become emblematic of the last vestiges of Mediterranean connectivity amid the increasing fragmentation that marked late antiquity.

The site rests in shallow water, concentrated around a sandy patch 7–8 m deep and largely surrounded by a reef that rises to within 4 m of the surface. Some well-preserved material was recovered within this reef toward the seaward edge, and the dynamic environment here was clearly instrumental in dispersing the assemblage over a broad area. Annual fieldwork campaigns have aimed not only to bring new cargo materials to light, but also to understand the depositional context of the site, and to critically re-examine the narrative of an imperially sponsored structure designed for rote assembly at its destination.³

A Thessalian *verde antico* ambo, Proconnesian marble chancel screen, and perhaps a ciborium and altar also in marble leave little doubt that the major cargo elements were destined for a church of some prestige. As focal points for the early Christian liturgy, these components carried obvious symbolism beyond their aesthetics, but understanding the impetus behind their import is dependent on the historical and social context of the assemblage as a whole. Should these elements be read as the architectural manifestations of imperial imposition on liturgical practice across the empire, or as a shared urban style favored by the patronage of local elites?

Although the fragmentary nature of the columns themselves makes complete quantification difficult, the corresponding capitals and bases yield higher numbers than initially recorded by Kapitän, higher in fact than might have easily been incorporated into the interior of a church. Some variation in the dimensions, and perhaps also in the stages of finishing process,⁴ may indicate that these columns were destined for several projects, or at least multiple parts of a single project. Additional materials recently recovered hint at a broader decorative program in action: golden yellow and reddish-orange mineral pigments, raw brown glass, and small polished fragments similar to *opus sectile* but likely serving here as stone samples. These finds complicate the cargo narrative by signaling anticipated additional stages of architectural production and associated maritime supply.

Other non-architectural finds have shed the most important new light on the ship and its Mediterranean maritime context. The recovery of transport amphoras, particularly Aegean LR2 and likely Cypriot or Cilician LR1 jars, has yielded higher numbers than can safely be ascribed to crew provisions. If the jars' corresponding ceramic lids offer reasonable proxy evidence, they point instead to what may be a secondary cargo of olive oil or other processed agricultural goods. While the wood from the hull has fared poorly on this shallow and dynamic seabed, hundreds of fasteners are preserved as concretions; their x-rays and casts offer important indirect evidence for a hull that does not appear particularly heavily built for a vessel likely more than 30 m in length and charged with a dense stone cargo.⁵ Patches of lead sheathing suggest a considerable history of voyages for the ship, an image further supported by the mixed assemblage of fine and common wares belonging to the galley.

Together, this overview of the cargo and shipboard assemblage reveals the intersection and interdependence of elite and everyday commerce: the mundane movements of agricultural staples and those that furnished urban tastes across the Mediterranean. The shipment of fine architecture underwrote a journey that allowed agricultural goods to travel from the East; at the same time, those elite materials were moving through networks and on infrastructure created by the regular journeys of ships like the one that sank at Marzamemi. In short, the unusual nature of this "church wreck" cargo should be taken as evidence not for the uniqueness of this endeavor, but rather for the persistence of certain interregional connections in the face of economic, political, and religious fragmentation that marked the last centuries of classical connectivity.

Notes

¹ Kapitän 1969; Kapitän 1980.

² Kapitän 1980, 129–130.

³ For a report on the 2013–2017 field seasons, see Leidwanger 2018.

⁴ Leidwanger – Tusa 2018; Castagnino Berlinghieri – Paribeni 2015, 1035.

⁵ Leidwanger – Tusa 2017, 118 f.

References

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