

# Revisiting the Origin and Destination of the Late Antique Marzamemi 'Church Wreck' Cargo

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# REVISITING THE ORIGIN AND DESTINATION OF THE LATE ANTIQUE MARZAMEMI ‘CHURCH WRECK’ CARGO

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## Abstract

Initially explored by Gerhard Kapitän in the 1960s, the famous 6<sup>th</sup> c. AD ‘church wreck’ at Marzamemi (Sicily) — with its cargo of prefabricated religious architectural elements — holds a special place in discussions of the ancient stone transport and late antique exchange. Renewed investigations aim to shed light on the broader socioeconomic and historical circumstances surrounding the shipment, including patterns of maritime connectivity between the divergent east and west and the possible roles of imperial agency and local patronage in ambitious architectural programs. Critical to these questions are the origin and destination of the cargo. Stable isotope analysis offers a window into the geographic range of resources available for this architectural program and, by extension, possible clues to the organization of materials, labor, and sponsorship. Analysis of the historical and architectural context allows evaluation of plausible destinations. This study opens new possibilities for interpreting the social and political world of 6<sup>th</sup> century exchange and a re-evaluation of the multifaceted relationship between Justinian and the recently acquired imperial lands.

## Keywords

shipwreck, late antiquity, stone trade

## Renewed investigations of the Marzamemi ‘Church Wreck’

The discovery, by fishermen in the late 1950s, of a highly unusual site in the shallow waters off southeast Sicily at Marzamemi garnered considerable attention from both the scholarly community and the public (Fig. 1). Scattered across the seabed, obscured by marine growth and shifting sands, lay a mix of architectural elements, some with obvious Christian iconography. Pioneering underwater archaeologist Gerhard Kapitän undertook investigations of the site intermittently over the next decade,

when it became popularly known as the ‘church wreck’ (KAPITÄN 1961; 1969; 1980). A half century after these important efforts, renewed fieldwork at this site began in 2013 under the leadership of Stanford University and the Soprintendenza del Mare as part of the broad Marzamemi Maritime Heritage Project. The lack of comprehensive study of the site, including non-cargo finds, raises issues for the contextualization of the important architectural shipment. The current project thus aims to understand the shipwreck’s broader socioeconomic world, and in particular the mechanisms behind this assemblage.

The site presents a dispersed field of artifacts strewn across an uneven and dynamic seabed of reef, rock, and sand extending more than 65 m by at least 30 m (Fig. 2). The stone architectural elements that mark the site rest primarily within and around several sandy depressions at about 7 m deep. Over three campaigns between 2013 and 2015, the team mapped the surface remains and excavated several areas totaling 144 m<sup>2</sup> in and around the promising sandy patch near the center of the site (Fig. 3). A variety of major architectural elements and many fragments of panels have been raised for additional study, together with numerous pieces of ceramics, stone, concretions, and other small finds. The documentation and interpretation of the wreck site and assemblage are complicated by two critical factors. First, illicit removal over the intervening decades since the site’s discovery and initial exploration is well attested, and at times artifacts have been raised primarily to ensure their preservation in this accessible area. Second, considerable post-depositional disturbance is evident in the juxtaposition of cultural material with rock and fallen reef. With the materials raised in the 1960s currently residing in Siracusa and the more recently excavated finds in the newly restored historic Palmento di Rudini that now serves as the project’s local base of operations and conservation lab, the entire assemblage has not yet been studied as a whole nor have the earlier finds yet been subjected to renewed study. As is typical for any excavation in progress, the observations offered here should thus be treated as preliminary (LEIDWANGER, BRUNO 2014; LEIDWANGER, TUSA 2015; 2016).



Fig. 1. Central and eastern Mediterranean region with Marzamemi and other major locations noted in the text (map: J. Leidwanger)

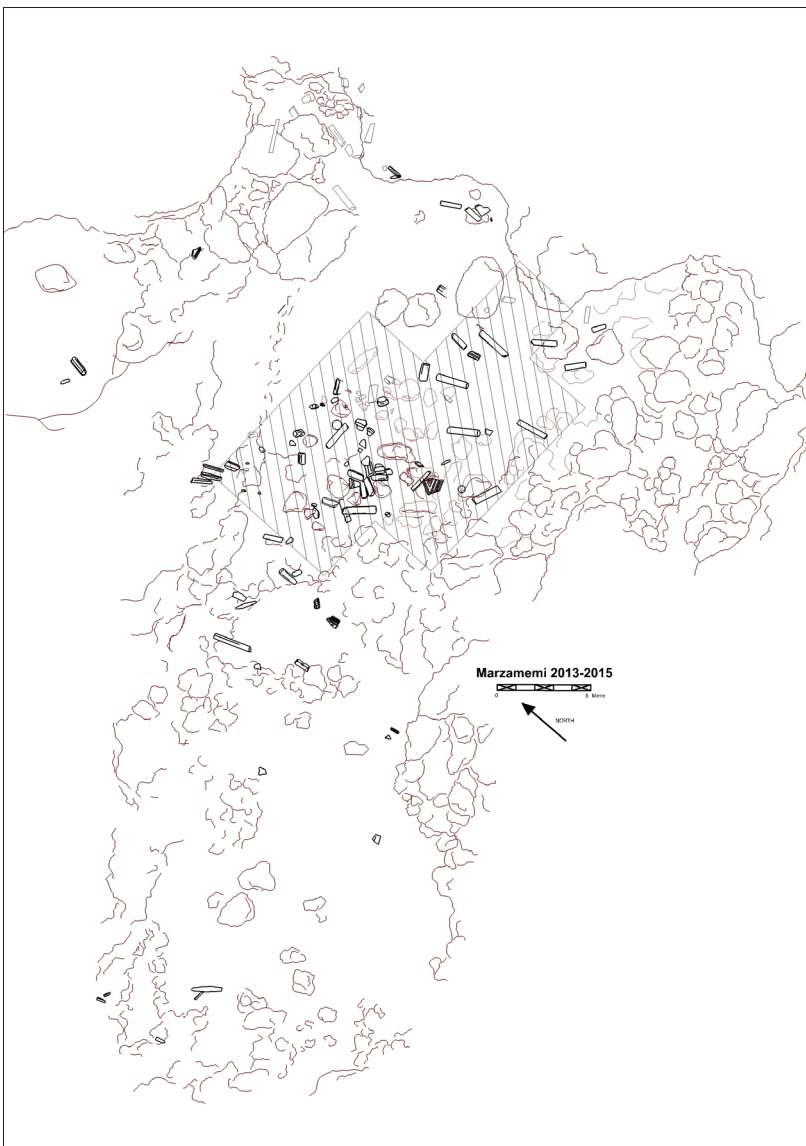


Fig. 2. Plan of the Marzamemi shipwreck site with shaded area showing the main focus of the 2013-2015 excavation seasons (plan: S. Matthews)



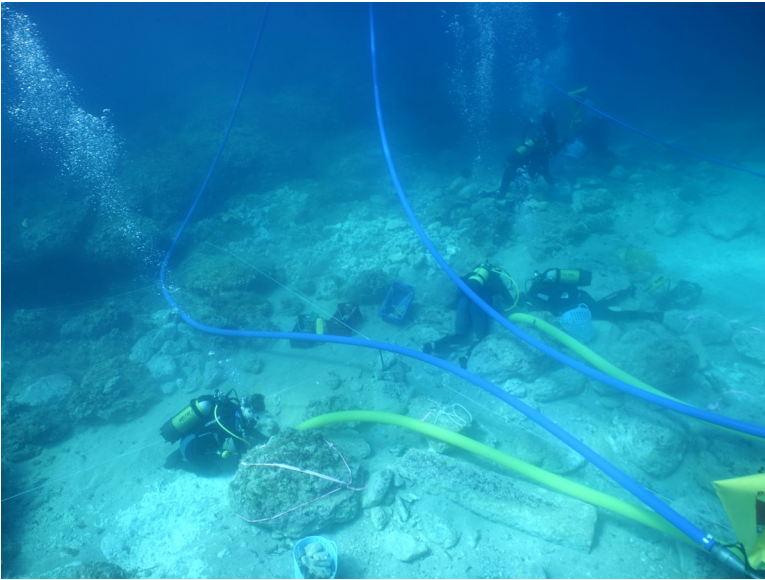


Fig. 3.  
View of the main excavation  
area during fieldwork in 2015  
(photo: L. McPhie)



Fig. 4.  
Depot area with recently excavated  
columns and capitals waiting to be  
raised in 2015 (photo: L. McPhie)



Fig. 5.  
Preparing to recover a newly  
discovered fragment of the ambo in  
2015 (photo: J. Leidwanger)



Fig. 6. Panel fragment from the shipwreck cargo. This find was discovered in fall 2014, at some distance from the site, from which it had been removed illicitly (photo: A. Oron)

Critical to this interpretive goal of understanding the context of this unusual shipwreck is identification of the cargo's extent, origin, and (where possible) the most likely destination. The majority of the assemblage consists of interior decorative elements belonging to elite 6<sup>th</sup> century architecture, particularly religious architecture in the case of panels bearing prominent Christian iconography. To judge from the elements studied by Kapitän and those remaining on the seabed, the shipment reflects the purposeful collection of specific decorative elements intended for maximum visual enhancement — and perhaps symbolic value — of architecture that would otherwise have been constructed largely of local stone. While a series of monolithic columns, bases and capitals comprise the bulk of this group (Fig. 4), the most famous pieces are certainly the decorative panels belonging to an ambo and chancel screen (Figs. 5 and 6). As was noted early by Kapitän, these pieces bear the distinctive style and iconography that can be linked to the 6<sup>th</sup> century, notably the era of the early Byzantine emperor Justinian. The structural architectural elements are easily identified as such even in their sometimes corroded state on the seabed, but their numbers and relationships are by no means as clear. Kapitän suggested a set of 28 matching

columns, bases and capitals, yet the confirmation or rejection of this intriguing hypothesis depends on a careful study of the whole of the assemblage and its context. For the time being, these numbers must be considered estimates based on surface counts and limited intrusive investigation. The columns are largely fragmentary, making it difficult to judge the overall quantity; at the same time, many more fragments of columns and other elements have been brought to light through recent fieldwork, raising the possibility that the relative numbers of individual elements may vary. The materials also hint at different stages of production and different overall dimensions. Such uneven numbers and potentially also the greater diversity merit continued study — on the seabed, through compositional analysis and digital modeling — before any firm conclusions might be drawn.

Among the non-architectural finds are a variety of ceramics that likewise hint at a diverse and potentially important assemblage. Kapitän's investigations clearly brought to light some important evidence for these wares, but without full publication we are left with just a few glimpses of the finer pieces — including an African Red Slip plate with iconography of Christ or a praying figure (KAPITÄN 1969, 125) — or those with a particularly interesting story and contemporary comparanda, such as the so-called 'wine thief' (for decanting wine from a larger vessel into a smaller one), water jar, and globular transport amphoras evidently quite like those found on board the famous 7<sup>th</sup> c. Yassiada vessel also under excavation (in Turkey) in the early 1960s (KAPITÄN 1969, 133; cf. Bass 1982). Recent excavations have shed new light on this ceramic assemblage. Alongside the Late Roman 2 (LR2) globular transport amphoras of probable Aegean origin are fragments of Late Roman 1 (LR1) jars of likely Cilician origin, as well as probable Late Roman 4 (LR4) jars from the southern Levant. These finds remain modest in number even with a recently discovered stone mortar and fragments of both cooking pots and common wares, yet they offer a critical new window into the socioeconomic context in which cargos like the "church wreck" architecture were circulating.

The present contribution aims to take a closer look at two fundamental questions surrounding this important assemblage: the origin of the stone architectural materials and their possible destinations. Beyond the broad caveat mentioned above regarding any excavation in progress, two critical points must be emphasized. First, the geological origin of the stone is not tantamount to the geographical origin of the vessel or voyage. Identifying where these materials were quarried can offer indirect evidence for maritime connections, but exploring the mechanisms at work in such a shipment requires balancing these against the wider archaeological assemblage. Second, the destination is one of the most

Sample	$\delta^{13}\text{C}\%$	$\delta^{18}\text{O}\%$	MGS (mm)	Color	Possible Attribution
WU14-040	2.8	-3.0	1.0	white/gray	Marmara
WU14-041	2.8	-1.0	unavailable	dark gray /green	LMarmara, Paros-Chorodaki, or calcitic Thasian
WU14-042	3.0	-1.7	0.8	white	Marmara or Paros Chorodaki
WU14-044	3.4	-2.1	1.5	white	Marmara or Paros Chorodaki
WU14-046	2.9	-3.6	1.6	white	Marmara or Afyon
WU14-047	2.8	-0.1	fine grain	dark gray /green	Marmara or Chorodaki
WU14-048	2.8	-3.1	1.0	white	Marmara
WU14-050	0.7	-2.2	0.8	white/gray	Paros Chorodaki or a Turkish Anatolian marble

Fig. 7. Marzamemi shipwreck stable isotope ratios of carbon and oxygen, maximum grain size, color and possible source quarry attribution. Stable isotope ratios are reported relative to the PDB international standard and grain size is measured in mm (table: S. Pike)

eagerly sought questions in any shipwreck investigation, but it is also generally one of the most difficult. Plausible possibilities can be raised based on comparanda at sites of consumption (in this case buildings that were actually built), but these are probabilities at best. Even the location of the shipwreck itself may not yield helpful evidence for the destination, since vessels need not have traveled the most direct route, and were often engaged in multiple stops prior to their final port. With these caveats in mind, some observations may be offered.

#### Investigating the origin of the cargo: physiochemical analysis of the stone

At the time of original excavation, Kapitän enlisted the help of J. B. Ward-Perkins, who offered an initial identification of their source region based largely on macroscopic observations (KAPITÄN 1980, 72, 78 and 99). Although Ward-Perkins had an outstanding connoisseur's eye for marble identification and indeed helped to lay the foundations for the study of the ancient marble trade, the current questions necessarily move beyond subjective macroscopic interpretations of marble sources by using scientific methods developed well after the 1960s. Chief among these is the carbon and oxygen stable isotope analysis championed by Norman Herz in the 1980s (HERZ 1987). Since then, other researchers have expanded the database to include additional quarries and higher resolutions within quarries (e.g. GORGONI, LAZZARINI, PALLANTE 2002; PIKE 2009; ATTANASIO, BRILLI, OGLE 2006). Macroscopic textural data coupled with the stable isotope ratios of carbon and oxygen have provided high-confidence quarry attributions for many samples. Additionally, MANDI *et al.* (1991) and ATTANASIO, BRILLI, OGLE (2006) have demonstrated that electron paramagnetic data can further discriminate between marble types with overlapping

stable isotope regions. The current study of the Marzamemi materials reflects a preliminary examination using stable isotope analysis to suggest the most likely origin of certain components within the ship's stone architectural cargo.

Samples were collected opportunistically from small chips weathered by the elements and gathered from the excavation units. It is unknown from which architectural forms each sample derives although an attempt was made to sample across the full range of stone types. Macroscopically, there are two varieties of marbles present in the collection. The first are white, light gray to beige-white marbles with fine to medium grained textures. The second are gray-green to green banded marbles, also with fine to medium grained textures. Furthermore, all the samples were collected from near the edge of the marble block and most show compact weathering rinds up to a couple millimeters thick or holes left by boring organisms.

Ideally, a multi-method approach would be used to assess the source for these marbles. However, this preliminary report only presents the results of macroscopic observations coupled with stable isotope data for carbon and oxygen. Small aliquots collected by drill of the freshest marble available were analyzed by continuous flow mass spectroscopy at the Stable Isotope Laboratory, Department of Geology, University of Alabama using the protocols established by SPÖTL, VENNEMANN (2003) and DEBAJYOTI, SKRZYPEK (2007). The isotope values of  $^{13}\text{C}/^{12}\text{C}$  and  $^{18}\text{O}/^{16}\text{O}$  are reported as per mil (‰) relative to the international PDB standard for carbon and oxygen isotopic ratios.

The table here (Fig. 7) lists the data including maximum grain size and potential sources, while the scatterplot diagram (Fig. 8) shows the distribution of these data in stable isotope space. The light marble and dark marble data are superimposed upon the graphical representation of GORGONI *et al.* (2002) of the carbon

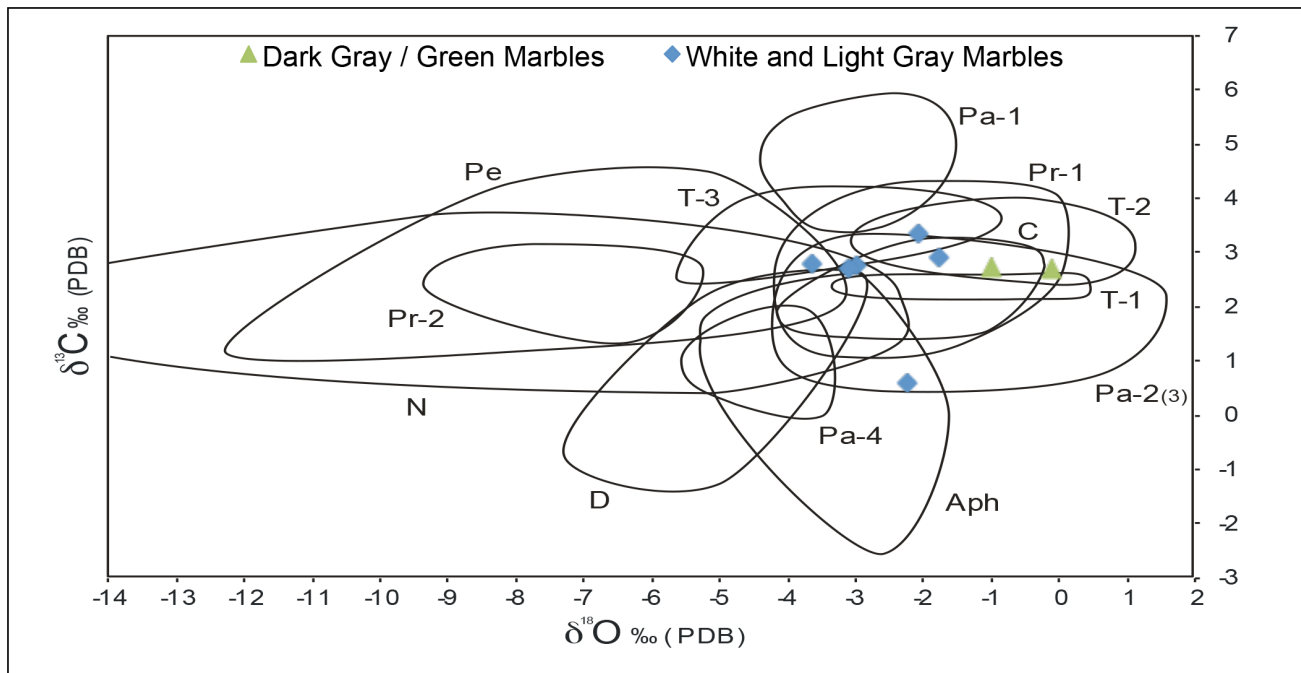


Fig. 8. Scatter-plot diagram in  $\delta^{13}\text{C}(\text{PDB})$  vs  $\delta^{18}\text{O}(\text{PDB})$  space of the Marzamemi shipwreck samples plotted against the white marble stable isotope database as published by GORGONI, LAZZARINI, PALLANTE (2002). As a group, the white and light gray marbles are likely of eastern Mediterranean origin, most likely Proconessus, although other quarries in modern Turkey and perhaps Thasos cannot be ruled out for certain samples. The two dark gray/green samples may derive from Thasos, Procennesus, or even Paros. However, when coupled with archaeological comparanda of early Christian decorative elements, the colored fragments most likely are Thessalian verde antico (diagram: S. Pike)

and oxygen stable isotope database. Note that during the stable isotope lab runs, samples WU14-045 and WU14-049 had a very low beam size, likely due to their poor preservation. Although the lab is reanalyzing these two samples, the data could not yet be included in this report.

Coupled with the macroscopic textural data it appears that these marbles are likely of eastern Mediterranean origin, most likely Proconessus although other quarries in modern Turkey and perhaps Thasos cannot be ruled out for certain samples. From an archaeological point of view, Proconessus certainly makes good sense for the light-colored stone, and is consonant with what is known about the large scale of operation during the 6<sup>th</sup> century, particularly for capitals, bases and columns (ASGARI 1995). The possibility that some might have originated on Thasos is intriguing and merits further attention. The green stones present another challenge of interpretation, with several sources available at the time. Yet in light of the current understanding of the production of church furniture during the 6<sup>th</sup> century, Thessalian 'verde antico' seems the most likely candidate if the samples derived from fragments of the ambo (MELFOS 2008).

With these preliminary thoughts in mind regarding a most likely origin for the major cargo in the northern Aegean and Sea of Marmara, some possibilities can be raised for the potential destinations that could reasonably have accommodated such a monumental cargo.

### First thoughts on the historical context and final destination

The era of the Marzamemi ship, the reign of Justinian, was marked by grand ambition, including no less than the remaking of the Roman Empire. The vessel and cargo under study reflect two aspects of that ambition: conquest and renewal. The movement of goods and artisans flourished in this newly reconnected Mediterranean. Buildings, often ecclesiastical, fashioned from high-quality stone usually imported from the east, were constructed in cities throughout Justinian's growing empire. This rebuilding came on the heels of several military campaigns. After concluding a peace with the Sassanids in the east in 532, Justinian turned his attention westward. His armies invaded North Africa in 533, Italy in 535, and took the southern coast of the Iberian Peninsula in 552. These conquests would not last: the majority of the Italian peninsula fell to the Lombards just a few years after Justinian's death; Spain was retaken in the early 7<sup>th</sup> century; and North Africa fell to the emergent caliphate shortly thereafter. Yet it is a mistake to see this short-lived pan-Mediterranean conquest as a failure. While Justinian's new empire did not endure, the connectivity it brought about transformed the visual landscape of several cities in the western Mediterranean. Carrying cargo for a newly-invigorated economy destined for a territory

only recently returned to the Byzantine oikoumene, the ‘church wreck’ is a tangible reminder of what was accomplished in a relatively brief time.

Much of the following remains speculation at this early stage in fieldwork, yet it is nevertheless worthwhile to evaluate potential destinations for such a cargo, especially as contrasting theories about this facet have circulated since Kapitän’s original investigations.

No one, as far as we know, has postulated the Iberian Peninsula as a potential destination for this vessel. This is likely with good reason: out of all of Justinian’s conquests, perhaps the least is known about the occupation of Spain, and what building material we have from the Byzantine period has been excavated poorly (KULIKOWSKI 2004). Verde antico is found in Spain at some late Roman sites, including Cordova (GREENHALGH 2012); so too is Proconnesian marble, though more often in the form of sarcophagi, not building material (KULIKOWSKI 2004). Spain cannot be ruled out, but there is little contemporary material to indicate it was the vessel’s ultimate destination.

North Africa — either Apollonia or Sabratha — was Kapitän’s presumed destination. Both sites had been excavated in part by Ward-Perkins, on whose expertise Kapitän relied, and both are appealing. If the destination was Apollonia, the cargo was most plausibly destined for the Central Church, one of the few late antique structures in the city not made solely from spolia or local stone (WARD-PERKINS, GOODCHILD, HARRISON 2003). The building is a collection of local limestone and some Proconnesian marble columns, bases, capitals, and chancel fittings, though there is not enough of this marble to adorn the entire building. The ‘church wreck’ thus fits well into this narrative as the second, lost vessel that would have supplied the missing building material for this grand imperial edifice.

Sabratha is an equally appealing destination, as is a city Kapitän did not mention, Carthage. Both experienced extensive rebuilding under Justinian. Perhaps the most famous example in Sabratha is the Basilica of Justinian, a “very noteworthy church” according to Procopius (*Aed.* 6.4.13). Carthage’s visual landscape changed drastically following the Byzantine arrival. Justinian rebuilt the circuit wall, enhanced the forum, and erected churches, a monastery, and a public bath (*Aed.* 6.5). Proconnesian marble was used in these and other North African cities reconquered by Justinian, but never in same quantity used elsewhere. One wonders, however, if the African Red Slip plate was intended as a commercial good, in which case North Africa is certainly a less likely destination (LEONE 2013). Certainly North Africa cannot be ruled out. The presence of significant spolia in later buildings, such as the Great Mosque of Kairouan (with Proconnesian marble) indicates that Justinian invested far more material in this area than might currently be realized.

Kapitän was skeptical of Italy as a potential destination due to the “political situation at the time” (KAPITÄN 1969, 133), presumably a reference to the long and destabilizing war Justinian was conducting in the peninsula. This statement assumes that trade, monumental architecture, and warfare cannot exist together, but events in Italy defy that assumption. In a recent paper, Elena Castagnino Berlinghieri and Andrea Paribeni have suggested Syracuse — some 35 km north of Marzamemi on the eastern shore of Sicily — as the intended location. This is compelling primarily because of the location where the vessel sank, but also because Sicily was Justinian’s stepping stone into Italy and the most secure of his new Italian holdings. There is nothing in either the city of Syracuse itself or in the textual sources that indicates such a cargo had a home in this city, but the possibility cannot be ruled out.

Another possibility is the Adriatic region, an area well-supplied with Proconnesian marble from the Veneto down to the heel of the boot. At the center, Ravenna had been flourishing as the capital of Italy since the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> century. Even before Justinian’s reconquest of Italy brought about greater access to markets, Ravenna was already refashioning itself. By the beginning of the 6<sup>th</sup> century spolia began to run out, leading to a boom in the local brick-making industry. Churches such as San Vitale, Sant’Apollinare in Classe, and San Michele in Afiscisco were all constructed of these new flatter, broader bricks. Ravenna was taking on a distinctive look, one that broke from earlier tradition (DELIYANNIS 2010). What was originally an indigenous architectural program was enhanced and became something new with the arrival of Justinian’s forces, who brought with them greater access to, among other things, luxury stone. Between 540 and 600, Ravenna and its port of Classe were lavishly provided with Proconnesian marble (HARPER 1997). Ravenna also served as a regional supply depot for this building industry. Ann Terry has argued that the Euphrasian Basilica in Poreč, in modern Croatia, was constructed in large part from Proconnesian decorative materials obtained not directly from Constantinople, but as pairs or other small sets most likely from nearby Ravenna (TERRY 1988). That the cargo may have been intended for further redistribution rather than use in one urban context like Ravenna is plausible, and the capitals do not necessarily resemble those most extensively used in the city.

Proconnesian marble was of great importance to Justinian. He adorned his own capital with it and constructed a palace on the island from which it was quarried. But it was also critical to other areas of his new empire as well, and one of our many goals, as more material emerges from the depths, is to determine how this vessel’s cargo helps us understand the short-lived but extremely important economic networks created by Justinian’s ambition.

### Toward a better understanding of the 'Church Wreck'

In revisiting the two basic questions about the Marzamemi vessel — its origin and possible destination — the present contribution aims to situate this shipwreck within its broader socioeconomic context of late antique connectivity and exchange. While an origin in the northern Aegean or Sea of Marmara seems increasingly likely, distinguishing among the several possible destinations remains a formidable challenge. What is evident from the assemblage, however, is that this cargo, so unusual and wealthy, need not be seen as a special one-off commission, but rather as a shipment tightly embedded in the routine commercial exchange of its period. Much work remains to be done, and it should be stated clearly that no critique raised here regarding earlier interpretations is intended as criticism of the pioneering accomplished by Kapitän in the 1960s; indeed, the present project is very much in his debt for raising some of these critical questions that, a half-century later, have only proven themselves to be more central and timely than ever.

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