



FIGURE 1

# In Distress

Rescuing a Roman Merchantmen 1700 Years Later

By Jeffrey G. Royal

Since 2005, RPM Nautical Foundation (RPMNF) and the Superintendent's Office of Underwater Archaeology in Sicily have conducted a survey of coastal waters off Sicily. Early in the summer of 2006, during verification of anomalies mapped in the previous season, the ROV cameras revealed the remains of a wrecksite. This site came to be known as the Levanzo I wreck, as it lies about 6 km north of Levanzo Island, one of the three Egadi Islands off the NW coast of Sicily (Figure 1). This 4th-century AD Roman merchantman laden with food stuffs and construction materials was enroute from North Africa to the Italian mainland when it met its demise. At the time of discovery, little was known about the nature of deeper-water sites compared to that known about sites near shore. Comparatively little is still known; however, with efforts by our and other organizations, more is being discovered about the nature of these sites and the threats to them.

At a depth of 90 m and out of practical diver depth, it would seem such a site was safe from human exploitation and/or damage, particularly to the illegal collecting by recreational divers that plagues shallow-water sites. Initial investigation of the site documented the damaged artifacts dispersed around the surface of this relatively flat site; it remained unclear as to how far the material extended into the sandy bottom (Figure 2). Over the successive years this site was further documented and diagnostic artifacts were recovered, while anomaly verification continued in the survey area. It quickly became clear that much of the survey area had been covered by dragnet fishermen. Many areas were scraped clean of virtually all biological presence and loose stones, leaving a barren, flat landscape. The only features are long drag marks that criss-cross the seafloor and flat rock outcrops slightly protruding from the sand. Only in areas where rock outcrops reached about half a meter high did the evidence for dragging end; here is found drag gear snagged on rocks and random, usually damaged, artifacts dumped by the ripped nets.

It was clear that the Levanzo I site had suffered dragnet hits as well, which resulted in the scattered artifacts on the surface of a very slight mound. This mound rose less than 30 cm in height, just below the height of rock outcrops that surround the wrecksite. Fortunately, dragnets had hit the rocks and risen off the seafloor at the site; but any of the material above the height of the rocks was now gone. Furthermore, a drag from certain directions where no rocks are present could still obliterate the remnants of the site. Considering the situation, Co-Director of the Project Dr. Sebastiano Tusa, Superintendent of Underwater Archaeology for Sicily, agreed that future damage to the site required mitigation and arranged conservation support for artifact retrieval.

In 2009 RPMNF had equipment and software in place that allowed numerous surface artifacts to be mapped in and recovered (Figure 3), as well as the capability to perform controlled excavation. This operation put in place experimental equipment and methods in order to maintain archaeological standards while working through an ROV. Excavation was limited to two 1-meter squares and revealed that the site sits atop a hard sediment layer approximately 5 cm below the surface (Fig. 4); hence, the shallow sand cover on the site provides artifacts virtually no protection from further dragnet incursions. Consequently, the ceramics exposed on the seafloor upon discovery were almost all that remained of the cargo due to the devastation of the dragnets. This reaffirmed the necessity for mitigation for this site, and illustrates the peril that offshore sites face. The Levanzo I wreck is similar to many others in deeper waters, where sedimentation rates are lower than those at the shore and can leave wrecksites largely exposed. The particular threat of drag nets is amplified as they dig into the sandy surface. **Although this merchantman is now receiving rescue efforts, one can only ponder the hundreds or possibly thousands of wrecks throughout the Mediterranean lost forever to dragnets.**

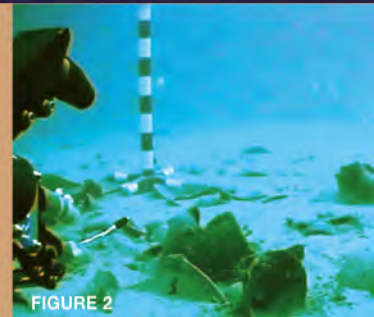


FIGURE 2



FIGURE 3



FIGURE 4

PHOTOS/ILLUSTRATIONS  
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