

The *galea* Magna shipwreck – archaeological evidence and archival sources of a Venetian war galley of 1598

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Abstract: Since 1999 and until 2021, numerous scattered remains of a presumed Venetian ship (weapons, coins, pottery, etc.) have been recovered from the shallow waters of the ‘trap-bay’ of Torre S. Sabina (Carovigno, Brindisi, Italy). Through extensive archival research and the study of the artifacts recovered, we were able to identify these finds as belonging to the *galea* Magna. On 11 November 1597, the *galea*, under the command of Marc’Antonio Magno, a Venetian *sopracomito* (ancient Venetian term for a noble commander of a galley), set sail from the island of Crete to Venice, following the common shipping route along the eastern Adriatic coast. A storm forced a change of route (Fig. 1) which, combined with the darkness of the night, caused the ship to run aground on the cliffs and sink at the entrance to the bay on 1 January 1598.

Keywords: galley, Marc’Antonio Magno, *galea* Magna, Torre Santa Sabina, shipwreck

1. Introduction

Torre Santa Sabina and, more precisely, the seabed of Baia dei Camerini has been, since the end of the 1960s, the scene of numerous underwater recoveries and, since 2007, the site of systematic underwater surveys and stratigraphic excavations conducted by the University of Salento in the broader framework of the research of seascapes archaeology in southern Puglia. In 2020–2021 this archaeological site was also the setting of a pilot intervention within the Underwater Muse project (Italy-Croatia CBC Program 2014–2020), due to the quality and variety of the finds in the bay. This latter can indeed be called a ‘supersite’, with its layers of events that are also significant markers of the evolution of the coastal landscape: cargos and hulls, but also remains of quarries and settlements (Auriemma 2014; 2015; Calantropio *et al.* 2021; Auriemma *et al.* 2022). One of the main objectives of the last 2020-2021 campaigns was to ascertain the attribution to a Venetian ship of several finds excavated during previous investigations.

2. Archaeological evidence

In 1999, close to the shore and at a depth of only 1.5-2 m, thanks to a joint intervention by the Central Institute for Restoration (ICR) of the Italian Ministry of Culture and the Ribezzo Museum of Brindisi, a metal object embedded in the sand was found. It was about 2.7 m long, curved and cylindrical in shape, attached to an unidentified wooden element, which was perhaps part of the longitudinal carpentry of a hull. The find was subsequently documented by photogrammetric filming during both the 2010 and 2021 excavation campaigns and left in situ (Fig. 2). Absolute dating, carried out at that time by CEDAD indicated a date range between 1320 and 1450. In the course of the various interventions, on the other hand, a number of weapons have been recovered: artillery projectiles (in iron and stone), an arquebus (muzzle-loading rifle), and mostly iron helmets (Fig. 3): about 23 examples of a particular type of *borgognotte* and one *cabbaset*, many of them overlapping and heavily concreted. They are presently being restored inside the ICR laboratory in Rome.

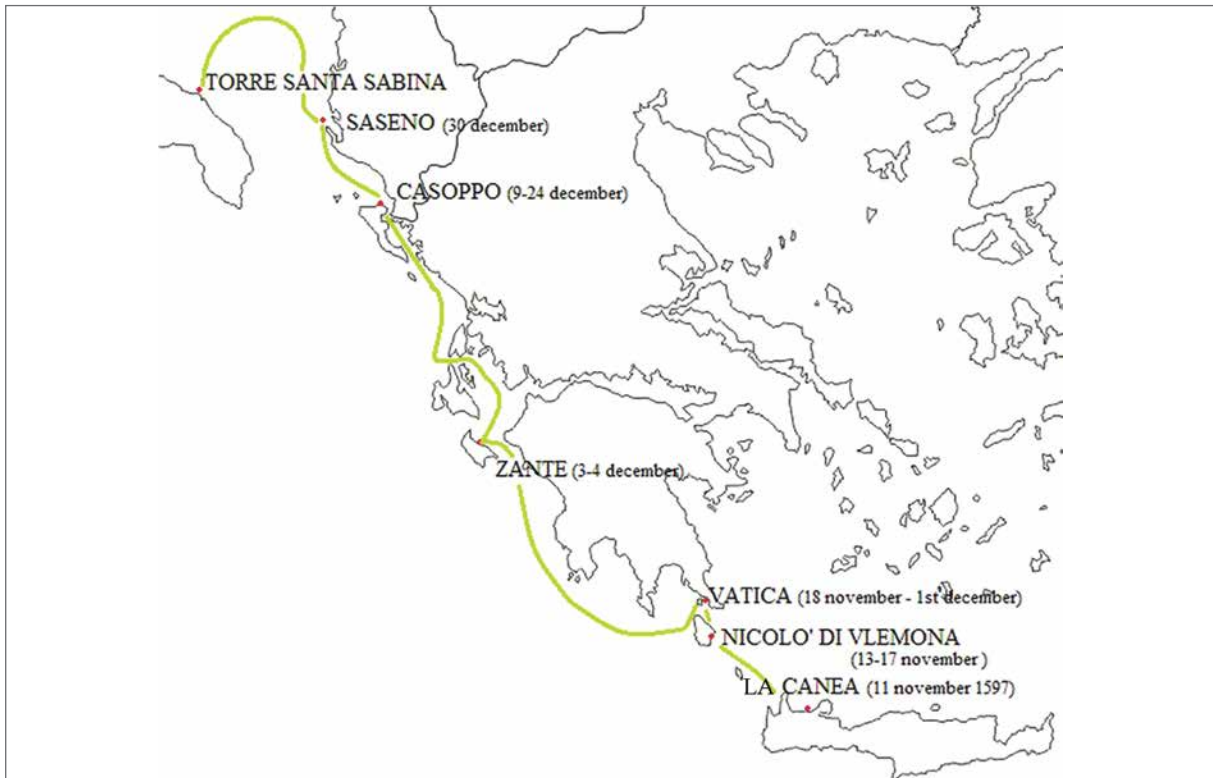


Fig. 1 Reconstruction of the route from the Venetian harbour of Chania to Torre Santa Sabina (author: A. Podestà)



Fig. 2 A metallic item attached to a wooden element not identified, maybe pertaining the longitudinal carpentry of a hull (elab.: L. Coluccia)

Over the years, several scattered fragments of archaeological finds have been recovered by Andrea Podestà and Fernando Zongolo: late 16th Century Italian glazed pottery (fragments of graffito pottery, apothecary vessels, plates, bowls, containers decorated with an armillary sphere motif (Fig. 4) and a probable fragment of Iznik pottery), glass fragments and several coins. During the 2011 campaign, a Venetian *Ducato* (Fig. 5) related to the period of regency of the Doge of the *Serenissima* Pasquale Cicogna (1585–1595) was recovered near the alleged naval item. This is a type of coin that, with minor variations, was in use for a century or more, with the winged Lion of St. Mark with its forepaw on the opened Book of Gospel on the left, the kneeling Doge on the right, holding the staff with cross and pennant at the top of the obverse and a full-length facing figure of St. Giustina, with palm branch and book, in the background; on the sides, two galleys at sea and a rocky island on the horizon and the value mark “124” *soldi* in the exergue of the reverse. Later, Podestà and Zongolo, after a storm, recovered and delivered to the Superintendence a pile of anonymous, largely concreted coins (Fig. 6), including a ten-gazette silver coin, called Lirone or Lirazza, (Venetian Law 1571, January 5) and a four-gazette coin (Venetian Law 1570, April 10).

In addition, during the 2020 campaign, an additional silver coin, yet to be restored and identified, was found near the aforementioned wooden element.



Fig. 3 A group of four corroded helmets a particular type of (borgognotte) overlapped and strongly concreted (photo: P. Pulli)



Fig. 4 From left to right: a fragment of a green and yellow glazed jar decorated with armillary sphere motif, a fragment of venetian *boccia* decorated with geometric shapes, fruits and leaf motif and two fragments of a white apothecary container (*albarello*) decorated with blue leaf motif (photo: A. Podestà)



Fig. 5 Silver coin (Reverse). Venice. Pasquale Cicogna (AD 1585 -1595). 124 Soldi (Ducato) type with a harbour scene behind St. Justina (photo: A. Podestà)



Fig. 6 Silver coins (heavily corroded) scattered on the seabed (photo: A. Podestà)

3. The historical fact

Years of research of archival records in epistolary correspondence from Naples and Dalmatia to the Senate of Venice in the Archivio di Stato of Venice and in the Vatican Apostolic Archive has finally made it possible to attribute those scattered fragments to a ship that was the protagonist of a long and troubled voyage. It was the year 1597, and on Tuesday, November 11, during the night of St. Martin's Day, Nicolò Donà, a 72-year-old patrician of the *Serenissima*, at the end of his tenure as Provveditor General and Inquisitor of the Kingdom of Candia, embarked for Venice from the port of Chania, a town on the northern coast of the island of Crete, on the wooden captain galley with convicts as rowers, "Veniera". The Veniera galley was followed by two slaves' galleys, the *galea* Magna and the Pisana commanded, respectively, by *sopracomiti* Marc'Antonio Magno and Francesco Pisani.

After the capture of three Barbary corsairs' ships (*fuste*) and other events, which forced Veniera to remain in the port of Corfu, on Monday, December 29, Donà sailed from Casoppo/Kassiopi bound for Dalmatia on the *galea* Magna, which became the captain galley, while the Pisana continued to serve as convoy galley.

Driven by the favourable sirocco wind, they reached the northern part of the island of Saseno, where the wind changed, coming from north-east, and the sea became so rough that they were unable to find a safe harbour despite several attempts. The waves broke with such force that they caused big damages to the *galea* Magna, and the two galleys lost sight of each other in the stormy sea, sailing separately towards Salento. The next day the *galea* Magna was close to the Apulian coast and the northeast wind suggested that they should get into port quickly.

Marc'Antonio Magno decided to sail to the safe harbor of Torre Guaceto (Cape Xiti), but the officers on board, not knowing the coast, mistook this place for Torre Santa Sabina, about 6 miles to the north. Upon reaching Santa Sabina, in the stretch of water to the east of the tower, the anchors were stranded, but in 1598, on Thursday, January 1, after the hour of Ave Maria (in the Roman time system, around midnight), the *grecale* wind caused the anchors to move on the sandy bottom and pushed the ship against the rocks, not far from the shore, causing it to sink. At the time, there were frequent landings there for embarking and disembarking; the Tower of Torre Santa Sabina did not have a guard, but local fishing families certainly did not hesitate to help strangers in distress inspired by the spirit of solidarity that has always characterized the seafarers.

We know that on that night the moon was two days past first quarter. Taking advantage of both the confusion and the illuminated sky, many rowers (convicts, *sforzati*) escaped, stealing valuables and money. We can assume this knowing that the galley was carrying a considerable amount of Venetian gold and silver coins.

As for the *galea* Magna, leaks in the bow quickly filled the hull with water and the deck quickly sank. Ironically, the seabed near those reefs was quite deep at the time, and had it not been for the inexperience of the sailors on board, who had no knowledge of those places, the galley would never have been wrecked.

The bow of the ship had remained high, supported by the rock on which it had collapsed. Superintendent Nicolò Donà only had to move to the front of the ship to avoid drowning and Councilman Tron with his wife and children and other people had also found a shelter in this small, not-yet-flooded space.

In the absence of the lifeboat, lost in navigation the previous day, there was no way out except to swim from that cramped, overcrowded and dark, wave-beaten place. As dispatches from Naples to the Senate confirm, some fighting occurred in a vain attempt to quell the revolt of the *sforzati* (convicts). There are reports of a *sforzato* from Mantua being wounded in the head by the galley's Comito (he was the highest non-noble officer who issued orders directly to the crew about when to row and when to sail). The *sforzato* in question attempted to escape after breaking a chest in the ship's desk, taking several large pieces of silver with him.

Some *sforzati*, who could not swim, remained in the bow, others saved themselves by swimming but at least a dozen lost their lives by drowning. On the morning of Friday, January 2, the Neapolitan Baron Agostino Caputo, feudatory of Carovigno, personally went to the aid of the Venetian nobles and hosted them in the Castle of Carovigno, about three miles from the site of the shipwreck. The generous help given to those *Serenissima* lords would be worth the granting of Venetian citizenship to the nobleman in 1599.

The kind aristocrat, however, once he realized the value of the ship's cargo, objected to the recovery of the Magna's cargo because he clearly wanted to take possession of part of the valuables. Indeed, according to the laws of the time, he would have been entitled to one-third of the goods recovered from the shipwreck.

The Superintendent General had lost his life savings in the sinking of the galley, and the other noblemen had also lost much of their wealth; the greatest damage had not been done by the sea, but by those who had tried to steal every item of value from the ship.

According to Donà's account, the shipwreck was due to the inexperience of the sailors on the galley. He then decided to file a complain against the Admiral Stamatello and the officers of the galley.

In the following days the sea returned ten bodies and several parts of the ship, destroyed by the waves, and dismembered by the violent blows against the rocks. The vessel was irretrievably lost, and the cargo was partly dispersed on the seabed and on the beach of the bay.

The nobleman Pietro Loffredo was the first to guard the recovered material, for which he was thanked for this by the Senate. Then a commissioner took daily and detailed notes of the finds.

On January 3, the vice-consul of Brindisi went to the site of the shipwreck, and on the same day Donà wrote to the Senate and to the Regency of Naples, where the notary Giò Carlo Scaramelli, aware of what had happened, reported the shipwreck and did his best to facilitate the recovery operations by convincing the Viceroy to have the Governors of Terra d'Otranto and Terra di Bari to issue the necessary orders. Around the middle of the month Baron Caputo left Carovigno in great secrecy to discuss in Naples his rights to the items recovered from the galley.

It should also be noted that at the time it was common practice to salvage from the wreckage even artillery, anchors and rigging, all items easily identifiable from the surface.

Harsh winter temperatures and storm surges certainly did not speed up the already complex recovery operations. Supervisor Marc'Antonio Magno personally supervised the recovery operations and interacted directly with the crew.

On Wednesday, January 21, the 13 galley guns, sails, and most of the equipment on board were recovered. The artillery had already been loaded and transported to Brindisi as was to be done with all the other equipment that was loaded onto a galley or a *Marcigliana* ship. The *sopracomito* and its crew were to embark on a galleon or a *Marcigliana*, while Donà was to embark on the *galea* Pisana.

On January 21 the ship appeared broken in the hull, so unrecoverable that it was the Donà's intention to sell it. But the hardships don't end here. The *galea* Pisana, once it broke away near the island of Saseno, continued sailing and reached the coast of Salento, where it escaped the fury of the waves near Otranto. The first letter containing news of the galley and addressed to the Regency of the Serenissima in Naples is dated Sunday, January 4. The galley had to drop some artillery en route to Apulia and, due to the stormy sea, it lost or damaged an antenna of the mast.

On January 20, the Pisana galley was still moored in Otranto due to bad weather and, although not *galea* fully repaired, it would head for Torre Santa Sabina to provide assistance to the *Provveditore* Donà and recover the *galea* Magna's public and private cargo.

After the Pisana hull has been repaired in early March, the castaways from the *galea* Magna embarked on the other galley, and set sail for Venice. Unfortunately, after arriving near the island of Mljet, the galley was driven for the second time by headwinds; a very strong bora wind blew it towards the opposite coast of the Adriatic.

On the night of Saturday, March 14, the mast also broke and the shipwreck could not be avoided; it occurred outside the port of Bari probably on the shoal called *u munde russ* or *Monterosso* (the red mountain).

Candia's Provveditor General, Nicolò Donà, spent more than two weeks in Bari, and on Sunday, April 5, having recovered his strength, he decided to continue his journey to Venice by land.

4. Conclusions

The analysis of numerous documents, compared with the archaeological testimonies, has produced conclusive evidence in terms of identification of the ship. In this respect, the correspondence with the Senate of the Venetian Republic of the high government official Giovan Carlo Scaramelli turned to be very useful.

The discovery provided information on the ship (master, passengers, crew, equipment, and hull structure), as well as on the story of the ship, its route (Fig. 1), and the reasons for its sinking. Several information about navigation and life aboard Venetian War Galleys in the late 16th century were also collected, thus completing the picture of the story of the *galea* Magna.

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