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Topic of the Year: Small but Kind of Mighty

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INDEX

7 Editorial

Cinzia Dal Maso

15 Memories

Italy to Italians. Interview with Daniele Manacorda 17

Carolina Megale

Butrint before the Butrint Foundation 25

Richard Hodges

35 Topic of the year: Small but Kind of Mighty

'Pompeii-mania' in schools Down Under 37

Louise Zarmati

Memory and Earthquake. The Pilastrì excavation project (Emilia Romagna, Italy) toward a shared community archaeology approach 47

Giulia Osti, Lara Dal Fiume, Simone Bergamini, Rita Guerzoni, Micol Boschetti, Valentino Nizzo, Margherita Pirani, Stefano Tassi

The case of the *Arles Rhône 3* Project: an example of underwater heritage communication 57

Caterina De Vivo

The Virtual Etruscan Museum of Populonia *Gasparri Collection*: enhancing the visitor's experience 67

Carolina Megale, Carlo Baione

Edutainment and gamification: a novel communication strategy for cultural heritage 79

Stefania Mancuso, Maurizio Muzzopappa & Fabio Bruno

91 Satura Lanx

Italian public archaeology on fieldwork: an overview 93

Francesco Ripanti

Disciplinary locus and professional habitus: the roles of Researcher and Discipline within the socio-political and cultural domains 105

Massimiliano Secci

Italian museums and Twitter: an analysis of Museum Week 2016 119

Chiara Zuanni

135 Postscript

Akira Matsuda

137 Archaeotales

The Lombards, a completely different story 139

Mariangela Galatea Vaglio

April 12th, 1204: Constantinople under siege 143

Francesco Ripanti

The Christmas Song of the custodian 147

Marina Lo Blundo

151 News

Living archaeology at the Archaeodrome 153

Francesco Ripanti

A wedding with surprise: orange blossoms at the museum 155

Nicoletta Frapiccini

How Millennials are changing our culture 157

Anna Paterlini

Being an archaeologist in Kurdistan. Interview with Luca Peyronel 161

Cinzia Dal Maso, Chiara Boracchi

The Monuments Men of Libya 165

Giulio Lucarini

169 Children's Corner

Tonight, we're sleeping at the museum! 171
Giovanna Baldassarre

The source-chest 175
Nina Marotta

179 Reviews

Warship battering rams on display in Favignana 181
Cinzia Dal Maso

Light on the new Salinas Museum 185
Flavia Frisone

The Riace celebrities 189
Giovanna Baldassarre

Agamemnon's Version 193
Giovanna Baldassarre

Watching the world with *Blu's* eyes 195
Cinzia Dal Maso

VOLUME 1

February 2017

Section

REVIEWS

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Warship battering rams on display in Favignana

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 c.dalmaso@archeostoriejpa.eu**Keywords** Favignana, warship rams, Sicily, Battle of the Egadi islands

In November 2015, two new rooms have come to enrich what the former Florio tuna fish processing plant on the Sicilian island of Favignana offers its visitors. These additions to the impressive multimedia museum host the ancient battering rams that were recently discovered northwest of the island of Levanzo and have proved to be the remains of the famous Battle of the Egadi Islands, the final clash of the First Punic War. The discovery has questioned the long-held belief that the battle took place at Favignana's Cala Rossa, and helped archaeologists reconstruct how the battle unfolded. Now the two stories - of the battle and of the discovery - are narrated by breathtakingly immersive multimedia displays.

Eleven Roman battering rams have been recovered from a stretch of sea northwest of the Island of Levanzo, off the Sicilian coast. With a twelfth ram still lying on the seabed, it is the biggest-ever recovery of its kind. All the finds come from the location where, on March 10th, 241 BC, two hundred Roman ships defeated the more massive Carthaginian fleet in the so-called Battle of the Egadi Islands. The battle is regarded as a momentous time in Roman history: it was the last clash of the First Punic War, marking at the same time the beginning of Carthage's decline and of Rome's rise to global power. Before then, Rome had been a land-based State that had succeeded in subjugating neighboring peoples in Italy; the Battle of the Egadi propelled it to Mediterranean-wide domination.

The battering rams are now displayed in the *Ex Stabilimento Florio delle Tonnare di Favignana e Formica* (a tuna fish processing plant for the islands of Favignana and Formica formerly owned by the Florio family). Being able to admire their three flat prongs, which still appear on the verge of smashing into the flank of an enemy ship, is a thrilling experience. Touching them is perhaps even disturbing: you can almost feel the three-bladed lethal weapon as it ravages the opposing ship. Some of the rams bear inscriptions mentioning the name of the *quaestor* who paid for their manufacturing, while others are decorated with winged victories or helmets: tracing their contours is overwhelming. In short, the exhibition ETT Ltd has created on behalf of the Superintendence of Trapani is not only beautiful and accurate; it is also powerful. It aims for the heart, and hits it.

In addition to the rams, the exhibition features other items found in the same stretch of seabed: eight helmets, some amphoras and pieces of pottery. These artifacts were collected during a ten-year underwater research started in 2005, and have provided convincing proof that

the Battle of the Egadi took place there – as Sebastiano Tusa, Superintendent of Maritime Cultural Heritage of Sicily, anticipated over thirty years ago. In 1984, in fact, Tusa heard local scuba diver Cecé Paladino talk about “a sea of anchors” – around 150 anchor stocks, to be more precise – that he had spotted underwater east of Capo Grosso, the northernmost point of Levanzo. At the time it was believed that the Battle of the Egadi had taken place at Favignana’s Cala Rossa (Red Bay) – reddened by Punic blood; but this identification was too simplistic to be true. Tusa thought instead that Cecé’s anchors could indicate the actual location where the Roman fleet hid, in order to catch the Carthaginians off guard; perhaps the Carthaginians were planning to reach Erice from Marettimo passing north of Levanzo. Tusa’s hypothesis remained unsubstantiated until 2002, when a fisherman dredged up the first ram. All the others, one by one, were identified and winched to the surface from the depths (100 meters) of the sea with the help of the advanced technology in the littoral investigation of the Mediterranean employed by the RPM Nautical Foundation, an American underwater research team headed by archaeologist Jeffrey Royal. He and Tusa read over Polybius and other historians’ works trying to picture the choices of the two admirals, the Carthaginian Hanno and the Roman Lutatius Catulus. They even studied the winds that were decisive for the outcome of the battle. That morning the wind favored the Carthaginians and Hanno set sail from Marettimo, but later a sudden change in the direction of the wind favored the Romans, just as Lutatius Catulus had foreseen. On the admiral’s signal, the Roman ships quickly left their hiding place and made a surprise attack, which sealed Hanno’s defeat: with the wind blowing against him and the Romans attacking from all sides, he was soon forced to pull back.

Today the two stories - of the battle and of the discovery - are narrated at the Florio plant with the help of multimedia totems. Simple and easy to use, these multipurpose devices may be accessed by several people at the same

time, thanks to the multiple seats arranged in front of them. The second room features a breathtakingly immersive 3D film that makes viewers feel like they are at the heart of the battle amid the clashing of rams and swords, at times incensed with Catulus’ passion, at times feeling sympathy for Hanno’s drama. Perhaps the multi-monitor system adopted in the room makes it hard to follow everything that happens simultaneously on the various screens, but the film is short and visitors are quite naturally drawn back to watch it one more time.

One may wonder whether the island of Favignana is a setting that makes the effort which has gone into the implementation of this massive project adequately appreciated. Actually, the island was almost desert during the inauguration and opening conference days in November 2015; the only people present were the many conference speakers and attendees. Furthermore, despite Mayor Giuseppe Pagoto’s promise of keeping the plant open on all winter weekends, the museum was closed until April 2016, when the summer season began. Yet the project is very successful, because the plant is a truly wonderful space: one of the largest tuna fish factories of the Mediterranean, credited with being the first, at the end of the nineteenth century, to preserve tuna in olive oil.

The Region of Sicily acquired and partially restored the plant in 1991 (over 14 million euro spent to restore 20.000 of the total 32.000 sq.m. space). Since 2009, the massive Florio plant, with its impressive warehouses, has become a spectacular example of industrial archaeology balanced between ancient history and present tuna fishing business, oral tradition and multimedia experience. Thanks to an agreement drawn up by the Italian government in August 2016, Sicily will benefit from State grants that will allow completing the Florio plant’s restoration (5 million euros) as well as incorporating the equipment for the processing of tuna as part of the museum (700.000 euros). The project aims at turning the complex into a great “culture factory” capable of attracting people and enlivening the island. A grand challenge indeed.

So far, numbers have been encouraging: around 60.000 visitors in 2014, 55.000 in 2015 and a much bigger figure in 2016, for an average annual income of around 240.000 euros. The Region entrusted the complex's management to the Municipality, which collects the 90% of the museum fees and manages guided tours, as well as cleaning- and security services. The Municipality is, however, in no position to ensure the long-term maintenance of such a large space. The effort of maximizing the Florio factory's potential is evident, as attests the decision of using its spaces to host the exhibition on the Battle of the Egadi. Cruise tourism has also recently discovered

Favignana, which is becoming an increasingly important port-of-call. The Florio plant does not have a website, but is very active and present on the main social networks thanks to the tireless commitment of communication manager Renato Alongi, who has reasons to be proud: Tripadvisor (https://www.tripadvisor.it/Attraction_Review-g657290-d3216944-Reviews-Tonnara_Florio_Favignana-Isola_di_Favignana_Aegadian_Islands_Islands_of_Sicily_Si.html) has rated the structure among the 10 top museums of Italy. It is a challenging project, whose great potential is matched by the strong determination to realize it. Time will tell if it will eventually be a success.

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