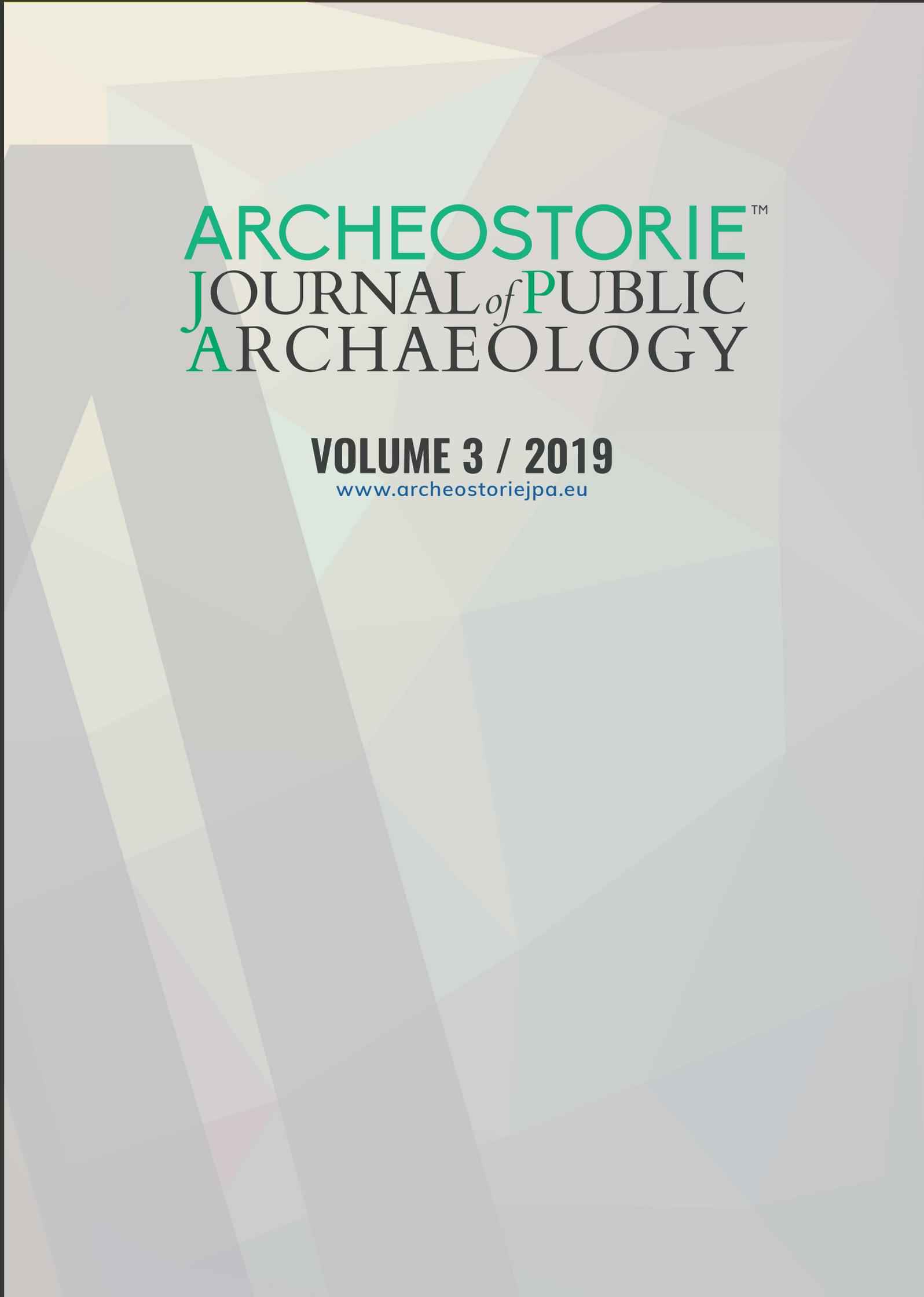




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Topic of the Year: Museum Archaeology



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Alessandra Cilio

Sea of Hope: a graphic novel that links together ancient and modern migrations

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Abstract

A work by pupils of the Liceo Pilo Albertelli in Rome. And on October 3, Remembrance Day for those who died at sea, the film that tells how it was made will be presented

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Keywords: graphic novel, Liceo Pilo Albertelli in Rome, migration, hospitality, integration

Far-off voices from the sea

“Amal, we need to talk... The ships!... What are we doing here? Are they taking us all on a trip?

Strange voices speaking Arabic, Latin and ancient Greek echo from the ancient walls of the Liceo Pilo Albertelli in Rome, in the centre of Rione Monti, a stone's throw from the church of Santa Maria Maggiore. Whose are they and where do they come from? They come from the pages of the story of Amal and Damis, two young Syrian refugees who ended up on the desks of Class III E – where I teach – because they are the protagonists of the graphic novel *Sea of Hope*: a fictional story (but not entirely), written and illustrated by the children.

She: *Amal*, her name means ‘hope’ in Arabic, set out in 2012 from Homs, one of the cities most affected by the war, leaving her boyfriend Nidal, who had become a fundamentalist. In search of a better life, on her own she followed the terrible, but now familiar steps of the journey made by Syrians seeking asylum in Europe: from home to Kobane, then to Turkey, then crossing the Bosphorus in an inflatable boat to reach Greece, from there to Albania and then again by sea to Italy.

After staying in a CAS hostel in Puglia, Amal falls under the sway of local organized crime and is forced to do hard labour in the fields. She is rescued by the police and transferred to Rome where she is helped and supported in her studies

by the Baobab Centre; she graduates from university and publishes her autobiographical story *Sea of Hope*.

Amal's tale is just in writing, but the story of the young male protagonist is a comic strip.

He: *Damis*, kidnapped on the beach of Latakia in Syria by a naval ‘joint venture’ of Syrians, Egyptians and Cypriots specialized in finding slave labour, is transported by sea to the island of Delos.

In the largest market in the ancient world, Damis is bought by *Philostratos*, a wealthy Italian merchant, and shipped to the port of Puteoli (Pozzuoli). In Italy, in the company of other young slaves, the little boy reaches a rustic villa near Rome and after months of continuous work, he dies, worn out by exhaustion.

Two parallel stories: both Amal and Damis departed from Syria and arrived in Italy. Two journeys distant in time, one set in the present, the other in the 1st century AD, but close by in space, following routes across the Mediterranean that have remained unchanged over the centuries.

History at school

Sea of Hope is the result of our participation in the Good Sense competition organized with foresight by Giuseppe and Bianca Laterza in the 2017-18 school year for nine state schools in Turin, Rome and Bari. The theme: migration, hospitality and integration.

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Fig. 1. A strip of the graphic novel *Sea of Hope* (Liceo Pilo Albertelli in Rome).

Our commitment took the form of creative writing based on actual events, interlinking the stories on two parallel levels: one geographical, coinciding in the vicissitudes of Damis and Amal, and one chronological, completely different with regard to the ‘story date’ which differs by centuries for these two events, but alike with respect to ‘narration time’, because the duration of the two protagonists’ journeys is similar.

Months of preparation were needed to teach this recent history; I suggested articles, monographs, documentary films and websites to the students. In particular, we made use of data provided by the Open Migration website in order to make Amal’s account as realistic as possible, while concerning the theme of forced labour, we had to pay homage to Alessadro Leogrande, journalist and writer who died in 2017 who always fought for those at the bottom of the pile, everywhere in the world, and whom we would have liked so much to have known.

For the ancient part, along the lines of my PhD thesis in history, the pupils reconstructed Mediterranean trade and created the story’s main characters by reading Latin and Greek literary sources and inscriptions.

The identity of *Philostratus* of Ascalona/*Neapolis*, one of the key characters, was based on the Delos inscriptions referring to the noted *mercator/negotiator* and his family; the names of all the characters were taken from Greek inscriptions from Rome relating to slaves. The

instrumentum was studied and added to the story to make the narrative even more realistic (e.g. the *bulla* worn by *Damis*, inspired by CIL XV, II 1, 7194); foreigners’ Roman funerary inscriptions were used to write the epitaph of the young protagonist.

Furthermore, every aspect of the comic strip has a historical basis: the occasion of the protagonist’s kidnapping is referred to on the calendar of Caere, of which there is a copy in the Museum of Roman Civilization; the representation of the cargo ships is inspired by the well-known Sidon sarcophagus; the landscapes of Delos (the Agora of the Italians, the Syriac temple, the Lions’ Road) derive from photographs of the sites; the skyline of the port of Puteoli is that engraved on a glass flask, a souvenir from Odemira; the prayer said by the young protagonist *Damis* is a quote from Apuleius’s *Metamorphosis*.

Nearby voices in the sea

At the end of this path, the pupils have acquired two things: the first is a better knowledge of some economic aspects of the ancient world, and the awareness that immigration is a long-term phenomenon and not just a current emergency as today’s accounts would have us believe. The second is that many of the foreigners we meet in the street have taken part in a terrible journey inspired by hope, like Amal.

The graphic novel has entailed many pleasant experiences: meeting the graphic artist Takoua

Ben Mohamed, an expert in intercultural issues; making the Rai Scuola Special Film - Look Yourself in the Eyes, the Common Sense Project; a beautiful presentation in the Roman bookshop L'altracittà, and especially the theatrical interpretation by foreign children of the CIES Matemù Theatre Laboratory in Rome, shot by our partner film company Hirya Lab.

Thus these young actors' real travel stories came into contact with the 'literary' ones of Amal and Damis. History, ancient as well as modern, is also the result of connection between stories and this is to everyone's advantage.

All this work may be seen in a film by Hirya and will be discussed at a round table at Palazzo Merulana in Rome at 15:00 on 3rd October, remembrance day for immigration victims. In order not to forget them, we will inaugurate a room in the new library of our school dedicated

to Mediterranean victims, with popular support and strongly sustained for years by our director Antonietta Corea, now achievable thanks to 'Monitor 440' funding from MIUR and MiBAC.

Our work concludes with the words of Amal: "Listening to my voice pronouncing words in another language, I think I can tell my story to the world – and with it those of millions of other people, with different itineraries, languages and diverse destinies, who over the centuries have made similar crossings in search of peace. Now they are a mute chorus of voices that populate the earth, the sky and the sea. A proverb from my beloved, unhappy country says: *نم لـضفا ملوقتسه ام نـا احكتمه تنك اذا طقفو مملكة: ...ت وكسلا* 'Speak only when you're sure that what you'll say is more beautiful than silence'. Now I'm certain that I'll beat the silence with that beautiful refrain".

