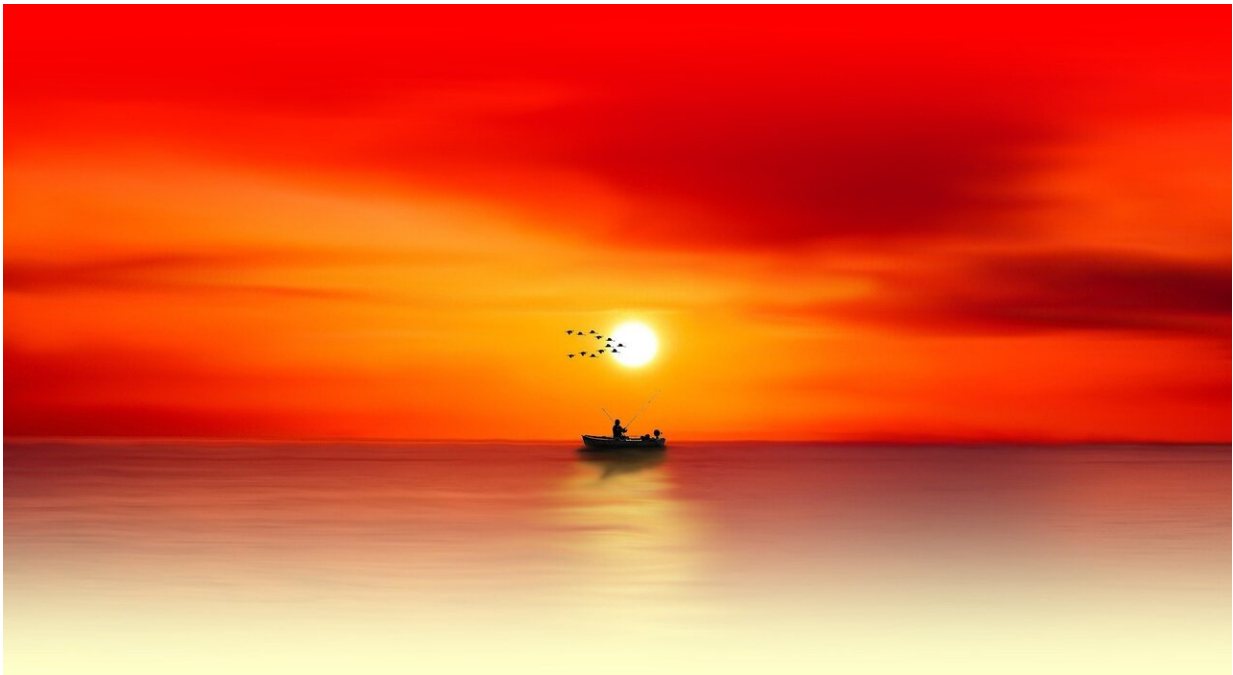


# Ephemeral evidence of Mediterranean mobility

December 23 2021

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The central Mediterranean throughout time has been a region defined by the continuous flow of people, goods, and ideas. Excavation and analysis of ancient shipwrecks along these coastlines reveal the overlapping social, political, and economic relationships that fostered the development of the region and spurred wide-ranging movement across the Mediterranean Sea.

Elizabeth S. Greene, Justin Leidwanger, and Leopoldo Repola direct the Marzamemi Maritime Heritage Project, a collaborative heritage initiative focusing on seaborne mobility in Sicily, Italy. Their recent excavation of the famous "church wreck" off this coast asked questions about exchange in the waning years of the Roman Empire. Very different images of mobility are raised by the numerous abandoned fishing boats on these same shores of southeastern Sicily. The repurposed boats—which had been utilized by displaced peoples en route to Italy from North Africa—were subsequently impounded by Italian authorities.

Extending their fieldwork beyond the traditional parameters of ancient Mediterranean studies, Greene, Leidwanger, and Repola, in the article "Ephemeral Heritage: Boats, Migration, and the Central Mediterranean Passage," published in the January 2022 issue of the *American Journal of Archaeology*, examine these contemporary migrations through an archaeological lens. By applying methodologies and tools used in analyzing ancient ships in their recording of the modern vessels and their material assemblages, the authors document this ephemeral heritage before it is destroyed. The authors align these contemporary voyages with past migrations and expand upon the region's history of mobility and interconnectedness.

Bureaucratic entities deem the intercepted ships and their contents to be little more than pollution that needs to be disposed. The authors assert that the boats and the seemingly inconsequential objects left behind make visible the impact of policy decisions that have impeded movement in the Mediterranean, making passage on the sea treacherous for displaced individuals seeking refuge.

While the authors' have recorded a series of abandoned and impounded boats along these shores, the article presents the case study of one vessel that departed from Misrata, a Libyan port, in 2018 with 264 individuals

on board. The boat is known only from the number 179 spray-painted on its hull by authorities after its interception.

The polyvocal archaeological data available from the remaining assemblages of blankets, clothing, wrappers, bottles, and personal items on this [boat](#)—and others like it—offer insights into the human experiences of the individuals undertaking these journeys. Documenting these boats adds nuance to the narratives of contemporary migration, shifting focus away from prevalent media depictions of faceless waves, tragedy, and precarious travel.

Hooks, tools, and rope offer evidence of the ship's prior fishing endeavors. Analysis of the distribution and types of food packaging and medicine suggests inequalities and varying degrees of preparation among those onboard. Scarves and blankets point to a need for objects to serve more than one purpose. Concealing the ship's name and destroying personal items indicate a desire to obscure previous identities and begin anew.

By considering these ships as cultural heritage and situating them within the longstanding history of Mediterranean movement, the authors seek to restructure how stories of displacement are presented. The authors advocate for inclusive archaeological approaches that reveal previously overlooked narratives in order to comprehend the past's ongoing impact as well as the political and environmental factors motivating these voyages.

**More information:** Elizabeth S. Greene et al, Ephemeral Heritage: Boats, Migration, and the Central Mediterranean Passage, *American Journal of Archaeology* (2021). [DOI: 10.1086/718177](https://doi.org/10.1086/718177)

Provided by University of Chicago

Citation: Ephemeral evidence of Mediterranean mobility (2021, December 23) retrieved 16 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2021-12-ephemeral-evidence-mediterranean-mobility.html>

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